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The Sticky Temptation of Poetry

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> There is only one difference between the absurdity of things envisaged without man's gaze and that of things among which the animal is present; it is that the former absurdity immediately suggests to us the apparent reduction of the exact sciences, whereas the latter hands us over to the sticky temptation of poetry...
>
> Georges Bataille, *Theory of Religion*

Abstract: Sometime around 1900, a fundamental shift occurred in the way animals were represented in works of Western literature, art, and philosophy. Authors began to write about animals in a way that was unheard-of or even unimaginable in previous epochs. Traditionally, animals had fulfilled a symbolic, allegorical, or satirical function. But in the period around the turn of the twentieth century these animals begin, as it were, to »misbehave« or to »resist« the metaphorical values attributed to them. There is a conspicuous abundance of animals in the literature of this period, and this animal presence is frequently characterised by a profound and troubling ambiguity, which is often more or less explicitly linked to the problem of writing, representation, and language – specifically poetic or metaphorical language.

Taking the Austrian literary scholar Oskar Walzel's 1918 essay »Neue Dichtung vom Tiere« as its starting point, this essay explores the historical and philosophical background of this paradigm shift as well as its implications for the study of animals in literature more generally. Zoopoetics is both an object of study in its own right and a specific methodological and disciplinary problem for literary animal studies: what can the study of animals can contribute to literary studies and vice versa? What can literary animal studies tell us about literature that conventional literary studies might otherwise be blind to? Although animals abound in the literature of almost every geographical area and historical period, traditional literary criticism has been marked by the tendency to disregard this ubiquitous animal presence in literary texts, or else a single-minded determination to read animals exclusively as metaphors and symbols for something else, in short as »animal imagery«, which, as Margot Norris writes, »presupposes the use of the concrete to express the abstract, and indeed, it seem[s] that nowhere in literature [are] animals to be allowed to be themselves« (Norris 1985, 17). But what

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does it mean for literary theory and criticism to allow animals to »be themselves«? Is it possible to resist the tendency to press animals »into symbolic service« (ibid.) as metaphors and allegories for the human, whilst also avoiding a naïve literalism with respect to the literary animal?

The pervasive uneasiness regarding the metaphorical conception of the animal within recent scholarship in animal studies stems from a more general suspicion that such a conception serves ultimately to assimilate the animal to a fundamentally logocentric discourse and hence to reduce »animal problems to a principle that functions within the *legibility* of the animal: from animal to *ani*-word« (Burt 2006, 166). The question of the animal thus turns out to have been the question of language all along. Conversely, however, we might also posit that the question of language has itself also always been the question of the animal. What would it mean for literary studies if we were to take the implications of this involution seriously? How can we be attentive to the specific way animals operate in literary texts as »functions of their literariness« (McHugh 2009, 490)? In other words, not merely as one trope in an author's poetic arsenal that could easily be replaced by any other, but rather as a specific problem to and for language and representation as such.

I

In 1918, the Austrian literary scholar Oskar Walzel published an article entitled »New Poetry of the Animal« in which he observed »a not inconsiderable shift« in recent literary depictions of animals (Walzel 1918, 53).[1] »It is an age-old characteristic of fables to speak of the animal but to mean the human« (ibid.), Walzel writes, citing as an example G.E. Lessing's treatise *On the Use of Animals in Fables* (1759), which argued that animals serve as a sort of symbolic short-

1 Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own. The original passage is as follows: »In der Dichtung vom Tiere läßt sich seit einiger Zeit eine nicht unbeträchtliche Verschiebung beobachten. Uralte Gewohnheit der Fabel ist, vom Tiere zu reden und den Menschen zu meinen. Glaubte doch Lessing, den Brauch der Fabel, Tiere reden und handeln zu lassen, schlechthin auf die ›allgemeine Bestandheit‹ der Tiercharaktere zurückführen zu dürfen. Der Wolf und das Lamm drücken den Gegensatz, den die Fabel versinnlichen will, besser und schärfer, vor allem gemeinverständlicher aus als die Menschen Nero und Britannicus. So folgerte Lessing. Ihm war das Tier in der Fabel ausschließlich nur Maske für Menschliches, und zwar eine Maske, die eindeutiger ist als das, was sie verhüllt. In neuerer Zeit wird das Tier um seiner selbst willen dichterisch erfaßt. Es soll nicht länger nur als bequemes Mittel dienen, in abgekürzter Form den Menschen zu versinnlichen. Es will sein eigenes Recht finden. Es möchte seine eigenen Leiden und Freuden zum Ausdruck gelangen lassen.«

hand, since the »universally familiar and unchanging character of the animals« (Lessing 1777, 187) makes the moral lesson of the fable far easier to grasp than the infinitely more varied and ambiguous characters of human beings.[2] The nature of the antagonism between »the wolf« and »the lamb« is more intuitive and transparent than that between »Nero« and »Britannicus«. For Lessing, Walzel writes, the animal is purely and simply a »mask« for the human, whose principal utility lies in its being less equivocal than what it dissembles. The new animal poetry, by contrast, seeks to give the animal poetic form »for its own sake«: »No longer shall the animal serve merely as a convenient and abbreviated metaphor for man. It wants to come into its own. It wants its own sorrows and joys to find expression« (Walzel 1918, 53). Walzel names Rainer Maria Rilke, Franz Kafka, and Franz Werfel, among others, as exponents of this new generation of animal poets, who are defined in large part by their »ardent aspiration to establish an empathic connection with the animal and to divine its mental processes [*Seelenvorgänge*]« (ibid.).[3]

