Introduction
Approaching the De natura animalium

The personality (a historical fiction, 202 CE)

It is April in the tenth year of the reign of the emperor Septimius Severus. All Rome celebrates not just the *decennalia*, the festival and games marking this ten-year anniversary, but also the emperor's return to the city at last after five years in the East. The theatre is packed, a buzzing hive full of pleasure-loving drones. The whole city has turned out. There seem to be as many Greeks, Jews, Egyptians, and Syrians as Romans – Latin is nearly drowned out in a cacophony of Eastern tongues. It's almost time for the day's big event. A great structure stands in the center of the arena, built to look like a boat. What's in store? Despite the mounting anticipation for the spectacle in the arena, all eyes eventually seek out the imperial box for a glimpse of the emperor with his family, a reassuring image, all at home finally and presiding over their people. Do they feel at home, so far from Africa and Syria?

There is the emperor, bearded, distinguished, a gold crown upon his head. He sits, standing only rarely and for short periods of time. The gout in his legs must be hurting him. They say that's the reason he declined when the senate offered him a triumph for his victories: he didn't want to have to stand the whole time in the chariot as the triumphal procession wound its way through the streets to the temple of Jupiter on the Capitol. But we have him to thank for the new temple in honor of Lord Sarapis.

And there beside him on his left is his wife and the mother of the Augusti, Julia Domna. Domina Domna? I hear that her name actually means "black" in her native tongue. She likes to talk about religion and philosophy – who doesn't these days? But it's in her blood: her ancestors are priests descended from the sun, god of us all. Heliogabal I think they call him in Syria. Well, Helios is smiling today. It's blazing unseasonably hot here in the arena. Philostratus stands beside the Empress. He's proud to

be there, you can tell. Proud as a peacock. I suppose that could have been me. That's what they tell me, anyway. But that kind of display is not for me. What is he whispering into the empress' ear? And there are the Syrian ladies waiting on the empress, the other Julias, Maesa and Sohaemias, her sister and niece, I think.

On the other side of the emperor are his two sons, Antoninus and Geta, the lion's cubs. Energetic boys, active. They say their natures are different. The younger one is quieter, more bookish, inquisitive. The older one has a cruel streak. Others say they're both equally wild. They fight. No surprise there. Brothers do fight. Antoninus, the one they call Caracalla, is fourteen now and has a new bride, Fulvia Plautilla. Her father, the Prefect Caius Fulvius Plautianus, the emperor's beloved kinsman and dearest friend since they were boys together in Libya, sits nearby, further off to the side and behind.

Felicitas saeculi, "good fortune of the age," as it says on the coins with the family portrait. Happy family. Or not. I hear rumors. But you don't need rumors to know that someone's always plotting and maneuvering in the palace. It's dangerous. Their talons are concealed. But kings don't listen to wise men like they should.

Some words pass between the emperor and Plautianus, and the emperor is evidently pleased at the spectacle that Plautianus offered earlier in the day: sixty wild boars displayed and then hunted down to the delight of the crowds. There was an Indian *korokotas*, too, a curious mix – by some divine mystery – of tiger, lion, dog, and fox. Some say this was the creature's debut in Rome, but I've seen one before. We also had to witness the slaughter of an elephant. There was a time when serving up that creature for death in the arena was a risky business, as likely to elicit tears as much as cheers from the spectators. But those days are gone. This crowd ate it up.

It's time for the big event now. A group of slaves approach the boat in the center of the arena, then they climb aboard and there is some pulling of ropes. The walls of the boat collapse and then – look! – bears, lionesses, panthers, lions, ostriches, wild asses, bison . . . I can't count them all. Marvelous. I want to inspect them more closely. Many in the crowd don't know what they're looking at. But *we* know their Greek names and I'm ready to show off and swap stories with the friends standing beside me, all in immaculate Attic Greek, of course. The crocodile reminds me: I must stop by the temple of Isis in the Campus Martius to ask a question of the priest and the attendants. We haven't seen anything like this since they caught that giant sea monster in the harbor of Augustus a few years ago.

They made a cast of its massive body and hauled it into the hunting theatre; when they opened it up, fifty bears came tumbling out – wonderful. But this tops the sea monster and the bears. This has variety.

But the hunters are marching in now, and they draw their swords, and the cheering of the crowd is deafening. They call this hunting. It's easy to track them down when they're trapped in the arena.

I've had enough of the blood and the crowd. There's six more days of this.

I will write up the day's spectacle for my Bithynian friend to include in his history. Back to the peace and quiet of my study and my books, my true love, my passion. My friends keep asking me the old question if I should get married. But I like not having the distraction and all the trouble that comes with family. Not very Roman of me, I know. But it does make me sound like a philosopher. Anyway, my real friends keep me company.

