

[Review] Don't Look Away: On the Restorative Forces of Writing in a Scattered World of Slaughter. Hayley Singer's *Abandon Every Hope: Essays for the Dead*. Upswell, 2023, 180pp, Pb, ISBN; 978-0-6455369-9-7.

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*What words are there for the hours at slaughter? For the stench, the cold,
the heavy loads, the life unworthy of life?*

(Singer 2023, 116)

In a blend of poetic prose and cultural critique, Hayley Singer's *Abandon Every Hope: Essays for the Dead* delves into the painful heart of that question. The essay collection touches its readers as an elegy for the forgotten and the forsaken – the *abandoned* animals reduced to carcasses in a system that values profit over life, and the human souls numbed by their complicity in this endless cycle of suffering, abandoned alongside with them.

The creative writer, teacher, and critic describes her first book-length work as a 'lamentation' – a form that allows for speculative and performative recreation of pain, horror, distress and grief in a public display (Singer 2024, n.pag.). It is indeed a daring and intellectually compelling manifesto – a searing call to confront the pervasive cruelty of industrial worlds and the cold calculus of meat production. Yet it also works in many different ways: as a thought-provoking critique of meat culture, anthropocentric thought, exploitative labour, and human-animal binaries; as an informative account of industrial histories, planetary crises, and their consequences; and as a daunting experiment in narrative

form like Deborah Levy's *Diary of a Steak* (1997). Singer's work thus cuts right to the heart of current debates around the *polycrisis* (Lähde 2023), particularly in view of the meat industry's ecological footprint. In a both highly personal and fiercely critical *tour de force* that is part memoir, part manifesto, and part cultural critique, Singer meticulously unravels details of animal cruelty that do not stop to shock even knowledgeable audiences – comparable in force to Alex Blanchette's expansive anthropological study *Porkopolis* (2020), Fahim Amir's fierce sociopolitical criticism *Being and Swine* (2020), Shaun Monson's and Joaquin Phoenix's groundbreaking documentary *Earthlings* (2005), or Jo-Anne McArthur's and her colleagues' captivating photography in *HIDDEN* (2020).

Immersing oneself into her essays feels like being drawn along dark corridors of slaughterhouses, where the walls show graphic displays of the violent histories of what it means to be human in an age defined by its appetite for dominance over other animals. The essays touch upon a remarkably wide range of issues, all of which are united by the suffering of living beings – both nonhuman and human – at their core. They are also united by a deeply personal perspective, rendered in a first-person narrative voice that is at once analytical and deeply affected by the atrocities she engages with – a voice that most likely belongs to the author herself. In an Australian take on violence against other animals, she not only pushes industrial meat packing or egg farming to readers' attention, but also pays tribute to the masses of roadkill, kangaroos, or horses suffering in so-called 'pee barns' for the production of the hormone replacement therapy drug 'Premarin' (PREgnant MARE's urINe) (Singer 2023, 134). Moreover, she presents diverse examples of 'accidental' deaths of millions of sheep or other animals in shipwrecks or floods, as well as of mass killings justified by the containment of COVID variants. Even though the essays do not seem organized according to any linear temporal structure, many are assigned to particular months and years between 2020 and 2022, and some – potentially those alluding to the author's personal memories or specific news stories – even to specific days. In that diffuse structure, Singer intermingles personal reflection with social commentary, resulting in a sense of intimacy in her descriptions of everyday cruelty. Personal memories, as portrayed

in 'May 20, 2021' (53-56), depicting a bunch of cows walking freely down the roads until they are shot by the police for not letting themselves be caught, do not read just as factual reports but as lamentation for a world that has lost its way. Meanwhile, between these real-world accounts, several essays reflect more generally on issues like animal activism, the role of writing and poetry in particular, the Holocaust, capitalist ideology and exploitative labour in slaughterhouses, or the epistemic violence that language use contributes to.

