

Developing Empathy Towards Other-than-human Animals through Cultural and Literary Representations

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Margarita Carretero-González, editor. *Spanish Thinking About Animals* (East Lansing, Michigan: Michigan State University Press, 2020), ix+205 pp.

Wojciech Małecki, Piotr Sorokowski, Bogusław Pawłowski, and Marcin Cieński. *Human Minds and Animal Stories: How Narratives Make Us Care About Other Species* (New York and London: Routledge, 2019), 190 pp.

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We are living in the geological period unofficially denominated Anthropocene, which is characterised by the overwhelmingly ubiquitous influence of humanity on the ecosystem and geology of our planet. In a relatively brief period of time on a biospheric time scale, in just five thousand years, our planet, which was mainly inhabited by wild animals and covered by unspoilt landscape, has turned into a world completely dominated by humans, domesticated animals and urban areas.

Since the origins of humanity, our population has been steadily increasing, yet it has noticeably skyrocketed especially in the last century, growing from 1.6 billion people in 1900 to almost 7 billion people in 2010 (Smil 613). Not only has human population grown, but also its associated domesticated zoomass. Currently, humans, livestock and pets make up to 97.11% of the world's mammalian biomass (Riechmann xi). Such accelerated change in biomass dynamics has had dire consequences for the planet as a whole. For the first time in history the planet has become dominated by one single species, which has brought about a radical transformation of the Earth's ecosystem - the number of wild animals, both terrestrial and marine, has declined dramatically, unspoilt nature has almost completely disappeared and instead, pastures, croplands, urban and industrial areas have relentlessly spread all over (Smil 628). Nowadays, as Ellis and Ramankutty (2008) pointed out, nature is embedded within human systems, since it is either dominated or affected by human activity. That is to say, in the attempt to satisfy our needs of accommodation, transportation and feeding, to name just a few examples, humans (un)intentionally destroy natural habitats of many other-than-human animals, which eventually leads to biodiversity loss—the extinction of both animal and plant species—altering natural equilibrium. Apart from all these dire effects of the Anthropocene, one of the main challenges is the anthropocentric worldview, which gives human benefit and

wellbeing utmost importance, as well as it allows and justifies the (mal)treatment of the more-than-human world and other-than-human animals. Anthropocentrism creates an artificial nature/culture dichotomy, where humanity is perceived as independent from the natural world and as a superior species that is allowed to dominate it. Nevertheless, such positioning and its consequent mastery of nature are counterproductive, since, as it has been widely discussed and demonstrated by scholars, “we are part of adaptive systems (ecosystems) [...], where everything is connected to everything else with multiple feedback loops, [...] originating a cause-effect-cause” pattern (Riechmann xi-xii). Consequently, greater human domination not only means the deterioration of the natural world, but also lower quality of life for humans themselves and their eventual demise, since we are an inseparable part of the natural world (Dubos 277). Therefore, a gradual turn towards a less anthropocentric positioning may be crucial in order to find a solution to the ecological crisis, which is why it should be addressed urgently.

Both *Spanish Thinking about Animals* edited by Margarita Carretero-González and *Human Minds and Animal Stories: How Narratives Make Us Care About Other Species* by Wojciech Małecki, Piotr Sorokowski, Bogusław Pawłowski, and Marcin Cieński study our morally unacceptable treatment of other-than-human animals and point at the need to change both the way we think about and relate to them. These two books call for the development of an “ecology of the mind” and the extension of our ethical circle which should definitely include other-than-human animals, thus putting an end to the idea of human exceptionalism and moral superiority, and developing a relationship of partnership, instead of one of dominion, exploitation and control (Riechmann xvi). Both books agree that the only way human-inflicted violence towards other species can be stopped is, first and foremost, by means of gradually abandoning our anthropocentric worldview and changing our attitude of domination towards them, since in morally relevant aspects they are no different from humans.

Although it is true that a lot has been achieved in the fight for animal rights in the last two centuries, animal abuse is still a wide-spread practice occurring systematically all over the planet (Singer and Mason; Foer; Singer *Animal Liberation*; Carretero-González). *Human Minds* suggests that the reason for this might be that the general public simply remains ignorant of all the suffering inflicted upon other-than-human animals, which gives licence to such phenomenon to linger. What both *Spanish Thinking About Animals* and *Human Minds and Animal Stories* aim at is finding a way to stop human occupation and monopolization of the Earth and to improve the relationship between human and other-than-human animals. In order to do so, both agree that it is crucial to change the way we think about other species, bringing light to the current deliberate and unnecessary animal abuse and violence and “expanding the circle of our moral concern” (Małecki et. Al. 7).

