

ESSAYS

The Animal Voice Behind the Animal Fable

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Introduction

It seems that the most common representation of nonhuman animals in literature is found in fables. Moreover, the term "fable" has often been understood as "animal story" (Brown 1997, 123). When asking for familiar fables, the first ones that may come to mind are animal fables, such as "The Ant and the Grasshopper" or "The Tortoise and the Hare". But do animal fables actually represent nonhuman animals? Do they have any relevance to nonhuman animal experience? In reality, grasshoppers do not play the violin and hares do not challenge tortoises. It seems that the only authentic details about the nonhuman animals in fables are easily perceived and very basic: some physical characteristics, such as their appearance and size, and a few of their ecological characteristics, such as their status in the food chain. However these descriptions are trivial – they do not give the readers any new insight about nonhuman animals. One does not need to read animal fables in order to learn that tortoises are slow walkers or that lions are predators.

Fable is defined as a short allegoric story, which hold a lesson (Baldick 1996, 80). Readers are supposed to learn the lesson, which is relevant to their own life, from the situation that is described in the fable. Although most animal fables hold positive educational messages (not to be lazy, not to be arrogant etc.) it seems that the message regarding the treatment towards nonhuman animals is quite negative – they are mere means to an end. Unlike the positive explicit messages, the anti-educational messages, regarding our treatment towards nonhuman animals, are not explicit, but they also take place in the act of reading and interpreting the fable.

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Therefore a widespread observation in animal studies criticism is that animal fables exclude nonhuman animals; that the animal characters have become "absent referents", which is – in Carol Adams terms – anything whose existence is transmuted into a metaphor for human existence (Adams 1999, 42). Erica Fudge, one of the few literary scholars who explore animal fiction from an animal rightist point of view, does not see any potential for interest in animal fables (Fudge 2002, 71-2). Similarly John Simons writes in his book about *Animal Rights and the Politics of Literary Representation*:

The role of animals in the fable is almost irrelevant. They are merely vehicles for the human and are not, in any way, presented as having physical or psychological existence in their own right [...] The fable has little to offer and can teach us nothing about the deeper relationships between the human and the non-human. (Simons 2002, 119)

Harriett Ritvo, a historian who examines the relation between humans and nonhuman animals, claims that "animal fable has little connection to real creatures" (Ritvo 1987, 4), and Nicolas Howe is even more censorious – he considers the use of nonhuman animals in fables as another form of their exploitation by humans:

That we burden animals by asking them to teach us how to behave like human beings seems no more than yet another way of exploiting them. We force animals to do physical labor, we raise them under cruel conditions, we mistreat them in all sorts of ways, and then we domesticate them most fully by moralizing them. Far better, it would seem, to read accounts by naturalists who observe animals in their own environments to learn about the natural world, who resist treating animals as figures to be written into beast fables to confirm our moral categories. (Howe 1999, 231)

Contrary to these views, I would like to claim that animal fables do not necessarily exclude the nonhuman animals and at least some of them describe some authentic nonhuman animal behavior or enable critical view regarding human treatment towards other animals. The instrumental treatment towards nonhuman animals in fables is not obliged, as the traditional reading in fables, which excludes the nonhuman protagonists, is not the exclusive reading. I would like to present two alternative reading strategies in animal fables, which do not exclude the nonhuman animals. These strategies enable us to

read at least some fables without ignoring the existence and experience of nonhuman animals. The first strategy is focusing on the literal level of the fable and the second is extending the lesson and applying it not only on relationships within the human community but also on our relations with other animals. Applying these strategies on at least some fables offers us a new perspective on the nonhuman animal condition as well as on the relationship between humans and other animals.

