

Roland Borgards

Introduction: Cultural and Literary Animal Studies

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Literary animals are created by words. Whether it is the three quarters wolf in Jack London's *White Fang* (1906), the grandmother-devouring wolf in Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm's *Rothkäppchen* (*Little Red Cap*, 1812); Lycaon, the Arcadian king who was transformed into a wolf after serving human flesh in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, or the wolf whose local extinction is the subject of Theodor Storm's *Chronik von Grieshuus* (*Chronicles of the Gray House*, 1884): as beings made out of words these literary animals seem to differ clearly from the real animals in the real world. Literary wolves cannot bite us and in turn we as readers cannot kill them.

This categorical distinction between real animals on the one hand and literary animals on the other has long been one of the unquestioned assumptions of literary criticism. In fact it constitutes the basis of the field's traditional focus on specific animal genres (fable, animal epic, animal tales) and animal motifs (the faithful dog, the funny ape, the bad wolf). In these cases it has been particularly easy to show that literature has the power to construct its own worlds with its own rules: the wolves of fables and fairy tales can talk (as in *Rothkäppchen*); adventurous wolves can become the focalizer of a text (as in *White Fang*); humans can transform into mythological wolves (as in the *Metamorphoses*). None of these seem to exist in the real world.

Since the turn of the century, the newly emerging field of literary animal studies (also known as cultural literary animal studies) has sought to provide a contrast to the traditional approach not only by expanding the existing corpus but also by intentionally questioning what has hitherto been taken for granted. The ›animal turn‹ (Ritvo 2007) in literary criticism – as well as in other disciplines – has resulted not only in a quantitative increase of scholarly articles, but also in a qualitative revision of the established concepts and terminology, especially with respect to traditional dichotomies such as human and animal, subject and object, action and behaviour, or culture and nature. It is an overarching aim of cultural animal studies to revise and re-conceptualize the scholarship built around this oppositional framework; important reference theories range from Michel Foucault's analysis of power structures and Jacques

Derrida's theory of deconstruction to Bruno Latour's actor-network theory and Donna Haraway's model of companion species.

Literary animal studies undoubtedly benefits from this aim. For instance, through the lens of Foucault we can follow the word wolves and trace power structures that extend far beyond the world of literature, while with Derrida we can read and question the werewolf as the metaphysical attempt of ›man‹ to define himself in contrast to the ›animal‹ (Foucault 2003; Derrida 2006; 2008; 2010). Latour allows us to describe the wolves in Storm's *Grieshuus* as actors, and with Haraway, London's eponymous hero White Fang can be understood as a companion species (Latour 2004; Haraway 2003; 2008). At the same time, though, literary animal studies provides an original contribution to the overarching aim associated with the animal turn, as it explores literary animals in a way that highlights how deeply aesthetic and literary questions are interwoven with both political and material spheres. There may be a distinction between literary and real animals. However, the field of literary animal studies proves that this distinction is by no means self-evident, trivial, natural or easy. Real wolves seem to play a formative role in every literary wolf – a process requiring serious scholarly attention – and every real wolf likewise exhibits traces – equally meriting careful scholarly attention – of their literary counterparts. It is the central aim of cultural literary animal studies to study these kinds of interrelations in their full complexity.

If we consider literary animals only in the context of signifiers that always refer to something else, especially to the characteristics of man and culture, this is, according to Susan McHugh, akin to a magic tragic: »Reading animals as metaphors, always as figures of and for the human, is a process that likewise ends with the human alone on the stage. Now you see the animal in the text, now you don't« (McHugh 2009a). One way out of the snare of anthropocentrism is currently being tested particularly on the basis of a new materialism, a social theory that mediates between semiotic culturalism on the one hand and factual naturalism on the other. This has lately given rise to a number of studies on ›literary animal agency‹ (e. g. Kling 2015). It is of great importance in describing animal agency to distinguish between two different ways in which animals may be liberated from their cultural reduction to mere objects and their literary reduction to mere signifiers: first, by ascribing them with the quasi-human abilities of a subject and thus invest them with a ›human subjectivity‹; second, by conceiving ›animals as agents‹ (McHugh 2009b, 491) and thus including them in the broad circle of potential actors.

Latour and Haraway – as well as Foucault and Derrida – both express scepticism about the conventional terminology and binary oppositions of subject/object and nature/culture so deeply rooted in the history of metaphysics. Therefore, the methodological reevaluation of animals as actors and companions corresponds to a negation of man, who is no longer seen as the only subject capable of acting

autonomously. Instead, man is seen as an actor among actors, a companion among companions. Neither Latour nor Haraway try to put the animal on a pedestal previously reserved for man. Whether animals are capable of actions formerly only ascribed to humans is not important for this discussion. To avoid misunderstandings, Latour explicitly developed his ANT on the basis of objects, just as Haraway explicitly linked the companion species to the technoid figure of the cyborg. If animals, for Latour, are able to become actors, this is not due to the fact that they can act like people, but because they can affect change like all the other *objects*.

