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“Birds have Proustian capacity for making remembrance”

– a post-pastoral reading of John Lewis-Stempel’s *Meadowland* and the question of anthropomorphising animals

Abstract. The article proposes discussion of John Lewis-Stempel’s *Meadowland* (2015) developed along two perspectives. One is the post-pastoral reading as suggested by Terry Gifford. He offers a contemporary interpretative mode that draws from both the rich history of British pastoral and countryside writing and from recent ecocritical devices. Additionally, this paper aims to point out the manifold functions of anthropomorphism and presents it as the long-established strategy of making sense of the ‘outer’ nature. Both animating non-humans in literary representation and post-pastoral depiction of British countryside prevail to be an expression of spatial proximity, and apparently an indispensable prerequisite for co-existence, for sharing material place. Far from causing confusion or misunderstanding, anthropomorphisation has an enduring power of organizing human experience and expressing interconnectedness. In historical terms, it remains a fact that people have always responded to the natural world, and that they have seen animals respond as well, thus turning them into agents.

Keywords: animals in literature, anthropomorphisation, post-pastoral, *Meadowland*, Lewis-Stempel, natureculture.

John Lewis-Stempel in his utterly vivid and intimate account *Meadowland. The Private Life of an English Field* (2015) uses language to negotiate between nature, history, literature and time. He becomes a cartographer who enacts, with an appetising pinch of humour and realism, the old dream of countryside bliss. And in recognizing the pastoral tradition *Meadowland* constitutes a continuum of literary and cultural attitudes towards the world of nature. This narrative offers a multidimensional representation of the place – the meadow. This is realised through literary depiction of geographical material space, where the encounter between human and non-human oc-

curs. It further is a platform for meditating upon man's mutual entanglement with natural world. Finally, the place emerges as a point of departure into the realm of literature.

Following Terry Gifford's current postulate, this article proposes a 'post-pastoral', i.e. beyond pastoral, reading of *Meadowland*. On the one hand, Lewis-Stempel is arguably writing in the long tradition of countryside authors. On the other, however, the author's self is primarily exposed as an extension of the place; it becomes intertwined in the web of the larger system. The author/narrator is living the pastoral dream; he is observantly attuned to the breathing, animated space of the meadow.

Furthermore, the multiformity of the meadow is negotiated through anthropomorphic representations of animals, which elevates them to the position of agents. And in this respect again, the narrative maintains the dialogic relationships with long literary tradition of humanizing animals. Anthropomorphism seems to be the most expedient way of articulating this human/non-human interconnectedness.

Post-pastoral

In order to establish a broader context for what the concept of pastoral, and later post-pastoral, is, Terry Gifford defines it through analysing the functions of this long literary tradition:

[Through pastoral] we, in Western culture, have mediated and negotiated our relationship with the land upon which we depend and the forces of nature at work out there in 'outer nature,' as we have at the same time mediated and negotiated our relationships with each other and what we think of as our 'inner nature' (Gifford 2012:7).

From the first pages of *Meadowland* the reader is captured by Lewis-Stempel's ability to show the oneness of 'we' (humans) and 'nature' (the non-human world). This unity, as shown, for example, in the sentence "Ravens mate for life, and this pair has been here since we have" (Lewis-Stempel 2015:11), is generated by the long-established sharing of material space. What unites both worlds, that of the man and that of the beasts, is physical proximity. But this tangible closeness, it must be emphasized, exists additionally within the continuum (not dichotomy) of culture and nature, the language with its richness to describe human experience (poetically and scientifically), and its dialogue with ancient traditions and folklore.

But developing his argument of the pastoral Eden, Arcadia or the Golden Age, where the intended idealization of the natural offers a much desired retreat, Gifford also recognizes the 'anti-pastoral' tradition. This antipodal literary trend aims at subverting, negating or demythologizing the impeccable fantasy of Arcadia by concentrating mainly on the existing dissonance, realism and unattractiveness of rural surroundings (Gifford 2012:10-19). However, whereas the anti-pastoral opposes the idealized visions of the earthly paradise, it does not disestablish the pastoral entirely. Instead it adds this indispensable measure of realistic representations of country life.

The two practices, laudative pastoral and disapproving anti-pastoral, seem to be contrapositive. What Gifford proposes then as a middle ground is the concept of 'post-pastoral'. This way of read-

ing is to involve, among other postulates, instinctive human wonderment at the forces of nature and the exhibition of man's humility. Our species' "hubris" is curtailed. His next proposal is the awareness that the way of seeing and looking at nature is culturally charged and that the traditional culture-nature opposition is to be erased. Post-pastoral writing is also suggestive of how "inner" self correlates with the "outer" natural world. It also addresses the problem of human alienation from our natural surroundings. Finally, it involves contemporary awareness of an informed witness to environmental changes (Gifford 2012: 20-28). This modern reading template seems to be the handy tool to cope with narratives like *Meadowland*. It constitutes a way to re-connect contemporary Western reader with the world of nature.

