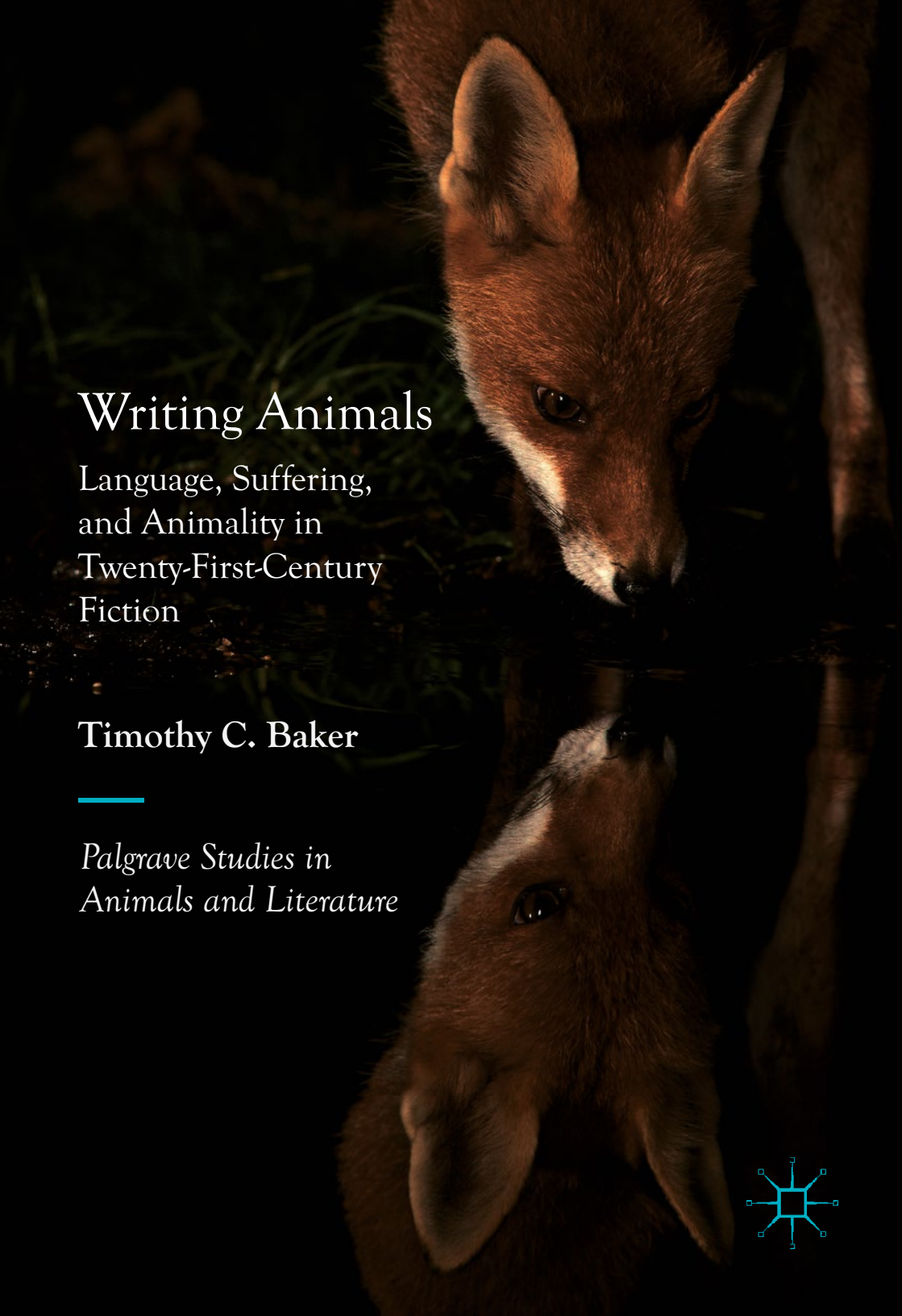

Writing Animals

Language, Suffering, and Animality in Twenty-First-Century Fiction

Timothy C. Baker

Palgrave Studies in Animals and Literature

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Contents

CHAPTER 1

Introduction: Literary Animals

Nonhuman animals haunt the peripheries of contemporary fiction. If 'the animal', as Kari Weil has influentially written, 'has functioned as an unexamined foundation on which the idea of the human and hence the humanities have been built', this is perhaps especially true of the novel, where animals often function as silent witnesses or points of comparison.[1] Animals, framed either individually or as a collective identity, are the others against which humanity measures itself. Animals take many forms in fiction, whether representing a desire for a shared existence, as in many children's animal stories, or appearing as fundamentally unknowable, as in the boom of animal horror in the 1970s.[2] Whether the animal is presented, in an inherently anthropomorphic way, as a familiar whose shared existence with humans can better help them understand their own lives or as an other who exists outside the sphere of human comprehension, however, the presence of animals in fiction presents a continual challenge to questions of linguistic representation.

