

Rachel Poliquin, *The Breathless Zoo: Taxidermy and the Cultures of Longing*. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2012.

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‘What sort of objects are taxidermied animals,’ Rachel Poliquin asks: ‘nature, artifice, or something in between?’ (107). Drawing on her training in material culture and curatorial work in natural history museums, Poliquin explores this surprisingly complex question in the first publication in Penn State University’s new series, ‘Animalibus: Of Animals and Cultures’. *The Breathless Zoo* is an engaging cultural history of the genres of taxidermy and the underlying motive for preserving — and especially displaying — animal skins. Regardless of genre, according to Poliquin, ‘all taxidermy is deeply marked by human longing’ (6), whether it be a longing to preserve natural beauty, remember a creaturely encounter, or prove an animal existence. While the longing to preserve a once-living being begins with a desire to fix its lively presence — a desire that the art and craft of taxidermy seems well-suited to fulfil — such longing can never be fulfilled, for taxidermy, though still an ‘animal’ in some sense, becomes a ‘thing’ as well. As such, the dead animal object in effect ventriloquizes human endeavours to make meaning of our relationship with the natural world. It is this ambiguous animal-thingness that Poliquin examines systematically in *The Breathless Zoo: Taxidermy and the Cultures of Longing*, in seven chapters each addressing a distinct kind of longing: wonder, beauty, spectacle, order, narrative, allegory, and remembrance.

As Poliquin indicates, taxidermy is a Western means of animal representation, an outcome of imperialist adventuring and the collection of exotic natural objects from far-away lands. These collections, the *Wunderkammern* of the wealthy patrons of Renaissance European expeditions, express the wondering kind of longing with which Poliquin begins her analysis. In this first chapter, the author establishes the impressive range of archival knowledge and

theoretical framing that characterizes the entire book. She demonstrates, for example, how such texts as the unpublished catalogues of Sir Hans Sloane's collection of 'Strange Things' and his travel writing in *Voyage to the Islands* (1701) were complemented by the first guides for techniques to preserve such specimens. Indeed, a 'poetics of strangeness' (19) was well under way at the time of Sloane's travels, as evidenced in Marco Polo's 1294 account of the fantastic flora and fauna of Asia and Francesco Patrizi's 1587 description of the several sources of wonder evocative to poets. Poliquin frames her analysis of the particular wonders of preserved natural specimens with the more general treatments of Early Modern wonder of Stephen Greenblatt, Lorraine Daston and Katharine Park, adding to their discussions of material culture and the Renaissance imagination a rich history of the technical challenges associated with taxidermy, a process that itself became a thing of wonder. Although the Early Modern yearning for awe-inspiring visions of nature's more exotic forms was eventually to give way to empiricism under Francis Bacon and the rise of the scientific method, the wonder associated with the animal-thing of taxidermy has endured. 'Perhaps the primary aesthetic reaction to all taxidermy,' Poliquin writes (38), wonder reflects the viewer's uneasy awareness that the taxidermied animal has taken on a life of its own after the death of the animal from which it is made.

Throughout her examination of 'the cultures of longing' surrounding taxidermy, Poliquin astutely connects the cultural history of these animal-things to contemporary works referencing the history of natural science, material culture, and animal representation. Framing her analysis with works by Susan Stewart, Harriet Ritvo and Steve Baker, for example, and including thirty-one colour and five black-and-white illustrations of vintage natural history taxidermy and contemporary taxidermy art throughout the book, *The Breathless Zoo* elucidates the omnipresence of these animal objects. The aesthetic dimensions of taxidermy are foregrounded in each chapter, emphasizing the point that, above all, taxidermied animals are meant to be looked at. In the chapter on the longings associated with beauty, for example, Poliquin focuses on the Victorian-era craze for hummingbird displays indicative of the longing to catch a glimpse of such beautiful creatures in the wild. In the decades leading up to photographic image-making, the 'captured liveliness' (50) of the dozens and dozens of taxidermied birds in William Bullock's display case must have induced swooning among nineteenth-century viewers. The 'moral weight of beauty,' Poliquin explains, had such a hold on the Victorian sensibility that collecting and displaying animals took on an aspect of self-improvement. As in the chapter on

