Introduction: What Is Zoopoetics?

Kári Driscoll and Eva Hoffmann

In *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, Jacques Derrida famously recounts his experience of being caught, naked, in the gaze of his cat. In the prolonged reflection on the human–animal relationship that follows, Derrida posits that within the Western tradition there are two fundamentally distinct types of discourse regarding the animal: "In the first place there are texts signed by people who have no doubt seen, observed, analyzed, reflected on the animal, but who have never seen themselves being seen by the animal" (Derrida 2008, 13, trans. mod.). In these philosophical and scientific texts, animals are only ever the objects of observation, and, to quote John Berger, "the fact that they can observe us has lost all significance" (Berger 1991, 16). This first category contains almost all of Western philosophy and science. In the second category we find primarily texts by "poets and prophets" (Derrida 2008, 14), and, indeed, as Derrida affirms, "thinking concerning the animal [*la pensée de l'animal*], if there is such a thing, derives from poetry. There you have a thesis: it is

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K. Driscoll and E. Hoffmann (eds.), *What Is Zoopoetics?*,
Palgrave Studies in Animals and Literature,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-64416-5_1

what philosophy has, essentially, had to deprive itself of. It is the difference between philosophical knowledge and poetic thinking [*une pensée poétique*]" (7). Poetic thinking, by implication, is in some sense synonymous with "*la pensée de l'animal*," which, in turn, would be a form of thinking that has taken account of the fact that what we call "the animal" can look at *us* and, "in a word, without a word, *address*" us (13).

Even more strongly, Derrida suggests that the experience of being looked at by an animal, of seeing oneself being seen through the eyes of a nonhuman, represents the starting point for thinking: "The animal looks at us [*nous regarde*, also: concerns us], and we are naked before it. Thinking perhaps begins there" (29). Indeed, this hypothesis is already announced in the title of his lecture—"L'animal que donc je suis"—which places "the animal" in the position usually occupied by the Cartesian *cogito*. All thinking, Derrida appears to be saying, is ultimately "animal thinking," in that it comes *after* or, indeed, *follows* from this encounter with "the animal," and this is what Western philosophy has—in and for the sake of its very essence—sought to forget. Poetry, by contrast, would be defined as that form of thinking that has not forgotten, but has continued to "think" or to "think through" the question of the animal, repeatedly, "endlessly, and from a novel perspective" (6). Not all poetry, perhaps, and certainly not in a unified or systematic way that would justify speaking of a single, coherent tradition or movement. Nevertheless, there is and has undeniably been a certain affinity between "poetic thinking" and "animal thinking," whose precise articulation will, of course, vary greatly depending on the historical, cultural, linguistic, and geographic context and a host of other factors, but which is ubiquitous enough to merit its own name: *zoopoetics*.

The general consensus seems to be that the term "zoopoetics" was first used by Derrida in a rather offhand allusion to "Kafka's vast zoopoetics" (6). While Derrida does not elaborate on this further, the reference to Kafka is instructive because of the specific way animals and animality figure in his writings. One of the first commentators to pick up on Kafka's zoopoetics was Walter Benjamin, in his 1934 essay written on the tenth anniversary of Kafka's death. A key component of Kafka's work, Benjamin writes, is the excavation of that which has been forgotten, and this operation is inextricably linked to the figure of the animal. Animals, for Kafka, are "repositories of the forgotten [*Behältnisse des Vergessenen*]," and "Kafka never tired of listening to the animals to hear that which has been forgotten [*den Tieren das Vergessene abzulauschen*]"

(Benjamin 1999, 810, trans. mod.). Returning to Derrida's text, we might say that zoopoetics involves not only seeing but also precisely this attentive listening—a practice of "listening otherwise" (cf. Driscoll 2017)—to the animal in order to recover something that has been forgotten or repressed. For Kafka, an unavoidable effect of this auscultation of the forgotten is the reanimalization of language. The Western, carnophallogocentric tradition has consistently sought to disembody language, to transcend the physical, animal part of the human. Thus, as Benjamin observes, one's own animal body is the "most forgotten Other [*die vergessenste Fremde*]" (Benjamin 1999, 810) of language. It is for this same reason, he writes, that "Kafka called the cough that erupted from within him 'the animal.' It was the vanguard of the great herd" (ibid.). Kafka's "vast zoopoetics," then, is also a poetics of the body, of the sudden reminder of one's own corporeality, and hence of one's own animality.