This fervent search for a nonhuman perspective on the world was by no means limited to the literature of the period. As an example of zoopoetics in the natural sciences Walzel mentions Wilhelm Bölsche's exuberant magnum opus *Das Liebesleben in der Natur* (1898–1903), but he might equally have referred to Jakob von Uexküll's *Umwelt und Innenwelt der Tiere* (1909), which posited that each living being has its own specific »Umwelt« that defines its unique perspective on the world. Rarely before had biological science shown such an interest in the subjective experience of animals. Meanwhile, the *Blue Rider* artist Franz Marc was proclaiming the »animalisation« of art. In a letter to the publisher and art historian Reinhard Piper dated 30 April 1910, Marc wrote: »I am seeking to increase my sensitivity to the organic rhythm of all things, to achieve pantheistic empathy with the tremor and flow of the blood in nature, in the trees, in the animals, in the air [...]. I see no more suitable medium for the ›*animalisation* of art‹ than the animal image« (Marc 1978, 98, original italics).[4] And in a fragment written the following year, Marc asks: »Is there a more mysterious idea for an artist than to imagine how nature is reflected in the eyes of an animal? How does a horse see the world, how does an eagle, a doe, or a dog?« (ibid., 99) He goes on to

2 »[D]ie allgemein bekannten und unveränderlichen Charaktere der Tiere«.

3 »Besonders bezeichnendes Merkmal unserer Neuesten [Dichter] ist das eifrige Streben, sich ins Tier einzufühlen und seine Seelenvorgänge ihm abzulauschen.«

4 »Ich suche mein Empfinden für den organischen Rhythmus aller Dinge zu steigern, suche mich pantheistisch einzufühlen in das Zittern und Rinnen des Blutes in der Natur, in den Bäumen, in den Tieren, in der Luft [...]. Ich sehe kein glücklicheres Mittel zur ›*Animalisierung* der Kunst‹ als das Tierbild.«

deplore what he regards as the squalid and soulless convention of placing an animal in a landscape as it is seen by human eyes, instead of »immersing ourselves in the soul of the animal [...] in order to divine its way of seeing [*Bilderkreis*]« (ibid.).[5] These are not idle ruminations on Marc's part: the ultimate goal of the »animalisation« of art is to rediscover »the wellspring of art itself« – and the way to achieve this lies via the animal.[6] Indeed, as the discovery of Palaeolithic cave paintings, such as those at Font-de-Gaume (discovered in 1901) and at Altamira (discovered in 1879 but not generally accepted as authentic until 1902) had only recently revealed, the prehistoric roots of painting lay precisely in the representation of animals (and not humans). Marc's question regarding the »mysterious idea« of the animal other's perspective on the world could thus be seen as the essential question behind all artistic expression.

This idea is mysterious precisely because, as Georges Bataille writes in his *Theory of Religion*, »[t]he animal opens before me a depth that attracts me and is familiar to me. In a sense, I know this depth: it is my own. It is also that which is farthest removed from me, that which deserves the name depth, which means precisely *that which is unfathomable to me* [*ce qui m'échappe*]. But this too is poetry... [or: it is also poetry; mais c'est aussi la poésie]« (Bataille 1989, 22, original italics). One might go so far as to say that this depth or narrow abyss between human and animal *is* in fact fundamentally the space of poetry, and hence of zoopoetics. »Nothing,« Bataille insists, »is more closed to us than this animal life from which we are descended« and to try to imagine the world through the eyes of a non-human consciousness is to indulge in the »poetic fallacy of animality« (ibid., 20). »There is only one difference between the absurdity of things envisaged without man's gaze and that of things among which the animal is present,« he writes, explaining that »it is that the former absurdity immediately suggests to us the apparent reduction of the exact sciences, whereas the latter hands us over to the sticky temptation of poetry« (ibid., 22). The overtly negative language Bataille uses to refer to this poetic turn to animality (absurdity, fallacy, sticky temptation, etc.) has led certain commentators to conclude that he is dismissive not only of any attempt to imagine a world without humans but also of poetry as such. Tom Tyler, for instance, interprets Bataille's remarks as an indictment of humans who, in attempting to »use words to describe experiences

5 »Gibt es für Künstler eine geheimnisvollere Idee als die, wie sich wohl die Natur in dem Auge eines Tieres spiegelt? Wie sieht ein Pferd die Welt oder ein Adler, ein Reh oder ein Hund? Wie armselig, ja seelenlos ist unsre Konvention, Tiere in eine Landschaft zu setzen, die unsren Augen zugehört statt uns in die Seele des Tieres zu versenken, um dessen Bilderkreis zu erraten.«

