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## Reflections on Anthropocentrism, Anthropomorphism and Impossible Fiction: Towards A Typological Spectrum of Fictional Animals

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## Abstract

There is growing consensus among animal studies scholars that fictional representations of animals, far from representing a discrete site of literary theory, offer insights into broader sociocultural forces and systems relevant to human-animal relations. This article aims to contribute to this developing corpus of interdisciplinary knowledge, and to aid attempts by creative practitioners to self-reflexively challenge the human/animal binary, by laying groundwork for a typological spectrum that might enable assessment of the relative anthropocentrism manifested by different conceptions of fictional animals. I consider philosophical and ethical questions surrounding attempted representations of animal subjectivity in human language, and employ key theoretical concepts comprised of ideological anthropocentrism, linguistic anthropomorphism, and impossible fiction. I propose that a useful typological spectrum might proceed on the basis that all fictional animals are anthropomorphised to some degree; that the relative anthropocentrism reflected by a given fictional animal (i.e. whether the adopted anthropomorphic strategy is 'better' or 'worse') depends on how effectively the animal represents an individual, embodied subjectivity not dependent for meaning on human consciousness; and that a practical enquiry in considering whether a fictional animal depends for meaning on human consciousness is how far the animal's imagined subjectivity is in fact impossible (e.g. by virtue of the attribution of impossibly human traits or knowledge).

## Keywords

animals in fiction, anthropomorphism, anthropocentrism

## Cover Page Footnote

I am grateful to two anonymous reviewers, Associate Professor Maria Takolander and Dr Claire Tanner for insightful and helpful feedback on an earlier draft of this paper. Any mistakes are my own.

# Reflections on Anthropocentrism, Anthropomorphism and Impossible Fiction: Towards a Typological Spectrum of Fictional Animals

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## Introduction

There is growing consensus among animal studies scholars that fictional representations of animals, far from representing a discrete site of literary theory, offer insights into broader sociocultural forces and systems relevant to human-animal relations. In *What Animals Mean in the Fiction of Modernity*, for example, Philip Armstrong uses a historically expansive range of literary texts (including *Robinson Crusoe*, *Moby Dick*, *The Old Man and the Sea*, *Disgrace* and *Life of Pi*) to explore:

the relationship between human-animal narratives and the social practices and conditions from which they emerge; the evidence of exchanges between human and non-human forms of agency; and the documentation of shifts in the emotional and affective engagements between humans and other animals. (2)

Susan McHugh describes the broader context for her enquiry into companion-species narrative histories, *Animal Stories: Narrating Across Species Lines*, in analogous terms: ‘literary and visual narrative forms [at times] become inseparable from shifts in the politics and sciences of species, such that questions about animal narratives come to concern the formal and practical futures of all species life’ (3). This potential of fictional animals to reveal aspects of human-animal relations embedded in the societies that produce and consume them leads animal studies scholars to press for an interdisciplinary approach to their interpretation. As editor David Herman writes in a recent volume interrogating twentieth and twenty-first century animal-related literature:

fictional texts centering on modes of entanglement between humans and other animals give rise to ‘transdisciplinary’ questions for research, the proper articulation of which will require the combined efforts of scholars in the arts and humanities, the social sciences, and the natural sciences. (2)

The present discussion aims to contribute to this developing corpus of interdisciplinary knowledge relating to the sociocultural origins and impacts of fictional animal representations. It does so by seeking to lay groundwork for a typological spectrum that might enable assessment of the relative anthropocentrism manifested by different conceptions of fictional animals. Such a spectrum, I believe, may provide important insights not only into how anthropocentric values are propagated in fictional forms commonly accepted as benign, indeed as promoting empathy

towards other species, but also how creative practitioners may self-reflexively employ fictional animals as a means of promoting post-anthropocentric consciousness and species plurality.<sup>1</sup>

I adopt an interdisciplinary lens consistent with animal studies' foundational rejection of accepted categories of humanist thought (Gross and Valley 3). I consider first philosophical and ethical questions surrounding attempted representations of animal subjectivity in human language; in particular, whether such attempts are foreclosed from the outset, are necessarily anthropocentric, or are inherently ethically irresponsible. I then discuss questions relevant to how a typological spectrum of the relative anthropocentrism of fictional animals might be framed, using the theoretical concepts of linguistic anthropomorphism (as developed by Eileen Crist in the field of behavioural science) and impossible fiction (as interpreted by postmodern literary theorist Jan Alber and philosopher Daniel Nolan). Finally, I seek to illustrate how a typological spectrum of the kind I propose might be applied to critically interpret fictional animals created by Julian Barnes and John Steinbeck respectively.