Between the statue and the library

Claudius Aelianus was born in Praeneste, about 35 km east of Rome, between 161 and 177 CE, conservatively reckoned.[1] This means that Aelian was born during the reign of Marcus Aurelius and grew up and came of age during the reign of Commodus.[2] In April of 202 CE, the date of the *decennalia* of Septimius Severus, he was a grown man between the ages of 25 and 41. The year that Severus died (211 CE), Aelian was between 34 and 50 years old, and in that same year Caracalla killed his brother Geta and became sole emperor of Rome. Aelian was between 41 and 57 years old when Elagabalus, son of Julia Sohaemias and grand-nephew of Julia Domna, became emperor in 218 CE. A student of the sophist Pausanias, who held the chair of rhetoric at Rome from *c.* 190–197 CE,[3] Aelian became

[1] This date is established from the notice in Philostratus' biography of Aelian in the *Lives of the Sophists*, where we learn that Aelian lived more than sixty years. That work also provides a *terminus post quem* for Aelian's death: the assassination of Elagabalus in 222 CE (presuming, of course, that that emperor and not Caracalla was the target of his invective, the *Indictment of the Little Woman*). Publication of the *Lives of the Sophists*, the *terminus ante quem* for Aelian's death, may itself be dated to between 230 and 238 CE (its addressee, Gordian I, was consul for the second time in 229–230 CE and died as emperor in 238 CE; Jones 2002 has, however, argued that Philostratus' addressee was Gordianus III, dating the *VS* between 242 and 244). By a conservative reckoning, then, Aelian died between 222 and 238 CE. Counting backward "more than sixty years" conservatively (i.e. 61 years) from 222 yields a birth date for Aelian in 161; counting backward from 238 yields a birth date in 177. Cf. Kindstrand 1998: 2597 and Schettino 2005: 283–284.

[2] There is even a fleeting reminiscence of Commodus at fr. 114 Hercher, 118 Domingo-Forasté.

[3] Philostr. *VS* 594; on the dating of Pausanias with regard to his tenure of the chair of rhetoric at Athens, see Avotins 1975: 319–324.

famous for his expertise and fluency in Attic Greek, the premier literary language of his age. Aelian had official duties as a priest and he was a distinguished man of letters in Rome. He was the author of a collection of *Rustic Letters*; a collection of narratives *On the Character of Animals*; another collection called the *Varied History*; two religious works, *On Providence* and *On Manifestations of the Divine*; a political invective against the emperor Elagabalus that he called *Indictment of the Little Woman*; and possibly some epigrams that were once inscribed on *hermai*, or commemorative stone columns, that decorated the grounds of what may have been his suburban villa in Rome.[4] There may have been more.[5] He was thought for a time to be a member of the literary "circle" of the empress Julia Domna,[6] but the notion of a formalized "circle" at the imperial court has now been sufficiently dismissed, and there is anyway no evidence for Aelian's involvement in such a salon.[7] Aelian was nevertheless fortunate to be admired in his own lifetime, and his literary works – all in Greek – would be influential for a thousand years and more in the Roman world.[8]

This book is concerned primarily with Aelian's collection *On the Character of Animals*, known in Latin as *De natura animalium* (henceforth *NA*). Although the title of Aelian's book is similar to the title of a book by Aristotle, the *Historia animalium*, Aelian and Aristotle could not be more different. Aelian is not a philosopher, but a moralist and a literary stylist. Whereas Aristotle's work was part of a larger, rigorously intellectual project of classification and causal explanation, Aelian wrote a different kind of natural history, a scholarly compendium suiting the literary tastes of his age and appealing directly to the pleasures of reading. When Aristotle inquires into the unique nature of the elephant, asp, or octopus, he asks what specific principles determine the development and behavior of each. Aelian instead tells stories. We hear of a troupe of elephants in Rome that could dance and perform pantomimes. We hear about an Egyptian boy beloved by an asp that spoke to him in dreams. And we hear about a monstrous octopus that

[4] *Inscriptiones Graecae* 14.1183. See Bowie 1989 and Wilson 1997: 2–3.

[5] On a fragmentary inscription possibly by Aelian, see Moretti 1978. The *Rustic Letters*, the *NA*, and the poems (at least the ones that we know of) have survived. Much of the *VH* has survived in a fragmentary version. *On Providence* and *On Manifestations of the Divine* (if they were indeed separate works) survive only in a few fragments. The *Indictment of the Little Woman* is a lost work, its title known only from Philostratus' biography of Aelian in the *Lives of the Sophists*, though some fragments by Aelian may well be extracts from the political diatribe (see Appendix).