This brings us to Benjamin's most important observation, which is simultaneously the most often overlooked, but which should have far-reaching consequences for how we approach not only "Kafka's vast zoopoetics" but zoopoetics in general. Immediately after observing that Kafka never tired of listening to his animals for traces of the forgotten, Benjamin writes: "They might not be the goal, but without them it can't be done [*Sie sind wohl nicht das Ziel, aber ohne sie geht es nicht*]" (ibid.). That is to say: Kafka's poetics is a zoopoetics not because his texts are *about* animals, but because the animals that inhabit his texts serve as a necessary and unsubstitutable means to particular, as yet inscrutable, poetic ends. Without them it can't be done. But what is "it"? We may never know, and indeed, the answer will be different each time, but whatever "it" may be, it contains the whole of zoopoetics.

Each of the fourteen essays collected in this volume can be seen as an attempt to answer this question by means of one or more specific texts, from a variety of traditions and periods, all of which engage, explicitly or implicitly, with the complex relationship between animality and poetic language—the entanglements of bodies and texts. Taken together, these essays present a rich and multifaceted collection of responses to the question of zoopoetics, not only in terms of the individual literary texts themselves, but also with regard to the methods and approaches of literary animal studies. That is to say, the intersection between "poetic thinking" and "animal thinking" is a characteristic not merely of poetry, but also of a certain mode of reading and criticism; the essays that follow are, thus, conceived as both studies and examples of zoopoetics.

To reiterate: zoopoetic texts are not—at least not necessarily and certainly not simply—texts *about* animals. Rather, they are texts that are, in one way or another, predicated upon an engagement with animals and animality (human and nonhuman). In short, their "poetic thinking," (i.e., the way they reflect on their own textuality and materiality), on questions of writing and representation, proceeds via the animal. This, moreover, has implications for how we, as readers and scholars in animal studies and literary studies—and literary animal studies—approach these texts. One of the most important implications of Benjamin's claim that the animals themselves might not be "the goal" of zoopoetics but rather its unsubstitutable "medium" is that we need not fear or mistrust the metaphorical, symbolic, and allegorical meanings embodied by literary animals, so long as we do not make the mistake of reading these nonhuman presences *only* or *simply* as metaphors—as arbitrary and interchangeable ciphers for the "real" or "intended" meaning. This approach has, of course, been endemic to traditional approaches to animals in literature. As Margot Norris writes in *Beasts of the Modern Imagination*, a foundational work of literary animal studies, "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). The single-minded determination to interpret the animals "out" of literary texts constitutes another form of forgetting and disappearance (cf. McHugh 2009a, 24), which a zoopoetic reading would seek to counteract. At the same time, we should also be wary of claiming to recover the animals "themselves," lest we ignore their specifically *literary* and *poetic* character. In short, the white whale in Melville's *Moby-Dick* is not *just* a metaphor; but he's also not *just* a whale. He is, if anything, an *animot* (Derrida 2008, 47–48), or a "figure" in Donna Haraway's sense, namely a "material-semiotic knot" (Haraway 2008, 4). The task of a zoopoetic reading is precisely to explore what lies between these two extremes, the mutual imbrication and entanglement of the material and the semiotic, the body and the text, the animal and the word.

