

Englisches Seminar Münster

Anglistentag 2007

Abstracts der Sektion I: "Defining the Human: Man-Animal Relations in Literature"

Harriet Ritvo:

"The Animal Turn in British Studies"

It is only recently that literary scholars and other humanists have begun to take the relationship between people and other animals seriously as a topic for research and interpretation - one that can reveal a great deal about human culture, as well as about the experience of the non-humans who come into contact with us. This expansion of interest parallels a much longer and more gradual expansion of interest among scientists and social scientists, and of sympathy in Anglophone culture at large. In particular, there has been an increasing willingness to see the human beings as part of a zoological continuum. I will offer an overview of these trends, and then illustrate them with reference to several examples drawn from the Victorian period in Britain.

Jürgen Meyer

"'Italianate Englishmen' and Other Renaissance Chimaeras"

The image of anatomical hybrids is fostered by a growing interest in the body during the Early Modern Age, the human-animal interface being topical in Renaissance culture. My paper discusses four possible types of 'mimicry' in (non-)fiction.

1) Mapping the human body, even such progressive anatomist-surgeons as Vesalius in his *De corporis humani fabrica septem libri* (1543) forged a number of illustrations of human organs using animal material, thus blurring the boundaries of human and animal physique in what may be defined as 'pictoral mimicry' - a common practice in the Galenic anatomy which Vesalius tried so hard to improve.

2) Ascham's *The Scholemaster* (1568/70) throws a tantrum at those Englishmen who (re-)turn 'Italianated'/alienated, turning into monstrous chimaeras by 'cultural mimicry'. As a Protestant, Ascham forgets his humanism and denies English Catholics both their status as educated subjects and as human beings.

3) Sidney begins his *Defence of Poesy* (1582/95) with an Italianate anecdote, in the course of which the speaker almost forms the wish of becoming a horse, if it were not for his down-to-earth attitude about remaining where, and what, he is ('self-reflexive mimicry'). His initial implication of Pegasus, mythical patron of high-flying fiction, stands in sharp contrast to the final allegory of England as explicit "stepmother" to poetry.

4) Baldwin's *Beware the Cat* (1552/70), following Vesalius' treatise in chronology, is a prose narrative of a persona who mixes a potion that allows him to comprehend the cat noise around him, and thus to understand that animals are sly but (arguably) reasonable creatures. The text invites a reading as an allegorical satire against Cat(holic)s, employing a representational mode of 'psychedelic mimicry'.

Thus, the discussion of 'humanoids' in Renaissance texts is situated in the controversies over such questions as 1) where, in the great chain of beings, 'man' can be located ("angel" or "animal"), 2) which are the cultural denominators for being (or not being) an Englishman or, for that matter, a

genuine human ("nature" or "nurture"), and 3) in what way English 'poesy' can be fostered to become a valuable body in literature ("romance" or "realism").

Andreas Höfele:

"Staging the Species Boundary in Shakespeare's Theatre"

In what we might call the perceptual topography or, to use a term coined by the Russian structuralist Yuri Lotman, the semiosphere of early modern London, the playhouse, the bear garden, and the site of public execution generate a powerfully synoptic vision. Horizontally linked with the other contemporary forms of public spectacle and vertically placed on a sliding scale between heaven and hell, Shakespeare's stage thrives on an economy of endlessly fungible signifiers which this symbolic order of space offers. The paper will explore how this economy provides the frame within which the early modern theatre negotiates "the place of the human."

Virginia Richter:

"Moving Machines, Suffering Creatures: Animals in Eighteenth-Century Literature and Culture"

