

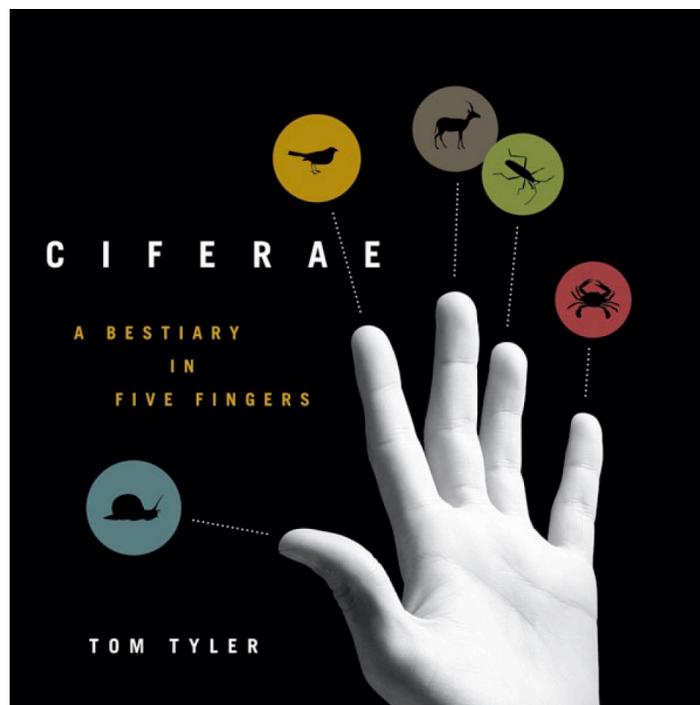
-----ANTENNAE BOOK REVIEW-----

Ciferae: A Bestiary in Five Fingers

Tom Tyler

Review by Eric C. Brown

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Tom Tyler's trenchant study of anthropocentric and philosophical discourse, part of Cary Wolfe's impressive "Posthumanities" series, is an important addition to the literature on human knowledge and epistemology, approached here through philosophy's unsteady preoccupation with non-human animals. The book itself is something of a marvel—modeled on the medieval bestiary, it comes complete with ornamental capitals, eclectic marginal glosses, and around the border of the pages an illustrated menagerie of animal "indices"—many drawn from these earlier bestiaries. There are in fact 101 of these accompanying figures, each part of a running paratextual commentary on the myriad animals cited throughout the text, so that the book doubles as a kind of illuminated encyclopedia. From flies and horses and dog-faced baboons to chameleons and chimeras, hens and harpies, bioluminescent fish, sea anemones, pandas, slugs, limpets, sheep, hoopoes and minotaurs, the book ranges over the flat and the fantastic, incorporating snippets from centuries of natural and unnatural history to supplement and destabilize the main discussion. Tyler's style is itself playful—the book commences not with a prologue but a prelude—and his thoroughgoing critique of

“epistemological anthropocentrism” bears a number of puns, figurations, and other linguistic flourishes. The central premise is that the categorical “animal” disrupts philosophy while philosophy nonetheless returns again and again to the site of this disruption; Tyler thus circulates through a series of examples showing “brutes and beasts crowding into texts in which they are supposedly unwelcome.” His review includes “J. L. Austin’s fish and Arthur Schopenhauer’s porcupines, Augustine’s eagle and Sigmund Freud’s wolves [. . .] and many more of philosophy’s overlooked or neglected creatures.” As an organizing (or disorganizing) principle, Tyler also divides the book into five chapters, each affiliated with the five fingers of the human hand, and the latter, with all its evolutionary freight and opposable thumbness, becomes itself the governing trope for Tyler’s reassessment of the (non) divisions between human and non-human animals.