### **Animal Studies and the (Im)Possible Representation of Animals in Fiction**

Thinking about fictional animals outside the scope of traditional literary theory exposes at the outset a threshold problem. In what sense can a fictional animal represent a real one? As McHugh identifies, the discipline of literary theory appears to be organised by the studied avoidance of questioning 'the metaphorical animal's ways of inhabiting literature without somehow being represented therein', even though this work 'present[s] tremendous opportunities for recovering and interrogating the material and representational problems specific to animality' (6). As discussed in detail below, a key element of my project here involves seeking to distinguish between the attribution of possible and impossible subjectivities

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<sup>1</sup> The term 'post-anthropocentrism' is adopted from Rosi Braidotti's *The Posthuman*.

onto fictional animal representations. A critical anterior question, then, is whether animal subjectivity can be represented in fiction at all.

In *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, Jacques Derrida charges that the discourses of probably all philosophers and theoreticians (Descartes, Kant, Heidegger, Lacan, and Levinas he references by name) reflect ignorance of what it is like to be ‘addressed’ – especially naked – by a *real* animal (12-13). He describes his experience being beheld naked by his pet cat – a ‘real cat’, he says, not ‘the figure of a cat...silently enter[ing] the bedroom as an allegory for all the cats on the earth, the felines that traverse our myths and religions, literature and fables’ – and how in that moment he has offered to his sight ‘the abyssal limit of the human: the inhuman or the ahuman, the ends of man...[I]n these moments of nakedness, as regards the animal, everything can happen to me, I am like a child ready for the apocalypse’ (6). For Derrida, then, literary creations in the guise of animals are implicated in humanism’s erasure of true animal alterity: an alterity which, when witnessed without a protective humanist lens, at once exposes as misconception the humanist divide between human and animal, and reveals the essential vulnerability of all life. Derrida’s evocation of the erasive effect of humanist discourses including literature on non-human life is not limited to ‘animals’ as a supposedly homogeneous collective, nor to groupings classified by species, but extends to *individual* animal subjectivity. Derrida rejects the notion that his cat represents ‘the immense symbolic responsibility with which our culture has always charged the feline race’ or appears as ‘the exemplar of a species called “cat”, even less so of an “animal” genus or kingdom’ (9). Even before identification as male or female, he writes, his cat ‘comes to me as this irreplaceable living being that one day enters my space, into this place where it can encounter me, see me, even see me naked. *Nothing can ever rob me of the certainty that what we have here is an existence that refuses to be conceptualized* [emphasis added] (9). Thus, any attempted conceptualisation of an animal or animals in fiction (as in other discourses) must, Derrida seems to suggest, result in the individual and collective occlusion of the real animal(s) upon which such conceptualisation might be modelled. A similar point appears to be asserted by Jean Baudrillard: ‘In all this – metaphor, guinea pig, model, allegory...– animals maintain a compulsory discourse. *Nowhere do they really speak*, because they only furnish the responses one asks for. It is their way of sending the Human back to his circular codes, behind which their silence analyzes us [emphasis added]’ (137-38).

Insofar as Derrida and Baudrillard argue that the act of representing or conceptualising animals in fiction *necessarily* leads to erasure of individual animal subjectivity, it seems to me this goes too far. Thomas Nagel may be correct in the assertion, discussed in J.M. Coetzee's *The Lives of Animals*, that a human is incapable of knowing what it is like for a bat to be a bat, for example (Coetzee 1999, 129). But I would argue this is quite different from saying that a human is incapable of distinguishing between contrasting conceptualisations of the subjectivity of an animal, based on how likely it is that a given conceptualisation might (or might not) reflect the subjectivity experienced by an animal of the relevant kind. Coetzee's character Elizabeth Costello responds to Nagel by saying (referring to a human character she has created):

[i]f I can think my way into the existence of a being who has never existed, then I can think my way into the existence of a bat or a chimpanzee or an oyster, any being with whom I share the substrate of life. (133)

This claim has been said to 'fall flat', on the grounds that '[l]iterature cannot, by itself, move from an imaginary to an objective phenomenology' (Bernaerts et al. 76). But irrespective of whether what Costello says is literally true, what is significant here is its corollary: to create an animal character that portrays convincingly the lived experience of a real animal calls for a process of imagining, language craft and political awareness equivalent to that involved in the creation of a convincing human character. It follows axiomatically that there must be degrees of success: *some fictional animals must be more like real animals than others*. Costello elsewhere discusses the poems 'The Jaguar' and 'Second Glance at a Jaguar' by Ted Hughes. In these poems, Costello says:

we know the jaguar not from the way he seems but from the way he moves. The body is as the body moves, or as the currents of life move within it. The poems ask us to imagine our way into that way of moving, to inhabit that body. (147)

I would suggest that a fictional jaguar susceptible of being understood in these terms provides a surely more authentic representation of the subjectivity experienced by a real member of his or her species than does, to choose a conspicuous example, a wolf depicted as impersonating a grandmother.