The presentation of nonhuman animals as both a counterpart to and a negation of human concerns can clearly be seen in a novel such as Deirdre Madden's *Molly Fox's Birthday* (2008). Molly Fox never appears in the novel, but is the centre around which the unnamed narrator's meditations on art, language, memory, trauma, and friendship revolve. Fox is an actor heralded for her 'remarkable understanding of language', which she uses, one character claims, to blow 'a hole through' unreality and dullness.[3] Language and art are set apart from lived experience in order to reveal it

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more fully. Various characters argue that 'there's a kind of truth that can only be expressed through artifice' (117) and, indeed, that one can 'redeem suffering through beauty' (163). Language and art, which are always linked in the novel, are thus positioned as a central human responsibility. Each of the characters, present and absent, reflects on the 'moral responsibility […] to be fully human' (200), and largely concludes, like the philosophers discussed below, that humanity in part consists in linguistic communication and the ability to create art that exceeds the individual. For all its human concerns, however, the novel also includes brief appearances by two nonhuman figures, one known through its unreality and one even more mysterious.

Fox keeps a fibreglass cow in her garden, which astounds the narrator: '[t]he fake cow was absurd, and it baffled and astonished me that Molly of all people should buy such a thing and put it in her garden. I mean, what was the *point* of it' (24, original emphasis). The cow is lifelike, but fundamentally artificial: it represents something real, and yet displaces that reality into a context where it no longer makes sense. The cow is not symbolic so much as a challenge to the human characters' assertions about the value of art. The cow is not beautiful or redemptive or psychologically revealing: it simply exists, and cannot be explained. The garden also contains another creature, however, a living hedgehog that is mentioned early in the novel but only described in the final paragraph, which is entirely devoted to it:

> And then I heard something rustle nearby at the bottom of a trellis. Lumbering, slightly awkward but moving with surprising speed nonetheless, it was a hedgehog. It had noticed me now, and it came to a complete standstill. Even when I stood up and moved towards it, it didn't budge, and so I was able to inspect it at my leisure. How strange it was, with its crown of brown spines and its bright eyes, its squat feet and pointed snout. It looked completely *other*, like a creature that had arrived not from a burrow beneath the ground, but from another planet. I moved closer again and still it stood there, immobile. It was only when I drew back that it scampered off once more. At the foot of a climbing rose it came across the champagne cork that had shot off into the undergrowth when Andrew opened the bottle. The hedgehog stopped for a moment, sniffed it, tapped it with its foot, sniffed it again. Inscrutable, mysterious, it moved on once more and then disappeared into the shadows and was gone. (220, original emphasis)

The hedgehog is uncanny in the truest sense, completely familiar and completely other. Its appearance in the novel's closing sentences gestures

towards a world that the characters cannot fully inhabit, a world without language or aesthetics. The nonhuman animal can be described through language, but it cannot be understood, and the narrator is unable to formulate a response to its appearance. Both the cow and hedgehog sit outside the novel's central concerns, and present a challenge to its inherent anthropocentrism.

As Colleen Glenney Boggs argues, 'animals appear in texts as disruptive presences that challenge our understanding of textual significance and figuration. "Animal representations" are an interface where the literal and symbolic meet and unsettle the terrains of modern taxonimization.'[4] This is precisely the tension that Madden's novel explores: both cow and hedgehog disrupt the narrative, and form a challenge to the narrator's own understanding of the world. Likewise, they challenge the binary separation not only between human and nonhuman but also between real and unreal: the artificial cow and the living hedgehog make the narrator both question her friendship with Fox and reconsider her own place in the world. The nonhuman animal cannot be anything other than represented, seen through a linguistic prism that it does not share. Madden's novel, ending on this opaque note, thus calls into question the ability of language to represent the world at all, given that there are so many experiences, human and nonhuman, that it cannot encompass.

Peripheral animals, however, are also used to help explain human psychology. Like *Molly Fox's Birthday*, Diana Evans's *26a* (2005) is largely concerned with human experience. Its central characters, the twins Georgia and Bessie, are introduced, however, in a scene that approaches magical realism as it blurs the boundaries between human and nonhuman life. Just before their birth, the twins are described as small, nondescript animals, scurrying through the undergrowth until unexpectedly being hit by a car: 'That was the memory that stayed with them: two furry creatures with petrified eyes staring into the oncoming headlights, into the doubled icy sun, into possibility. It helped explain things. It reminded them of who they were.'[5] A few pages later, after being born as humans, the twins look at their pet hamster, named Ham, and see in his eyes the fundamental question they share: 'What am I' (5). Ham is rarely mentioned again in the novel, and the strange scene of their birth is never fully explained. Instead, these moments of taxonomic breakdown and the blurring of identities are used to suggest the difficulty the twins will later have with causal explanations, and with understanding their world. Rather than a clear scene of reincarnation, Evans presents birth and death as traumatic experiences

that are shared by both human and nonhuman animals: bodily experience is fundamentally violent, and resists clear categorisation.

