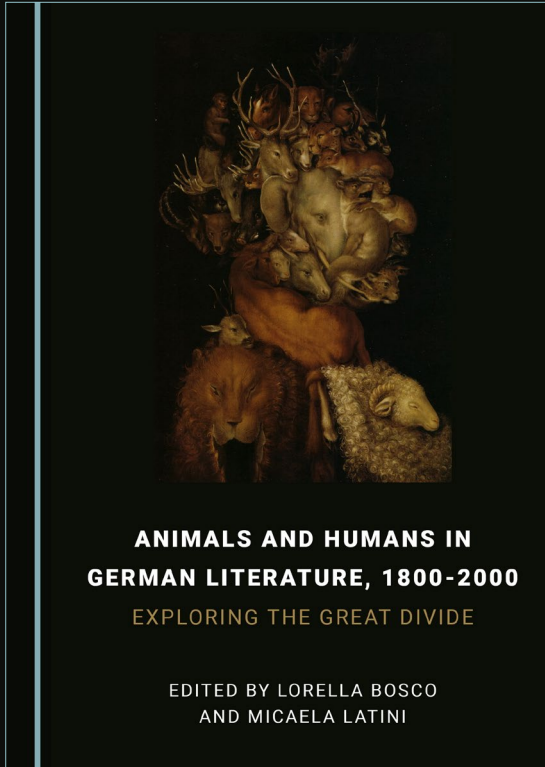


BOOK REVIEW

# Theriotopologies

Carlo Salzani



*Review of:*

Lorella Bosco and Micaela Latini, eds. *Animals and Humans in German Literature, 1800–2000: Exploring the Great Divide*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2020. xviii + 160 pp. £58.99, hb.

Carlo Salzani is a Research Fellow at the Messerli Research Institute of Vienna, Austria, and a faculty member of the Paris Institute for Critical Thinking (PICT).

Email: [carlosalzani@gmail.com](mailto:carlosalzani@gmail.com)

In *The Animal that Therefore I Am*, Jacques Derrida suggests that it is in the texts by “poets or prophets” that something like a true thinking of the animal should be sought.<sup>1</sup> The texts written by philosophers and scientists, on the contrary, are unable to really “encounter” the animal other, since they rest on the traditional dichotomy that divides the observing human subject from the animal reduced to a passive object. A similar argument was famously put forward by J.M. Coetzee’s protagonist Elizabeth Costello in *The Lives of Animals*, where philosophers and poets are juxtaposed with only the latter being granted true access to the authentic, bodily presence of the animal, often also despite themselves.<sup>2</sup> The advantage of literature and poetry over philosophy, the argument goes, is that they can bypass the narrow constraints of reason — traditionally the main discriminating feature between humans and nonhumans and thus also the main anthropocentric bias — and try to access otherness through imagination, bodily feelings, and empathy. This vantage opens up a whole field of investigation that should be seen not as alternative but rather as complementary to traditional — logocentric and thus still all too anthropocentric — animal ethics.

The presence of nonhuman animals in the cultural imagination is immemorial. In his seminal 1980 essay “Why Look at Animals?” John Berger argued, for example, that, like the first painting, the first metaphor must also have been an animal.<sup>3</sup> However, the field of “Literary Animal Studies” offers a different approach: the focus here is not (or not only) the symbolic or semiotic role animals are assigned in literary works (if one is fond of academic compartmentalization and labels, this could be the purview of “Cultural Animal Studies”), but rather — or also — the ways in which literature and poetry can offer a different access to animal subjectivity and life. Of course, this new access rests on new “scientific” findings in disciplines such as ethology, comparative or animal psychology, and many others. There-

1 Jacques Derrida, *The Animal that Therefore I Am*, trans. David Willis, ed. Marie-Louise Mallet (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 14.

2 J.M. Coetzee, *The Lives of Animals* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999).

3 John Berger, “Why Look at Animals?” in *About Looking* (London: Bloomsbury, 1980), 3–30.

fore even this quite specific field, as is by now commonplace to say, must be interdisciplinary. But Literary Animal Studies ideally challenges precisely the anthropocentric premises of “science”, i.e., the division between subject and object, and thereby also the consequent bias of human supremacy. The animal sought in this field of research is certainly “created by words” (x), but these very words challenge the literality of animals and literal representation as such.