Advocating the idea of post-pastoral in his other essay "Five Modes of 'Listening Deeply' to Pastoral Sounds", Gifford again expounds the two notions (pastoral and post-pastoral readings) in an attempt to enlarge his concept with ecocritical thought. He traces the ever-present denouncing of pastoral to the 1973 book by Raymond Williams *The Country and the City*. The book was highly influential in diminishing the role of countryside writing. Its publication, he argues, invited the deconstruction of pastoral and rendered this form of "listening mode" obsolete. It announced, prematurely, the demise of the pastoral literary tradition. The resulting negative and diminishing view of pastoral is attributable, Gifford explains, to Williams' "narrow historical range of country house literature" (Gifford 2016:12). Nature or countryside writing in a fuller sense than Williams addressed, however, still continues to integrate man with environment. Again Gifford proposes an explanation, or rather repetition of what post-pastoral really means. At the same time he distances the notion from the abundance of contemporary 'posts'. The prefixed 'post' is not what comes "after" in terms of historical chronology but what reaches "beyond" pastoral, extending its conceptual terms:

The post-pastoral is really best to describe works that successfully suggest a collapse of the human/nature divide while being aware of the problematics involved. It is more about connections than the disconnections essential to the pastoral (Gifford 2016:5).

In the view of such an inclusive definition, *Meadowland* does indeed represent a post-pastoral text. It transgresses the boundaries of culture and nature and, in departing from this dichotomy, it realizes Gifford's postulates. But the traditional chasm between country and city, the reader is reminded early in the book, still lurks, if only symbolically, just round the corner. On his way home to Hereford, the narrator notices:

Despite scarcity of population, I count at least five houses where the inhabitants have strimmed their roadside verge to within a centimeter of its life. Internally I rail at the suburbanity of such an aesthetic (why move to the country if you want to turn it Hyacinth Bucket's¹ Blossom Avenue?), and rather more honourably deplore the ecological holocaust (Lewis-Stempel 2015:18).

1 A symbolic middle-class snob from the BBC sitcom series *Keeping Up Appearances*.

The urbanites in their attempt to find a country retreat fail to “listen deeply”, as the title of Gifford’s essay suggests, and themselves fall victim to pastoral delusion. And in such actions as Lewis-Stempel describes, they attempt to transpose suburbia to the countryside.

In the course of the narrative, which reaches its climax in July entries of the journal, the farmer finds his sublime Arcadia. When the time of cutting hay starts, the narrator decides to make hay by hand, scything. Real authentic farming experience was killed, he says, in the 1950s when cabs were put on tractors (Lewis-Stempel 2015:170). So he enacts the chores of a medieval peasant in order to connect himself to the genuineness of life. This hay making description brings us again to the question of proximity. The authenticity of experience, the sublimity which the natural world can offer, is dependent of sensual reception delivered only by physical closeness. The aroma of scythed grass is like “deodorant in Arcadia” (Lewis-Stempel 2015:173) and the grass itself seems to act, to respond to the scyther’s moves: “(...) this morning the grass mostly bends before the blade, then pops back up giggling” (Lewis-Stempel 2015:172). The July diary entries become the guide through the folklore of mowing practices as well as through abundant literary tradition. Folk songs are quoted along with the verses of Robert Frost’s poem “Mowing” or the lines of John Stewart Collis’s *The Worm Forgives the Plough*². By saying: “John Clare found his poems in a field. Sometimes I find words. There is nothing like working land for growing and reaping lines of prose” (Lewis-Stempel 2015:178), the author shows how the farming experience and literary expression become related through a certain kind of consciousness. The rapture of mowing is demonstrated in the following example:

Penny [the author’s wife] appears angelically out of the waterfall of perspiration with a mug of tea. ‘How’s it going?’ she asks with a grimace.

‘Fantastically!’ I exclaim. Neither am I joking. Nothing in the last ten years of farming, with the exception of delivering calves, has given me such satisfaction.

I am in a state of near ecstasy (...) (Lewis-Stempel 2015:173)

His post-pastoral paradise, however, is already being discreetly subverted by the description of unrelenting attacks of blood-drinking horseflies.