The First Reading Strategy: Focusing the Literal Level of the Fable

Each fable holds two levels – literal and allegorical. Nonhuman animals function often as the protagonists of the fable literal level, which is the actual plot of the fable, but they are excluded from the allegorical level, which is considered as the significance of the fable and traditionally deals with humans exclusively. By reading fables we tend to ignore its literal level, subordinating it entirely to the allegorical level. However, a common claim among allegory theorists is that allegories, like other literary texts, have also an independent literal level, which is not to be reduced to the allegorical level. William Empson claimed that one of the allegory functions is to let the reader feel that the work has two distinctive levels, which interlaced one another (Empson 1961, 140). Angus Fletcher argued in his seminal work that the literal level of the allegory can be free from the allegorical intention and the reader can stop there (Fletcher 1993, 317).

Following the claims of Empson and Fletcher regarding the autonomic status of the literal level in allegories, and as fable is an allegorical text (actually, it is sometimes considered as the prototype for allegorical text), I would like to suggest a reading in animal fables that focus on its literal level. To illustrate this option I would like to deal with Aesop's famous fable "The Country Mouse and the City Mouse" (Aesop 1941, 131). In this well known fable, a city mouse invites a country mouse to join him in the city for a feast. They sneak into a house and are about to taste some homey delicacies; alas, suddenly the door opens and a human being comes in. The country mouse is terrified and declares that he prefers his poor but peaceful hole. Unlike many other nonhuman animals protagonists in

fables the mice in this fable behave quite authentically; they seek food and cooperate with members of their species and fear humans, as real mice do. Additionally, while in most human cultures mice are considered as vermin, "The Country Mouse and the City Mouse" significantly demonstrates a different attitude. It describes the interaction between the humans and the mice from the mice's perspective. The mice are the characterized figures in the fable. They start and conclude it, and their feelings and thoughts are described as well. The man who enters the room is described from their point of view – as an intimidating intrusion on their feast. Readers can definitely sympathize with the mice, and even learn a thing or two about their real lives and experiences. All this might help them to be more compassionate toward such unexpected visitors in the real life.

Another example is Aesop's "Jupiter and the Ass" (Aesop 1941, 69). In this fable, an ass, which is exploited by a gardener and is suffering from the heavy load, asks Jupiter's permission to work for a neighbor potter. Jupiter grants his request, but after a short while the ass finds out that the potter burdens him with even heavier loads. He prays again, asking to leave the potter and to become a tanner's servant. Jupiter grants, but soon the ass realizes that once again the change is for the worse: besides being hard worked, he is also often cruelly treated. In addition, the poor ass understands that his new master would not spare his skin. Although asses do not pray, realistic aspects in this fable are easily revealed: asses are indeed used by humans, carrying heavy loads, and they suffer as a result. The fable provides us with an educational catalog of beasts of burden's suffering, so to speak. Furthermore, reading a detailed report about the well-known reality of ass' exploitation from the unexpected perspective of the ass himself encourages us to sympathize with the ass in the fable; this, in turn, might lead to sympathy for concrete asses in the real world.

Following these readings, a question arises: what makes the nonhuman animal insignificant in some fables and significant in others? The answer is not just a matter of the interpreter's personal interests – it depends on the fable's content as well. Two possible types of content issues come to mind: first, are the nonhuman animals that are

represented in the fable domestic or wild? And second, does the interaction in the fable occur between humans and other animals or between nonhuman animals only? Most humans – fable writers included – hardly know any wild animals and are barely familiar with interactions among nonhuman animals. By writing about them, humans are using mainly their imagination and cultural stereotypes of those animals. Nevertheless, fables writers were most likely familiar with some domestic animals and their interactions with people – they presumably knew, for example, how people mistreat asses and how mice fear humans. That may explain why fables that describe interactions between domestic animals and humans have a realistic effect, while other fables do not.