Joseph Wright of Derby's painting *Bird in an Airpump* (1768) depicts a group of spectators, of different ages and sexes, watching an experiment performed on a small bird. The animal's lifeless body, placed in the vacuum produced by the eponymous airpump, demonstrates the effects of the lack of oxygen on the organism. The glances of the spectators mingle scientific curiosity with pity for the expiring creature. Wright's painting thus epitomizes the contradictory functions of animals in eighteenth-century culture: In Descartes' definition, animals are pure matter, devoid of both reason and feeling, and therefore uniquely suitable objects of experimentation. By contrast, philosophers of sentiment like Rousseau and Shaftesbury see animals as sentient beings and fellow-creatures; their ability to feel, and consequently, to suffer, renders them a gauge of true humanity - man's ability to feel empathy. In literary texts, the emotional refinement of characters is often shown through their compassion with dumb creatures, as in the case of Sterne's sentimental travellers mourning dead asses and captive birds (*A Sentimental Journey through France and Italy*). The culture of sensibility thus prepares the way for the nineteenth-century discourse of anti-vivisectionism and animal protection, while Enlightenment interest in science places the animal body at the centre of an unprecedented theatre of cruelty - the experimental laboratory. This contradictory take on the animal body as object of science/object of pity is accompanied by continuous speculations about the central Cartesian difference marker - rational speech. In inquiries about animals' capacity to acquire language, from Locke to Lord Monboddo, the difference between humans and animals - and man's uniqueness within God's creation - is at stake. - The eighteenth century, in all its discursive polyvalence, is a period central to modern conceptions of human-animal relations; however, so far this aspect of eighteenth-century culture has been under-researched and deserves more critical attention.

Greta Olson:

"Evolving Images of Beasts in Eighteenth-Century Britain"

Thinking about animals forces us to question our status as humans. Recently, philosophers like Peter Singer have argued that the traditional assumption that non-human beings are inherently inferior is analogous to the poor thinking that has informed racist as well as sexist attitudes. This 'speciesism' needs to be overridden. The roots of animal liberation philosophy can be found in eighteenth-century literary fiction, science, philosophy, and law. The Utilitarian Jeremy Bentham reasoned that if animals can suffer, and clearly they can, then they deserve rights and protection just as humans do. Increasing moral injunctions and laws against cruelty towards animals were based on the growing conviction that animals were sentient beings. To torture animals signified not only a lack of civility on the torturer's part but also the potential instigation of other forms of violence. Analogously, arguments developed about the need to discontinue public executions, flogging, and pillaring, because such practices incited certain types of individuals to perform other acts of cruelty. Hogarth's engravings, the "Four Stages of Cruelty" (1750/51) depict how childhood brutality to animals will lead to vicious criminality in adulthood and be repaid by hanging, anatomization, and finally having one's entrails eaten by a canine. Similarly, the psychological sadism enacted by Samuel Richardson's rake/villain Lovelace against Clarissa is in part explained by childhood propensity for hunting and killing small animals. And Caleb Williams is pitied in prison because he is being held - without bedding and chains - in conditions worse than a dog. Yet Robinson Crusoe equates "savages" and "cannibals" with wild beasts, and imposes rule over them on his island, and vicious criminals were frequently compared with beasts in contemporary legal texts and debates.

In this presentation I consider evolving contradictory attitudes towards animals during the long eighteenth century in legal, scientific and literary texts to argue that the elevation of animals to the sentient did not necessarily bring a betterment of inter-human relations. Forbidding animal (and human) torture and bloodsports so as to save 'dangerous' humans from viciousness meant that those designated as 'dangerous' were assigned to an ontological category inferior to that which had formally been considered brute. The process was akin to early racialist theories that insisted that blacks were more like apes than white Europeans.

Oliver Lindner:

"'Stout Competitors': Man and Animals in British Science Fiction, 1880-1930"

Ants, Bacteria, Bees and Birds, Apes and Monkeys – early British science fiction literature teems with animals. From H.G. Wells's *The Island of Dr Moreau* (1896) with its depiction of a scientist's efforts to humanize animals onwards, science fiction has questioned existing boundaries and presuppositions of the man-animal relationship. Unlike other genres of literature, science fiction is not bound to the ties of realistic description, and therefore it provides a fruitful field of speculations on the future state of mankind, its place within the universe and also its relation to the animal world. With its potency of reshaping the relationship between man and animal, British science fiction of the period 1880-1930, particularly in the wake of biological science and evolutionary theory, has sketched many ways of interaction between man and animal and thereby focused on topics such as subjugation/domination, progress/degeneration or instinct/reason.

From the extinction of animal species in W.D. Hay's early utopian novel *Three Hundred Years Hence* (1881) and O. Stapledon's *Last and First Men* (1930), the re-emergence of animals as dangerous force in the post-apocalyptic scenery of R. Jefferies's novel *After London; or, Wild England* (1885), the use of animals as domestic servants as depicted in P. Greg's *Across the Zodiac* (1881) or man's overthrow by a generation of large and intelligent ants in A.L. Green's short story "The Captivity of the Professor" (1901) or in the remarkable novel *The Polyphemes* (1906), written by the prominent British physician F. Hernemann-Johnson, science fiction of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries reveals a wide range of possibilities.