One of the post-pastoral modes, furthermore, involves renunciation of narcissist self-indulgence and adoption of self-ironic distance towards one’s own nostalgia. This is a recurring leitmotif in Lewis-Stempel’s humorous account. Lofty tones are evoked, for instance, in paraphrasing Robert Browning’s famous poem “Home Thoughts From Abroad”: “Oh, the joy to be alive in England, in Meadowland, once May is here” (Lewis-Stempel 2015:113). But such elevation easily alternates with self-deprecating humor. A good illustration of this strategy is the sheep shearing scene which dispels any misconceptions about carefree rural bliss, inviting post-pastoral realism. Again, with a humorous effect, the author recounts:

² First published in 1975, the book is an account of the author’s working on a farm during the Second World War.

Shearing is fine in your twenties; in your forties it kills. (...) I start off at a reasonable(ish) rate of a sheep every two minutes, the clippers neatly sliding under the line of yellow risen lanolin in the fleece; by sheep number 21 I am down to a sheep every five minutes, (...) by sheep number 26 I am 140 years old. By sheep number 31 I cheat. (...) But I can never tell anyone about it because it is so seriously uncool. My back is broken, and the exertion turned me into the portrait in Dorian Gray's attic (Lewis-Stempel 2015:142-3).

Gifford proposes a “dialectic” listening mode, which, by his own admission, seems perfectly accordant with E. O. Wilson's theory of biophilia³. It involves adopting such form of “listening” to the place, landscape, nature that will enhance interconnectedness (Gifford 2016:6). In this light, *Meadowland's* territory, which is in itself the state of in-between, between open nature and nature worked by man, seems perfectly relevant for accommodating the pastoral ideal. In the narrative the meadow is as much a material place with real inhabitants as a metaphor for what is neither natural nor civilized. Interposed at the junction of traditional dichotomy of the wild and the cultivated, the meadow is rather a continuum of both. Its natural state must be maintained by man but at the same time it is neglect that brings abundance. The meadow is an ecosystem, hence its dependence on intricate interconnectedness of all forms of agency. Consequently, you can never comprehend what it is without comprehending how it works, its workings being represented only through intricate interdependence among its agents. Lewis-Stempel says: “A meadow is not natural habitat; it is a relationship between nature, man and beast. At its best, it is also equilibrium, artistry” (Lewis-Stempel 2015:15). So how, on the literary plain, can the authorial voice affirm the interconnectedness of human and non-human actors? How to show that nature, history, literature, and environmental knowledge intersect in order that an intricate topography of the place may emerge?

Humanizing the field and its agents

Culture and nature merge frequently in this apparently insignificant place. And, even the narrator's arachnological reflections may recall cultural undertones. For instance, his documentary-like musings on a black wolf spider (*Pardosa amentata*), a hunter with as many as eight eyes on its head are followed by “all the better to see with”, reminiscent of the Red Riding Hood fairy tale (Lewis-Stempel 2015:148). The narrative introduces hilarious observations of hunting spiders mating in which scenes the innocent male suitor is threatened by the voluptuous but deadly female. The intimate moment develops dangerously when later that very same lady wolf spider “stares malevolently” contemplating whether or not to eat her male cavalier. She finally opts not to, to the relief of the sympathetic narrator; the whole scene offering itself as a comic invitation to male solidarity. The events in the field or landscape description often promote aesthetic engagement: “27 JUNE Under the two old shading apple trees of Bank Field the cows are standing waiting for Constable

3 Edward O. Wilson, an American biologist, researcher, naturalist and author proposed the biophilia hypothesis in his book *Biophilia* (1984). It develops the idea of human inborn propensity to seek connections with nature and non-human forms of life. Source: Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Biophilia_hypothesis (19 February 2017).

to paint them” (Lewis-Stempel 2015:145). The *Meadowland* is a literary realization of what Gifford refers to as “natureculture”⁴.

But it is through anthropomorphising that the place becomes a living creature, breathing its rhythm through spring, awakening towards the July climax of its existence – haying – and later falling into natural autumnal tranquillity. The field is the doer, the place in which subject and object coalesce into one. By humanizing the place, the man expects a response and elevates the natural world to the position of agency. When still frozen in January, the field “groans and protests” (Lewis-Stempel 2015:15) under the man’s weight; in February when “an empty meadow is always in a state of waiting, of anticipation,” the author finds that “a wood gets on with things by itself, naturally” (Lewis-Stempel 2015:55); in May, because of dandelion flowers, it “has all the allure of dandruff on a school blazer” (Lewis-Stempel 2015:125). The field may be “in a mood” or “drowsed” when artificially fertilized with nitrogen; trees do not “give up”, they “try” to re-forest. All the elements that belong to the place are endowed with human emotional states or features of character. They become agents.