6 »Diese Betrachtung soll keine müßige causerie sein, sondern uns zu den Quellen der Kunst führen.«

that can only be experienced *without* words, without distinctions, without consciousness« end up producing only »nonsense« (Tyler 2012, 10–11). But this is a slight mischaracterisation of Bataille's statement, which actually reads: »to describe a landscape tied to these conditions [sc. of immanent animality] is only nonsense, *or a poetic leap*« (Bataille 1989, 21, my italics). But this is not to say that poetry is sheer nonsense. For Bataille, only poetry is properly equipped to describe the world without humans, because »poetry describes nothing that does not slip toward the unknowable« (ibid.). In this respect, poetry and animality are intimately linked, since animality, understood as nonhuman subjectivity or non-linguistic consciousness, is that which eternally eludes our attempts to capture it in language. In absolute terms, this poetic leap is doomed to fail – we will never reach the other side – but this is precisely what constitutes its value. It becomes the site of a productive tension that allows us to push the boundaries of the intelligible.[7]

The constitutive impossibility of gaining access to the subjective experience of a nonhuman other likewise haunts Walzel's animal poets. The inner life of an animal is only accessible to us humans by analogy to our own: »if anywhere«, Walzel notes, »in this instance man truly is the measure of all things« (Walzel 1918, 53).[8] This, however, need not deter poets (or natural scientists) from attempting to imagine their way into nonhuman subjectivities in order to see the world from another's perspective. What Walzel is describing here is likewise a kind of animal phenomenology: the desire on the part of writers and thinkers to get inside the minds of animals and to find adequate expression for them in their works. It is, in other words, a version of the question famously posed by Thomas Nagel over half a century later: »What is it like to be a bat?« This in turn relates to one of the basic tensions not just of literary representations of animals and animal life but also of cultural and literary animal studies itself: the status of anthropomorphism and especially, as we shall see, of metaphor.

Walzel distinguishes between two essential attitudes or trajectories, which an »animal poet« might follow. On the one hand, »there are those who take Man as their point of departure« and look only for those traits in animals, which aptly describe specific features of the human; and on the other, »there are those who start with the animal, and seek to understand it on the basis of their knowledge of

7 Compare Ron Broglio's more recent assertion that »the very impossibility of understanding the animal as Other serves as the productive friction by which authentically new thinking and art are produced. The problem itself becomes a means of creating outside of what is acceptably known and intelligible« (Broglio 2011, xx).

8 »Wenn irgendwo, so ist in diesem Fall der Mensch das Maß der Dinge.«

the human« (Walzel 1918, 56).[9] At first glance, there may not appear to be any meaningful difference between these two types of zoopoetics at all, which is what makes Walzel's distinction all the more important. Certainly, both types of zoopoetics view the human and the animal *in terms of* each other, which is to say: they are both inherently *metaphorical* enterprises. But whereas the former say ›animal‹ and mean ›human‹ – in the age-old tradition of the fable – when the latter say ›animal‹ they actually truly mean ›animal‹, and yet they are aware that their understanding of this nonhuman other will inevitably be *anthropomorphic*. But the status and import of this anthropomorphism is by no means identical in both cases.

Anthropomorphism has, of course, been the object of widespread suspicion, if not outright interdiction, particularly in those discourses dealing with animal phenomenology and subjectivity that consider themselves the most rigorously ›scientific‹ (cf. Tyler 2012, 53), on the grounds that it imputes human forms of agency and subjectivity upon animals, and that it is, in effect, a form of the ›pathetic fallacy‹. In recent years, however, this view has come under fire by scholars who point out that the charge of anthropomorphism is in itself based on a Cartesian, humanist paradigm that views consciousness and agency as the exclusive province of the rational human subject.[10] Take, for example, Daniel C. Dennett's memorable critique of Nagel's question of what it is like to be a bat, which Dennett considers to be not only unanswerable but hopelessly anthropomorphic and hence fallacious on the grounds that it takes for granted that to be a bat is »to be the sort of thing it is like something to be« (Dennett 1995, 703).[11] While I am only too happy to accept that the question of what it is like to be a bat (or any Other, for that matter, nonhuman or otherwise) may be fundamentally unanswerable, I do not see how it follows that being a bat is not *like anything*. Beyond the allegation of anthropomorphism, however, I wonder if the problem doesn't ultimately lie in the metaphorical structure of the question: in order to be able to say that it is »like« something to be a bat, one must not only ascribe some

9 »Mit einiger Sicherheit lassen sich nur zwei gegensätzliche Richtungen unterscheiden, die von Tierdichtern eingeschlagen werden. Der eine kommt vom Menschen und sucht nach Zügen des Tieres, die zutreffend bezeichnen, was an Menschen zu beobachten ist; der andere geht vom Tier aus und will es aus seiner Kenntnis des Menschen verstehen.«

10 As Tom Tyler observes, such a concept of anthropomorphism makes no sense outside an anthropocentric frame of reference that identifies certain traits or faculties as essentially and principally *human*, as demonstrated by the simple fact that there are no analogous ›morphisms‹ for other species: we do not think of dolphins as »chiropteromorphic« even though they too use echolocation, a trait originally identified only in bats (Tyler 2012, 60).