Both novels afford only glimpses of animal life: the nonhuman animal hovers at the fringes of the narrative, representing everything that language cannot encompass. The animal is not the proper material of fiction, these texts suggest, but any narrative that focuses solely on the human is necessarily partial and incomplete. This central absence is a crucial question for any critical study of animals in fiction. As Mario Ortiz Robles notes, not only are texts about animals often placed at the fringes of the literary canon, but 'these traces of the animal in literature suggest a number of possible tracks, histories, plots and scenarios that both blur and reaffirm the double structure that at once binds human to nonhuman, and keeps them categorically separate from each other'.[6] This bidirectional action is present in both Evans's and Madden's novels: the glimpses of animal life simultaneously indicate the place of the human in a larger world of creaturely life and distinguish the human from other creatures. While both novels certainly privilege human experience, the brief depictions of nonhuman animals allow the authors to gesture towards a more inclusive perspective in which humans share the world, and their experiences, with other creatures, and in which language is not the sole marker of value.

The relation between fiction and animality has been extensively explored in recent years. A number of influential critics have drawn attention to the relation between 'real' animals and the often more metaphorical portrayals of animals in fiction. Susan McHugh, for instance, has argued that this tension 'present[s] tremendous opportunities for recovering and interrogating the material and representational problems specific to animality'.[7] Considering the politics of textual representation, she argues, can lead to broader understandings of human-animal relations more generally. Catherine Parry's *Other Animals in Twenty-First Century Fiction* meanwhile argues that 'the creatures of fiction can, and indeed must, be read as significant and meaningful in the lives of humans and other animals'.[8] While both authors are careful to avoid establishing a correlation between fictional and real animals, their studies suggest that studying the appearance of animals in fiction leads to a better understanding, and perhaps a dissolution, of the conventional binaries between human and nonhuman lives, and raises crucial questions about the nature of literary representation.[9]

As Robert McKay summarises the field, literary animal studies in the twenty-first century may 'reveal the omnipresence of human-animal encounters and ideas about the animal in cultural texts, interpret the manipulations of discourse that produce such representations, and put such textual events into tension with thinking about animals' (and humans') actual experience'.[10] Literary animal studies, as currently positioned, thus focuses both on the relation between real and imagined animals and on the degree to which imagined animals are inherently textual productions. As Ortiz Robles cautions, however, the majority of literary texts retain an anthropocentric focus:

> the 'otherness' of the animal is not often encoded as otherness: dogs, cats, horses, and songbirds tend to be portrayed in literature as familiar beings whose strangeness (the fact that they are animals) only compels us to examine our own ideological investments, psychic cathexes, and physical predicaments in an oblique and thereby simplified manner.[11]

Studies of the relation between humans and nonhuman animals, when restricted to an inherently human paradigm such as the literary text, may ultimately end up privileging the human at the expense of any conception of lived animal experience. Even the nomenclature shares this problem: while the term 'nonhuman animals' is used in this book, as elsewhere, to highlight the degree to which animality is a shared feature of both humans and other animals, it also erects a binary division between humans and all other living creatures.[12] The problem that remains for literary animal studies is that any study of the literary text must inevitably focus on the human representation of nonhuman animals, and in so doing may reinforce the anthropocentric perspective it seeks to question.

The innate privileging of language has been challenged by materialist ecocriticism, which Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann define as the study of the way material forms, whether bodies or things, 'intra-act with each other and with the human dimension, producing configurations of meanings and discourses that we can interpret as stories'.[13] 'New materialism', as Iovino defines it, drawing on thinkers as diverse as Bruno Latour, Jane Bennett, and Rosi Braidotti, stands against the extremes of linguistic constructivism to recall 'the concreteness of existential experience, with regard to both the bodily dimension and nonbinary object-subject epistemological structures'.[14] That is, rather than looking to narrative to explain or represent nonhuman bodies, in a fundamentally anthropocentric way,

these theorists explore the narrativity of nonhuman bodies. In looking at matter as text, such approaches attempt to move away from the consistent focus on language that has been a hallmark of literary animal studies in favour of a more integrated approach: literature is only one of many forms of engagement. This approach departs from an underlying anthropocentrism to suggest, in Lowell Duckert's words, that '[o]ur shared bodies – texts included – derive from these material meshworks'.[15]

Yet literature continues to offer possibilities for rethinking both material and linguistic divisions. For Hubert Zapf, for instance, 'literature is a medium that represents the exclusions of the cultural system and symbolically reintegrates the nonintegrated into language and discourse'.[16] The emergent field of zoopoetics, as introduced by Aaron M. Moe, for instance, positions literature as a 'co-making', in which humans and nonhuman animals are both seen as having agency in the creation of a poetic text, 'bring[ing] the sensuous world to the surface of the written page'.[17] For both Zapf and Moe, literary production cannot be discarded, but instead can be approached from a new perspective, as a less stable, and less anthropocentric, mode of approaching the world.