It is important to note that the fact that the nonhuman animals talk does not necessarily exclude their experience and subordinate it to human content. It is very difficult to represent nonhuman animals, whose consciousness is nonverbal, in the literary medium, which is nothing but literal, as Gillian Beer phrased it "How is it possible to be true to animal experience, even if that were the wish, if your medium of description is written human language?" (Beer 2005, 313). Due to this difficulty in many cases nonhuman animals are bestowed with a voice that they do not hold in reality. This phenomenon is common also in non-allegorical literary works, which deal with nonhuman animals. For example, Richard Adams' famous novel *Watership Down* (1984) arouses sympathy towards real rabbits, although the rabbits in his novel use human language. Their description – aside the anthropomorphized elements – includes also many elements which deal with the authentic lives of rabbits, such as their struggle to survive after their natural habitat became a human construction site. In these cases the nonhuman animals are indeed partly anthropomorphized, but their experience is not excluded. Actually, the partial anthropomorphism functions as an instrument which helps us to understand the nonhuman viewpoint.

In their seminal work on metaphor George Lakoff and Marc Johnson argue that anthropomorphism, which is defined as attributing human characters to a nonhuman subject, is a case of metaphor, which is defined as attributing one subject the characters of other subject (Lakoff and Johnson 1980, 33). We use metaphors to discuss unfamiliar

subjects in familiar terms and likewise we use anthropomorphism in order to discuss unfamiliar subjects, such as the nonverbal consciousness, in familiar terms – human verbal consciousness.

The Second Reading Strategy: Broadening the Lesson of the Fable

In addition to focusing on the literal level of the fable, constructing an alternative thematic level is also possible. This alternative thematic level would not focus on human only, but also question their treatment towards other animals. Indeed, the lesson of many classical fables is present explicitly as part of the fable, but the fable is not necessarily restricted to this lesson. In many cases the lessons were added to the fables in a later period, not by their original writers, and therefore many fables hold in different versions different – and sometimes even converse – lessons. Therefore I would like to suggest a reading in fables, in which the thematic level does not exclude nonhuman animals.

As I have just argued before, fables which deal with interactions between nonhumans and humans have a potential of focusing on the literal level of the fable. Additionally, these fables have also potential for broadening the lesson also to interspecific issues. Fables which present interactions only among nonhuman animals have no moral implication; nonhuman animals (as well as human babies and some brain-damaged people) are moral *patients*, as they can feel pain and pleasure, but they are not moral *agents*, as they cannot make ethical decisions (Regan 2004, 295). Therefore ethical judgment of nonhuman acts is irrelevant. If a fox "mistreats" a stork in a fable, it cannot have a moral implication on the lives of real foxes and storks. The only possible moral implications in this case exclude the nonhuman animals by allegorizing them and focus on human relations solely. But when an animal fable deals with relationships between humans and other animals, it may have moral implications about interspecific relations as well.

As aforementioned, when a human mistreats an ass in a fable, we may allegorize it, but we may also judge this treatment literally. However, animalistic aspects of fables do not

end with factual descriptions and realistic effect – animal fables might have an alternative thematic function as well. While the common thematic function concerns the human condition, an alternative thematic function might concerns the nonhuman animal condition and the relationship between humans and other animals. Consider for example Aesop's "The Forester and the Lion":

A Forester meeting with a Lion one day, they talked together for a while without differing much in opinion. At last a dispute happening to arise about the point of superiority between a man and a Lion. The man, wanting better argument, showed the Lion a marble monument, on which was placed the statue of a man striding over a vanquished Lion. "If this," says the Lion, "is all you have to say for it, let us be the carvers, and we will make the Lion striding over the man". (Aesop 1941, 86-7)

The literal meaning of the fable lacks any realistic credibility regarding nonhuman animal representation as lions do not talk to humans and are not concerned with the idea of superiority over humankind. But in this literal level of meaning, humans are actually authentically represented; human individuals and human culture are indeed concerned with human superiority over other species. Therefore, we can see the forester as a symbol of humanity, while the lion's function is to cast a doubt on anthropocentrism and to criticize it. We can also read this ancient fable in the light of Canon Criticism. Such criticism exposes the fact that the bulk of historical and artistic representations are produced by dominating social groups, reflecting their perspective and interests. Other voices, which were too weak to represent themselves, were consequently excluded from cultural representation. Therefore what we can learn from these representations is more about the dominating group's perspective than about the social reality itself (Ross 2000, 516). In the fable, the lion's words point at the same idea: that the artistic representation of a man striding over a defeated lion does not represent reality but only its maker's perspective, which is in this case the human perspective.