11 For an incisive critique of Dennett's latent Cartesianism, see Wolfe 2010, 31–47.

form of subjective experience to a nonhuman Other, one must also consider it possible and meaningful to encapsulate or at least approximate the nature of that Other in language.

And so we return to the »sticky temptation of poetry« in the form of an unanswerable question that may nevertheless push the boundaries of human knowledge. This would be the form of anthropomorphism that informs the second species of zoopoetics identified by Walzel. This kind of »poetic leap« is, of course, not without risk, but as Jane Bennett writes, it may be »worth running the risks associated with anthropomorphizing (superstition, the divinization of nature, romanticism) because it, oddly enough, works against anthropocentrism« (Bennett 2010, 120), by allowing the possibility of nonhuman agency. In her discussion of Darwin's writings on worms, Bennett observes that it was his tendency to anthropomorphise the worms he was observing that allowed him to recognise in them a form of nonhuman agency and wilfulness, which, initially, he understood in terms of his own, but, she adds, »the narcissism of this gaze backfired, for it also prompted Darwin to pay close attention to the mundane activities of worms, and what came to the fore through paying attention was their own, distinctive, material complexity« (Bennett 2010, 99). In other words, the initial anthropomorphism of Darwin's observations opened up the possibility of thinking about the ways in which the worms were »like« their human observer, but this metaphorical connection gave way to an awareness of an irreducible difference, which moreover could not be understood purely and simply in negative terms. This encounter gives rise to a productive and unsettling oscillation between similarity and difference, identity and alterity, which results in a form of agency for the animal. Strikingly, this shift is mirrored in Walzel's own text, which moves almost imperceptibly from describing how poets want to represent animals (»no longer shall the animal serve merely as a convenient and abbreviated metaphor for man«) to how the textual animals *themselves* want to be represented (»It wants to come into its own«).

Thus the »new« literary animal inhabits the text as an end in itself. But how can we account for the sudden and pervasive shift in literary, philosophical and scientific representations of animals that took place around 1900 in Europe? While Walzel's essay represents one of the earliest descriptions of the symptoms of this shift, it does little to explain how it came about in the first place. Before venturing a definition of zoopoetics and discussing its implications for literary animal studies, let me therefore take a moment to sketch the historical and philosophical background for this paradigm shift.

II

The industrialisation and mass urbanisation of European society that had occurred over the previous century meant that humans were now suddenly divorced from animal life in their everyday existence like never before. The establishment of the modern zoological garden and the rise in popularity of domestic pet-keeping may be seen as attempts to compensate for this, even as they serve as indicators of radically new parameters for human–animal interaction. At the same time, developments in the natural sciences – most importantly Darwin's formulation of the theory of evolution – coupled with Nietzsche's thoroughgoing critique of metaphysical anthropocentrism and Freud's mapping of the human subconscious, had given rise to a newly animalised conception of the human. This growing awareness of man's own animal nature did not, for the most part, bring man closer to other animals, however. On the contrary, paradoxical as it may seem, it frequently led to a greater perceived distance to the rest of the animal world. Much like the moats separating the spectators from the animals on display in the enclosures at Carl Hagenbeck's new *Tierpark* outside Hamburg, the barrier between human and animal was now harder to perceive, but no less insurmountable for all that.

Ultimately, this discovery of man's animal nature was nothing but a rediscovery, or an enforced reinterpretation of the Aristotelian definition of man as the ζῷον λόγον ἔχον, the animal possessing language (λόγος), which in turn implies reason, the capacity for abstract thought, self-consciousness, the ability to make and use tools, subjectivity, historicity, an awareness of death, and all the heartache, and the thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to. In the words of Hermann Bahr, »now man too had become an animal« (Bahr 1909, 277),[12] but he was still the only animal that had language, and his inability to communicate with his fellow creatures weighed heavily upon him. The insurmountable gap between man and animal was language. It is significant that the paradigm shift in representations of animals around 1900 coincided with the so-called »Sprachkrise«, the pervasive crisis of faith in the ability of language to describe reality. In the absence of the metaphysical certainties at the base of anthropocentrism, language and self-consciousness suddenly seemed more like a liability than a privilege – the bars of the animals' cages might have disappeared from view, but they were still there; and now they were around man, while the animals roamed free out in the »Open«.