[6] Münscher 1907: 477 and Platnauer 1965: 144–145.

[7] Bowersock 1969: 101–109 and Whitmarsh 2007: 31–34.

[8] See Kindstrand 1986 and 1998: 2990–2993.

lived off the coast of Italy. The pleasure of reading draws us in, seducing us. But there is also an edge to many of the stories, as Aelian's honeyed prose becomes a medium for provoking his readers' contemplation of the failures of human morality. Generally disenchanted with human society, Aelian is a personality at odds with the world of Severan Rome. A crucial mechanism for seduction, making the reader vulnerable for Aelian's moral criticism, is the work's rejection of systematic classification. There is no order to the sequence of chapters within the seventeen books of the *NA*, and that disorder was deliberate.

Each chapter of the *NA* offers itself as a polished literary fragment, but there are no obvious clues and no overarching narrative voice telling us how to put those fragments together, to make meaningful connections from one chapter to the next. Am I to read the book from cover to cover, as a linear activity, experiencing each chapter in approximately the same sequence that Aelian wrote or arranged them?[9] Or am I to pick and choose at random or flip back and forth between different chapters in a semantic drift, browsing through the *NA* as if it were a kind of hypertextual jungle?[10] The *NA* – a text whose "openness" is representative of the period's anthologizing aesthetic[11] – accommodates a variety of approaches.

The anecdotal prose fragment, Aelian's favored literary form, raises interesting questions. While pleasing and provocative in and of themselves, Aelian's fragments – *qua* fragments, molecular bits of a literary culture[12] – may be hooked up, fitted into, and *used* in a variety of different contexts. They are stories or factoids ready to be swapped at a moment's notice, the perfect moment, in a display of erudite learning. And stories about nature and animals were the particularly favored gems of *paideia*, the sophistic education of the Imperial age, as we see clearly from the evidence of contemporary narratives. In Achilles Tatius' romance, the hero-narrator Kleitophon uses his knowledge of animal mating habits and the power of attraction in nature to seduce his beloved Leukippe, and Kleitophon's slave-accomplice Saturos engages in a battle of wits with the troublesome attendant Konops by manipulating animal fables. The characters of Philostratus' *Life of Apollonios of Tyana*, too, take every opportunity to share their wisdom about animals and nature. The same writer's *Eikones* neatly illustrates the intense contemporary fascination with the intertwining of human morality and animal characters when his sophistic narrator

[9] On the ordering of chapters in the *NA*, see GLR xx–xxi. [10] Thus Sharrock 2000: 5.
[11] On the "open" work, see Eco 1989. [12] Cf. Parker 2008: 116 and DuBois 2010: 40.

offers a description of a painting of Aesop surrounded by his *muthoi*: the fox leads a chorus of actors with a combination of human and animal bodies.[13]

The accumulated lore and traditions about animals therefore represent a discourse, a vast storehouse of fragmentary knowledge, ready to be drawn upon when needed by the practitioners of sophistic skill. Aelian even describes his collection of animal narratives as a *keimêlion*, some treasure stored up as valuable. The structural variety of the work, an apparently random jumble of anecdotal fragments ready for the sophist's use, seems to anticipate the stylistic disorder favored by Roland Barthes in his own lyrical collection of fragments from the discourse of the lover: "Throughout any love life, figures occur to the lover without any order, for on each occasion they depend on an (internal or external) accident. Confronting each of these incidents (what 'befalls' him), the amorous subject draws on the reservoir (the thesaurus?) of figures, depending on the needs, the injunctions, or the pleasures of his image-repertoire."[14] Barthes and Aelian both conjure the fragmentary nature of discourse, but whereas Barthes emphasizes its "non-syntagmatic, non-narrative" quality, Aelian attempts to exert a centripetal force to discursive fragmentation: the disparate pieces of the discourse on animals are held together by repeated references to some transcendent divine power and by the insistent positing of a speaking, assembling, authorizing "I." Thus, the *NA*, not unlike the "false multiplicity" described by Deleuze and Guattari,[15] reflects only the illusion of the chaos and disorder of discourse unmoored from a contextualizing subject. The morally assertive and reassertive "I" of the work's preface and epilogue, as well as the text's continual return to "nature's divine mystery," strongly suggest an identity or vector seeking a way through the tangle.

