

Zoofictions

Poetics of animality in contemporary narrative

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Abstract

The depiction of animals in literature has functioned as a projective mirror of humans and has changed, throughout time, so as to represent the human anxieties peculiar to each epoch. From the second half of the twentieth century onwards, the fictional depiction of animals has taken new paths and complexities. If, for several centuries, animals remained in the Western poetic imagination as symbolic archetypes for humans, following a notoriously anthropocentric and species-based train of thought which set a radical cut between humanity and animality, contemporary fiction has instigated a feeling of indistinction between man and animal, fostering a progressive blurring of the limits that had previously separated them. The animal is gradually endowed with its own ontology and the animal metaphor becomes intertwined with the postmodern context.



Fig 1 / Magpies. Aberdeen Bestiary.

In the last few decades of the twentieth century and particularly in the beginning of the twenty-first century there has been a profound change in the relationships between human and non-human, inevitably mirrored by literary creation, where more and more writers look for new ways of interacting with the animal's otherness, be it by *sharing*, *becoming-animal* or *metamorphosis*.



Fig 2 / Parrot. Latin Bestiary.

In contemporary Portuguese fiction, numerous texts thematize a kind of commitment or affective bond between man and animal, arising between them a relationship founded on sharing a common time, common meanings and common emotions ("Homenagem ao Papagaio Verde" [1976], by Jorge de Sena; or *Cão como nós* [2002], by Manuel Alegre).

Other contemporary writers foresee the close togetherness between human and non-human with greater intensity, opening up to a relationship of *becoming* – *becoming-animal* for man and *becoming-man* for the animal – which is visible in the symbiosis or (con)fusion of natures between human and non-human (*Myra* [2008], by Maria Velho da Costa; *Amar um cão* [1990], by Maria Gabriela Llansol).

In other texts, the processes of identification or crossing of humanity and animality are taken to the highest possible level of hybridism. The authors choose metamorphosis in the kafkaesque sense of the term, which is the radical mutation of man into animal ("Um casaco de raposa vermelha" [2007], by Teolinda Gersão; "O porco de Erimanto ou os perigos da especialização" [2010], by A. M. Pires Cabral). In these narratives, the lead characters undergo the radical experience of *becoming another* in the body of the *animal-other*, by suffering irreversible metamorphoses that lead them to an absolute dislocation of the territory of their human lives.

The interrogative gaze of man directed at the limits of his humanity has gained renewed projection in the literature of recent years, in which an ever growing number of writers insistently question the animal-like essence and the bestial side of the human being. (*Animalescos* [2013], de Gonçalo M. Tavares).



Fig 3 / Adam naming animals. Aberdeen Bestiary.

Conclusion

Reflecting the obliteration of the human and the quest for the remaining humanity in man, contemporary fiction seems to be haunted by a renewed perception of animality, based on a closeness between human and non-human and a radical blurring of boundaries between both species, moving from the classic humanization of the animal to the bestialization of man.



Fig 4 / Francis Bacon. Two studies of Georg Dyer with dog, 1968.