Toward a Bestial Rhetoric

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In 1993, my first full year as a master's student studying rhetoric at the University of Tennessee, the venerable George Kennedy visited campus. He was part of a star-studded interdisciplinary symposium on rhetoric (Page duBois and Thomas Cole were the other two guests), and if memory serves, the large crowd awaiting Kennedy's talk stirred with anticipation; this event was two years after the publication of a much-needed and now indispensable translation of Aristotle's *Rhetoric*. After the talk, it stirred with something more like befuddlement.

Kennedy's talk, “A Hoot in the Dark,” shared a title with an essay he had published in *Philosophy and Rhetoric* the year prior. The subject? Animal rhetoric. I don't recall many specifics from the talk apart from Kennedy's opening with his crow-watching habits in Chapel Hill, but I do recall the real-time responses. There were whispers, sidelong glances, and muttering, all of which bespoke a slight panic about his—and the field's—direction. What was Kennedy doing? Was our distinguished leader, translator of the Sage himself, going off some deep end and taking the discipline with him? By the time he visited our campus, Kennedy had no doubt become accustomed to such responses, having been greeted on at least one occasion with a wry “Dr. Doolittle, I presume?” Indeed, such responses to this direction in Kennedy's writing had been circulating through the field proper even before “A Hoot” appeared in print. In his preface to *Writing Histories of Rhetoric*, Victor Vitanza attests to the shockwaves: “Prior to [the article's] appearance, I had heard through the grapevine that Kennedy had written a ‘wild,’ perhaps savage, article. And indeed, he has” (1994, ix). Vitanza goes on to characterize his reading of the article as “undecidable,” because while rereading its title and the text itself, I cannot still decide if Kennedy (or ‘energy’) wrote it seriously or farcically with beak in cheek. ... Perhaps, like Aristotle, Kennedy is exploring the various possible ways, or paths” (1994, x).
Vitanza’s account of “A Hoot” itself opens paths I want to consider in this forum, ways (back) into the question of rhetoric’s animality: the untimeliness of Kennedy’s focus on animals and Kennedy’s use of Aristotle in his animal-related work. In short, Kennedy channels Aristotle’s rhetorical theories while simultaneously overlooking Aristotle’s observations on the very topic of rhetorical beasts. In its own way, though, Kennedy’s fleeting dalliance with animality leaves us with a few (perhaps a very Aristotelian three, maybe more) remarkable theoretical possibilities and paths for future research, tantalizing suggestions of what animality can do to—and for—rhetorical theory.

“A Hoot in the Dark” was indeed untimely. Its untimeliness helps to account for the responses it drew, its illegibility to scholars in rhetoric, and the fact that it has not been cited all that frequently. Certainly linguists, anthropologists, and animal scientists had, prior to 1992, been studying animals, language, and communication, and Kennedy’s article draws on that body of scholarship. Jo Liska, who responded to “A Hoot” in Philosophy and Rhetoric the following year, seems quite knowledgeable in this realm of research as well, and while she strenuously disagrees with Kennedy’s definition of rhetoric, she nevertheless takes as a given what might have been viewed by rhetoric scholars as his wilder assertion: that animals—not just human ones—practice rhetoric. And not just rhetoric, but Aristotelian rhetoric. These creatures practice, according to Kennedy, deliberative, judicial, and epideictic rhetoric (1992, 5, 12). They deploy ethos, pathos, and logos (1992, 15). They gesture and preen, sing and growl. And yet even premised on such traditional categories, Kennedy’s attention to animals yields three crucial challenges to rhetorical theory: first, it shifts attention from “wordy” language to language rendered with calls, tones, facial expressions, and bodies. Second, it posits rhetoric as energetic intensity, a movement, or an urge to move others (1992, 2–3). And finally, the speaker or author takes a back seat to the audience. Or better said, the speaker is kicked to the curb.

When scholars have cited “A Hoot,” they (and here I count myself) often zero in on the idea of rhetoric-as-energy (Bone et al. 2008, 435), a notion that has found legs in both the rising interest in material and bodily rhetorics (Petraglia 1998, 125–27; Kazan 2005, 393) and in the refiguring of topoi as social energy (Cintron 2010; Olson 2010). Add to this the recent meteoric rise of the question of the animal in literary studies and philosophy, and the signs of its momentum in rhetorical studies, and one thing becomes clear: “A Hoot in the Dark” is now timelier than ever. And so now
is a good time to reconsider Kennedy’s untimely meditations on animals and to note that it might well be useful to keep the rhetoric-as-energy theory tied to the nonhuman, nonwordy animals that occasioned its emergence. For Kennedy knows well what Kenneth Burke intuited decades prior: that nonhuman animals invite those of us (human ones) interested in questions of rhetoric and communication to suspend the habituated emphasis on verbal language and consciousness. Animals instead offer models of rhetorical behavior and interaction that are physical, even instinctual, but perhaps no less artful. This even Aristotle knew.