wonder, Poliquin deftly manages some heavy lifting in the chapter on beauty, tracing the nineteenth-century aesthetics of taxidermy to the romantic branch of natural history stimulated by the poetry of William Wordsworth and Percy Bysshe Shelley, a strain of thought that continues with, among other examples, E.O. Wilson's biophilia hypothesis and contemporary environmental ethics discourse upholding the protection of natural beauty.

Poliquin's analysis is most acute in the first four chapters, where she confidently taps her sensibilities as an art historian to show how taxidermy is grounded in the Victorian imagination. To control the potential problem of sprawl in discussing such a multifaceted topic, she focuses each chapter on a particular animal species and, to some extent, genre of taxidermy. In the chapter on 'Spectacle' the focus is on lion taxidermies in the genre of the natural history diorama. This 'bolder' genre of taxidermy 'raised more general questions about the blurring of reality and representations, the fusion of nature and culture, animal and imagination, that defines all taxidermy' (81). Nationalism and imperialism infuse taxidermy displays in the spectacular genre, Poliquin observes, promulgated by the world exhibitions that took place in Europe and the United States during the late nineteenth century. Here again, Poliquin develops the history of the craft of taxidermy, giving the American master taxidermists and diorama makers William T. Hornaday and Carl Akeley their due. Preserving the skins of such large animals as lions and presenting them in action scenes presented new technical difficulties — large animals have more articulated bodies than birds, more underlying musculature to render, more expressive faces — difficulties that Hornaday and Akeley overcame in their refinement of taxidermy techniques. As Poliquin makes clear, the diorama genre was primarily an American development that signified a 'shift in taxidermic expectations' toward more naturalistic representation (94). The early twentieth-century rise of natural history museum dioramas and the emphasis on naturalistic representation took place in a time of increased urbanization and distancing of humans from the natural world, a phenomenon that only intensified the longing for proximity to the 'sheer, raw animal presence' (105).

In the chapter on 'Order,' Poliquin considers zebra taxidermy. Rather than treading the well-worn path of examining nationalist and political ideologies in nineteenth-century natural science, however, she strives to formulate the role of zebra taxidermy in creating a 'poetics of animal order' (115). How has taxidermy itself 'contribute[d] to the making and display of

zoological order’? she asks (115). The case of the zebra is definitive, indicating a cul-de-sac for the usefulness of taxidermy to science. The contested sub-species of zebras and variations in zebra stripe patterns even among sub-species demonstrate the limitations of taxidermy to contribute to scientific understanding even as they encourage the potential of taxidermic display in the natural history museum to serve as visual evidence of scientific principles of classification. It is not Poliquin’s task here to detail the division that developed between the scientific work of the natural history museum and its public education mission, but this division does seem significant to the poetics of animal order pervasive in the contemporary taxidermy art she discusses later in the book. After all, the ‘seeing through’ of ‘orderly arrangements of creatures in natural history museums’ to the underlying theoretical systems (132) does suggest an ideology of ‘correct’ seeing. Indeed, the ‘squeamishness’ that Poliquin ascribes to contemporary responses to taxidermy of all sorts may be linked to a sense of natural order first inscribed by natural history museum taxidermy arrangements.