It is important to note an additional point. If it is accepted, as I have argued it should be, that some fictional representations of animals may come closer to the subjective experience of real animals than others, from one perspective a difficult ethical question arises. Kari Weil notes a commonality between animal studies and trauma studies, in that, bearing in mind the violence done to animals and the difficulties humans face in trying to understand how animals experience that violence, '[b]oth raise questions about how one can give testimony to an experience that cannot be spoken or that may be distorted by speaking about it' (6). More broadly, contemporary tensions surrounding 'identity politics' and the potential for authors to effect 'cultural appropriation' through the representation in fiction of the life-worlds of other humans (Greenidge) – raised notably by books such as *Little Bee*, a 2009 book written by Englishman Chris Cleave from the perspective of a fourteen-year old Nigerian girl – arguably have particular relevance for attempts to inhabit and relate the actual lived experiences of animals.

I would argue, however, that although articulating these concerns may be helpful in directing writers engaged in creating fictional animals to respect the potential political sensitivity of the enterprise – just as Derrida's and Baudrillard's critiques are helpful in urging vigilance against the essential human/animal divide underlying humanism – nevertheless, it is important to guard against allowing political awareness to develop into paralysis. Mainstream fictional animals are created and consumed on a vast scale. The novels *Black Beauty*, *Watership Down*, *Charlotte's Web* and *Jonathan Livingstone Seagull* figure among the best-selling of all time, for example, while at the time of writing three of the four highest-grossing films of 2016 comprise *Zootopia*, *Finding Dory* and *The Jungle Book*. But real animals born into the age of the anthropocene face death and suffering through industrial farming, experimentation, human recreation and habitat loss to a stunning and unprecedented degree (Wadiwel 5-7). In the circumstances, the uncritical assumption that popular representations of fictional animals are universally harmless or indeed promote empathy (Simons 120) seems to me uncomfortably optimistic. I would argue that animal studies as an interdisciplinary field should not confine itself to passive consideration of the sociocultural significance of fictional representations of animals, but should rather proactively empower and encourage creative practitioners to use such representations self-reflexively, with a view perhaps to diluting the impact of anthropocentrism, and promoting species plurality and inter-species respect.

Much of the insightful and ground-breaking work produced to date by animal studies scholars in connection with fictional animals – Jay Johnston and Fiona Probyn-Rapsey’s edited volume *Animal Death* and Aaron Gross and Anne Vallely’s *Animals and the Human Imagination* may be added to the titles noted above by way of illustration – have tended to focus on discrete interrogations of the role that select works play in reflecting, maintaining or disrupting the human/animal divide. In the next section, I discuss how a more generally applicable typological spectrum might be framed with a view to identifying how different conceptions of fictional animals may serve: either to reinforce the erasure of animal alterity and subjectivity Derrida locates in the humanist philosophical tradition; or, conversely, to represent in some measure the subjectivity of individual animals, which I think can be employed self-reflexively in fiction to destabilise humanism’s anthropocentric human/animal binary.

### **Towards a Typological Spectrum of Fictional Animals: Anthropocentrism, Anthropomorphism and Impossible Subjectivities**

*The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy (ODP)* defines as ‘anthropocentric’: ‘[a]ny view magnifying the importance of human beings in the cosmos, e.g. by seeing it as created for our benefit’. A more sophisticated conception developed by critical animal studies theory treats anthropocentrism as an *ideology* which, by means of an essential human/animal binary, operates to ‘maintain the centrality and priority of human existence through marginalizing and subordinating nonhuman perspectives, interests and beings’ (Weitzenfeld and Joy 4-5). A critical element of the process by which this ideology is sustained involves directly and indirectly classifying non-human beings as essentially aimless: ‘only achiev[ing] meaning instrumentally through human consciousness’ (6).