Despite these significant differences, the critics discussed above, and indeed all those working in critical animal studies, are united in their attempts to rethink the central division between human and nonhuman animals that underlies much of Western thought. They call into question the Enlightenment claim, as synthesised by Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, that '[t]he idea of man in European history is expressed in the way in which he is distinguished from the animal'.[18] According to Adorno and Horkheimer, this central division is known through violence: the injury and death of the animal, caused by humans, shows that humanity possesses reason, while the animal can only respond in terror. Taxonomic division is both violent in itself and predicated on violence: in such a system, as Karl Steel notes in tracing these ideas to Medieval Europe, 'animals *must* suffer to guarantee humans the opportunity for meaningful domination, by which humans claim exclusive possession of reason, speech, and immortal souls'.[19] Even in the contemporary period, Anat Pick argues, 'the human-animal distinction constitutes an arena in which relations of power operate in their exemplary purity'.[20] Consideration of the relation between humans and nonhuman animals is not simply a question for literary study, but is necessary for any understanding of power relations. Rethinking this species division, then, invites a challenge not only to spe-

cies boundaries but to the elemental discourses of violence, suffering, and vulnerability as well.

Species divisions are predicated not only on material violence but also on linguistic violence. As Jacques Derrida notes in *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, the critical text around which much of literary animal studies and critical animal studies continues to revolve, the word 'animal' itself is such an act of violence. Examining the 'wrong or evil' that stems from the term, he writes:

> [humans] have given themselves the word in order to corral a large number of living beings within a single concept: 'The Animal,' they say. And they have given it to themselves, this word, at the same time according themselves, reserving for them, for humans, the right to the word, the naming noun [*nom*], the verb, the attribute, to a language of words, in short to the very thing that the others in question would be deprived of […]. All the philosophers we will investigate […] say the same thing: the animal is deprived of language.[21]

Humanity is defined by the ability to create a linguistic category which subsumes other species differences, and to which the living beings placed in that category cannot respond.[22] The linguistic determination of 'animals', for Derrida, creates the grounds for defining the animal as not having language. In creating a binary division that eradicates species differences, such that all nonhuman animals are referred to by the same term, and in self-designating humanity as the only species that can make such distinctions, humanity defines itself through an act of linguistic violence that presages the physical violence enacted upon other animals.[23]

These by-now-familiar critical perspectives indicate the centrality of two of this book's main themes to larger discourses of animal studies. Firstly, questions of violence, suffering, and vulnerability are at the heart of any study of the relationship between humans and other animals. Secondly, species distinctions are at least in part supported, or even created, by and through language. Ideas of animality as what is fundamentally opposed to the human depend on the identification of animal as intrinsically other through language. These twin foci are combined in the novels discussed throughout this study: understanding the relation between suffering and language is not only essential for any discussion of the relation between human and nonhuman animals but, as the texts below demonstrate, for an understanding of fiction itself. Whether central or peripheral, the appear-

ance of nonhuman animals in fiction challenges the stability of linguistic representation, and the implied anthropocentrism of the novel form. The animal fictions in this book are inherently self-critiquing: they demonstrate the ways in which an essentially human, language-based form can be used not to elevate the human, but to open a space for the exploration of species and linguistic boundaries.

The recent discourse of zoopoetics, as inaugurated by Moe, suggests one potential avenue for investigating these questions. Kári Driscoll and Eva Hoffmann clarify in their introduction to an edited collection on the field that zoopoetic texts are not simply texts about animals, but are rather 'predicated upon an engagement with animals and animality'.[24] Zoopoetics is a way of thinking through animality (including both human and nonhuman animals), rather than positioning the animal as an abstract other. Looking at the way bodies and texts inform each other and challenge traditional epistemological hierarchies enlivens discourses surrounding both species and linguistic hierarchies. The texts discussed below are united in using language to think through animals, and using animals to think through language. This book further suggests that such an approach not only destabilises traditional forms of categorisation but also provides new insights into the relation between pain, suffering, and death, at both individual and species levels. Combining approaches to language and suffering which independently underpin much contemporary work in critical animal studies allows for a focus on vulnerability that has not been fully articulated. By looking at the ways bodies and texts mutually inform each other, and challenging binaristic approaches to human and nonhuman animals, this book argues for the continued importance of fiction as a form of thinking about and through animals.

Language Animals

The correlation between humanity and language use stretches back to Aristotle, and is perhaps most familiarly codified in the twentieth century by Hannah Arendt and Martin Heidegger. For both thinkers, language is the essential basis of political and social life: Arendt, following Aristotle, argues that humans 'can experience meaningfulness only because they talk with and make sense to each other and to themselves', while for Heidegger language is what allows humans to be 'world-forming', while animals are 'deprived' in their experience of the world.[25] As much as critical animal studies has moved past and often been formed in direct contrast to