In this sense, zoopoetics may also be seen as an exercise in what Derrida calls "limitrophy" (Derrida 2008, 29) or "feed[ing] the limit, […] complicating, thickening, delinearizing, folding, and dividing" (ibid.) it, multiplying differences and discontinuities, in order to show how the limit is not "single and indivisible" but rather multiple, fractured, and

folded in on itself in myriad complex and often contradictory ways. The task, therefore, is not to "blur" or "efface" the boundary between humans and animals—or rather, between "what calls *itself* man and what *he* calls the animal" (30)—in favor of a "homogeneous continuity" (ibid.), but rather to insist on the irreducible multiplicity and heterogeneity contained in those categories. This is important to keep in mind in order to counteract the inadvertent tendency, even within animal studies, to reify the category of 'the animal' by taking it for granted that everything from spiders to dogs to whales falls under the purview of the field. This is a tendency to which zoopoetics is, of course, not immune either. It makes a difference that Moby-Dick is a whale (even if he is not *just* a whale) and not a dog or a spider, and hence strictly speaking, we would need to distinguish between cetopoetics, cynopoetics, and arachnopoetics, and so on—and, indeed, many of the contributions to this volume do just that (e.g., the chapters by Michaela Castellanos, Joela Jacobs, and Matthias Preuss).

If it is, nevertheless, meaningful and important to speak of zoopoetics as a poetics of animality more generally, it is not because of the legitimacy of "the animal" as an ontological category, but rather because of its function as a discursive one, namely as the "other" of the human. Animals, more so than other forms of life such as plants, are obviously agential beings that operate at roughly the same speed and scale as humans and have their own perspective on the world around them: animals *look at us* in a way that trees and rivers—or, for that matter, other humans—do not, and this is what has always made them "good to think," as Claude Lévi-Strauss famously put it (Lévi-Strauss 1963, 89). Animals, in short, have always served as both a mirror and a screen for the human, a site of negativity against which "the human" has been defined. Yet this also means, as Kari Weil writes, that "[t]he idea of 'the animal'—the instinctive being with presumably no access to language, texts, or abstract thinking—has functioned as an unexamined foundation on which the idea of the human and hence the humanities have been built" (Weil 2012, 23). As our understanding of animal language, culture, and morality develops, she continues, so must our view of the nature of the human and the humanities. This is a further reason why a zoopoetic intervention into literary studies may be necessary, as the traditional insistence on reading literary animals as metaphors and allegories for the human has not only served to occlude the complexity and material-semiotic recalcitrance of these nonhuman presences, subsuming the

diversity of literary animals under the singularity of "the animal," it has *also* tended to assume a singular and universal human experience or condition that would be self-evidently represented by the former. Thus, such reductionist reading practices have served to perpetuate an epistemological framework that takes "human" to mean white, male, heterosexual, able-bodied, rational, and so forth.

A central concern for zoopoetics—conceived both as an object of study and as a methodological problem for animal studies, and for literary studies more generally is, thus, the question of representation: Who or what is being represented by whom or what and in what way? What, in this context, would it mean for literary theory and criticism to let animals "be themselves"? And how can and do representations of animality help us to come to a more inclusive and complex understanding of what it means to be human? Questions of representation are especially important for animal studies because nonhuman animals simply "cannot speak for themselves, or at least they cannot speak any of the languages that the academy recognizes as necessary for such self-representation" (2012, 4). This problem is compounded within *literary* animal studies because there are, strictly speaking, no "actual" animals in literary texts that "we" might allow to "be themselves": there are only words, or rather, *animots*. A zoopoetic approach to literature must take the implications of this fact seriously, and the contributors to this volume, many of whom are both scholars and poets or artists in their own right, resist the tendency to press animals "into symbolic service" as metaphors and allegories for the human, and instead are attentive to the specific ways in which animals operate in literary texts as "functions of their literariness" (McHugh 2009b, 490).

Much of the nervousness within animal studies surrounding the metaphorical and/or semiotic conception of animals stems from the suspicion that "such a conception serves ultimately to assimilate the animal to a fundamentally logocentric discourse" (Driscoll 2015, 227) that reduces the question of the animal to the question of legibility. In this context, it is important to stress that our encounters with animals in the "real" world are also *both* material *and* semiotic, and hence that the relationship between "real" animals and "literary" animals is not that of an original to a copy, but rather reciprocal and irreducibly entangled. Roland Borgards, one of the founders of literary animal studies, has argued persuasively for the inclusion of animals and plants in the collective production of meaning, suggesting that we read animals and their textual traces as "material