To her credit, Poliquin’s examination of the cultures of longing is comprehensive, and each chapter contributes to the overall project decisively. In the book’s later chapters, the author draws on her considerable knowledge of taxidermy’s cultural liveliness in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, derived from her work as an observer of contemporary practices surrounding taxidermy in her blog *Ravishing Beasts*, now in its sixth year. In the chapter on ‘Narrative,’ she considers the animal-object known as the hunting trophy, specifically the mounted head, examining how the trophy mount works in telling the highly personal narrative of a particular hunt. Of all forms of taxidermy, the hunting trophy seems most likely to represent longing fulfilled. However, as Poliquin notes, the trophy mount is a ‘souvenir of deadly desiring’ (154), as much a memorial of loss as a testimony of fulfilment. (However, had she included trophy mounts of endangered and extinct beasts among her examples, this loss would be more poignant.) In addition to examples of traditional hunting trophies, she illustrates the current ambivalence surrounding them by referencing the works of such contemporary artists as Angela Singer, whose modified trophy mounts graphically reference the deadness of the hunted animal. Significantly, Poliquin’s analysis of reclaimed taxidermy extends her earlier observations in the book of the role of taxidermy in preserving a vanishing natural world. Partly salvific and partly kitsch, the reclamation of taxidermy in art indicates a continuing longing: the desire to rediscover and perhaps continue the narrative embodied by the souvenir.

Poliquin's chapter on 'Allegory,' though suggestive of a category overlap with the chapter on 'Narrative,' raises a new set of questions. Here, in comparing the anthropomorphic taxidermy of nineteenth-century fabulist Hermann Ploucquet and the better known tiny animal tableaux of Walter Potter from the same time, she asks, what happens 'when fables are portrayed with real dead creatures?' (173). The larger question seems to be, what does the use of real dead creatures as substitutes for humans in any kind of story suggest about our fellowship with animal others? While the work of Charles Darwin and other naturalists during this time brought to light the importance of species kinships, Poliquin pinpoints a disturbing shift in the selection of species that, to her, indicates a 'perversion' of human-animal kinship. In contrast to Plocquet's use of species that reflected their natural behaviours ('foxes eat rabbits, not the other way around' (179)), Potter's selection of species tended to be much narrower. Mostly 'pest' species and usually juvenile, they rarely interacted with other species in such sentimental tableaux as rabbits in a schoolroom. For Poliquin, not only does Potter's work diminish the potency of allegory, it also diminishes the appreciation of kinship among species and the uniqueness of species' contribution to natural order, reinscribing humans as dominant over other species in such saccharine representations as 'cute' dead kittens in dresses. Whereas Victorian anthropomorphic taxidermy seems to mock animal life and dilute the fabulous potential of animals, contemporary taxidermy reinvigorates the polysemous potential of real dead creatures, Poliquin observes. Such 'postmodern beast fables' (193) as the Idiots' golden lion taxidermy *Ophelia* and Iris Schieferstein's hieroglyphic roadkill in *Life Can Be So Nice* exemplify the cultural work of taxidermy in reflecting complex longings.

Continuing to trace the influence of the Victorian sensibility on contemporary taxidermy practices, Poliquin's final chapter on the cultural meanings of pet taxidermy drives home her point that longing is the trope that best characterizes our contradictory and inconsistent relationships with animals. Taxidermy of beloved dead pets is perhaps the most compelling form such longings take. The breadth of examples here is impressive, including Victorian mourning souvenirs; the gallery of taxidermied nineteenth-century dog breeds at the Tring Museum; the character Félicité's fetishism of her stuffed dead parrot in Gustave Flaubert's short story 'A Simple Heart'; Pet Preservation and Perpetual Pets, two companies that offer freeze-drying services to bereft pet owners; and finally, performance artist Tinkebell's controversial work Poppo, a handbag she created from the skin of her dead cat. The materiality

of longing comes to the fore in these examples, and Poliquin shows how touch manifests that longing. Obviously, though, petting one's deceased cat or dog is nowhere near the same experience as petting it while it was alive, and so once again, Poliquin shows how the longing associated with taxidermy is unsatisfiable. Though the 'melancholic aura' (218) surrounding taxidermied extinct animals seems oddly out of place in a chapter on pets, and it would be fascinating to see Poliquin develop a richer analysis of the particular kind of longing associated with vanished creatures, this final chapter on 'Remembrance' underscores the plaintiveness of the author's opening question. 'What sort of objects are taxidermied animals?' Tokens of 'immortal longing' (223) transacting nature and culture.

Works Cited

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