Heideggerian thought, he remains a constant reference point for contemporary formulations of the human, and so deserves consideration here, as well as below. Heidegger is not establishing a clear binary in this claim, nor attempting to define the animal in relation to the human: he rejects the notion of species hierarchies, and cautions that the animal's deprivation is not equivalent to having no world, but is instead a form of impoverishment. Instead, Heidegger argues, in maintaining a fundamental distinction between humans and other animals, that only humans have access to other beings as beings. While for Aristotle all living creatures must have access to other beings, according to Heidegger it is only humans who can attend to the world and experience it through being. As William McNeill interprets Heidegger's work, '[t]he animal neither has nor exists as a self in the way in which we do'.[26] The animal is open to and absorbed in the world—it is not a mere Cartesian automaton—but yet its openness means that it is always captivated by whatever presents itself. That is, for Heidegger nonhuman animals can respond or relate to the world, but only humans can relate to the world as being something in particular. This distinction, as he develops elsewhere, is in part related to language. Only humans have access to the world-forming potential of language, or *logos*. It is not only that the human is 'a living creature who possesses language along with other capacities. Rather, language is the house of being in which the human being ek-sists by dwelling, in that he belongs to the truth of being, guarding it'.[27] Language is not simply one tool of many which humans possess: it is the central attribute of being, and allows the animal to be defined, in Derrida's formulation, as what is 'deprived of the *logos*, deprived of the *can-have-the-logos*'.[28] Language is what allows meaning and truth—it allows humans to escape the demands of present experience and communicate their experience to others—and it is precisely that of which the animal is deprived.

The centrality of language in human life continues to be asserted by more recent thinkers from a variety of disciplines. Language, argue Robert C. Berwick and Noam Chomsky, is 'a species property of humans' that has no equivalent elsewhere in the natural world.[29] While they acknowledge that many nonhuman animals have systems of communication, they repeatedly deny that there is any significant overlap, evolutionary or otherwise, between animal communication and human language. Human language, they argue, is tied to complex thought and experience in a way unavailable to any other animal. In order to support such claims, they look at attempts to teach chimpanzees human language, concluding that while chimps have

been able to memorise human words and signs, they can use them only in an associative manner, where a given sign refers to a set of objects, rather than a concept. For instance, a chimp, they claim, may use the sign 'apple' to refer to the knife used to cut the apple, the drawer where the apples were stored, and so on, but possesses no abstract concept of an apple as such. Although Berwick and Chomsky would reject such a comparison, the pattern here is similar to Heidegger's: both humans and nonhuman animals can respond to a given stimulus, but only humans can respond to it as it really is. It is not simply that humans have a heightened conceptual framework or ability to abstract, but that, through language, they can consider an object or stimulus as it is in relation to the entire world. For Berwick and Chomsky, and many other scientific theorists, chimp language (or rather, human language as taught to chimpanzees, a distinction further explored in relation to Karen Joy Fowler's *We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves* in Chap. 3) fundamentally works in a different way to human language, and cannot be counted as language more properly.

Using similar studies as well as referring to a long philosophical tradition, Charles Taylor develops this view to insist that what separates human language from other forms of animal communication is its ability to judge worth, which enables moral and ethical evaluations: '[p]relinguistic animals treat something as desirable or repugnant by going after it or avoiding it. But only language beings can identify things as *worthy* of desire or aversion. For such identifications raise issues of intrinsic rightness.'[30] Human language is differentiated from other forms of communication by two varieties of collective experience, echoing Arendt: language is not individual but shared, creating an 'us', and individual words are not learned one at a time, but only make sense within the context of a whole language. Language is what allows human community; it 'creates a context for human life and action'.[31] Whether through narrative or ethics, language is what makes humans human. Although they have little else in common, for Heidegger, Berwick and Chomsky, and Taylor, humans, through language, have access to the world, whereas nonhuman animals can only respond to objects or experiences as they encounter them.

Like Kelly Oliver and a number of other recent thinkers, Taylor positions Johann Herder's account of the origin of language as central to understanding the division between human and nonhuman communicative systems. As Taylor reads Herder, human speech is an expression of thought. Herder locates this idea in a human encounter with a bleating sheep:

> As soon as [the human being] develops a need to become acquainted with the sheep, no instinct disturbs him, no sense tears him too close to the sheep or away from it; it stands there exactly as it expresses itself to his senses. White, soft, woolly – his soul, operating with awareness, seeks a characteristic mark – *the sheep bleats!* – his soul has found a characteristic mark. […] 'The *sound* of bleating, perceived by a human soul as the distinguishing sign of the sheep, became, thanks to this determination to which it was destined, the *name* of the sheep, even if the human being's tongue had never tried to stammer it.' […] And what is the *whole of human language* but a *collection of such words*?[32]

The passage curiously posits the sound the sheep makes as the same sound the human makes to name the sheep, and yet the sound, when uttered by the human, has an entirely different function. The birth of human language, in Herder's account, immediately rises from the sound (if not the language) of the nonhuman animal, but is just as immediately distinguished from it.[33] The sheep speaks, as Oliver notes, so that the human soul can respond: 'Man learns to speak, and thereby becomes human, in response to animals'.[34] For Oliver this is an example of 'animal pedagogy', or the ways in which 'animals teach man to be human' precisely through their exclusion from the category of 'human'.[35] For both Taylor and Oliver, this responsiveness, taking the form of reflection, is central for demarcating human speech. While the sheep can only bleat, humans can use that sound to reflect on the sheep as a sheep, and place it within the context of a world. And yet, as Taylor notes, there is a further shift occasioned by human language: it is not simply that language reflects a world that exists before, or outside, of language. Instead, Taylor argues, 'language through constituting the semantic dimension transforms any [pre-existing] framework, giving us new feelings, new desires, new goals, new relationships'.[36] In the Herderian account, then, language may have its origin in nonhuman animal communication, but ultimately exceeds it, to the extent that it radically transforms the world it describes.[37] These views, although frequently disputed, continue to underpin large swathes of theoretical writing.

