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Antonio di Benedetto. *Animal World.* Riverside, CA: Xenos Books, 1997. 138 pp. $15.00 (paper), ISBN 978-1-879378-17-9; (cloth), ISBN 978-1-879378-18-6.

Reviewed by Boria Sax (Mercy College)
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Since about the early nineteenth century, the predominant image of the artist has been that of romantic rebel. Among the early romantics, such as the young Goethe and Blake, the rebellion was directed primarily against the conventions of society. As they became disillusioned with the French Revolution, romantic authors such as Byron often directed their rebellion against God. As a deity became less central to Western culture, rebellion took on subtler yet more extravagant forms. Alienation replaced open defiance, and this has remained the badge of the artist through most of the twentieth century.

It may turn out that rebellion and alienation of the artist were often just elaborate conventions, not totally unlike those of the patriotic epic or courtly love. What interests us at the moment is the way in which the literature of revolt and alienation gave new significance to animals. Previously, animals in literature had been primarily the stylized conversationalists of Aesop or the glamorized emblems of heraldry. It was probably E.T.A. Hoffmann, in Tom-Cat Murr, who first realized that urban animals are ideal symbols of alienation, since they live with a society they can never hope to fully join or understand. This insight was utilized by Franz Kafka, in his *Metamorphosis*, as well as by countless others.

The Uruguayan Antonio di Benedetto (1922-1986) writes in the same tradition in his collection of tales entitled *Animal World*. Here alienation in no longer the province of the artist or even the human condition. It is, rather, shared by the dogs, cats, ants, monkeys, cows, vipers and other beings that fill these stories. It does not even seem to make a great deal of difference whether the author speaks as a group of plant-lice or as a man. A single narrative voice seems to run through all living things. Even metamorphoses, for example of man to dog, are reported in a casual manner.

The tales, nevertheless, are filled with muted lyricism. "They say I'm splitting blood and will die soon. No, no! They're butterflies, red butterflies ..." So begins "Koch's Butterflies," the first story of the book. The speaker tells how he, inspired by a burro chewing daisies, once took a butterfly into his mouth. He went on to swallow several more, which then lived and reproduced in the darkness of his heart. After remaining for generations, they have begun to fly away.

The butterflies represent the stories in the book, nourished by the author, yet with a life apart from his. In one story, plant-lice tell how they once lived in terror, when the housewife pledged to use a pesticide, yet they find their salvation in the slovenly ways of human beings. In another, anger and frustration transform a man, literally, into a hound. In yet another, the mice pick out a single man to bear the guilt for the devastation brought by human beings upon their kind.

We feel frustration in the way all of these creatures, so exuberantly diverse, never quite seem to communicate. There are no ennobling passions or deeds in the vignettes, and the motivations of all characters, human or animal, generally seem to run between brutal necessity and pettiness. Like Kafka, perhaps the most important influence in these stories, di Benedetto seems very precariously poised between indifference, despair and hope.

Today, insecurity seems to be replacing alienation as the driving emotion behind much of literature. As ever more of them are driven to extinction, animals take on yet another significance–symbols of the uncertainty of fate. It is over a decade and a half since the death of di Benedetto, and these stories are now unlikely to be read as protest, either political or metaphysical. Perhaps future readers may, increasingly, be drawn to them less for sardonic commentary than for the celebration of creation in all its endless variety.

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