12 »Jetzt aber war der Mensch auch ein Tier geworden.«

The conception of the human as the ζῷον λόγον ἔχον, projects the human into a relation of supplementarity vis-à-vis the animal, as »animal + *x*«; the essence of the human is one of excess, which compensates for a lack that was there before but which the animal, in its pure, inviolate animality, defined as radical immanence, wholeness and presence, is felt not to have. Thus man comes to be seen as *ein Mängelwesen*: a deficient creature, a being defined by a lack or insufficiency, which must be supplemented by means of language. In the end, man is almost invariably defined as the animal that is not an animal. This paradox is one of the fundamental tensions at the heart of the Western tradition of metaphysical anthropocentrism, which continually seeks to maintain a rigid boundary between the mutually determining and delimiting categories of man and animal. At the same time, as Jacques Derrida observes, this »supplementarity makes possible all that constitutes the property of man« even though it »*is nothing*, neither a presence nor an absence, [...] neither a substance nor an essence of man. [...] Man *calls himself* man only by drawing limits excluding his other from the play of supplementarity: the purity of nature, of animality, primitivism, childhood, madness, divinity. The approach to these limits is at once feared as a threat of death, and desired as access to a life without differance« (Derrida 1997, 244, original italics). The animal »is on the side of death« (ibid., 196), which means that it is, or at least it is held to be, »outside the text«. But such characterisations ignore the fact that »the animal« is itself a construct of language. It is a word used, among many things, to designate that which is outside language, outside the »play of supplementarity«. Animality is next to divinity.[13] If zoopoetics is anything, it is a way of looking at, and thinking about, how animality functions *within* language, especially within poetic or metaphorical language. From Derrida's chain of non-supplementarity it appears as if the ›excluded others‹ are all interchangeable; but there is nevertheless a primacy of the sort of pure, unbroken alterity that the animal represents. Certainly, the zoopoetic writers of the *Sprachkrise* such as Hugo von Hofmannsthal and Rainer Maria Rilke attribute to both children and poets the ability to see the world as it really is, but only because they are more *like* animals than other people: even they will never be *in* the world in the same way as we like to imagine animals are – »like water in water« to use Bataille's striking formulation (Bataille 1989, 23) – which is to say ›outside language‹.

Crucially for our investigation into the »new literary animal« around 1900, the *Sprachkrise* was in large part triggered by a revised understanding of language as *inherently* metaphorical. The classical Aristotelian definition of metaphor as

13 This link is apparent in the term »anthropomorphism« itself, which was first used to denote the attribution of human characteristics to angels and deities, before it came to mean attributing them to animals (cf. Daston 2005).

simply the ›improper use of words‹, which depended on the prior existence of a stable, literal meaning from which such metaphorical or figurative usage might deviate, had become untenable. Instead, metaphor came to be seen as a *primary* form of expression. Undoubtedly the most iconic document of this crisis of language is Friedrich Nietzsche's treatise *On Truth and Lying in a Non-Moral Sense* (1873). In it, Nietzsche argues that language is nothing but an unreliable set of arbitrary signs with no essential or necessary link to ›reality‹ – all words, and abstract concepts such as a truth in particular, are simply metaphors that have become so worn down by overuse, that that we have forgotten that they are metaphors. »We believe that when we speak of trees, colours, snow, and flowers, we have knowledge of the things themselves, and yet we possess only metaphors of things which in no way correspond to the original entities« (Nietzsche 1999, 144). Because all language is inherently metaphorical, Nietzsche argues, it is not science but poetry that has a privileged relationship to reality: the scientists ignore or deny the constructedness of all human experience and all our concepts and profess to offer an objective view of the world. Poets, by contrast, because they traffic first and foremost in metaphor and subjective experience, are in fact far closer to the truth about reality – the truth that there is no truth, in other words – than are the scientists who try to step outside their subjectivity and to think in abstract concepts rather than poetic metaphors and images. Nietzsche's critique of language is in many respects a continuation of Kant's critique of knowledge, in that it presupposes the existence of a ›Ding an sich‹ from which language, as inherently metaphorical, deviates. When we talk about Truth, we in fact mobilise »a mobile army of metaphors, metonymies, anthropomorphisms« (ibid., 146), in other words a series of constructs created by man in order to subjugate the world to his own point of view. According to this anthropocentric worldview, man is the measure of all things, and that is how it should be. The crisis of language is at once the crisis of anthropocentrism, and of the assurance that the point of view of the human was the only point of view worth having.

In this sense, Franz Marc's question »How does a horse see the world?« is not only an anti-anthropocentric question but a fundamentally *zoopoetic* one, in that it acknowledges not only that a particular animal has a distinct perspective on the world, but also that this perspective is interesting in and of itself, and, conversely, that the answer or answers to this question, that the very act of posing the question in the first place, can have a significant effect on how we humans see and interpret and represent the world around us. One of the chief consequences of the prevailing crisis of anthropocentrism was a desperate search for a way out of the »prison-house of language« and into the »Open«, which in turn meant a stark increase in the number of writers and artists yielding to the »sticky temptation« of zoopoetics. The originary metaphoricity of language, coupled with the primary

animality of the metaphor, meant that any attempt to escape the boundaries of linguistic consciousness must proceed via the animal, which exists on the boundary of language and meaning, forever eluding conceptualisation, slipping toward the ineffable. If zoopoetics becomes a hallmark of the literature of this period, in the works of authors such as Rilke, Kafka, and Hofmannsthal, it is because they are each in their own way concerned with the limits of language.