From a different perspective, though, the subject *is* the tangle itself, if we accept that what Aelian depicts in the *NA* has more in common with Foucault's concept of the subject as a "composite form" than with the Cartesian subject of modern philosophy.[16] Aelian's assertive and reassertive "I" may then be understood as an effect that arises from the intersection of the multiple discourses on animals, ethnicity, marriage, family life, philosophy, exoticism, sex, pleasure, the body, kingship, women, etc. Aelian's book

[13] Ach. Tat. 1.15–19, 2.21–22; Philostr. *VA* 2.2.1–2, 2.6, 2.11.1–14.2, 2.15.1, 2.16, 3.1.2, 3.6–9, 3.46–49, 6.10.6, 6.25; and Philostr. *Im.* 1.3. On animals in Achilles Tatius and Philostratus, see Morales 2004, Flinterman 1995, and Demoen and Praet 2009. On the anecdote in literary culture of the second and third centuries, see Goldhill 2009a. On Philostratus, the author of the *VA* and *Im.*, see Bowie 2009. On animal fables in Greek and Roman culture, see Van Dijk 1997, Henderson 2001, and Kurke 2010.

[14] Barthes 1979: 6–7. [15] Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 16. [16] Bonnafous-Boucher 2009: 86.

is therefore not just a figure for the disappearance of the author amid the fragmentation and disorder of a literary tradition, but a compelling illustration of the tenuousness of a singular authority as it struggles to assert itself, constantly at risk of being overwhelmed by the chorus of voices from the past.[17] König and Whitmarsh have rightly stressed that Aelian's *NA* and other such compilatory texts are "virtuoso" performances of "mastery in the spheres of research, synthesis and exposition. It is not that the author recedes in such texts, more that the role of the author is reconceived: new virtues are located in the arts of editing and the organisation of pre-existing units of knowledge."[18] This is generally true, but Aelian's countercultural literary persona and his anxiety over his place in society as well as in the canon make the question of the "receding author" a salient point of the *NA*. To put it another way, the *NA* is suspended between the individual and the multiplicity, the statue and the library.

Aelian's turn away from a successful career as a public speaker, denying himself a life appearing in imperial palaces, is a sign that he has yielded to his own becoming minor in the sophistic world of Severan Rome. I use the phrase "becoming minor" here in the sense meant by Deleuze and Guattari and described by Leonard Lawlor as an "affect of shame at being a man, at being human all too human, with our oppressions, our clichés, our opinions, and our desires."[19] Aelian is not the figure speaking at the center of the auditorium. He is off to the side of the crowd, or alone in his study, writing. His sense of self-separation is reinforced by his choice of subject: having become minor, Aelian subsequently moves closer to becoming animal, and hence to becoming worldly.[20] He may not be a slave, as he proudly asserts in the epilogue of the *NA*, but he nonetheless identifies with the "irrational" beasts, the most abject figures of the arena.[21] And he begins writing like an animal.[22] He wants to speak with foreign tongues, with animal tongues, and to make animal sounds.[23] His book invites the polyphony of the world. He wants to write not the grand, totalizing

[17] Cf. Gunderson 2009: 6. [18] König and Whitmarsh 2007: 28. [19] Lawlor 2008: 174.

[20] On "becoming minor" and "becoming animal" see Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 233–309. On a critique of Deleuze and Guattari and on "becoming worldly," see Haraway 2008: 27–30, 41–42. On "becoming" (γίγνεσθαι) as a metamorphosis that need not be physical or entail a change of appearance, see Buxton 2009: 23.

[21] For Aelian's humanization of the animal, animalization of the human, and problematization of the slave, cf. Agamben 2004: 37–38.

[22] See Lawlor 2008 on writing as the crucial signifier of a successful "becoming animal" in the sense described by Deleuze and Guattari. On the intertwining of the theme of slavery, animal narratives, and transgressive/transformative writing in Apuleius' *Metamorphoses* and the *Vita Aesopi*, see Finkelpearl 2003.

[23] *NA* 5.51.

narrative of Roman imperial Hellenism, but Hellenism as translation. The book is a meadow or garland. But it is also the twisting and turning of tunnels dug by subterranean creatures, potentially undermining established structures.[24] It is true that Aelian imposes a conservative morality on many of the animal narratives that he presents, but this voice should not be considered the final moral authority of the *NA*. The hermeneutic "I" that seeks a meaningful way through the disorder of the text opens itself up to the possibility of its own transformation. The reader who delves deeply into Aelian's book confronts issues of culture, philosophy, divinity, gender, desire, and power – the stakes are high. Aelian's contemporaries may have praised him for maintaining a conservative Roman character (was there a statue of Aelian in Rome?). But Aelian's text postulates also a reader who will fly from that conservative authority and burrow her way into the library, perhaps through some surprising point of entry, seeking metamorphosis.