There is no denying the fact that the animation of the place would not be possible if the author didn’t extend the artistic licence of anthropomorphisation onto all inhabitants of the system, with no exceptions. He has the works of all the local and national naturalists, folklorists, and writers (from Chaucer to Orwell) to draw from. For example, the animal agents are characteristically endowed with human disposition to indecency. And in the course of the narrative some (vixen, mole, badger) become more than merely background extras. So, the parade of human, or all too human, ineptitudes in animal shapes has twofold effect. First, it strengthens the bond with literary anthropomorphising predecessors. Secondly, it easily evokes the spirit of acceptance and compassion, and it creates the sense of belonging to a shared place. And so while a male blackbird is “oblivious”, the little wren with his promiscuous mating habits “is not a moral giant. (...) [he] travels between his families, a bigamous commercial traveler in a 1930s thriller” (Lewis-Stempel 2015:73-4). But, warned by William Blake, the reader knows that “He who shall hurt the little Wren / Shall never be belov’d by Men”⁵ and so the little bird’s vices are easily forgiven. The narrator’s old acquaintance – the vixen, escaping with a murdered mallard – is “a pretty killer”, however, “a spiv with a fag would look less shifty” (Lewis-Stempel 2015:114). The frequent literary references also testify to the fact that not only did artists of all times humanize animals but that their convictions were, on occasion, completely incorrect. For example, there is “14 February, St Valentine’s Day, the day that Geoffrey Chaucer was convinced that the birds became betrothed” (Lewis-Stempel 2015:46).

4 Terry Gifford uses the amalgam term “natureculture” in his article “From Countryside to Environment” after Donna Haraway. She is a distinguished American professor whose works helped develop post-humanist thought in philosophy. Source: Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Donna_Haraway (25.02.2017).

5 William Blake “Auguries of Innocence”. The poem was written about 1801–3 as part of *The Ballads (or Pickering) Manuscript*.

Anthropomorphizing is proved to have always been a natural propensity of man to make guesses about animals.

Doubtless, humanizing non-humans is a way of bringing Constable's cows to life, of making them act. Erica Fudge, a British historian writing about animal history, points out to the limitations of studying animals in historical perspective. Unlike humans, they can be investigated as natural history museum artefacts, mounted monuments of the art of taxidermy rather than as doers of actions. She poses a question whether animals can be considered as "historical agents" (Fudge 2006). Consequently, pondering on the question of animal agency in the past, she cannot but presume their *incapacity* for such agency. While non-humans are undoubtedly capable of acting as agents, it is impossible to trace this agency back in time. Rather, we inscribe them as we would a "blank page" with meanings that stem from our anthropocentric perspective. This is the difference, she notes, between subjectivity and agency. Nonetheless, Fudge points to the fact that animal agency formulates the interaction, the interspecies synergy which shifts, and always has shifted, our landscape and our way of seeing that landscape (Fudge 2006). It is only humans who are, for the time being, ineffective in their perception of that shift. In *Meadowland*, Lewis-Stempel elevates birds to the position of catalysts whose occurrence immediately precipitates memories. They are agents empowered with "Proustian capacity for making remembrance" (Lewis-Stempel 2015:103). The birds can evoke both literary references, as in "Shakespeare too had a particular liking for the 'martlet'"⁶ and personal intimate memories: "I only have to see a house martin and I am in my childhood home (...)" (Lewis-Stempel 2015:103).

In addition, in discussing anthropomorphism, one cannot overlook the fact that humanizing other species is not only a literary claim. On the contrary, it has long attracted interdisciplinary interest. Extensive research substantiates the intuitive assumption that anthropomorphisation is an inborn mental capacity of humans. This argument is advanced by Sowon S. Park, who explores the relationship between literature and, among other forms of knowledge, cognitive neuroscience. She claims that anthropomorphism is "a process of inductive inference" (Park 2013:150) whose aim is to transgress the species categories in order to moderate our own epistemic ineffectiveness of non-human, that is of what animals are to us and how we are related. Rather than being a "fallacy", humanizing animals may bridge the eternal divide between species. It may, so the argument goes, clarify certain distortions and misinformation that surround interspecies relations. Anthropomorphising animals may be more than intuitive. This inherent capacity of human mind aims to enable interspecies communication. Projecting human perspectives on other species may be unconscious and automatic. Uncertainty still prevails, however, as to what extent this automatization of such projections is culturally driven. Park also warns about the possible ethical ramifications of anti-anthropomorphic perspective, specifically, about cultural othering. Her conclusions clearly take the argument beyond the realm of literary:

6 A house martin

If othering dehumanizes the human by transforming differences into ideological hierarchies and diminishing other species with whom we share life, anthropomorphism humanizes the non-human with no less transformative implications (...) Even while we acknowledge ultimate unknowability, the process of reasoning and inferring has deep political and ethical implications. For treating agents as human or nonhuman has a powerful impact on whether those agents are going to be treated as moral agents (Park 2013:160).