The »universally familiar and unchanging character of the animals« which Lessing identified as the precondition for the symbolic function of animals in fables, are in turn dependent on a familiar, universal taxonomy, in which these essential characteristics of each animal are codified. When the animals in the literature around 1900 begin to ›misbehave‹ or ›resist‹ the metaphorical significances with which they have been burdened, it creates a particularly disquieting effect in the reader, perhaps because we generally expect the symbolic meaning of literary animals to be easy to determine. Traditionally, we read them as symbols or metaphors, and it is an unsettling experience when we are unable to say exactly *what* these symbols and metaphors stand for – it troubles the most fundamental assumptions of humanism and anthropocentrism. And if this ›new‹ literary animal emerges at the turn of the twentieth century, it is in large part because the *Sprachkrise* had revealed that one of the pillars of anthropocentrism was built on shifting sands. As I have already emphasised, from the very beginning, language has been seen as the defining characteristic of man, as that which set him apart from other animals. Man is the animal that has language: language is the dividing principle, it is that which precipitated the division of the world into Self and Other. By 1900, this division had become an insurmountable problem for European writers and thinkers. The transcendental unity of the »I« was being dismantled on all fronts – »Je est un autre« (Rimbaud); »Das Ich ist unrettbar« (Mach); »das Ich ist nicht Herr in seinem eigenen Haus« (Freud) etc. – and with it the sense of order and harmony guaranteed by the institution of metaphysical anthropocentrism. »If an animal could say ›I‹«, Immanuel Kant had written over a century earlier in his lectures on philosophical anthropology, »then it would be my companion. The ›I‹ gives each individual the prerogative to make himself centre of the world« (Kant 1831, 207).[14] Man is the only animal that can say »I« – but now »I« was another. The crisis of language is a crisis of anthropocentrism. Which means it was also a crisis of a certain way of thinking about animality. In fact, I would like to suggest that the crisis of language and representation is inextricably linked to an attendant ›crisis of the animal‹, which may be seen as the result of the profound social transformation

14 »Wenn ein Thier ich sagen könnte, so wäre es mein Camerad. Das Ich giebt einem jeden den Vorzug, sich zum Mittelpunct der Welt zu machen.«

of human–animal relations that had taken place over the course of the nineteenth century, but which also has to do with the intimate and constantly reaffirmed link between the animal and the origin of language, poetry, art, and figurative representation as such. In other words, a re-evaluation of the nature of language and poetic or figurative expression necessarily carried with it a re-appraisal of the figure of the animal. And it is at the intersection of these two questions – the question of language and the question of the animal – that I locate what I refer to as the poetics of animality, or zoopoetics.

III

Paul Valéry once defined poetics as »a name for everything that bears on the creation or composition of works having language at once as their substance and as their instrument« (qtd. in Todorov 1981, 7). Taking this useful definition as a starting point, we might posit that zoopoetics is concerned with the interplay between animality and language in the creation or composition of such works. That is to say, while poetics in general is concerned with objects whose »substance« and »instrument« is language – treating language as both the medium and the message, in other words – zoopoetics is concerned not only with the constitution of the animal in and through language, but also the constitution of language in relation and in opposition to the figure of the animal. Zoopoetics thus also always involves the question of zoopoiesis, of the creation *of* the animal as much as the creation *by means of* the animal. In a sense, zoopoetics may be regarded as the most fundamental form of poetics, in that it incorporates the primary distinction between human and animal on the basis of language. By interrogating this relationship between animality and language, zoopoetics thus inhabits the »abyssal rupture« between human and animal, and reveals how that dividing line is fragmented, unstable, and internally incoherent.

On the one hand, zoopoetics denotes an object of study in and of itself, an attribute of literary and theoretical works that in one way or another deal centrally with the figure of the animal in relation to language, writing, and thought. What all of these texts have in common is a preoccupation with the transgression of the boundaries between human and animal through language. On the other hand, zoopoetics presents a disciplinary and methodological question, namely: what can the study of animals contribute to literary studies and vice versa? While animal studies may undoubtedly be able to tell us something about animals and their place in human history and society, I would also like to think that literary animal studies can also tell us something about *literature*, and moreover something to which conventional literary studies might otherwise be blind, particularly as it has

been marked by the tendency to disregard the ubiquitous animal presence in literary texts, or else a single-minded determination to read animals exclusively as metaphors and symbols for something else. That is to say, insofar as literary studies has paid any attention to animals in literature, it has almost invariably taken the form of an investigation of »animal imagery« in a given text or œuvre. As Margot Norris writes in her ground-breaking study *Beasts of the Modern Imagination* »Imagery presupposes the use of the concrete to express the abstract, and indeed, it seem[s] that nowhere in literature [are] animals to be allowed to be themselves, to refer to Nature and to their own animality without being pressed into symbolic service as metaphors, or as figures in fable or allegory (invariably of some aspect of the human)« (Norris 1985, 17). This concern for the animal's autonomy within the literary text mirrors Walzel's distinction between animal narratives in the fable tradition, which spoke of the animal while meaning the human, and more recent works (i. e. from around 1900), in which »the animal is given poetic form for its own sake« (Walzel 1918, 53). And, indeed, the straightforward metaphorical conception of the literary animal had become all but untenable by the turn of the twentieth century, not only because of the emergent crisis of the anthropocentric assumptions that compel us to view any nonhuman presence in terms of its significance for the human, but also a crisis surrounding the nature and status of *metaphorical language* itself.