The paper will argue that from the 1880s onwards the function of animals in science fiction literature has increasingly changed from early portrayals of strange animals as exotic ingredients to a futuristic setting or servant-like domestics to the depiction of animals as competitive species that challenge man's dominance on earth and create their own societies and structures by developing intellectually equal or even superior modes of thought and existence. Whereas the dominance of mankind had been exclusively threatened by extraterrestrial beings in early science fiction, such as H.G. Wells' pathbreaking *The War of the Worlds* (1897), from the early twentieth century onwards animal species are also used as powerful competitors questioning mankind's superior position both on earth and within the larger universe. The paper will use an interdisciplinary approach by setting major developments concerning the relationship of man and animals in science fiction literature against the backdrop of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century debates in zoological discourse and evolutionary theory.

Sonja Fielitz:

"I always thought unicorns were fabulous monsters. I never saw one alive before": The Cultural Construct and Significance of the Unicorn in Nineteenth- and Twentieth/Twenty-First-Century Texts"

With the exception of the dragon, probably no imaginary animal has had a greater appeal to human beings than the unicorn. For more than two thousand years it has acquired a range of symbolic meanings, and its legend has many different facets in various cultures from classical antiquity to the Western world of the present. Thus it will be the concern of my paper to trace the cultural significance of the unicorn in such different texts of the nineteenth and twentieth/twenty-first centuries as Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass*, Tennessee Williams's *The Glass Menagerie*, C.S. Lewis' *The Last Battle*, Theodore Sturgeon's "The Silken-Swift", Iris Murdoch's *The Unicorn*, Peter Beagle's *The Last Unicorn* and Joanne K. Rowling's Harry Potter series in order to throw some light on the following questions: How did authors construct this imaginary animal? Which cultural values (such as courage, wisdom, virtue, nobility or rather pride, wrath and destructive forces) does it symbolise in which cultural contexts? Does the unicorn symbolise either good or evil or does its significance remain ambiguous? Could one even go so far as to assume that its strength represents the invincible power of Christ respectively the destructive power of Satan? As it will turn out, the symbolism connected with the cultural construct of this imaginary animal throughout the centuries is so complex and meaningful that its appeal will undoubtedly continue for a long time to come – and surely until Münster 2007.

Beatrix Hesse:

"Learning from Animals: T.H. White's King Arthur"

In *The Sword in the Stone*, the first volume of his tetralogy on the King Arthur myth, *The Once and Future King* (rev. ed. 1958), T.H. White introduces a new variation of the traditional motif of man-animal metamorphosis. In order to teach him about the various forms of political organization, his tutor Merlyn successively transforms the youthful Arthur into a perch, a merlin, an ant and a wild goose. This idea is clearly indebted to evolutionary theory in general and, more particularly, to the evolving discipline of ethology. The theory of evolution provided a scientific justification for the time-honoured tradition of comparing different types of state and government to the organization of communal life among animals. Apart from his own observations of ants, birds of prey and wild geese, White drew upon studies by Julian Huxley, W.H. Hudson, Auguste Forel and Konrad Lorenz. Among writers of fiction, White acknowledged the influence of Selma Lagerlöf and Rudyard Kipling. But while earlier treatments of the man-animal dichotomy had tended to treat it as a binary opposition with man defined by what distinguishes him from animals, White deliberately distances himself from this technique by turning Arthur into the ideal representative of humanity precisely by acknowledging his kinship with other species.

In my paper, I will sketch White's evolutionary philosophy as expressed in *The Once and Future King* and its intended fifth volume, *The Book of Merlyn* (which, although completed in 1941, was only published posthumously in 1977), and examine the various influences of literary sources and textbooks on ethology consulted by White. The second part of my paper will follow up the conspicuous parallels between *The Book of Merlyn* and Konrad Lorenz' *Das sogenannte Böse* (1963) noticed by François Gallix and Sylvia Townsend Warner. These similarities are the more remarkable for the fact that, due to dates of composition and publication, neither of the two books can actually have influenced the other. In the case of *The Book of Merlyn* and *Das sogenannte Böse*, literature and science closely approach each other – however, the two books met with a widely different reception: While Lorenz was awarded the Nobel Prize, White's transformations of Arthur into various animals were turned into a Disney movie. In fiction, representations of animals seem to be unavoidably associated with children's literature.