In the previous section, I sought to establish that fictional portrayals of animals should be recognised across a spectrum: that the project of representing in fiction an animal subjectivity corresponding to that of a real animal should not be seen as foreclosed from the outset, but rather as realisable to some degree, depending on an equivalent process of imagining, language craft and political awareness to the creation of a human fictional character. It seems to me to follow from the above ideological conception of anthropocentrism that if a fictional animal

possesses a sufficiently convincing subjectivity as a unique non-human being, he or she can be successfully represented as having meaning apart from human consciousness, and thus as constituting a profound opposition to anthropocentrism. Conversely, however, a fictional animal whose representation operates to maintain the centrality of human existence and/or to subordinate or marginalise non-human beings – by reinforcing either a human-animal dualism or a human-animal continuum – must be, to the extent of that maintenance or subordination, anthropocentric. The concept of anthropocentrism thus marks out the two ends of my proposed spectrum: ‘worse’ fictional animals (anthropocentric) and ‘better’ (anti-anthropocentric).

Moving on to anthropomorphism, there is considerable uncertainty at present within the fields of literary theory and animal studies in relation to both precisely what stylistic techniques this idea refers to, and whether, from the perspective of challenging the human/animal binary, it is part of the problem or the solution. Gillian Beer’s interesting comparative analysis of fictional animals appears to assume that anthropomorphism refers in most if not all cases to the investing of animal characters with the power of language; she writes that the ‘paradox of representation through language, of “literary beasts”, is what particularly interests me here, as I have indicated in my title “Animal Presences: Tussles with Anthropomorphism”’ (313). Allan Burns’ approach appears perhaps not inconsistent with Beer’s, but places contrasting emphasis on whether a fiction’s narrative voice is in the first or third person; ‘[f]irst-person animal narratives, such as *Black Beauty*, are overtly anthropomorphic fantasies and cannot operate within or even congruent to the framework of natural science’, he writes, whereas ‘an objectively maintained third-person point of view that focuses exclusively on exterior action and rigorously excludes any hint of interiority would correspond with an anthropocentric or behaviorist position’ (344). John Simons distinguishes ‘trivial’ from ‘strong’ anthropomorphism, where the former ‘treats animals as though they were people but [does] not seek to use this strategy to point [*sic*] any moral or teach any example’ and the latter ‘deals with animals as if they were humans...either to show how the non-human experience differs from the human or to create profound questions in the reader’s mind as to the extent to which humans and non-humans are really different’ (119-20). Bearing in mind the *ODP* definition of anthropomorphism – relevantly, the representation of animals ‘as having human form, or as having human thoughts and intentions’ – I would suggest that the apparently insoluble difficulties involved in trying to reconcile these contrasting formulations reveal

difficulties inherent in attempting to distinguish a ‘human’ thought or intention from an ‘animal’ thought or intention. To illustrate, consider the story, ‘the chicken crossed the road’. Does the chicken represent trivial anthropomorphism per Simons’ definition – on the basis that ‘crossing the road’ implicitly imputes a human intention to the chicken – or is the chicken anthropocentric, following Burns, owing to an objectively maintained third-person point of view focused exclusively on exterior action? If the story were changed to ‘I am a chicken and I crossed the road’, would the shift to the first person narrative voice be regarded as sufficient to endow the chicken with the power of language, hence satisfying Beer’s apparent conception of anthropomorphism? Or would the shift mean that for Burns the story is no longer anthropocentric, but an anthropomorphic fantasy incapable of operating within the framework of natural science? Or would Simons consider that as a first person narrative the story has moved from ‘trivial’ to ‘strong’ anthropomorphism, because now the author is creating a profound question in the reader’s mind about how different humans and chickens really are? These questions may be somewhat facetious, but I would suggest they are nevertheless difficult to answer, and highlight serious shortcomings with the referenced attempts to define anthropomorphism.

It is perhaps the opacity surrounding anthropomorphism that leads to starkly different assessments of whether it is good or bad. Weil, for example, notes that ‘as a process of identification, the urge to anthropomorphize the experience of another, like the urge to empathize with that experience, risks becoming a form of narcissistic projection that erases boundaries of difference’ (19). But she also observes that animal studies’ turn to ethics has ‘brought a new focus on the notion of anthropomorphism...as a potentially productive, critical tool that has similarities to empathy within recent historical research’ (19). Simons is guilty of no such equivocation; anthropomorphism, he writes, ‘is perhaps the most powerful, important and multifaceted representational tool for the development of a discourse which might enable literature to develop as speciesism becomes an increasingly unacceptable model for the world within which literature is generated and which it reflects’ (139).

