

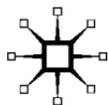
Animal Rights and the Politics of Literary Representation

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John Simons

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In memory of the millions of animals slaughtered in the foot and
mouth epidemic of 2001

Schafe können sicher weiden,
Wo ein guter Hirter wacht.
Wo Regenten wohl regieren,
Kann man Ruh und Freide spüren
Und was Länder glücklich macht.

J. S. Bach, Cantata: *Was mir behagt, isi nur die muntre Jagd*
BWV 208 Nr.9

(Where there is a good shepherd watching them, sheep may safely
graze. Where rulers rule wisely, one can experience peace and tranquility
and the things that make nations fortunate.)

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A Very Brief Prelude

Five years ago I was in the privileged position of being asked to deliver an inaugural lecture. The lecture was entitled 'Animals and the Scope of Criticism' and the book you are about to read is, in many ways, an expansion of the ideas sketched out in that lecture. As I was preparing the text for my talk I was struck by the etymology of the word 'inauguration'. It means 'to begin something', but it carries within it the sense of beginning something by first checking that the omens are propitious. The way to do this is to slaughter animals and look at the patterns of their entrails. What occurred to me as I contemplated this was how tied up we are in the death of animals and how even such as innocent and pleasurable activity as an inaugural lecture had behind it the smell of blood. The Latin *inaugurare* means to take omens from the flight of birds but the official augurs were ritual slaughterers and in modern Britain there are increasingly few birds.

In this book I argue in various ways that it is all but impossible to disentangle ourselves from the history wrapped up in the idea of inauguration. I also express considerable scepticism as to the power of philosophy to enable us to do this. I am more concerned with showing how literary texts can be read with a view to exploring their articulation of the animal world and the relationship of humans with that world. Although I do propose some ways forward in the final chapter, these should ultimately be seen as tentative and subordinate to the act of attempting to use the texts of our cultures to think ourselves into a position which might break us free from the terrible treatment of animals that has marred most of histories.

In some ways I am offering an alternative set of stories and that could be read as a move towards the construction of a specific canon. However, I would not wish this interpretation of my intentions to be taken too far although, to some extent, that is one possible outcome of my project. I would prefer readers to look at the ways I have approached texts and then to see how the ideas I have developed in my readings might work in other contexts.

In order to play down the canonising effect, I have also quite deliberately chosen an eclectic and ahistorical approach in that I do not work through my material period by period. It would have been possible to include far more material and it would have been necessary to do so

had this book taken the form of an historical survey of the problem of animals in literature. Smart, Blake and Cowper are not given anything like the attention they deserve in this context, Whitman is not mentioned at all, and although I cite Dr Johnson I do not dwell on his relationship with the 'very fine cat' Hodge. Similarly there is little attention paid to the extraordinarily rich response to animals which is to be found in the poetry of Thomas Hardy and John Clare. In the modern age, Ted Hughes and Les Murray in particular deserve attention.

I do, however, provide the reader with some contexts for my work and parts of this book are deliberately constructed so as to provide what is, essentially, a brief course in animal rights thinking and its history. This is not a textbook, but I am working on the assumption that not everyone who might be interested in what I say about the politics of literary texts will necessarily be familiar with the politics of animal rights. Indeed, one of the chief points in writing the book at all is to address what I see as the grave shortcomings of literary studies where the address to the non-human experience is concerned. Similarly, my address to theory does not offer a textbook approach. Those who are familiar with the philosophical contexts that are the subject of implied engagement in this work do not need them restated here. Those who are not can find plenty of expository work elsewhere.

I hope that anyone who reads this book and finds some merit in it will locate that merit not only in what it says about literature, but also in what it says about the way we live and the way we might live if we chose. There is always more to be said and not everything that could be said is said here. What I have tried to do is to say the things that seem to me most important and to say them as clearly and appropriately as I can. I am, in many ways, stepping back behind the trajectory of literary studies as they currently exist as this book addresses truth and ethics and proposes that we act on the messages I read in our culture.

Finally, this work is designed as a useful book in that it offers an account of things that could and should be changed, and is, in itself, a contribution towards changing them. I did not start out with the intention of writing something quite as polemical or quite as directed towards action as this book has become. I do not see myself as a campaigner. However, as I worked on the texts and as I read around and researched the field I found myself frequently overwhelmed with anger and dismay. Tragedy is marked by pity and terror and anyone who spends as much time as I have in the last few years studying the ways

in which humans treat animals will encounter plenty of both. They will also encounter the hubris of the human condition as it relates to animals and, possibly, the anagnoresis inherent in our encounter with the suffering of the non-human. If history repeats itself, the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce, I am sad to say that it seems that we have lived in a history where no such chance of repetition will be possible.

It would not have done justice to the experience of doing this work if the feeling that was released as I thought about my topic had not been represented in the final product. Even less justice would have been done if at least one of the aims of this book were not to advocate a different way forward. This is an academic book about certain aspects of the literary representation of animals. But that is no reason why it should not also be a contribution to a wider debate in which many thousands of people of all walks of life are currently engaged and which they hold as central to their idea of what it is to live a good life.