And yet Aristotle’s imprints on “A Hoot,” as I intimated, are rather predictable and schematic. Kennedy’s deep knowledge of Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* provides the organizing principle of his theory of animal rhetoric but at the same time is the source of its primary limitation. The categories he brings to bear on rhetoric in the animal world are recognizably Aristotelian, and yet “A Hoot” is written as if Aristotle himself never had much to say about rhetorical activity among the beasts. This is largely because Kennedy’s evolutionary (Darwinian) approach doesn’t need to be sanctioned by Aristotle—indeed, to invoke Aristotle next to Darwin risks anachronism. Even so, “A Hoot” leaves room for more specific considerations of nonhuman rhetoric, and one might as well begin such an effort with Aristotle, whose zoological writings shaped the knowledge of bestial bodies, lives, and activities for subsequent generations.

Aristotle’s corpus can animate the question of rhetoric and animals in surprising ways, but seeing that requires a suspension of received beliefs about Aristotle as the champion of a decidedly humanist, rational rhetoric. It also—relatedly—calls for a tracking of Aristotle’s rhetorical theories into his zoological treatises. As an example, the animals in Aristotle’s *History of Animals* frequently flirt with *phronēsis*. At the beginning of book 7, Aristotle observes that the “activities and lives” of animals “differ according to their characters” (1991, 57), their *ēthē*. He continues, noting that “even the other animals mostly possess traces of the characteristics to do with the soul, such as present differences more obviously in the case of humans” (1991, 57). After listing some of these characteristics, such as tameness and wildness, temper and mischievousness, Aristotle notes that these traits feature in *zoa* together with what he formulates as “resemblances of intelligent understanding” (1991, 59). The theory of difference underpinning this phrasing is too complicated to go into here, but suffice it to say that these traits in animals are deemed by Aristotle as analogical to those possessed by humans. The trick, though, is that the analogies persist with more and less
purity—that is, certain qualities are directly attributed to animals, unsettling the theory of “resemblances” by pulling it into the realm of direct likeness or even that of qualities in common.

Such likenesses inhere in the sketches of animals in Aristotle’s zoological treatises. At the opening of book 8 of *History of Animals*, book 7’s language of strict analogy all but vanishes, replaced by a different sort of logic, a qualifying logic that ascribes a cluster of reasoning-related traits to “certain animals,” the ones who are more developed and/or have longer life spans:

For they [i.e., more developed, longer-lived animals] are seen to have a certain natural capability in relation to each of the soul’s affections—to intelligence and stupidity, courage and cowardice, to mildness and ferocity, and the other dispositions of this sort. Certain animals at the same time are receptive of some learning and instruction, some from each other, some from humans, that is all that have some hearing (not just those that hear sounds but also those that distinguish the difference between the signs). (1991, 215)

This passage credits “some” animals with intelligence (here the word is a form of *phronēsis*), with the ability to learn and receive instruction (*mathēseōs kai didaskalias*), and with rudimentary understanding of certain meaningful signs (*sēmeiōn*).

Even more revealing than the general discussions of animal capacities are the ones that consider specific animals. Also in book 8, Aristotle notes that dolphins who have pursued a fish to the ocean’s depths out of hunger and therefore face a long return journey to the water’s surface “restrain their breath as though from calculation [*hósper analogisamenoi*]” (1991, 395). With this “as-if” logic, Aristotle hedges—neither fully ascribing nor completely withholding the capacity to calculate from the zooming, breathless dolphins.