Eileen Crist’s work regarding anthropomorphism in the linguistics of behavioural science provides, I believe, a means of resolving both the question of whether fictional animals are anthropomorphised – they always are – and whether anthropomorphism is good – it depends. For Crist, the accepted ‘vernacular of *human* action’ involves three elements:

*meaningfulness* (actions have subjective significance for the actor); *authorship* (actors are able to act or refrain from acting according to their own agency and will); and *continuity* (actions by an individual or group are coherently connected and combine together in the stream of the living) (1-10). Depictions of animal subjectivity begin, according to Crist, not with direct attribution of individual mentality, but with anterior elements of lexicon, grammar and reasoning consistent with animal actions being meaningful, authored and continuous (as human actions are). An important illustration for Crist is the writing of Charles Darwin, for example the following passage:

nothing is more common than for animals to take pleasure in practicing whatever instinct they follow at other times for some real good. How often do we see birds which fly easily, gliding and sailing through the air obviously for pleasure . . . Hence it is not at all surprising that male birds should continue singing for their own amusement after the season for courtship is over. (Darwin, *The Descent of Man*, in Crist, 36)

Through the imputation of pleasure and amusement, Darwin attributes to the birds an experience of their own flying and singing as subjectively meaningful; intentionality with respect to when they choose to fly and sing; and ultimately an ontological significance located in the same temporal plane as the human. Thus, Crist explains, such accounts are both anthropomorphic and clearly distinguishable from the mechanomorphism of classical ethology, which in specialised technical vocabulary (for example, ‘innate releasing mechanism’ (“IRM”) or ‘parental investment’) treats animal behaviour as a set of mechanised responses to physiological states and environmental stimuli. For Crist, where mechanomorphic writing implicitly characterises animals as mindlessly compelled to act by a technically defined grid of forces extrinsic to lived experience, Darwin’s brand of anthropomorphism advances a powerful view of animal life as meaningful, authored and continuous, and thereby yields an imposing and cogent perspective on understanding animals in semantic kinship with the human world (202-04).

It has been observed, perhaps correctly, that Crist’s argument is ‘rich with irony’, implying as it does that Darwin’s commitment to Cartesian empiricism is at odds with a Cartesian understanding of animal mind (Boehrer 12). Be that as it may, I would argue that Crist’s analysis provides a critical starting point for consideration of anthropomorphism in the

context of fictional animals. For one thing, by focusing on linguistic constructions of animal exteriority, rather than interiority, Crist's insistence that anthropomorphism can play a constructive role in promoting kinship has much in common with the way Elizabeth Costello talks about Ted Hughes' poetic jaguar. Cary Wolfe has pointed out that humanism relies on an artificial, abstracted concept of 'the human', which is 'achieved by escaping or repressing not just its animal origins in nature, the biological, and the evolutionary, but more generally by *transcending the bonds of materiality and embodiment altogether* [emphasis added]' (xv). When Costello describes the jaguar 'ask[ing] us to imagine our way into that way of moving, to inhabit that body', she identifies how precisely the brand of anthropomorphism urged by Crist has the potential to destabilise the human/animal binary, simply because humanist discourses generally foreclose an awareness of embodied existence at all.

More generally, it is difficult to imagine how a fictional animal – that is, an animal represented as having a corporeal existence in the relevant fictional world, as against existing solely as image or metaphor – could be represented otherwise than as to some degree acting in ways that are meaningful, authored and continuous. The technical vocabulary of ethology is arguably impossible to sustain on its own terms in fiction. To illustrate, consider a story that recounts, 'Harry studied the parental investment of the honeyeaters nesting in the forest'; even a reader acquainted with the behavioural science-based interpretation of parental investment (as referring to a parent bird's ability to invest in other offspring (Kvarnemo 452)) is likely to be put on notice of questions surrounding why Harry has found himself designating the actions of the honeyeaters – whose nesting is implicitly meaningful, authored and continuous – according to an objectifying scientific paradigm. Crist's insights therefore seem to suggest that animals in fiction are almost invariably, perhaps necessarily, anthropomorphised according to her conception of the term. The corollary of this conclusion, I would argue, is that at inception most if not all fictional animals are equipped in linguistic terms with the possibility of some kind of individual subjectivity; in contrast to an ethological mechanomorphism that precludes animal subjectivity from the outset, how far fiction subsumes animal subjectivity into an anthropocentric world view may depend on the extent of ontological erasure *within the text itself*.