Singer's engagement with the very craft of writing constitutes a core theme of the book, as she Singer allows language to become as brutal and fractured as the subject she seeks to expose. With that aim, she explores the functions of specific aesthetic forms: the caesura, that deliberate slash in the narrative where words 'drop off the page, go missing in action', functions not only as a formal device but as a metaphor for the erasure of life itself (83). In Singer's hands, the very structure of language becomes a battleground – a 'leaky container, filled with holes' that reflects the breakdown of both meaning and morality in a world obsessed with commodification. Despite the often-fragmentary style of the writing, the essays present their readers with a sense of coherence, perhaps due to the texts' fluid collision of prose and poetry, which mirrors its content. There is an overall rhythmic quality to the text – a pulse that mirrors the heartbeat of the animals and the inexorable marches of death it depicts. Perhaps that is why it does not lose its poetic quality even in its unflinching portrayal of industrial slaughter, employing visceral language to describe the repulsive reality behind the sanitized façade of diverse meat industries. Singer's words for the death of kangaroos 'in answer to the demands of too many incisions' tie in seamlessly with 'that warm drunk blanked' numbing their butchers' minds 'against the slicing and smacking of heads, tails, hooves of hearts hammering in all their multitudes' (12). Singer's generic experimentation – presenting poetic prose, fractured narrative, speculation, and even a short play within one somewhat coherent work – does not merely serve the aim of aesthetic shock; it much rather seems to be a calculated strategy to unsettle readers' assumptions about narrative coherence and to compel them to see beyond the sanitized stories told within meat cultural societies.

This stylistic audacity – the deliberate use of fragmented syntax, the interlacing of quotation and memory, the jarring shifts in tone – demands an active engagement from the readers. It feels as if the text itself were in a state of perpetual becoming, constantly challenging the boundaries of genre and the limits of language. While it is certainly not a pleasure read, it invites critical and ambitious readers are invited to consider not only *what* is being said but *how* it is said – underscoring the idea that form and content are inextricably linked in the battle against cultural amnesia. In this respect, Singer's work puts narratological animal studies theory by pioneers like Susan McHugh (2011) or David Herman (2018) into practice. In this showcasing of the ways narrative forms and strategies may shape feelings of relationality to and empathy for other animals, it may be insightful for animal activists interested in the use of strategic aesthetics for communicating their causes.

Singer's creative craftsmanship behind the writing causes her PhD thesis on the so-called *fleischgeist* – the origin of the book – to formally vanish from the text. Her scholarly insights from that work do *not* vanish from it, though. Besides her personal memories of the practical and emotional challenges involved in digging through this topic, the work is filled with critical content. '[A] pun on Hegel's concept of the *zeitgeist*', Singer explains, '[f]leischgeist is a German compound term' that implies 'meat production and consumption encapsulated the spirit of our times' (2024, n. pag.). Informative accounts on the history of industrial meatpacking may remind readers of Blanchette's 'industrial hog' as world-defining species (2020). Departing from the first meat plant in Cincinnati and 'the streams of animals' processed within the Chicago Union Stockyards, whom Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* (1996) famously described as 'rivers of death' (Singer 2023, 117), Singer traces these histories up to present day meat conglomerates like Tyson Foods. While doing so, she exposes how capitalism, with its relentless drive for efficiency and profit, transforms living beings into mere 'raw materials' for a system that disregards life itself. Moreover, she addresses the ecological footprint of these industries, e.g., in factual accounts on today's toxic manure lagoons, and ends her collection with a reflection on the '[m]illions of pigs [...] fattened up with nowhere to go' during the mass closing of restaurants and hotels

during COVID lockdowns (147). Throughout, the text vividly portrays the brutal mechanics of slaughterhouses, manure lagoons, or woodchippers that reduce living beings to 'raw materials' for a profit-driven machine. Passages, such as, '[u]nlike other gases that might bubble off, hydrogen sulphide sticks to the manure molecule and accumulates with the build-up of shit', mercilessly dig into the most repulsive elements of industrial processes. In Singer's narrative, the physical traces of violence – the stench, the blood, the very decay of flesh – become symbols of an epoch marked by excess, waste, and the relentless exploitation of life.