The dolphin’s calculation follows the pattern Aristotle discusses in *The Movement of Animals*, where he syllogizes physical action or movement. In many cases, a string of premises deriving from physical conditions lead to decisive action. Here is an example: you are cold; you need a covering; a sweater is a covering; you go get a sweater. (The example is drawn from Aristotle’s *Movement of Animals* except the sweater there is a cloak [2006, 461].) Here, Aristotle concludes, “the conclusion drawn from [these] premises becomes the action” (2006, 461). The train of bodily perception,
in other words, leads to an action, also physical. Aristotle goes on to consider the immediacy of such actions and how the syllogizing act encompasses sensation and phantasias: “My appetite says, I must drink; this is drink, says sensation or imagination or thought, and one immediately drinks” (2006, 463). “It is in this manner,” Aristotle notes, “that animals are impelled to move and act” (2006, 463). Lions, after all, are just as likely to seek water as humans when thirsty. All animals, therefore—humans, hyenas, dogs, and deer—engage in this sort of appetitive syllogizing. In discussing this passage, Richard Sorabji observes that “Aristotle does not notice how close he has come to allowing reasoning to animals” (1993, 16). I would interpret this passage slightly differently, though: animals of the nonhuman variety allow Aristotle to consider physical, bodily syllogizing, a stripe of rhetorical reasoning that quickly condenses the plodding steps of thought into swift certainty of physical actions.

This bodily version of reasoning shows up in Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*, specifically in Aristotle’s discussion of calmness found in book 2. It reads as follows: “That anger ceases toward those who humble themselves is evident even in the case of dogs, who do not bite those sitting down” (2007, 109). That dogs can serve as a rhetorical “case” for Aristotle’s discussion of emotions reveals his certainty about their capacities to receive impressions, feel, and act. The nonbiting dog passage is usefully amplified by the discussion of bodily syllogizing in his biological treatises. According to Aristotle, dogs no doubt participate in a sort of body thinking, wherein the dog considers the disposition, or literally the position, of the person in question and reading the sitting position as one of humility (according to Aristotle anyway) deems that person nonthreatening and acts accordingly. Nonhuman animals are expert in the bodily economies of perception and action.

As I mentioned at the outset, the primary theoretical legacy of “A Hoot in the Dark” has thus far been the idea of rhetorical energy. And yet cleaving that theory from the article’s overall aim is to miss a crucial point: that rhetorical energy resides in places where human animals may not even tread. Such insight is crucial for history as well as for rhetorical theory; historians of rhetoric can now devote energy to rhetoric’s nonhuman forebears. Therefore, and finally, while Kennedy wrote eighteen years ago about rhetoric in the world of animals, I believe the time is right not only to revisit that question—generally, in the way Kennedy does, as well as on the level of contemporary ethics and rights-based discourse about animals (see Goodale and Black 2010)—but also to open the question of animals in the worlds of rhetoric. Considering the places in rhetorical theory that
are infested with nonhuman animals might help us find more lively, less predictable and tame theories of rhetoric, however dormant.

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NOTES

1. Email message from George Kennedy to author, 19 June 2010.

2. Evidence for this emphasis on rhetoric’s physical side is all over the introductory section of “A Hoot,” but it is perhaps most explicit in this sentence: “It seems clear, however, that rhetorical energy is not found only in language. It is present also in physical actions, facial expressions, gestures, and signs generally” (1992, 3–4).

3. “The receiver’s interpretation of a communication is prior to the speaker’s intent in determining the meaning” (Kennedy 1992, 7–9).

4. For an overview of Kenneth Burke’s work that begins with this question, see Hawhee 2009–10.

5. The word translated here as “traces,” *ichnē*, has a common metaphorical meaning of “footprints,” and Aristotle uses it again in a somewhat similar discussion of gender differences among the animals. With the exception of bears and leopards, Aristotle argues, females are “softer, more vicious, less simple, more impetuous … while the males on the contrary are more wilder, simpler, less cunning. There are traces [*ichnē*] of these characters in virtually all animals, but they are all the more evident in those that are more possessed of character and especially in man” (1991, 217–19). “For man’s nature,” he continues, “is the most complete, so that these dispositions too are more evident in humans” (1991, 219).

6. See, for example, David Balme’s discussion of these lines: “The resemblances are (i) analogy, as between kinds (*genē*); (ii) the more-and-less, as between forms of a kind (*eidē*). In this connection genos and eidos may refer either to the animal or to the attribute. In the following sentence the attribute is the reference: animal tameness is a form of the same kind of character as human tameness, but differs by the more-and-less; but animals do not have the same kind of art and wisdom as humans, and their capabilities in this area can only be compared analogically with the human capabilities” (Aristotle 1991, 59).

7. By Kennedy’s logic, even plants engage in rhetoric (10).

WORKS CITED


addressing animals