The anthropocentric split into the self and the other may lead to refusal to recognize the existence of common ground, of shared understanding of the world intrinsic to all species. As history has shown, this may further lead to appropriation, marginalization, exclusion and exploitation.

Heterogeneity of animal representation and physical-linguistic proximity

The over generalised term ‘animal’ and the simplified human/animal dualism fail to communicate the complexity of non-human entities. This suspicion towards the simplifying nominal use of ‘animal’ is also articulated in Derrida’s famous lecture “The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)”: “The animal is a word, it is an appellation that men have instituted, a name they have given themselves the right and the authority to give to another living creature [*a l’autre vivant*]” (Derrida 2002:392). But is it “the Animal”, asks Derrida, or “animals”? The non-humans seem “encamped” in the singularity of the concept, or they remain within the strict enclosure of a definite article (the) as “an irreducible living multiplicity of mortals” (Derrida 2002:409). Derrida speaks publicly against such a conceptual simplification of the word ‘animals’, choosing to refer to particular animal species rather than using the common (plural) concept. This refusal to oversimplify “the animal” is what, by his own admission, distinguishes him from other philosophers. But, as he adds, not from writers.⁷

Who would be more privileged in representing the heterogeneity of non-humans than the author of *Meadowland*, a farmer himself? Lewis-Stempel is virtually living within the pastoral. Combining a distinct way of looking with his own farming experience, the writer allows agency of a non-human field. But he does more than that. He also acknowledges the potential of linguistic expression. Here language is a tool which restores subjectivity of human perception. For without the human ability to name or animal capacity for being named, non-human agents easily run the risk of merging into a uniform anonymous entity. So, when he is “in the mood for lists” (Lewis-Stempel 2015:271), starting with the snipe hiding in the grass, through mallard, dipper or kestrel, the narrator introduces us to many dozen field inhabitants, including floral agents as well. Throughout the narrative, which in its calendar organization resembles a farmer’s almanac⁸, he

⁷ For his recorded commentary on the issue see the interview available on YouTube channel: *Jacques Derrida and the Question of “The Animal”*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ry49Jr0TFjk> (24 February 2017)

⁸ The organization is a distant echo of Edmund Spenser’s 16th century pastoral collection *The Shepherdes Calender* (1579).

takes notes of the present ones as though making a checklist of livestock: “14 September (...) The chiffchaff has flown” (Lewis-Stempel 2015:216). Naturally, he is perceptive enough to notice some “conspicuous absentees”, for instance, tree sparrow and brambling are missing this season (Lewis-Stempel 2015:271). Only through such meticulously detailed representations can the language of the book become inclusive. Physical proximity invariably involves naming, and in *Meadowland*, whatever lives with people is given a name.

To dwell on this argument further, it is interesting to notice that the vast bio-nomenclature performs an additional function here. Namely, it demonstrates how the natural and cultural merge in the linguistic representations of species. At times, then, Lewis-Stempel offers a detailed discussion of vernacularisms, the preserves of local colour. Regional names, which were historically prior to accurate taxonomic objectivity, are yet one more endorsement of “natureculture”. Objective scientific universalism with its standardised nomenclature seems to have limited value for literary representations of life, of place, of the meadow. Lewis-Stempel reminds us, for example, that those flowers which are given traditional local names prove to have either culinary or medical value. By the same token, he observes that “almost no birds today have vernacular names. Bird names have become standardized, homogenized, conscripted into what is considered proper by scientists for classification” (Lewis-Stempel 2015:97). The growing process of urbanization isolates man from the natural world but also diminishes his potential to use the knowledge humankind had stored for centuries. The ensuing disconnection and marginalization accompanies changes in the language. Being depreciated by culture and civilisation in physical terms, non-humans slip into linguistic oblivion. The names by which they were long known gradually disappear. The capacity for being named diminishes; the uniform term ‘animal’ threatens natural diversity of life. In *Meadowland*, on the other hand, anthropomorphism offers a way of preserving nature within the human imaginarium.