Human unacceptable instrumental treatment of animals seems to be normalised, and although more and more information about the current practices engaged in experimentation on animals, factory farming, use of animals for entertainment, etc. is widely available, there is still a vast majority who unfortunately decides to turn a blind eye on the issue. Argumentative persuasion seems to fail to change our treatment of

other-than-human animals, because human moral attitudes are strongly tied to our unconscious intuition, which is extremely reluctant to implementing changes through logical argumentation (Rorty 167–201; Haidt; Aaltola; Elżanowski). A different approach should be taken, and both *Human Minds and Animal Stories* and *Spanish Thinking About Animals* point at the power of narratives to influence our attitude to other-than-human animals. Not only can literature extend our environmental awareness and connect us “vicariously with [the] experience, suffering, [and] pain ... of nonhumans” as Laurence Buell highlights (2), but it also “might eventually have an impact on environmental laws and policies and on the daily behavior, even on the conscious and unconscious worldviews, of other members of society” (Slovic 140).

Spanish Thinking About Animals takes a traditional qualitative approach to study representations of other-than-human animals through Spanish literature and other discourses. Not only does it analyse the way other-than-human animals are treated by ordinary humans on a daily basis, but it also approaches the issue from historical and legal perspectives, which has not been done before. *Human Minds and Animal Stories*, on the other hand, studies the impact of narratives on the behaviour of humans towards other species through an innovative empirical method, combining instruments from experimental social sciences and environmental humanities. Therefore, both volumes approach the study of animals from interdisciplinary perspectives, not only through a literary framework, but also through the lenses of history, law and social sciences, thus complementing each other.

It is true that the nineteenth century movement of sentimental liberalism already promoted the use of narrative persuasion in order to improve attitudes towards other species, and even today many environmental and animal rights organisations rely on striking stories of animal abuse and suffering to try to awaken the public’s sensitivity to the problem. Nonetheless, as *Human Minds and Animal Stories* highlights, no matter how wide-spread and accepted the belief in the power of narratives is, it “does not rest on much more than historical evidence, speculation, and anecdotal reports [...] it does not rest on statistically relevant empirical data, which is a serious drawback from a scholarly point of view” (Małecki et al. 12). Therefore, the main objective of this book is to test this common assumption scientifically.

With this idea in mind Wojciech Małecki, Piotr Sorokowski, Bogusław Pawłowski, and Marcin Cieński conducted over a dozen double-blind controlled experiments with more than three thousand randomly selected subjects, who were given a variety of literary narratives depicting other-than-human animals and who did not know what the real purpose of the study was. In each study the subjects were divided into a control group, who read non-animal related narratives, and an experimental group, who were asked to read a narrative dealing with other-than-human animals, which was expected to affect the readers’ attitudes towards other species. Interestingly, the process and the findings are presented in a rather different book format, unusual for an academic work. Even though the volume includes all the necessary elements of an academic book and clearly states the hypothesis, research questions, methodology, results and conclusions, it is worth highlighting that the study itself is presented in the form of a narrative. The

authors tell the process of their research as if it were a detective story, and they also reveal some frustrating moments during their research and how they overcame them, potentially engaging the ordinary public along with scholars, and making the reading much more gripping.

Throughout the study not only was the main hypothesis tested, but also a set of secondary hypotheses in order to figure out what kind of narratives (fictional or non-fictional, narrated in first or third person, different species animal protagonists, etc.) are better suited to change humans' attitudes towards other-than-human animals. The outcomes of the study point at the fact that narratives with animal content do influence our thinking about other species, regardless of the narratives being perceived as clearly fictional (part of a novel) or non-fictional (a newspaper report, for instance), but the strength of the influence may indeed rely on the protagonist's species, since those narratives starring species which are perceived to be more akin to humans are likely to leave a greater mark on the reader, whichever age and sex they are. Another promising finding is a relatively lasting character of this influence, from two weeks to two months after exposure to the narrative. Moreover, stories depicting human cruelty and severe other-than-human animal suffering are more likely to have a longer and stronger impact on readers. Although the study was carried out in Poland and the results may indeed be culturally biased, and therefore cannot be generalized yet, these outcomes are really promising, since they suggest that a regular exposure to stories with animal-related content may well lead to a greater awareness of the issue and eventually change not only the way we think about other species, but also the way we relate to them.