If so, the lion becomes a symbol of political groups, whose perspectives are culturally ignored. This reading also fits common claims in fable criticism accordingly the fable expresses the philosophy of the weak and the rightless and prefers the victimized side

over the powerful (Spoerri 1942, 32; Friederici 1965, 932). Since Romanticism, the relation between the signifier and the signified within the poetic symbol is considered as the relation between a prototype member and its class (Fletcher 1993, 17; Frye 2000, 89). Nonhuman animals are the prototype of excluded political group, due to their ultimate weakness in culture. Even lions, which are considered as very strong animals, are profoundly weak, because they cannot represent themselves and tell their own story. As Horkheimer and Adorno write in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*: "Escape from the dismal emptiness of existence calls for resistance, and for this speech is essential. Even the strongest of animals is infinitely weak" (Horkheimer and Adorno 1997, 247).

Having reviewed classical fables, I would like to discuss a modern animal fable – Orwell's *Animal Farm*.¹ This work can be divided into two parts: the first one describes the events leading to Mr. Jones' abandonment of the farm, and the second part deals with the self-government of the animals. According to the principle that I have just drawn, the first part – which describes the suffering of the farm animals under the reign of the human farmer – is characterized by a high degree of realism, while the second part – which describes their suffering under the reign of the pigs – is characterized by a low degree of realism.² Although the description of the animal suffering under the human farmer husbandry has an obvious allegorical function – it stands for the Russian people suffering under the czar's reign – we can also read this description literally. Major's speech in the beginning of the story can refer to the real situation of farm animals:

Now, comrades, what is the nature of this life of ours? Let us face it: Our lives are miserable, laborious and short. We are born, we are given just so much food as will keep the breath in our bodies; and those of us who are capable of it are forced to work to the last atom of our strength; and the very instant that our usefulness has come to an end we are slaughtered with hideous cruelty. No animal in England knows the meaning of happiness or leisure after he is a year old. No animal in England is free. The life of an animal is misery and slavery: that is the plain truth. (Orwell 1999, 5)

1 Although *Animal Farm* defiantly does not match the basic definition of the genre – a brief tale that conveys a moral lesson – it does hold some animal fable characteristics, primarily the allegorical use of nonhuman animals, which is the most relevant aspect to this essay.

2 I use the term "realistic" here as oppose to "fantastic" – as a representation that compatible with our common-knowledge regarding its object.

In contrary to other common representations of farm animals in literature (mainly in children literature), where the relations between the farmer and the nonhuman animals is described as symbiotic, the relations between the farmer and the animals in *Animal Farm* are presented as exploitative. The fact that the nonhuman animals claim it by using a human language does not lessen its power and validity; we can distinguish between the context of the claim, which is not realistic because of the animals' linguistic expression, and the content of the claim, which reflects a valid and horrible reality.

Most of the critical reviews of *Animal Farm* focus on the analogy between the explicit components of the story and the Russian Revolution of 1917: Major is Marx, Napoleon is Stalin, Snowball is Trotsky, Mr. Jones is the czar, Manor Farm is Russia, the song Beasts of England is The International and so on (Ferguson 1990, 109-10; Rai 1990, 113; Meyers 1984, 135). But every analogy necessarily contains both similarity and difference – otherwise the two contexts would not be analogical but identical. This differential gap prevents us from reducing the nonhuman condition to the human condition and therefore completely excluding it. Most critics, anthropocentric orientated, pre-assume that the only function of nonhuman animal experience in literature is to illuminate human experience. Therefore, they reduce animal experience to human experience and neglect the non- reducible aspects.

Major's speech, for example, can mostly refer to the human condition – "We are born, we are given just so much food as will keep the breath in our bodies; and those of us who are capable of it are forced to work to the last atom of our strength animals are worked". This sentence well describes both animal and human worker exploitation. But the next sentence – "and the very instant that our usefulness has come to an end we are slaughtered with hideous cruelty" – cannot refer to the human condition, but only to the condition of nonhuman animals. This description cannot exclude the nonhuman animals, because as much as human workers are exploited, at least in most cases they are not slaughtered when they are no longer viewed as efficient.