metaphors" (Borgards 2015, 180; cf. 2012). More importantly, the encounter between humans and other animals leaves a trace in the text that cannot be translated into meaning. Along similar lines, albeit in a Derridean rather than a Latourian vein, Rodolfo Piskorski has proposed "zoogrammatology" (cf. Piskorski 2015) as a method for reading these animal traces. In his contribution to this volume, Piskorski develops the concept of *arche*-animality (in reference to Derrida's concept of *arche*-writing) as a framework for a zoopoetic reading of Clarice Lispector's novel *The Apple in the Dark* that complicates traditional understandings of metaphoricity. These considerations serve as a further indication of the way in which the figure of the animal and of animality presents "a specific problem *to* and *for* language and representation" (Driscoll 2015, 228).

Following the principle of "limitrophy" to trouble and complicate the binary distinction between man and animal, the contributions to this volume explore new ways of reading animal figures both in canonical texts and in lesser-known works, tracing the question of zoopoetics across a variety of genres and historical periods and taking material-semiotic exchanges between human and nonhuman animals into account. Thus, in their zoopoetic readings the authors of this volume pay attention to animals not only as the objects of literary representation, but also as actively involved in the *production* of the very materiality of the text. In so doing, this volume expands on existing approaches to zoopoetics and engages with the question on how zoopoetics should proceed. By granting animals an active role in the making of poetry, a zoopoetic approach defies the long-held belief within the history of Western philosophy and the humanities in general that the human as the ζῷον λόγος ἔχων is the only animal that possesses language. In other words, animals not only have their own languages in which they communicate, but they also influence us in our production of language, and specifically in the making of poetry. Literary animals are therefore imbricated in the lives of actual animals—and vice versa.

Zoopoetics, thus, takes both human and nonhuman animals to be not only the objects but also *agents* of representation. This brings us close to Aaron M. Moe's conception of zoopoetics, whose central tenet is that "nonhuman animals […] are makers" and that "they have agency in that making" (Moe 2014, 2):

> The etymology [of zoopoetics] also suggests that when a poet undergoes the making process of *poiesis* in harmony with the gestures and vocalizations of nonhuman animals, a multispecies event occurs. It is a co-making. A joint venture. The two-fold foci of zoopoetics—that nonhuman animals are makers and that this making has shaped the form of human poems—illustrates how animals *animate* […] and therefore bring the sensuous world to the surface of the written page. (2014, 2)

Emphasizing agency as "the first focus of zoopoetics" (Moe 2013, 4), Moe argues for the empowerment of nonhuman animals and their "bodily *poiesis*" in the poetic process. As Michaela Castellanos notes in her chapter in this volume, however, Moe's model often tends to assume a rather straightforward "translation" from the "real" animals' bodily *poiesis* to the poetic text. It also implies a hierarchy of representation, whereby poetic texts that result from encounters with "real" animals are somehow more "zoopoetic" than ones that engage with purely cultural animals and animality. Leaving aside the difficulty of determining whether a particular poem is the record of an *actual* encounter and engagement with an animal "in the flesh," it seems arbitrary and above all reductive to discount the agency of textual or cultural animals in coshaping zoopoetic texts. Rilke's iconic animal poem "The Panther," for example, was inspired not only by his visits to the *Jardin des Plantes*, but also by a statuette of a panther he had encountered in Rodin's studio. The former is just as much a "figure" in Haraway's sense as the latter, and it is precisely the combination of these two impressions, these two encounters, along with innumerable others that are both natural and cultural, human and animal, real and imagined, that constitutes the "material-semiotic knot" of the poem.