Similarly, Haraway's central argument, which seeks to establish animals as a subject worthy of consideration, hinges not on the human likeness of animals, but on the common life that is realized in cross-species communities. These could be communities of co-evolution such as humans and dogs (Haraway 2003), or communities of research such as those found in a laboratory (Haraway 2008, 69–93). Haraway illustrates that these communities are in fact much less hierarchical than has always been assumed by the traditional human will to rule. Moreover she demonstrates how these communities always have a semiotic, in addition to the material, side: wherever humans come into contact with another species we find »material-semiotic nodes or knots in which diverse bodies and meanings coshape one another« (ibid, 4). Haraway makes explicit how one can connect the concept of the material-semiotic knot with aesthetic and literary questions: »For me, figures have always been where the biological and literary or artistic come together with all of the force of lived reality« (ibid). The ›literary‹ is thus not limited to the field of literature but emerges as one of the basic constitutions of the world we live in. Each encounter between humans and animals in a so-called »contact zone« (ibid., 205) thus has a literary or aesthetic dimension to it.

On the basis of such animal-centred theoretical considerations, literary animal studies carries out three interrelated argumentative movements. First, it aims to introduce animals as an independent topic of literary history. As soon as we begin to search for the literary animal in fiction, we discover a remarkably rich bestiary. Second, it seeks – working within the framework of the broader cultural animal studies – to reflect on and challenge conventional concepts and dichotomies, and especially the metaphysical binaries of human/animal, nature/culture and subject/object. Finally, the field strives towards a careful revision of its own literary methods. For if the aim of general animal studies is to rethink what animals are and what kind of relationship exists between man and animal, this must also have implications for the conceptual definition of what a literary animal can be, and for the methods with which we can study literary animals.

The field of literary animal studies therefore needs to take into account animal theory. Without animal theory the interpretation of literary animals will quickly

lead into one of two directions. Either it will concentrate on purely literary aspects and thus marginalize real animals, as evidenced by traditional motif history, or it will, in its focus on the represented animals, only understand the literary as a kind of container for animal content, as is often the case when literary animal texts are read as a direct ethical positioning of their authors (for an interpretation of J.M. Coetzee's 1999 *The Lives of Animals* in this vein, see Dawn/Singer 2010). Cary Wolfe points out that animal studies not only sees animals as content and topic – »the ›animal‹ studied by animal studies« – but also understands them as a destabilization of their own scientific methods – »how animal studies studies ›the animal‹« (Wolfe 2010, 99). The same applies to literary animal studies. Here too the emphasis rests first on ›the represented animal studied by literary animal studies‹, then on ›how literature represents the animal‹ and finally on ›how literary animal studies studies the represented animal‹.

This commitment to methodological and theoretical reflection should not be seen as limiting. On the contrary, it encourages us to explore the wide variety of relevant texts in animal theory, which offer diverse approaches from Horkheimer/Adorno and John Berger over Deleuze/Guattari and George Bataille to Giorgio Agamben, Derrida or Haraway, and also includes the broad field of animal ethics and philosophical debates about the anthropological difference and theory of mind in animals. A literary study of animals can either refer to one of these approaches or combine several of them in a careful methodical crossover. Interpretations that appear completely unaffected by any of these theoretical debates, however, fall short of the current state of research, just as interpretations that combine as many of the theoretical perspectives as possible without reason also fail to make a significant contribution.

On the basis of these considerations we can isolate a number of potential tasks for the literary study of animals. First, it will be necessary to advance the methodological and theoretical reflection of our tools and methods of research. As of now, the question of how various scientific approaches to the study of literary animals stand in relation to one another remains unanswered. It will be of particular importance to specify the interplay of the two currently dominating perspectives, with Foucault/Derrida on one, and Latour/Haraway on the other side. The two approaches concur in their scepticism about ontological definitions of the animal, their mutual interest in the history of knowledge of animals, and finally in the belief that animal issues are always already implicated in matters of politics and aesthetics. Following this, it will be necessary to clarify the relationship between literary studies and philosophical animal ethics and more practically-oriented forms of animal protection; and the interdisciplinary collaboration with the scientific disciplines of ethology, animal ecology and evolutionary biology has also, in terms of methodology, not yet reached a secure basis. The

point at which all these methodological debates intersect is the question of how the ›literary‹ and the ›animal‹ are related to one another in the most basic sense: as a literary form with animal content (McKay 2014), as a literary representation of animal interests (Copeland 2012) or in networks of material-semiotic actors (McHugh 2009a; 2009b).

A second task will be to increase the number of concrete case studies. In addition to the established animal writers of literary history like Flaubert, Kafka or Coetzee, we need to consider authors whose comparably dense references to animals have received less critical attention, such as Georg Büchner or Gabriel García Márquez. Similarly, in addition to the great, canonized literary animals like Hoffmann's *Kater Murr* (*Tomcat Murr*), Melville's *Moby-Dick* or London's *White Fang*, there are numerous less prominent animal protagonists who deserve to be analysed from the multitude of new perspectives. And last but not least there is, in addition to the monkeys, dogs and wolves – those flagship-animals of literary history –, the whole wide world of ordinary and small animals, common and marginal. A theoretically informed literary history of the infamous animals has not yet been written; no conference has been dedicated to the literary hedgehog and no monograph published about the literary louse; as of yet there has been no insightful research done on the fleas in the fur collar of the doorkeeper in Kafka's *Vor dem Gesetz* (*Before the Law*).

On a final note, it is time to consider the old topics anew and to thus approach, for instance, a theory of the animal fable, animal metaphor or zoological poetics that incorporates and builds on the new insights gleaned from the ›animal turn‹. Animals have after all often been the chosen vantage point into the ›literary‹ even for poets (Driscoll 2014; Moe 2014). The systematic analysis of such issues has only just begun.

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