Points of entry

In Chapter 1, I consider the evidence for Aelian's countercultural persona, most significantly what the author has to say about and for himself in the crucial preface and epilogue to the *NA*. I also look at Philostratus' biography of Aelian in the *Lives of the Sophists* and the notice in the tenth-century Byzantine encyclopedia known as the *Souda*. Reading this evidence closely, I address important questions about Aelian's self-positioning within the ongoing philosophical debate about the relationship between animals and humans, his ethnic background, and the claim in the *Souda* that he served as high priest.

Aelian's *Rustic Letters* are the subject of Chapter 2. In reading these finely crafted literary epistles I focus on the rustic subjectivity of Aelian's Athenian farmers and how they define themselves by their relation to animal life, sometimes reaffirming the division between human and animal and at other times blurring that distinction. Aelian's interest in the intertwining of human and animal in the Athenian countryside as well as the fragmentary collection as a literary genre reflects similar interests in Aelian's other works.

The structural disorder of the *NA* is the subject of Chapter 3. The aesthetic of *poikilia* – "variety," "dappling," "polychromaticism" – was well established in Greek literature by the third century CE. But Aelian's affinity for *poikilia* is attended by anxieties that his compositional style impugns both his intellectual integrity and his masculinity. I attempt to understand

[24] *NA* 6.43 and 16.15. Cf. Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 6–7.

Aelian's defensiveness through a survey of the development of *poikilia* in prose literature from the classical period to Aelian's day and through a consideration of how he attempts to respond to his imagined critics.

In the fourth chapter I deal more deeply with the question of Aelian's Roman identity and his adoption of a Greek literary persona. The chapter begins with a close reading of the programmatic passage that begins the collection, on a curious species of philhellenic bird that dwells off the coast of Italy. I then gauge the significance of Aelian's careful distancing of himself from Roman culture in the *NA*, but also consider how he engages with two central institutions of Roman culture, namely the animal spectacle of the arena and married domestic life.

Chapter 5 addresses the question of Aelian's Stoicism. After sketching the beliefs of Stoicism as understood in the third century CE, I describe how the *NA* both adheres to and departs from Stoic doctrine. Of particular interest is the tension between Stoicism (a philosophy that encourages sober, rational reflection on the natural world) and the paradoxography of Aelian's literary book of animal wonders.

Aelian's relationship to the divine, an important facet of Stoicism, is the subject of Chapter 6. I look at what role animals play in the various depictions of gods and goddesses from different cultures in the *NA*. Here, too, the intersection with literature is a focus, as Aelian's most creative engagement with the divine is seen in his elaboration, his *writing* of myth, even while myth itself is problematized against an intellectual background that privileges philosophical truth.

In Chapter 7, I look at Aelian's contribution to the contemporary fascination with Egypt and India, his depictions of which occur in two significant groups of roughly sequential chapters within the otherwise disordered structure of the *NA*. In the Egyptian and Indian groupings of the *NA*, the discourse on animals is tightly intertwined with cultural exoticism, and yet in many ways these exotic "other" worlds serve as a mirror for the cultural landscape of Severan Rome.

The prominence of sex and physical desire in the *NA*, as they pertain to both animals and humans, is the subject of Chapter 8. After a detailed consideration of the complex sexual morality of the *NA*, I deal with Aelian's recurring interest in transgender phenomena and the intersex bodies of certain animals, subjects relevant to Aelian's own gendered persona in the *NA*. The chapter concludes with an analysis of the collection's many narratives of interspecies eroticism, especially those potentially unsettling stories where humans are depicted in the erotic embrace of nonhuman animals.

In Chapter 9, I address Aelian's treatment of kingship in the *NA* through an analysis of how he manipulates the symbolic associations of bees, lions, and eagles. Even if there is no explicit engagement with Severan politics in the *NA*, we know from his diatribe against Elagabalus that Aelian was interested in the figure of the emperor, and his chapters on the kings of animals give us some insight into Aelian's political thought. The chapter concludes with a look at how different animals – goose, swan, octopus, and crow – deal with tyranny and how the political strategies of those animals might have been relevant to a writer of natural history in the age of the Severans.

In the final chapter, I move beyond the *NA* and consider the *Varied History* as Aelian's attempt to engage more directly with human morality. In the two longest chapters of the *VH*, Aelian offers elaborate narratives of two women, the Persian concubine Aspasia of Phokaia and Atalante, the virgin huntress of myth. This turn towards complex, compelling women reflects Aelian's ongoing interest in a critique of masculine ethics in Greco-Roman culture of the third century CE. But I contend that these stories also prompt reflection about what a different ethics would look like and what different kinds of subjects it would produce.