One challenge to this apparent orthodoxy comes from philosophers and scientists who relate human language to other forms of trans-species communication. Brian Massumi, for instance, claims that 'human language is essentially animal', insofar as it emerges from the animal play that 'creates the conditions for language'.[38] Rather than positing language as an essential criterion for humanness, he illustrates the extent to which it is

simply a development of behaviours found in other animals, and thus exists on a continuum. Frans de Waal goes further in illustrating the way in which the criteria for distinguishing between humans and other animals are always positioned in relation to the human, and rarely emerge from an informed understanding of the cognitive abilities of a given species. De Waal examines similar linguistic experiments to the ones Berwick and Chomsky describe, this time with parrots, and notes that while the ability to label objects may not count as language use, this is in part because the criteria have changed: 'we should not forget that once upon a time linguists defined language simply as symbolic communication. Only when apes proved capable of such communication did they feel the need to raise the bar and add refinements such as […] syntax and recursivity.'[39] As de Waal, Carl Safina, and many other scientists note, the testing conditions for animal language are inherently artificial, and place the burden of proof on the nonhuman animal: the grounds for comparison, they argue, should be not what distinguishes species, but what traits or abilities they have in common.[40] Such accounts of animal life often de-emphasise the importance of language in order to privilege other forms of communication or emotional responsiveness.

Fiction, however, remains a place in which the status and nature of human language can be questioned through language itself. Herder's image of the bleating of a sheep as a catalyst for rethinking the nature of the human, for instance, curiously is echoed in two texts by Michel Faber. In the story 'Sheep' a conceptual artist, stranded in the Highlands, looks at a field of sheep and imagines an exhibition which would reconstitute all of a sheep's constituent parts once they had been processed by humans, combining cuts of meat with wool slippers. The sheep's response causes her to rethink the project, if only briefly:

> June turned back to the sheep, at a loss for what to do or say.
>
> 'Baaaaahh!' said one of the sheep, and June realised all at once that her idea for the 'Reconstitution' show was much less interesting than the fact that these animals were here alive, a different species from her, existing on a part of the planet she might easily never have seen: an alternative centre of the world.[41]

The sheep's bleating here is certainly nonreflective, and does not necessarily possess meaning for the sheep, and yet it occasions a reconsideration of the world in the human who hears it. Faber thus recreates Herder's scene of origins—perhaps unintentionally—to examine the way the divide

between human and nonhuman language can lead to the creation of a shared conceptual world.

In Faber's *Under the Skin* (2000), on the contrary, a science fiction novel in which the 'humans' are an alien species, while the term 'vodsels' is used for terrestrial humans, the 'human' protagonist Isserley attempts to make contact with a sheep, since it resembles her original form: 'It was so hard to believe the creature couldn't speak. It looked so much as if it should be able to. Despite its bizarre features, there was something deceptively human about it.'[42] The inability of the human and sheep 'to reach across the species divide and communicate' (63), despite their similar physiognomy, ultimately frustrates Isserley: she must learn throughout the novel that her preconceptions of who can speak (sheep) and who cannot (vodsels) is insufficient. Later, however, speaking to a visitor from her own planet, she still lies, claiming that 'sheep' is 'what they call themselves' (240), and arguing that it would be impossible to consider eating them because of their resemblance to humans. In the earlier story, species and linguistic divisions can be overcome, but with the possibility that any shared experience is simply an imposition of the human observer. In *Under the Skin*, however, the divide is not only between species within the novels, but between the reader and the world of the novel: by including the reader's own species in the realm of nonhuman animals, Faber points to the potential arbitrariness of both species and linguistic divisions.[43]

Faber's work challenges the dualism between human and nonhuman animals that is a central feature of the philosophical accounts above. As Gilbert Simondon argues, from Descartes onwards humanist thought creates a binary between humans and animals so that the latter is 'a fictive being […] that is precisely what man is not'.[44] Matthew Calarco similarly claims that one 'of the chief limitations for thought at present' is what he calls 'metaphysical anthropocentrism', or the extent to which nonhuman life is determined in relation to the human.[45] Each of the texts discussed in this book endeavours, to varying extents, to unpick this division: the fictive beings that appear in their pages are not positioned as the negation or counterpart of the human, but instead offer the opportunity to rethink the relation between different species, and the role language plays in establishing species differences. Yet language remains, as Wendy Doniger writes, 'the sticking point': 'Since language is the lens through which we view the world, it is easy to understand how we failed to see, through those lenses, that our lenses – our categories, our words for humans and for animals – were badly skewed.'[46] While humans might now, at least in the context of

critical animal studies, focus on empathy or shared experience with other animals, the very terms in which they do so remain predicated on division. The animal is still pronounced upon by, and in relation to, humans. Jenny Diski likewise states that '[t]here's no way out of anthropocentrism for us. […] It is a trap consciousness lays, a game of everlasting mirrors, which we can't escape.'[47] Diski resists any calls to collapse the existence of a division between humans and other animals and repeatedly argues that an anthropocentric view is fundamental to human perception, and cannot be otherwise: there is no perspective available to humans that does not place them at the centre of the world.