Margarita Carretero-González *Spanish Thinking About Animals*, which is another brilliant contribution to The Animal Turn series, provides an interdisciplinary glance at the animal question in Spain, where many popular festivities unfold around cruelty towards a great variety of animals, such as bulls, horses, pigs, etc., and where abandonment and abuse of pets has been and still is a huge structural problem. No wonder, statistics put Spain in the spotlight as "the country with the cruellest behaviour toward animals in the EU" (Carretero-González xxi). Yet, a great majority of Spaniards have been questioning such unnecessary cruelty, which has led to the abolishment of bullfighting and some other festivities involving other-than-human animals in some parts of Spain and to a huge change in the legal status of animals, from being considered "objects" to "subjects". The book invites its readers to glance at the animal question in Spain through an antispeciesist lens and aims at finding a way to improve interspecies relationships and to put an end to human ubiquitous occupation and monopolization.

The book studies representations of animals in Spanish literature and culture, and highlights the human tendency to instrumentalise other-than-human animals both in artistic representations and in real life. The book is divided into four parts: "Animals in Literature", "Animal Ethics and Aesthetics", "Huma/nimal Bodies and Violence" and "The Fight against Speciesism". The three chapters of the first part of the book reveal that, in medieval texts, other-than-human animals were used as topoi to fulfil a particular role, likewise, in fables, they were assigned anthropomorphic qualities with a focus on human vices and virtues and not on exploring or emphasising animal worth and individuality.

Furthermore, the second part “Animal Ethics and Aesthetics” shows that, apart from being used as a literary device, as a metaphor for human behaviour, other-than-human animals are also instrumentalised for aesthetics purposes in artistic representations, like painting, photography, films, etc. Such a reduction of other-than-human identity to a mere object of beauty is just another example of human imposition of their own view on others, and therefore, yet another indication of human mastery over them and a reinforcement of the idea of other-than-human animals as nothing but beautiful creatures to look at, creatures to work on, the ones to eat, etc. Nonetheless, Verónica Perales Blanco, in the concluding chapter of this part, “*Wear My Eyes: Driving Empathy through Artistic Creation*”, states that not all aesthetic representations should be abandoned or rendered harmful, since a deep aesthetic vision of other-than-human animals, not a merely superficial one, could indeed play a crucial role in extending our circle of ethical concern and combatting our instrumental relationship towards other species. She suggests that through a technique of animal transposition we could eventually “place our feelings in [animals’] bodies, [...] represent them as significant elements in the biosphere, and, thus, [...] generate empathy” (102). Such a shift from a human perspective to a nonhuman one would allow humans to see animals as free individuals, who are not born to serve humans, but have their own purpose in life. The two concluding sections of the book, “Huma/nimal Bodies and Violence” and “The Fight against Speciesism”, present the animal question from ecofeminist, philosophical and legal perspectives, uncovering the interrelationship between the different forms of domination (males over females, or humans over animals) and point at an important shift in the Spanish thinking about animals as ‘subjects’.

Human Minds and Animals Stories as well as *Spanish Thinking about Animals* suggest that a balanced and respectful coexistence between human and other-than-human animals is possible. A huge handicap to such coexistence is a lack of awareness among the general public of all the atrocities that other species face in order to satisfy human whims. It is remarkable that both books are written in a rather simple, non-technical language, which makes them interesting and easily accessible not only for different scholars, such as ecocritics and other experts in the fields of environmental humanities and animal studies, but also for general non-specialist readers, who may still remain ignorant of the animal issue and thus might benefit from these eye-opening texts. What both works seem to demonstrate is that cultural representations of animal suffering, abuse and instrumentalization are essential in order to raise awareness about the animal question and are likely to promote a crucial change in human’s treatment of animals—from a domineering monological relationship towards an egalitarian dialogical one. Both books call for the urgency to abandon the ideology of human exceptionalism and extend our familiar ethical circle, including other-than-human animals in it, and are hopeful that this shift can be achieved by means of artistic representations of the animal question.

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