To enquire into how different techniques of representation may erase the subjectivity of fictional animals, I propose that the concept of 'impossible' (or 'unnatural') fiction may have

considerable value. Literary theorist Jan Alber has demonstrated that, while the impossible is used self-consciously in experimental postmodernist metafiction such as Philip Roth's *The Breast* (in which the protagonist transforms into a giant breast), similar kinds of metaphysical impossibility recur throughout the history of literature in more conventional contexts (for example the speaking beast in animal fables or time travel in science fiction) (4-7). Philosopher Daniel Nolan makes an analogous point with respect to the personification of nation-states or abstractions like death or duty:

[o]ur ability to understand fictions, report on them, engage with them, and so on is not restricted to those fictions that describe possible goings-on... impossible fictions are not a peripheral case caused by unusual experimentation with fictional devices, but can be found in traditional and widespread kinds of cases. (68)

As I explore in more detail in the two case studies below, 'impossibility' may provide a touchstone by which to measure how far the characterisation of a given fictional animal works to promote anthropocentrism by erasing that animal's potential (as, in Crist's terms, an anthropomorphic creation whose actions are meaningful, authored and continuous) to possess a unique subjectivity not dependent for meaning on human consciousness. To provide a passing illustration, I would argue that a wolf impersonating a grandmother performs meaningful, authored and continuous acts, but is so impossibly imbued with human abilities and qualities that the potential for individual subjectivity as a wolf with which he is endowed at inception is erased, probably in its entirety, by the manner of his portrayal. An erasure such as that of the fairy tale wolf must, I would suggest, be considered an epitome of anthropocentrism: the wolf's physical characteristics are hived off and impossibly instrumentalised for human purposes with a manifest disregard for wolf subjectivity easily equivalent to that reflected by the destruction of real animals for their meat or skin. The wolf's subjectivity is made meaningful only as a metonymic representation of the human. On this view, the point made by Alber and Nolan that impossible fictions have long been commonly accepted by readers, in a variety of contexts, supports an inference that such impossible representations of fictional animals may be widely enjoyed without their anthropocentric import attracting concern, even notice.

In summary, then, I propose that a useful typological spectrum might proceed on the basis that all fictional animals are anthropomorphised to some degree; that the relative

anthropocentrism reflected by a given fictional animal (i.e. whether the adopted anthropomorphic strategy is ‘better’ or ‘worse’) depends on how effectively the animal represents an individual, embodied subjectivity not dependent for meaning on human consciousness; and that a practical enquiry in considering whether a fictional animal depends for meaning on human consciousness is how far the animal’s imagined subjectivity is in fact impossible (for instance by virtue of the attribution of impossibly human traits or knowledge).

A number of further clarifications in relation to this idea of impossibility are important. In describing what he means by impossibility, Nolan deliberately avoids portrayals of animals:

[w]hile there are interesting questions about whether, for instance, birds could, or do, sing love songs to each other, or whether it is possible for bears to grumble about the onset of winter... whether these things are literally impossible would lead us too far afield. (60)

The sense in which I use impossibility respects this caution. As Nolan emphasises, in testing for an impossibility in fiction, there should be no room for doubt; it is not an enquiry into technical language devices – whether bears grumble – or indeed ‘overt’ anthropomorphism – whether birds sing love songs – but rather a question of patent logical or physical impossibility. It will be apparent from the alternative conceptions of anthropomorphism discussed above that conferring language on fictional animals is sometimes regarded as something of a Rubicon. However, I would suggest that a focus on language *as language* is misplaced. I have two dogs. If I write that my Kelpie tells my Border Collie she has been to the park and eaten a liver treat, it seems to me there is no necessary erasure of her individual subjectivity as a being, Kelpie, dog or animal. Endowing the written representation of my Kelpie with a power of language is, to that extent at least, merely a technical device permitting me to communicate in the medium of human writing an inter-animal exchange that is, I think, clearly possible. It does not seem to me to affect the position whether I write in the third or the first person, just as, to draw on Elizabeth Costello’s analogy, choice of narrative voice does not automatically bear upon the success with which a human fictional character is created. However, if I write – in first or third person – that my Kelpie tells my Border Collie that while at the park she admired the Frank Lloyd Wright-inspired architecture, or that she tells the postman in the language of English that the Border Collie has stolen her bone, then I would suggest that the result in either case is the imputation of

patently impossible human understandings and attributes which operate to erase her own individual subjectivity and hence to reinforce anthropocentrism.

A typological spectrum of the kind I propose is not intended to assume that fiction portraying animal characters must be entirely realist. It may well be, for example, that a fictional cat could be created whose subjective experiences are readily identifiable by a human reader as within the possible realm of potential cat experiences, hence her or his portrayal need not be anthropocentric according to my spectrum, irrespective of the fact that she is portrayed travelling through time.