The nonhuman animals that appear in the novels below are fundamentally human constructs, delimited by language (as are, of course, the human characters); however much a novel might appear to offer insight into, for instance, the mind of an ape, it only offers a vision of what an ape might be like, through a human medium.[48] Fiction can gesture towards the otherness of animals, as Madden's novel does, or suggest similarities, as Evans's does, or draw attention to the problem of the human-animal divide more generally, as Faber's does. Yet fiction, as currently understood, can never be other than human. As suggested above, one way to move past the irresolvable question of language is to focus on the closely linked themes of suffering, grief, mourning, and indeed death, which can be posited as central to all creaturely experience.

Suffering Animals

Suffering, Diski argues, is a fundamentally human, and linguistic, construct: '[w]ho else can define suffering but humans? It's our word.'[49] Nevertheless in both contemporary philosophy and critical animal studies, suffering is positioned as the central shared experience of human and nonhuman animals (or at least sentient animals). Originally defined in relation to physical pain but more recently also defined to include mourning, grief, and other painful emotions, suffering has long been the primary focus for many writers on animal rights, from Jeremy Bentham to Peter Singer. Bentham famously states, in a lengthy footnote concerning the limits of the penal branch of jurisprudence, that the right to be free of torment is not determined by a being's number of legs, villosity of skin, faculty of reason, or faculty of discourse. The central question, he states 'is not, Can they *reason?* nor, Can they *talk?* but, Can they *suffer?*'[50] The capacity to suffer is in itself sufficient to deem an individual

worthy of rights. As Singer develops this thought two centuries later, beings who have the ability to suffer may be assumed to have an interest in not suffering, and that interest should be protected. If, as he argues, 'there are no good reasons […] for denying that animals feel pain', and there can also 'be no moral justification for regarding the pain (or pleasure) that animals feel as less important than the same amount of pain (or pleasure) felt by humans', then it follows that humans should, where possible, reduce the pain experienced by nonhuman animals.[51] As Cary Wolfe notes, focusing on suffering as the grounds for considering the rights of the animal demonstrates 'the sheer irrelevance of speech itself to the question of standing'.[52] Once language use is no longer taken as the central component of being human, the question of rights can be expanded exponentially, and the hierarchical understanding of species begins to crumble.

Derrida's no-less influential reading of Bentham boldly asserts that this question 'changes everything'. It not only destabilises language as an essential criterion for humanity, but also calls into question the very idea of capability or faculties: no longer can notions of species be restricted to a pre-defined set of abilities. He argues: '[t]he question is disturbed by a certain *passivity*. It bears witness, manifesting already, as a question, the response that testifies to a sufferance, a passion, a not-being-able.'[53] The question is not, then, what animals (human and nonhuman) can do, but what they cannot: it makes vulnerability the 'nonpower at the heart of power'.[54] Focusing on suffering raises the possibility of placing vulnerability at the heart of any question of rights, and reshapes any anthropocentric conception of the world. For critics such as Ralph C. Acampora, this is the necessary starting point for any moral philosophy: 'our moral starting position is *already* one of corporal compassion with other species', and so the 'burden of proof' is not on those who wish to support what he calls 'proto-ethical predispositions' but rather on those who wish to deny them.[55] The anthropocentric insistence on language ability, and indeed all specified abilities, as the grounds for species distinction is thus based on a fundamental misunderstanding of the world, and of power. Power lies not in assertion, nor in the dominance of one species over the other, nor in the meeting of a particular set of criteria: rather, power must be seen in relation to questions of vulnerability and compassion. This radical reassessment of the relation between humans and nonhuman animals not only challenges the dominance of the liberal humanist subject, but the very questions such discourses pose.

Recent animal studies, for instance, highlight not only the experience of the animal body in pain, but the way a focus on emotion indicates common ground between humans and other animals and requires a fundamental reappraisal of how such grounds are judged.[56] Vinciane Despret suggests, in a passage worth quoting at length, that a focus on a phenomenon such as mourning forces a reconsideration of how mourning relates to language:

> Chimpanzees test me on my language and my sphere of experience because the definitions of mourning that, to all appearances, 'we humans all agree on' do not allow us to pass from our sphere to theirs. It isn't the same mourning. But it is precisely at this moment that the question needs to be opened and not closed. It is the moment for considering the failure of bringing them together as a problem, not of the chimpanzees but of our own versions.
>
> 'It doesn't have the same meaning as it does for us' is not a sign of the poverty of meaning among chimpanzees; it indicates our own poverty. Mourning became, in my own cultural sphere, a term without a homonym, prose too poor to connect with anything, prose that puts our experiences on notice. If we want to therefore take seriously the question 'what is asked of us to say that chimpanzees experience a version of mourning?' we must, so as not to exclude chimpanzees from the start, put our own concepts to the test of versions. The work of translation thus becomes a work of creation and fabulation, to resist the assignment of prose.[57]