John Berger, in his well-known essay *Why look at animals?* [first published in 1980], states that it is through imagination that animals first entered human consciousness. Prior to becoming, only as late as the 19th century, the source of food or leather, animals were primarily considered as “messengers and promises”. Not even the cattle were essentially a source of meat, but they had mysterious, prophetic or sacrificial powers. “And the choice of a given species as magical, tameable *and* alimentary was originally determined by the habits, proximity and ‘invitation’ of the animal in question” (Berger 2009:12). It is a fact that presently the original context for physical encounter with animals is gradually becoming limited. Given that, the ancient way of reading, seeing and listening to non-human world is being transformed into standardized, mechanical categorization. The non-human entities are becoming “animals of the mind” (Berger 2009:25).

This ever-growing cognitive distance, despite the accumulation of scientific data, is best illustrated by Lewis-Stempel’s accidental encounter with an otter performing its “ablutions” by the river (Lewis-Stempel 2015:146). True, the narrator captures this rare moment enthusiastically, but its sublimity quickly vanishes. It is depreciated because he recollects having seen other otters before in a zoo. The imposed closeness of a zoo shatters the present wonderment. So, now, his own sighting of one is narrowed, abridged, encapsulated by his previous experience:

In a moment of unpleasant realisation I understand that viewing the otter in the tank at Bristol Zoo diminished this sighting in the wild. I saw the copy before the real thing. I saw the manufactured spectacle before the natural sighting.

Is this not what happens to us all today? Has *Autumnwatch*⁹ not killed the experience of being an amateur naturalist? (Lewis-Stempel 2015:147-148)

In consequence, such moments of ultimate encounter will not yield the (pastoral) effect one could wish for. Can the informed naturalist still continue to have access to the authenticity of experience? As Berger observes, the more we have seen and “the more we know, the further away they are” (Berger 2009:27). For Lewis-Stempel, a zoo had already provided animal imagery which now erodes the uniqueness, mystery and wildness of the real thing. The knowledge then destroys the need for the anthropomorphic or anecdotal which originally had an explanatory function. Lewis-Stempel is quite explicit in his nostalgia about the past and, when remembering James Herriot¹⁰, he says: “[Even] vets today dress like forensic scientists at the scene of a crime” (Lewis-Stempel 2015:217).

Humanization of non-humans, seen as a cognitive mistake by scientists, is a consequence of spatial closeness. How to recognize the very existence of your neighbours without being allowed to bestow names and qualities upon them? Language, including human propensity to anthropomorphise, organizes human experience and sharing of space. And until the 19th century humanization of other species was the conveyor of this closeness (Berger 2009:21). Today, however, since the physical adjacency changed into the isolation of man and animal, this seclusion may be (as noted by Berger, Derrida and Braidotti) the source of uneasiness, confusion and falsity.

Around anthropomorphising

Almost four decades after Berger noticed the growing detachment between man and animals, this process of turning non-humans into cultural constructs is addressed by Rosi Braidotti in her post-humanist reflections on “becoming-animal”. In her book *The Posthuman*, she recalls the travestied animal taxonomy which currently appears to reduce human/non-human relationship. Under this grouping, animals fall into simplified, generalized classes of companion species, commodities (e.g. food suppliers) or the nearly extinct phantasmata. What she sees between man and beast is the oedipal bond, based on ambivalence and manipulation. And, paradoxically, it is here that the strategy of metaphorisation seems to be a most potent device.

⁹ *Autumnwatch* – popular BBC wildlife series. Source: Wikipedia. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Springwatch> (2 February 2017).

¹⁰ James Herriot is a pen name used by a well-known British veterinarian and writer whose real name was James Alfred ‘Alf’ Wright. In 1975 he published his omnibus volume *All Creatures Great and Small*, which included his first two books *If Only They Could Talk* and *It Shouldn't Happen to a Vet*, with three chapters from *Let Sleeping Vets Lie*. The success was followed by two more omnibus volumes: *All Things Bright and Beautiful* and *All Things Wise and Wonderful*. The semi-autobiographical accounts of his life and veterinarian career were filmed into a TV series by BBC under the title *All Creatures Great and Small*. Both the narrative series and its cinematographic adaptation became enormously popular in the UK and across the world.