Furthermore, while it is of course crucial for a zoopoetic approach that we acknowledge the agency of both human and nonhuman animals by regarding poetic and other forms of artistic expression as a "multispecies event," we must also keep in mind that the agency of nonhumans in these processes has been and continues to be quite limited. That is to say, an overly affirmative focus on agency runs the risk of obscuring how animals function both as a symbolic and as a material resource, which turns animals into a form of capital or biopolitical animal matter, as Nicole Shukin (2009) suggests. The authors of this volume, for example Matthias Preuss, Belinda Kleinhans, and Michaela Castellanos, extend the logic of biopolitics to the animal body in their zoopoetic readings,

and point to the precariousness that is involved. Matthias Preuss expands on Moe's zoopoetics by proposing to understand literature as expression, as text, and as secretion. His reading of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* accounts for the materiality of animal matter, while challenging the notion of empowerment and agency by pointing to the historical exploitation of animal skin and secretion in the material production of literature. This, too, is a "multispecies event" of sorts, albeit one quite different from the reciprocal pleasure of making that Moe appears to envisage.

Furthermore, the mimetic aspect of a zoopoetic reading that focuses on a joint "bodily energy" between species runs the risk of reiterating categorization and tends to ignore the fluidity of "becoming" with which many zoopoetic texts imagine alternative forms of life. In this volume, Peter Meedom's contribution on Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood* challenges our understanding of species and presents a zoopoetic reading that makes other forms of life and kinship formations legible. Meedom's chapter illustrates how zoopoetic approaches to literature share some of the concerns and interest of queer theory, as Eva Hoffmann also points out in her contribution. These chapters highlight the need for zoopoetics to engage with intersectional analysis: zoopoetics can and must not only challenge our conceptions of both "the animal" and "the human"—while being attentive to the specific historical moments from which these categories emerge—but also investigate how these categories intersect with constructions such as race, gender, and sexuality. In that regard, zoopoetic approaches to language and literature can inform other discourses, and be informed by them, for example critical race studies, gender studies, disability studies, etc., by investigating the central role of animality in the way we construct and perceive identity and differences.

What Is Zoopoetics? is divided into three sections, "Texts," "Bodies," and "Entanglement," each comprising four chapters. All three of these terms are central to our conception of zoopoetics, and hence all of the chapters engage with the entanglements of textuality and corporeality, the encounter between human and nonhuman meanings and forms. Nevertheless, we have grouped these twelve essays according to the relative emphasis they give to these elements. The first section focuses on questions of language, metaphoricity, and narrative, in short on the semiotic side of the "knot," whereas the second section is primarily concerned with the materiality of literary animals. The final section brings these two sides together, focusing on interspecies encounters and the complex interplay between word and world that emerges when species

meet. In addition to these twelve essays, we have the great privilege of being able to include two texts by Marcel Beyer, one of the great contemporary "zoopoets." These ruminations on writing, communication, language, and representation frame and complement the discussions at the heart of this book.

The first chapter, by Nicolas Picard, is entitled "Hunting Narratives: Capturing the Lives of Animals." In it, Picard explores the structural analogy between hunting and hermeneutics, and what this means for practices of zoopoetic reading. "Hunting narratives," thus, refers both to stories about hunting as well as the hunt for narratives. To a certain extent, he writes, "We hunt to be able to tell stories. The pleasure of narration is as important as the pleasure of the hunt, since it is, in the end, the pleasure of predation." Belinda Kleinhans's chapter sheds light on the more sinister side of linking predation and narration. Focusing on literary animals in the work of Günter Eich, particularly his "moles," Kleinhans explores how Eich's zoopoetics seeks to "undermine" the complicity of language in oppressive regimes of power (specifically National Socialism). Continuing the theme of animality and language, Joela Jacobs's contribution traces the motif of attributing speech to dogs from postmodern internet memes such as "Doge," which plays with ungrammatical language, to modernist canine narratives by Oskar Panizza and Franz Kafka, which tie in with the tradition of the eloquent "philosopher dog." Jacobs argues that language undoes the difference between human and animal in these texts by introducing epistemological and ontological doubt which destabilizes the perception of self and other for both the narrating dogs and the human readers. Concluding the "Texts" section, Sebastian Schönbeck's chapter proposes a zoopoetic reevaluation of the genre of the fable, which, he argues, has been unjustly maligned by literary animal studies as being quintessentially anthropocentric. Through a careful analysis of Heinrich von Kleist's repurposing of one of La Fontaine's fables in his essay "On the Gradual Production of Thoughts Whilst Speaking," Schönbeck explores the interrelation between aesthetics, poetics, political philosophy, and natural history in Enlightenment thought.