And to be sure, the new animal poets, like so many authors of the period, exhibit a profoundly ambiguous relationship towards metaphoricity. Although Nietzsche had championed the poets over the scientists as being the ones who understood that reality is a linguistic construct, this did not prevent the poets themselves from despairing at the inability of language to capture the thing in itself. This in turn explains why the new animal poets were adamant that the literary animal should inhabit the text for its own sake. Thus, in his »Dialogue on Poetry« (1904), the preeminent poet of the *Sprachkrise*, Hugo von Hofmannsthal, insists that poetry »never substitutes one thing for another« but rather tries »feverishly« to deliver the thing itself (Hofmannsthal 1992, 77).[15] Poetic animals in particular are not to be read as metaphors or symbols of something else: »they mean nothing but themselves« (ibid., 79).[16]

15 »Niemals setzt die Poesie eine Sache für eine andere, denn es ist gerade die Poesie, welche fieberhaft bestrebt ist, die Sache selbst zu setzen, mit einer ganz anderen Energie als die stumpfe Alltagssprache, mit einer ganz anderen Zauberkraft als die schwächliche Terminologie der Wissenschaft.«

16 »Ja, sie bedeuten, aber sprich es nicht aus, was sie bedeuten: was immer du sagen wolltest, es wäre unrichtig. Sie bedeuten hier nichts als sich selber«.

At the same time, the realisation that all language was metaphorical, and that λόγος is really μῦθος, offered new possibilities for creative expression. This lead to a certain paradox whereby authors such as Hofmannsthal reject metaphor as leading away from the thing itself, whilst simultaneously insisting on poetry's ability to reveal the truth by symbolico-metaphorical means. Ultimately, their despair at metaphoricity in fact betokens a yearning to return to a world of stable significances, where words still refer unambiguously to things. This is particularly evident in some of the more metaphysical animal poets, including Rilke and Hofmannsthal, but we find it even in Kafka, who, in a late diary entry, exclaims that »metaphors are one among many things which make me despair of writing. Writing's lack of independence, its dependence on the maid who tends the fire, on the cat warming itself by the stove [...]. All these are independent activities ruled by their own laws; only writing is helpless, cannot live in itself, is a joke and a despair [*Spaß und Verzweiflung*]« (Kafka 1988, 398). Now, insofar as I understand this statement (and I'm not sure that I do), it seems clear that the cat warming itself by the stove is not to be read *metaphorically* as referring to something other than itself, but rather as *literally* a cat warming itself by the stove. But why should writing be dependent on this cat? And is the cat not dependent on the stove for warmth? And on the maid who tends the fire? There are many unanswered questions. Undoubtedly, however, Kafka's relationship to writing and metaphor is not characterised purely by despair (*Verzweiflung*), but also by a certain playful irony (*Spaß*), which has gone largely unacknowledged, not least by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, who, in their seminal study on Kafka, take this diary entry as a starting point for a prolonged discussion of metaphor in Kafka's writing. Kafka, they argue, deliberately »kills« all metaphor, particularly in his animals, which »never refer to a mythology or to archetypes« (Deleuze/Guattari 1986, 13). What Kafka offers instead is metamorphosis, which, they claim, is »the contrary of metaphor«: »There is no longer any proper sense or figurative sense, but only a distribution of states that is part of the range of the word. [...] There is no longer man or animal, since each deterritorializes the other, in a conjunction of flux, in a continuum of reversible intensities« (ibid., 22).

Deleuze and Guattari are notoriously dismissive of metaphor, which they regard as dependent upon a stable, *a priori* separation of the ›proper‹ and the ›figurative‹ sense of a word, and hence on a fixed opposition between self and other, which is anathema to the principle of becoming. Hence, they too would view it as senseless to ask what it is like to be a bat, since here too a bat is not something it is like anything to be, at least not if the essence of such being is a stable, fixed ›batness‹. We are no longer dealing with a language in which nouns refer to stable identities, and, more importantly, could thus be applied metaphorically to something else. The most surprising thing about Deleuze and Guattari's comments,

however, is the way they rely on an Aristotelian conception of metaphor as simply the ›improper‹ use of words to mean something other than what they ›really‹ mean, and hence on a theory of language that considers the meaning of words to be neatly divisible into ›literal‹ and ›figurative‹. By the mid-1970s this conception of metaphor was being deconstructed by the likes of Jacques Derrida and Paul Ricœur, but the re-evaluation of metaphor goes back at least to Nietzsche, as Deleuze must have known, so his rejection of metaphor in favour of becoming must appear as a wilful misrepresentation of the true nature of the problem.

A more productive approach to the nature of metaphor and its relation to zoopoetics may be found in Max Black's classic 1955 essay on »Metaphor«, in which he offers a concise and sophisticated reflection on precisely the impossibility of determining the ›literal‹ and ›figurative‹ meaning of any given word. Having shown the classical »substitution« and »comparison« theories of metaphor to be untenable, Black instead proposes what he calls the »interaction theory« of metaphor, whereby the two terms – in his example, »man« and »wolf« – do not remain stable and unambiguously literal or figurative, but rather enter into a reciprocal relationship that generates new meaning that cannot be translated »back« into some literal paraphrase.