Animals are humanized, bestowed with man's properties, norms, features of character. Such anthropomorphism, however, leads further to forcing on them the status of phantasm, encamping them in the dimension of unreality, turning them into sentimental misinterpretations or cultural constructs (Braidotti 2014:150-154). While there is a substantial time-lapse between both works (Berger wrote his essay in 1977 and Braidotti is reflecting on the issue early in 21st century), both authors repudiate the 20th century pageant where animals are turned into "human puppets" (Berger 2009:25). Whereas she denounces certain contemporary forms of humanizing animals, Braidotti does not in fact criticize or reject anthropomorphism entirely. The complex question of metaphorising non-humans is rather signalled here and the contemporary human (post-human) map is oriented beyond *anthropos*. Could then post-humanism, in this respect, mean shifting the focal point of analysis from man to the bond with non-humans? Therefore, if it is the interspecies bond, the connection that needs to be studied, anthropomorphism is simply the enactment of this connection.

In strictly scientific terms, to declare oneself anthropomorphiser is to take sides and to be exposed to various charges of pretentious sentimentality, subjective prejudice, or even delusional naïveté, etc. Berger provides insightful observations of this ancient human inclination to metaphorise animals and turn them into signs which helped to map the intricate meanings of surrounding world. Historically speaking, humanizing other species indicated the search for universal explanations. It was a way of "chartering" the experience of the world: "Every animals offered explanations, or, more precisely, lent their name or character to a quality, which like all qualities was, in its essence, mysterious" (Berger 2009:18). Drawing from the context of the vast body of scientific data, Dominique Lestel, a French philosopher, in his article "Epistemological Interlude" defends anthropomorphism. He offers a compelling discussion of how anthropomorphism and the use of anecdote in ethology, the study of animal behaviour, are seen as a menace to the objective scientific observation by certain part of academia (Lestel 2014:152). But is it possible to study animal behavior while not projecting human emotions onto the objects of study? Is animal behavior separable from animal emotions? The article reveals the impossibility of such proposals:

To speak of anthropomorphism with disgust implies, on the one hand, that it is possible and appropriate to describe animals as if they had no relationship with humans, and, second, that it is possible to form an "objective" representation of them that is truly independent of the observer who develops it (Lestel 2014:153-4).

Lestel denounces such claims of objectivity. He further indicates that denying anthropomorphism legitimacy in ethologic research is "a type of mental rigidity" (Lestel 2014:154). In conclusion, animals have emotional, physical, psychological and semiotic needs in that their actions convey and also interpret meaning.

In *Meadowland*, which describes a physical space, not an imaginary realm, the old boar badger is called "a Nazi, a follower of Goering's maxim 'Guns Before Butter'", and his territorial boundary overlaps with that of humans: "(...) he has adopted the human's stock fence as his national border"

(Lewis-Stempel 2015:7). Drawing from the abundance of literary tradition, Lewis-Stempel ostentatiously allows himself to fall into anthropomorphism when he admits: “And the worst anthropomorphisers of all are country people. I have never known a sow badger to be anything but an ‘old girl’, and when the gender of an animal is unknown it is always ‘he’ and never ‘it’” (Lewis-Stempel 2015:113). So, duly, Moldy Warp – arguably the most common object of humanization – is described as “the most violent diner”. The insatiable species whose pantry is named as “a chamber of horrors” is, however, presented with all the knowledge of an informed naturalist (Lewis-Stempel 2015:61). In the narrative the animals act. And if Erica Fudge identifies their historical agency only through preserved artefacts, *Meadowland* is a record of their ongoing performance: the buzzard “looks none too pleased” (Lewis-Stempel 2015:67) and a crow is “hopping about with evil intent” (Lewis-Stempel 2015:145). Even the speechless earthworms speak metaphorically because once drowned in January pools they remain “a silent white S” (Lewis-Stempel 2015:20). Far from exhausting the meadowland menagerie, the green woodpecker “violates” God’s commandments, and a moth “wears gaudy dress” to avoid being eaten.

Jacques Derrida in his essay on Animal asks a persuasive question: “Can animals suffer?” It is the modality inscribed in the very semantics of the verb ‘can’ that is so meaningful for the philosopher. The verb that indicates potential, power, being able, changes its meaning in this very question. Derrida argues:

The question is disturbed by a certain *passivity*. It bears witness, manifesting already, as question, the response that testifies to a sufferance, a passion, a not-being-able. The word can [*pouvoir*] changes sense and sign here once one asks “can they suffer?” (Derrida 2002:396)

The answer, Derrida concludes, is self-evident. It is older than the question itself. The truth of this fact was recognizable even before humans were capable of asking the question: “No one can deny the suffering, fear or panic, the terror or fright that humans witness in certain animals. (Descartes himself was not able to claim that animals were insensitive to suffering)” (Derrida 2002:396).