The first chapter considers Protagoras’s assertion that “man is the measure of all things,” and Tyler foregrounds two interpretive models to address the idea of anthropocentrism here: Batailles’ assumption that “we” are “human before we are animal” and Heidegger’s notion of man as “shepherd of Being,” entrusted through language with the “preservation of the unconcealedness of beings.” Tyler questions both the degree and kind of anthropocentrism at work in these philosophers, which leads him to a series of examples sketching the ruled and unruly expression of animals in other philosophical writings. The title of Tyler’s book, “Ciferae,” derives from the Latin for “cipher,” and Tyler convincingly shows that it is as ciphers that animals have been most routinely used in these writings: as placeholders, stand-ins, coded signifiers, a means to some end quite indifferent to that means. Against the use of animals as endlessly substitutable terms in a discourse otherwise unconcerned with the particularity of the species (or for that matter the individual animal), Tyler ultimately urges a comprehension of animals beyond representation. (Tyler’s 101 individual animal citations contribute here—in these moments uncontained by the flow of argument, the animals are wild and unbounded and multivarious, the “ferae” in “Ciferae,” breaking down Animal or animality into something like Derrida’s call for an animal studies of “unsubstitutable singularity.”) And in this initial chapter he posits such exempla (or “indices”) as Buridan’s ass—the donkey who could not decide between two precisely equal bales of hay and so starved to death—as classic instances of the cipherous animal, an “absent referent” whose conspicuous erasability (over centuries, the donkey has metamorphosed into a “lamb between two fierce wolves, a hound between two does, a student between two books,” and so forth) overrides its particular presence.

In the three ensuing chapters, Tyler treats successively what he schematizes as epistemological realism, relativism, and pragmatism. The “middle finger” chapter (featuring a few “rude philosophers”) springs from an account of G. E. Moore’s paper “Proof of an External World,” and reviews the anthropocentric consequences of “holding that a reality exists independently of the beliefs and ideas of those who come into contact with it.” Tyler discusses three representative writers—Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, and Christopher Norris—before concluding with a look at Nietzsche’s essay “On Truth and Lies in an Extra-Moral Sense” and his comparison of human cognition with that of gnats. Chapter Three, clustering around the “ring finger,” presents a study of the epistemological relativism of Kant and his epigones. This extends to a discussion of Kantian extraterrestrials and modulates into a critique of relativism that supposes “a representationalist perspective need not be anthropocentric.” Tyler closes the chapter with a look at Saussure and Post-Kantian philosophy as well as a more extended look at the work of language expert Benjamin Lee Whorf, who promoted “linguistic relativity”: exemplified by false etymologies and intuited, arbitrary, sometimes fanciful relationships between signifier and signified. In the chapter on epistemological pragmatism, Tyler shifts to Nietzsche’s later work on perspectivism and the corporeality of sensibility. He sees here the foundation for an epistemology that can successfully avoid anthropocentrism by denying “the instrumental employment of knowledge as a uniquely human attribute.” Tyler also includes an intriguing account of Darwin’s practice of pigeon breeding (contra his more famous, but also more conceptual or even mythical, Galapagos finches) as an instance of such pragmatic approaches to knowledge. He concludes that none of these philosophical epistemologies—realism, relativism, pragmatism—must ipso facto subscribe to a Protagorean, anthropocentric world-view, though most have.

Finally, Tyler confronts the question, “Who Is Man?” through that “distinctive, distinguishing organ, the hand,” the ultimate mark of “human exceptionalism.” This last chapter is presided over by the thumb, and works both to oppose and to draw in the preceding chapters. Tyler’s synthesis here is to turn

anthropocentrism back upon itself, to ask what exactly “anthropos” signifies in this reflexive paradigm. His review of the history of commentary on hands, handiness, and prehensile grasp is a fascinating one, culminating in a theory of “hospitable narcissism,” one neither static nor sterile but actively reaching after a renovated sense of “we.” While there is a sometimes precarious balancing act in the book between the absorbing compulsions of the collector (the real bestiary in this book is not the 101 figures but the philosophers themselves) and the winnowing energies of the exegete, the book succeeds at being more than a catalogue of historical traces or loose assembly of local hermeneutic interventions. It champions an evaluative epistemology no longer inevitably anthropocentric, at least not as that term has been previously employed by centuries of philosophers. And along the way it makes an excellent case for flux and disorder as productive means to understand ourselves and the world around, within, beyond, and, often, right across from us.