A final point of clarification concerns the relationship between this notion of impossibility and anthropocentrism itself. I think there can be little doubt that a view of the cosmos as existing for human benefit reflects a metaphysical impossibility, no more possible than that death can exist in human form or that a human can become a breast or travel through time. But that is quite different from suggesting that a fictional animal who herself or himself had an anthropocentric view of the world would reflect an impossible subjectivity and hence an anthropocentric portrayal. It seems to me a representation of a dog or cow or other domesticated animal, in particular, might conceivably be drawn as believing the world was created for the benefit of humans, without the fictional representation itself constituting an anthropocentric representation on the basis of impossibility.

## Two Case Studies

To illustrate two different points along my proposed typological spectrum, I have selected chapters from Julian Barnes' *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters* and John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*. In the former, the first chapter is told – as confirmed in the final sentence – from the perspective of a woodworm. The woodworm is represented as communicating directly with the reader, and as offering a unique stowaway's perspective on the journey of Noah's ark:

Now, I realize that accounts differ. Your species has its much repeated version, which still charms even sceptics; while the animals have a compendium of sentimental myths. But they're not going to rock the boat, are they? Not when they've been created as

heroes...But I am not constrained in that way. I was never chosen. In fact, like several other species, I was specifically not chosen. I was a stowaway; I too survived; I escaped... (4)

Barnes' book as a whole employs a startling range of narrative techniques. The third chapter, for example, is written in a voice the reader understands to belong 'perhaps [to] an official of the court' in sixteenth century France (73); the fifth by an art historian; the eighth in epistolary form by an actor addressing his girlfriend; the tenth by a dreamer who wakes in heaven. Yet the chapters are linked by 'connective devices': for example, the image of the ark or ship as both offering protection and imprisoning; the recurring presence of woodworms and reindeers (Finney 54-59). Barnes' overall project appears to involve exploring how, although 'different modes of discourse generate different meanings regardless of their content' (Finney 59), nevertheless even wildly contrasting accounts of different moments in time combine to form overarching patterns of meaning. Barnes himself has described the book as 'like a sequence of paintings on a wall...You can get pleasure from each in turn if you want to, but if you look at them together, then you see that they amount to one big panel' (Finney 69).

Alber sees Barnes' woodworm as exemplifying a kind of 'playful intertextuality' through which 'postmodernist narratives relate back to the well-known generic conventions of beast fables and children's stories to create a new configuration, namely a speaking animal that unites the functions of this impossible blend in traditional genres but also moves beyond them' (70-71). It may be that the woodworm does indeed operate as a self-reflexively postmodern literary device, illuminating both the inherent contingency and cumulative effect of historical discourse(s) and so contributing to the project of enhancing human self-conception. But Barnes makes no attempt to relate the actual subjectivity of a woodworm. As in the excerpt above, Barnes' woodworm possesses a consciousness capable of understanding how histories can charm or sentimentalise according to the agenda of the teller; elsewhere, the woodworm recounts in the same vein:

[y]ou aren't too good with the truth, either, your species...I can see there might be a positive side to this wilful averting of the eye: ignoring the bad things makes it easier for you to carry on. But ignoring the bad things makes you end up believing that bad things never happen. (34)

I doubt it is controversial to suggest that such abstract reflections lie outside the subjective experience of an actual woodworm. According to the spectrum of anthropomorphism described above, then, the potential subjectivity *qua* woodworm with which Barnes' creation is invested at inception, as a character whose actions are meaningful, authored and continuous, is, I would argue, substantially if not completely erased by the impossible attribution of uniquely human attributes and knowledge. Implicit in Barnes' depiction is a characterisation of woodworms as playthings for humans to think with: or, in terms of the ideology of anthropocentrism, as only achieving meaning instrumentally through human consciousness. Whatever the contribution to postmodernist literature, from the perspective of anthropocentrism it seems to me the brand of metonymy employed by Barnes does not 'move beyond' speaking beast fables at all, but treats animal subjectivity with a degree of dismissive entitlement and assumed superiority more or less identical to that represented by a grandmother-impersonating wolf.