Lewis-Stempel does address, albeit in a more light-hearted example, the question of animal agency, or rather ability. Again, the modal ‘can’ (Derrida’s *pouvoir*) is evoked in the context of animal behaviour. As the following illustration demonstrates, projecting human ways on animals can function as a source of humour but also as manifestation of interconnectedness.

The equines continue circling the hut, until Zeb, my horse, breaks out of the circle and runs, with absolute deliberation, up to me. And gently tugs on the sleeve of my shirt. He pulls the sleeve again with infinite courtesy. Animals can, of course, talk. In that moment he and I are one, indivisible. I can see inside his great impenetrable chestnut head, see every slow bestial process. I am a fellow animal and he wants me to play (Lewis-Stempel 2015:144).

Man’s reading of animal ways derives from years of proximity, careful observation and empathy. It is undeniably intuitive and, as such, counter-scientific.

Ecocritical anguish

Terry Gifford's conceptual frame for post-pastoral offers a broad platform for how man interacts with the surrounding natural world. As his words cited earlier in the article indicate, post-pastoral reading does more than nullify the nature/culture divide. It also responds to the current problematics of the issue, namely modern anxiety concerning climatic change. Sadly, given the recent scientific facts concerning climate change and human-induced changes of natural landscape, it remains clear that one way in which nature becomes an agent is when it 'threatens' with extinction or climatic doom. It nowadays remains impossible for literary representations of nature or landscape to disregard the environmental transformations of the past decades. The old-fashioned strong tincture of idealization in countryside literature became disrupted around the 1960s and this paved way for literary discussions about environment. This shift and cultural and literary responses to it are discussed in detail by the aforementioned article "From Countryside to Environment" locating the change historically within the decades between 1960s and 1980s.¹¹

In *Meadowland* Lewis-Stempel's dialectic listening to nature cannot fail to illustrate the environmental issues. He observes: "I fret eschatologically about the curlews, as though it is their migratory wingbeats that turn the earth, and should they fail to appear we will have entered some ecological end time" (Lewis-Stempel 2015:77). This end-of-the-world anguish is suspended somewhere between Ted Hughes' confirmation that the returning swifts mean that "the globe's still working"¹² and modern environmental knowledge of species' disappearance and the fear of this absence.

The above passage from *Meadowland* provides perhaps the most explicit illustration of ecological angst, which is otherwise infrequently hinted at throughout the narrative. It is, nonetheless, hard to escape the obvious conclusion that even the most humorous, apparently light-hearted depictions of countryside must encompass this distressing post-pastoral knowledge.

Conclusions

The foregoing discussion of *Meadowland* has attempted to prove the vitality of post-pastoral countryside writing. Its aim is also to point out the manifold functions of anthropomorphism, this long-established strategy of making sense of the outer nature. Both animating non-humans in literary representation and post-pastoral depiction of British countryside are expressions of spatial proximity, apparently an indispensable prerequisite for co-existence, for sharing material place. Far from causing confusion or misunderstanding, anthropomorphisation has an enduring power of organizing human experience and expressing interconnectedness. And speaking

11 Gifford also provides an analysis of literary works concerning nature of the decades between 1960s and 1980s and their mutual influences or lack of thereof. Interestingly, he dispels the popular views concerning the sweeping influence of Rachel Carson's book *Silent Spring* (1962) in the United Kingdom. Instead, he identifies Richard Mabey's *The Common Ground* (1980) as the turning point in British nature writing (Gifford 2016:9).

12 Ted Hughes "Swifts".

in historical terms, it remains a fact that people have always responded to natural world, turning animals into agents.

Following the civilization schism into a number of bipolarities, such as country/city, nature/culture, human/animal, the post-pastoralist position utilizes the language as a means of mediating between these apparently separate realms. By animating landscape and its inhabitants, John Lewis-Stempel preserves the world of nature within a human imaginarium. Humanizing non-humans allows man to seek connections. Similarly, by anecdotal projection of man's attributes, the narrative's author finds the artistic correspondence with the habitat, his "equilibrium".

In addition to extending human perception of the environment, anthropomorphism entails giving voice to animals. For, as Derrida points out, animal has no language; it is deprived of the power to respond, which in a way is the sole property of humans (Derrida 2002:400).

Finally, in presenting how the species intersect in terrain of the meadow, the narrator proves the concurrence of animal agents. At the same time, by effacing himself from the central position within the narrative, Lewis-Stempel melts into the meadowland. Indicative of this position are tiny grasshoppers which, with their 300-million-year lineage, "are another landowner with a prior claim to humans" (Lewis-Stempel 2015:145). Thus human self-importance is diminished.

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