To say »man is a wolf« is to set in motion a »system of related commonplaces« (Black 1955, 287) about wolves and men, which become imbricated in one another. Those human characteristics which, in Black's phrase, »can without undue strain be talked about in ›wolf-language‹ will be rendered prominent and those that can't will be pushed into the background« (ibid., 288). Moreover, this »wolf-system« (ibid.), as Black calls it, is dynamic and contingent, in the sense that it will evoke different commonplaces depending on the cultural and linguistic context in which it is invoked (as Black observes, someone from a culture that believes wolves to be reincarnated humans will understand the metaphor »man is a wolf« quite differently than he does), but at base the wolf-system serves as a filter that »*organizes* our view of man« (ibid., original italics). Crucially, this organization is a reciprocal process, for, he adds, »if to call a man a wolf is to put him in a special light, we must not forget that the metaphor makes the wolf seem more human than he otherwise would« (ibid., 291). It doesn't take too much of a leap of the imagination to translate this into a deleuzo-guattarian statement about mutual becoming and reciprocal deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation, which consequently do not appear antithetical to the rule of metaphor but indeed entirely commensurate with it.

Furthermore, the »system of associated commonplaces« which in Black's theory is set in motion by the metaphor, is nothing other than Lessing's idea about the »universal and unchanging character« of the animals in fables, which are suddenly restored to their irreducible alterity and thus achieve a certain degree of agency: upon closer inspection they are *not* as unambiguous and easily deciphered as they

first appear, and above all it is far more difficult to determine which is the ›literal‹ and which is the ›figurative‹ meaning. With this, the opposition between the two types of zoopoetics outlined by Walzel also begins to crumble, since even the *first* form – i.e. that which begins and ends with the human – is open to a zoopoetic reading, since the passage through the animal metaphor will necessarily have troubled the seemingly stable boundary between »wolf« and »man«, irrespective of the author's intentions.

If recent scholarship within animal studies has nevertheless exhibited a pervasive uneasiness regarding the metaphorical conception of the animal in literature and culture, this may on the one hand be attributed to an overly narrow, Aristotelian conception of metaphor as a mode of signification where one thing (the ›figure‹ or ›vehicle‹) stands for something else (the ›ground‹ or ›tenor‹), which is the actual or intended meaning, to which the ›figure‹ is subordinate and ultimately interchangeable. This is or certainly has been the dominant mode of reading animals in literary texts (and elsewhere), which never stand for themselves but only ever for something else – usually the human. They are always the ›instrument‹, never the ›substance‹, to use Valéry's terms. The specificity of the animal, either as a being or as a figure, is thus systematically denied.

On the other hand, this wariness of a metaphorical conception of the animal in turn speaks to a more general suspicion, by no means unjustified, that such a conception serves ultimately to assimilate the animal to a fundamentally logocentric discourse and hence to reduce »animal problems to a principle that functions within the *legibility* of the animal: from animal to *ani*-word«, as Jonathan Burt writes in response to Derrida's *animot* (Burt 2006, 166, original italics; cf. Derrida 2008, 41). The question of the animal thus turns out to have been the question of language all along. Conversely, however, from a literary and philosophical standpoint, we might also posit that the question of language has itself also always been the question of the animal. What would it mean for literary studies if we were to take the implications of this involution seriously? Obviously, we cannot be content to look for animal *imagery*, or to interpret the animal out of the text by ›discovering‹ the true significance behind the animal figure, which is thus rendered entirely instrumental and substitutable. Rather, a zoopoetic approach to literature must first and foremost be attentive to the *specific* way animals operate in literary texts as »functions of their literariness« (McHugh 2009, 490). In other words, the figure of the animal is not merely one trope in an author's poetic arsenal that could easily be replaced by any other, but rather presents a specific problem *to* and *for* language and representation. Why, after all, have animals always served as such exemplary metaphors and symbols? Why, in the mythical accounts of the origin of painting, music, poetry, (and more recently, film), of the origin of language itself, does the animal always play such a prominent role, when it is precisely these things

which are held up as proof of the inherent difference between man and animal? Is it not, to quote John Berger, because »the first metaphor was animal« (Berger 1991, 7)? And is this idea not in and of itself a fundamentally *zoopoetic* idea?

It is striking that whilst anthropomorphism is now taken seriously by many scholars, there has so far been no comparable rehabilitation of metaphor, which still seems to carry the stigma of anthropocentrism, and to entail the circumscription of the animal within a human symbolic order that does violence to the absolute alterity of the nonhuman Other. But if it is possible – necessary, even – to re-examine the underlying assumptions that cause the pervasive uneasiness surrounding anthropomorphism, why should metaphor be any different, unless we wish to cling to the absolute alterity of the animal other, despite the essentially Cartesian, dualistic conception of the human that such a view must inadvertently support? The animal is not »outside the text«, either literally or figuratively. Certainly, Nagel's question, just as Franz Marc's before it, is guilty of what Bataille called »the poetic fallacy of animality«. As such, it might be deemed insufficiently rigorous by certain philosophers, and inherently naïve and sentimental by certain literary scholars. But as I have argued, such questions are worth asking and worth taking seriously as fundamentally *poetic* questions. The question of language *is*, at a very basic level, synonymous with the question of the animal, and that is why, in order to engage with the latter, the study of literature must engage with the poetics of animality.

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