Chapter three of *The Grapes of Wrath*, embedded amidst the epic narrative of the Joad family's journey from the dusty desolation of Oklahoma to the profit-fuelled wastage of California, recounts a single scene: a turtle crossing a highway. The turtle's progress is recounted in a closely focalised, exterior, mostly neutral but at times directly anthropomorphic descriptive style: '[h]is hard legs and yellow-nailed feet threshed slowly through the grass, not really walking, but boosting and dragging his shell along... His horny beak was partly open, and his fierce, humorous eyes, under brows like fingernails, stared straight ahead' (17-18). The turtle encounters one hurdle after another: sliding 'little by little' up the embankment to the highway; a red ant that runs into 'the soft skin inside the shell' and is 'crushed between body and legs'; a sedan that swings off the highway to avoid the turtle, causing him to jerk his head into his shell; the burning hot surface of the highway; a light truck whose driver swerves to hit him, flips him 'like a tiddly-wink', spins him 'like a coin', and rolls him off the highway; the challenge of

righting himself by catching a piece of quartz with his front foot.<sup>2</sup> After the turtle's crossing, the chapter closes:

[t]he turtle entered a dust road and jerked itself along, drawing a wavy shallow trench in the dust with its shell. The old humorous eyes looked ahead, and the horny beak opened a little. His yellow toe nails slipped a fraction in the dust. (17)

There is nothing impossible about the scene itself. It would be feasible, I think, to attempt a more ambitious exploration of the interior subjectivity of the turtle, in terms of his thoughts and feelings, without risking impossible subjectivity of the kind discussed previously. But, bearing in mind how depictions of animal exteriority in the vernacular of human action can destabilise the human/animal binary according to Crist's conception of anthropomorphism, such an alternative approach would not necessarily result in the character of the turtle presenting a stronger challenge to anthropocentrism. The turtle's actions are clearly meaningful, authored and continuous, and, seen independently of the rest of the novel, there is no apparent erasure of his individual subjectivity. Indeed, I would suggest that Steinbeck's description achieves, in Elizabeth Costello's terms, the result that we know the turtle 'not from the way he seems but from the way he moves': that Steinbeck 'ask[s] us to imagine that way of moving, to inhabit that body'.

The problem – a problem which may highlight a more general tension between animal studies and traditional literary theory – consists in the turtle, viewed in the context of the novel, performing a symbolic function: i.e. symbolising the perseverance of the Joad family and of 'Okies' more generally in their pursuit of a better life in the West of the United States. In fact the turtle has been described as '[p]robably Steinbeck's most famous use of the symbolic epitome' (Griffin and Freedman, 575). While the practice of animal symbolism may be seen as enriching literature and thereby enhancing human self-conception, there is, it seems to me, an

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<sup>2</sup> I have adopted the personal pronoun 'him' in relation to the turtle for consistency across my discussion; Steinbeck alternates between 'him' and 'it'.

underlying impossibility analogous to that which characterises anthropocentrism itself. Just as real animals surely do not exist for the purpose of enabling humans to benefit by making sense of their own condition, a fictional animal which operates to achieve that purpose through symbolism must, I think, have the individual subjectivity it might otherwise have possessed, by virtue of its actions being meaningful, authored and continuous, at least partially erased. In terms of the ideology of anthropocentrism, the attribution of symbolic meaning to the subjectivity of the turtle only allows the turtle to achieve meaning instrumentally through human consciousness.

It seems to me that the role of Steinbeck's turtle in *The Grapes of Wrath* is not exclusively symbolic. The effectiveness of the portrayal when viewed in isolation, and the way the depiction arguably operates more broadly across the novel to break down the human/animal binary by illustrating how determination and vulnerability are shared across species; these achievements, I think, militate against the anthropocentric import of the turtle's framing as symbol. Nevertheless, while I would suggest that my Steinbeck case study represents a less anthropocentric fictional animal than the Barnes case study, the problems associated with animal symbolism mean there remains a distinctly anthropocentric element.

## Conclusion

It has been suggested more than once that writing about animals requires navigation between the Scylla of anthropomorphism and the Charybdis of anthropocentrism (Burns 344; Pearson and Weismantel 17). I have sought to demonstrate that this supposed dichotomy is unhelpful. A preferable conceptualisation, I have suggested, is to accept that anthropomorphism is inevitable, and to see the challenge more in terms of negotiating a spectrum from 'worse' anthropomorphism – which buttresses an anthropocentric world view – to 'better' anthropomorphism – which disrupts anthropocentrism by recognising individual animal subjectivity, thereby promoting post-anthropocentric species equivalence and plurality. In so doing I have sought to contribute to animal studies' project of interrogating how representations of fictional animals implicate broader sociocultural forces and systems relevant to human-animal relations, by identifying how different approaches to constructing fictional animals (including

approaches commonly accepted as benign) may convey profoundly anthropocentric meanings. I have also proposed how a typological spectrum of fictional representations of animals might be framed, with a view to aiding attempts by fiction writers to self-reflexively challenge the ideology of anthropocentrism through fiction.

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