It is not wholly possible to move between one species' display of emotion and another. Mourning-like behaviours in elephants or chimpanzees may not mean the same thing as the same behaviours in humans. Yet, Despret argues, rather than either positing human experience as the basis for interspecies comparison or simply claiming that no comparison is possible, the simple fact that humans and chimpanzees both, it appears, mourn, and yet that this mourning is fundamentally not the same, requires a reconsideration of mourning itself. Mourning—and indeed suffering more generally, as Diski notes—has become codified through language. It is 'our word', and yet the word has come to stand for a broad set of emotions that it does not engage with: to claim that humans mourn is, perhaps, to imply that humans understand what it is to mourn. Looking at the mourning of animals, then, becomes a way not only to rethink questions of compassion, as Acampora argues, or vulnerability, but also to rethink the way in which such terms have become too easily glossed, or too easily understood.

Rethinking animal emotion and suffering allows for a reconsideration of human emotion and suffering.

Expanding the definition of suffering from a focus on the physical body, as is often the focus of animal rights advocates, to include mental and emotional states allows for an expanded notion of empathy that can cross species lines. As Jill Bennett writes in a different context, the

> conjunction of affect and critical awareness may be understood to constitute the basis of an empathy not in affinity (*feeling for* another insofar as we can imagine *being* that other) but on a *feeling for* another that entails an encounter with something irreducible and different, often inaccessible.[58]

This shift from affinity to encounter is central to much work in affect theory and underpins much of this book's argument. Looking at nonhuman animals, as represented in literature, offers an opportunity to foreground the essential difference at the heart of empathy. As Veena Das highlights in particular relation to mourning, suffering often centres on 'the transactions between language and body'.[59] As in Despret's account, questions of suffering and mourning are made more, rather than less, important when neither language nor bodies are shared. Exploring the relation between human and nonhuman animals in light of an empathy based on difference neither reinforces traditional speciesist hierarchies nor entirely collapses differences between species. Instead, it highlights the extent to which difference, between both individuals and species, invites a radical rethinking of body, experience, and language. As the example of Max Porter's work below also indicates, such a focus also eradicates the need for a unidirectional approach where nonhuman animals are always observed by and related to the human. Placing difference at the centre of questions of vulnerability, suffering, and empathy opens a space for rethinking both species and experiential dissimilarities, as well as similarities.

Such reconsiderations are made possible, indeed are demanded, not only by first-hand encounters with nonhuman animals, but also by examining the way animals are represented in literature. Literature provides one of the central fora for rethinking the poverty of language and representation: studying the appearance of animals in fiction leads not only to the dissolution or challenging of species hierarchies but also to a more thorough reappraisal of the politics of representation more generally. Barbara King's account of animal grief, for instance, largely focuses on

studies of animal behaviour, but also turns to fiction for support. King sidesteps Heidegger's influential claim that nonhuman animals do not have a concept of death, which might be taken to indicate the impossibility of animal grief, to show that grief arises from the loss of something loved.[60] Grief emerges from the bond that two creatures share, and so is not linguistically, or even conceptually, determined. As well as drawing on many accounts of encounters with nonhuman animals, however, King also includes a discussion of Verlyn Klinkenborg's *Timothy; or, Notes of an Abject Reptile* (2006), arguing that the novel reveals 'that we humans don't understand other animals nearly as well as we think' and 'mirrors perfectly what we are coming to grasp in animal-behavior science more clearly than ever before: We must look at animals' actions with fresh eyes and thoughts unconstrained by expectations.'[61] Yet Klinkenborg's novel is centred on such constraints. Retelling the story of the eighteenth-century naturalist Gilbert White's encounters with his tortoise Timothy (previously extracted by the novelist Sylvia Townsend Warner) from the tortoise's perspective, Klinkenborg highlights the way language creates a barrier between human and nonhuman animals:

> My voice would shatter his human solitude. The happiness of his breed depends upon it. The world is theirs to arrange. So they tell themselves. A word or two from me – 'Now, then' – and they would have all that arranging to do over again. […] [White] is happier translating a language he doesn't know. Happier believing, despite himself, that the language of the brute creation is no language at all. That true speech is human and the rest inarticulate metaphor.[62]

Observing humans from a detached perspective, Timothy repeatedly asserts that inter-species companionship is in fact one-sided and relies on animal silence. It is difficult, if not impossible, to see animal actions and emotions 'with fresh eyes' when the very terminology for so doing is indisputably human.

The tension between the desire to recognise the presence of shared emotions, including suffering and grief, and the inability to reflect on them in anything but human language leads to critiques of anthropomorphism. For many critics, anthropomorphism eradicates important species differences; presenting nonhuman animals in relation to the human risks misrepresenting animals. Yet, as Chris Philo and Chris Wilbert note, as