Yet Singer goes further than that and explores the roots of meat culture and the *fleischgeist* in a pervasive act in deconstruction and critique of anthropocentric thought and the myth of human supremacy. Her reflections are deeply informed by the traditions of critical animal theory and ecological thought. Skilfully, she invokes key thinkers, such as Giorgio Agamben, Jacques Derrida, Dinesh Wadiwel, or Val Plumwood – the absence of Donna Haraway's name seems a deliberate choice – to dismantle the entrenched binaries that separate human from animal, culture from nature. She might not even be losing her non-scholarly readers at this point, as she does not dwell on their theories and philosophies but restricts herself to repeated sign-posting that connects human exceptionalist thinking with her subject matter of exploitative, meat industrial labour: 'This is philosophy, religion, science and narrative as ritual exclusion. Human is separated from animal. Animal is separated from soul. These are conceptual moves [...] the joint labour of generations' (136). Here, she not only questions the legitimacy of centuries-old Cartesian paradigms but also challenges us to imagine a world in which the 'animal condition' is recognized in all its complexity – a condition not of inferiority but of shared vulnerability and mutual obligation.

Despite all that, and contrary to what its title might suggest, *Abandon Every Hope* is far from nihilistic. As mentioned earlier, there is an undercurrent of possibility that runs throughout the book – a conviction that critical reflection and artistic intervention may challenge dominant cultural narratives and aid societies in imagining alternative ways of being. Singer's meditation on the role of writing, for instance, comes across as an act of

defiance and a clarion call for transformation. Decisively, she points out that '[m]eat is a standpoint, a perspective' (90). To Singer, 'meat' may emblemize the detrimental imbalance of present-day human-animal relationships, yet Singer frames this imbalance *not* as an ontological constant, but as a 'standpoint': a certain part of culture, the result of sociocultural and -political negotiation, and, therefore, undergoing constant change. If the guiding formula of 'meat' is not intrinsic to humanity but a mere manifestation of a particular culture, then there *is* hope for change. Accordingly, 'thinking from this perspective is like travelling to another place, towards another horizon', Singer continues, '[i]t means getting lost to the feeling that you exist outside the edible earth community' (90). Here, Singer's text seems to answer Haraway's thoughts on *companion species* and *killability* (2003, 2007), suggesting a horizon where humans embraced their embeddedness in the material world as earthly beings who live and eat next to others while none are *per se* rendered killable or disposable. The act of writing becomes a means for encouraging this shift in perspective while reassembling the fragments of a shattered world into a new narrative of hope and resistance: 'Pain cuts narrative to pieces. Narrative – porous, uncertain, temporary and sometimes terribly sick – can also put pieces of your body, and others, back into some kind of together, again' (84). Here, Singer invites her readers to consider the possibility that narrative, despite its disintegrating force within this fragmented text, may also serve as a kind of restorative ritual. It is a difficult and almost paradoxical hope: that in the very act of disassembling the world, we might find the seeds of a new, more just order.

This ties in with Singer's take on language, which may become a tool in marking beings as killable, but also one that challenges this framing. By exposing what she terms 'meat-speak' that governs our everyday interactions – language that is carefully sanitized to obscure the brutal realities behind our food systems – Singer urges us to look beyond the veneer of civility. Language shapes the 'conventions that decide what can and cannot be shown, what is and isn't sayable. Meat-speak is a highly regulated but spectrally contaminated genre, thought to be no genre at all' (18). Like 'meat' being a mere

perspective, so ‘meat-speak’ is a mere genre – a convention that may be wide-spread and dominant yet far from set in stone. Accordingly, in a speculative future where cows, pigs, chickens, and others are perceived as individuals and subjects with their own perspectives and agencies, terms like ‘livestock’, ‘broiler’, ‘porker’, or ‘dairy cow’ may transition from being standardized terms to becoming anachronistic ones. These points turn Singer’s work into more than a critique of industrial cruelty; it stands out rather as a meditation on the power of narrative to shape our perceptions, and, ultimately, our treatment of other animals – including human ones.