One of the most remarkable and well-known sayings in Marx and Engels' *Manifesto of the Communist Party* is that "proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains" (Marx and Engels 1998, 37). Marx and Engels use the word "chains" metaphorically, while in *Animal Farm* the chains are concretized and used literally:

Their first act was to gallop in a body right round the boundaries of the farm, as though to make quite sure that no human being was hiding anywhere upon it; then they raced back to the farm building to wipe out the last trace of Jones's hated reign. The harness-room at the end of the stable was broken open; the bites, the nose-rings, the dog-chains, the cruel knives with which Mr. Jones had been used to castrate the pigs and lambs, were all flung down the well. The reins, the halters, the blinkers, the degrading nosebags, were thrown onto the rubbish fire, which was burning in the yard. So were the whips. (Orwell 1999, 13)

This elaborated description demonstrates the difference between the metaphorical chains, which the proletarians are restrained by, and the concrete chains, which are used to control nonhuman animals. The comparison does not exclude the nonhuman animal exploitation, but demonstrates its uniqueness and raises attention to it.

As I mentioned before, the second part of *Animal Farm* has no realistic effect – in reality pigs do not rule other animals. It is obvious that the function of the later events in the story is allegorical. But the anti-Soviet interpretation is not the only possible interpretation. A common claim regarding the thematic function of *Animal Farm* is that it is much wider than the critique of the Soviet Union – it condemns dictatorships as they are. The fact that the pig-dictator in the story is called Napoleon supports this approach (Ferguson 1990, 112; Meyers 1984, 135). So once again we can see the nonhuman animals' slavery (and farm animals in particular) as the symbol, as the prototype, of slavery in general. This is indeed a very reasonable choice once we acknowledge that agriculture includes incomparable practices of control and exploitation, such as maiming, killing, separating parents from their offspring, preventing mating or forcing reproduction, and genetically distorting the animals by artificial selection.

In his preface to the Ukraine edition of *Animal Farm*, Orwell describes the circumstances of writing the story:

I saw a little boy, perhaps ten years old, driving a huge cart-horse along a narrow path, whipping it whenever it tried to turn. It struck me that if only such animals became aware of their strength we should have no power over them, and that men exploit animals in much the same way as the rich exploit proletariat. I proceeded to analyze Marx's theory from the animals' point of view. To them it was clear that the concept of a class struggle between humans was pure illusion, since whenever it was necessary to exploit animals, all humans united against them: the true struggle is between animals and humans. From this point of departure, it was not difficult to elaborate the story. (Orwell 1970, 458-9)

It seems that Orwell himself was interested in the implications of his story on the nonhuman animal condition. We cannot tell for sure whether other fable writers were also interested in such implications, but at least some of the animal fables – usually those which present relationship between humans and other animals – provide us with the means to expose the nonhuman animal voice behind the animal fable. Nonhuman animals do not have to be see-through; we can choose to see them instead of seeing through them. As any other literary text, the meaning of the fable and its significance do not originate from the written text exclusively but they are produced within the interaction between the text and its readers. Therefore the traditional anthropocentric understanding of fables is at least partly a result of the speciesist bias of their interpreters. In many cases the anthropocentric understanding of fables is not inevitable. Some fables enable us an alternative understanding, which does not exclude the nonhuman animals and does not reduce them to human figures and issues. If we try to notice the nonhuman existence behind the anthropomorphized figures, we will be able to learn about nonhuman animals and our relations with them. We could still use animal fables in order to understand allegorically human issues, but we could do so parallel to our interest in the nonhuman animals, without nullifying them. This way, instead of a reading, which is based on animal stereotypes and passive understanding of explicit messages, we reach a multilevel understanding, which develops both empathy for nonhuman animals and critical reading methods.

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