Section two begins with a chapter by Rodolfo Piskorski on Clarice Lispector's novel *The Apple in the Dark*. Departing from an inherent ambiguity in the Portuguese term for giving birth ("dar a/à luz," which, depending on whether it is written with an *a* or an *à*, means either to "give [someone] to the light" or to "give the light [to someone]"),

Piskorski develops a rich and complex reading of the poetics of light and dark in the novel, which he relates to the figure of animality, or, more specifically, *arche*-animality, an "articulating supplement" that both precedes and makes possible the distinction and transition between nature and culture. Following on from this, Michaela Castellanos's chapter approaches Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* as a zoopoetic text that probes the contingencies of the categories human and animal through the narrator's language. Castellanos situates whales in the cultural and historical context of early nineteenth-century America and argues that the anxiety over categorization of animal bodies mirrors the uncertainty of how to comprehend racialized bodies. Eva Hoffmann's chapter, "Queering the Interspecies Encounter: Yoko Tawada's *Memoirs of a Polar Bear*," presents a zoopoetic reading of the queer kinship in Tawada's novel that runs counter to the heteropatriarchal logic of procreation and family structures, and illustrates how the lives of three generations of polar bears are intricately intertwined and entangled with those of their human companions, from which new narratives and forms of writings emerge. While the first three chapters of this section explore the role of gender, race, and sexuality in the production and rendering of animal bodies, Paul Sheehan's chapter, which brings this section to a close, takes up the problem of the real and metaphorical disappearance of animal bodies. Through a reading of texts by W. S. Merwin and Richard Skelton, Sheehan imagines a zoopoetics of extinction predicated on absence and mourning for lost species.

The third section begins with the paradigmatic figure of entanglement: the spider. In his chapter, Matthias Preuss presents three different zoopoetological (or rather arachnopoetological) figures inhabiting Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Whether the spider's relation to the text is read as "spinning," "weaving," or "secreting," each of these three figures implies both a semiotic and a material component, which furthermore has important implications for the conception of the animal as the *medium* of zoopoetics. Peter Meedom's "Impersonal Love: *Nightwood*'s Poetics of Mournful Entanglement" shifts the discussion toward the relationship of personal and impersonal life in Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood*. Focusing primarily on the seemingly incoherent ramblings of the "gender-bending quack" Matthew O'Connor, Meedom explores how the novel addresses the entanglement of personal lives in the impersonal life of the earth, calling for an impersonal love attuned to loss. Figures of loss and mourning also animate Ann Marie Thornburg's chapter,

in which she reads two poems—one by Diane Seuss and one by Carl Phillips—that revolve around an encounter between a human speaker and an animal, which end in gestures of letting go of the other. Rather than signaling the speaker's giving up on relating or giving into vague celebrations of difference, however, these gestures, Thornburg argues, are supported by processes of self-scrutiny that acknowledge the precarity of relating. In the closing chapter, multimedia artist Catherine Clover presents and comments on her textual field recording, *Heading South into Town*, which follows the motion of a journey from Melbourne's suburban north to the center of the city and details a contingent interaction between people and birds through hearing, listening, voicing, speaking, and reading. In the chapter, she considers her creative work through a reflexive process, including how artistic thinking can work with and through the current ecological crisis and what art offers. The motif of human-bird interaction is then taken up in the volume's coda, written by Marcel Beyer, in which he meditates on the various forms of communication that take place between him and the birds on the balcony of his apartment, and how it relates to his work as a writer.

Acknowledgements The editors would like to thank all the contributors for their hard work and everyone at Palgrave who helped us bring this to fruition. Special thanks to Marcel Beyer for agreeing to be part of this volume. Thanks also to Niels Springveld for carefully proofreading all the chapters and for compiling the index, and to Susanne Knittel for her help and support.

Utrecht and Eugene, May 2017

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