For it is not only nonhuman animals that are being *abandoned* in present-day consumer capitalist societies but human ones along with them. At its core, *Abandon Every Hope* meditates on the concept of abandonment itself – the abandonment of hope, of life, and of the very possibility of a shared, compassionate world. It forces the readers to step off their luxury boats of comfortable indifference and inspires action in readers who care. The image of ‘Billy the Billionth’ – a Hereford steer starring in the news as the ‘billionth animal to pass through the gates’ of the Chicago Union Stockyards (42), whose life is reduced to a mere statistic – is emblematic of the profound loss that industrial violence entails. ‘While the details of Billy’s life are lost’, Singer reflects, ‘Billy himself was abandoned. To be abandoned is to guarantee death in unfathomable ways’ (ibid.). In this haunting meditation, Singer captures the tragic paradox of modernity: that in our quest to conquer nature and control life, we have ultimately forsaken respect for and connection to other living beings.

Viewed as a whole, *Abandon Every Hope* is a text of desolation as much as a text of possibility. It is a work that invites the readers to bear witness – not merely to the horror of industrial animal agriculture, but also to the resilience of life and the transformative potential of art. There is an inherent optimism in the text’s insistence on the power of writing and narrative to heal and reforge connections with others. Through the act of witnessing and writing, Singer seems to imply, we might begin to stitch together a world that has been ripped apart by cruelty and neglect. Nevertheless, Singer’s radical vision does not offer easy solutions or comforting platitudes; rather, it challenges its readers to engage

with a world that is messy, painful, and often beyond comprehension. It is a book that demands active, critical participation – a reminder that to be human in the so-called Anthropocene is to be constantly confronted with the inescapable realities of their own making. Yet, within this confrontation lies the possibility of transformation: a chance to ‘abandon every hope’ of returning to a prelapsarian world of innocence, and to instead forge a future that acknowledges both our shared vulnerability and our collective responsibility.

To conclude, Singer’s work stands out as a work of profound artistic and ethical significance. It is a book that forces us to reckon with the ugly truths of industrial society while also offering a space for reflection, mourning, and ultimately, a reimagining of our place in the world. Its blend of lyrical intensity, intellectual rigor, and unflinching realism marks it as a singular contribution to contemporary literature – a text that is as much a work of art as it is a political intervention. By exposing the myriad ways in which our systems of power and consumption devalue life – whether through the hyper-separation of human and animal, the commodification of flesh, or the deliberate erasure of the stories of those rendered invisible – Singer not only dissects the machinery of modern cruelty but also illuminates a path forward: a path in which art and activism converge, where the fragments of a broken narrative might yet be reassembled into a new language of care, responsibility, and hope.

Albeit not a book for the faint of heart, *Abandon Every Hope* is an invitation to witness, to feel, to think, to admit, and ultimately, to act. For in the very act of reading and engaging with this text, we are compelled to confront the uncomfortable truths of our times and to acknowledge that, in the words of Francis Bacon, ‘of course [...] we are meat, we are potential carcasses’ (89). This recognition, as harrowing as it may be, is the first step toward a more compassionate and just world. In times when societies too often choose to look away, Singer dares us to confront our deepest anxieties and, in doing so, opens up the possibility of redemption through art, critical inquiry, and the relentless pursuit of truth. In the personal and the political, between micro- and the macro-scale of suffering, Singer evokes a sense of resonance: a shared experience of abandonment and, paradoxically, a call to find one another in the midst of desolation.

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