In their introduction to this new collection, *Animals and Humans in German Literature, 1800–2000*, editors Lorella Bosco and Micaela Latini adopt the theoretical grid recently proposed by German literary scholar Roland Borgards (a theoretical grid that also explicitly structures most chapters of the book), according to which there are essentially two roles that can be assigned to animals in literature: they can act either as “semiotic” animals—that is, they are endowed with a semiotic function, they symbolize or represent something else, usually some human concern—or as “diegetic” animals—animals who have a place as living beings in the diegesis, that is in the narrative representation.<sup>4</sup> The wager of Literary Animal Studies is precisely to discover the diegetic animal in fictional representations and under the multiple layers of the cultural imagination of different epochs. Literary Animal Studies, Bosco and Latini write, rejects the anthropocentrism of the semiotic animal, of the animal as mere literary motif; but it cannot be said to be theriocentric either, since its animals are “made of words”, and it cannot but focus on the interaction between diegesis, history, cultural context, and poetics. Hence, Bosco and Latini adopt a different label, also proposed by Borgards,<sup>5</sup> namely “theriotopologic”: it is precisely its topology, its positioning between animality, cultural space, and social order, that allows Literary Animal Studies to question categorical assumptions and perhaps to present a different access to animal otherness.

4 Roland Borgards, “Tiere in der Literatur—Eine methodische Standortbestimmung,” in *Das Tier an sich. Disziplinenübergreifende Perspektiven für neue Wege im wissenschaftsbasierten Tierschutz*, ed. Herwig Grimm and Carola Otterstedt (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2012), 87–118.

5 Roland Borgards, ed., *Tiere. Ein kulturwissenschaftliches Handbuch* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 2016), 226–7.

On these premises, the essays collected in this volume focus on a specific cultural space and tradition, the German-speaking literature of the past two centuries. In Germany, like elsewhere, the manifold domain of Animal Studies has quickly caught up with the Anglo-American lead and has become a burgeoning field of research. This book however belongs less to the *German* branch of Literary Animal Studies than to the international field of German Studies with a focus on animality, or to the international field of Literary Animal Studies with a focus on German literature, since not only is it written in English (the academic *lingua franca*), but most of its contributors are Italian Germanists or work in Italy. It could even be argued, therefore, that this volume has more to do with the contemporary flourishing of Animal Studies in Italy (where it is by now well established across academic disciplines and in society at large; one example among many is the recent volume edited by Felice Cimatti and myself) than with the German state of this research field.<sup>6</sup> Or perhaps it reflects the cross-pollination of different disciplines and different national contexts, which is a significant characteristic of Animal Studies as such.

In this volume, the scope of the analysis is quite broad (1800–2000), and the ten chapters here included certainly cannot aim at completeness or exhaustiveness. But they do indeed cover a lot of material touching not only the canonical works but also a wide range of writings and representations. The ten case studies display a wide variety of theoretical and methodological approaches as well, but the general goal is the “quest” for the diegetic animal, for the repressed or forgotten traces of an active role nonhuman creatures have played in literature as they have elsewhere. The chapters are quite equally distributed to cover the two centuries, whereby the first four chapters analyse works from the nineteenth century, the fifth chapter functions as a sort of junction between the two centuries, chapters six to nine focus on twentieth-century works, and the last chapter analyses a novel from the early twenty-first century.

6 Felice Cimatti and Carlo Salzani, eds., *Animality in Contemporary Italian Philosophy* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020).

In chapter one, Grazia Pulvirenti and Renata Gambino explore Heinrich von Kleist's drama *Penthesilea* (1808) explicitly employing Borgards's theoretical grid. In this drama, they argue, horses, elephants, and especially hounds are portrayed as autonomous characters that not only are central to the dramatic action, but also form a sort of cross-species community where humans and nonhumans co-shape each other. It is perhaps not irrelevant that the human part of this community is composed by the Amazons, the female warriors fighting the Greeks in the Trojan War, whose queen is Penthesilea: according to the traditional Western idea of humanity, women (especially when they do not comply with the submissive role assigned to them by patriarchy) are closer to animality than to humanity—and in fact Kleist's play culminates in the queen, accompanied by her hunting dogs, literally tearing apart with hands and teeth the body of Achilles in a frenzy of "animal" fury. The animalized woman is also the topic of chapter two, in which Sonia Saporiti focuses on the retelling of the myth of Melusine, the snake woman, by Ludwig Tieck (1800). Saporiti's perspective is however more psychoanalytical, and rather than seeking the diegetic animal she explores the remainders and traces of animality that the Western tradition imposes on femininity. Although this point is not thematized by the authors, in these two chapters the diegetic animal is also the "woman", the barbarian (the Amazons), the corporeal, "nature's being", the "animal part" that the Western tradition has often expelled and excepted from humanity "proper".

Chapter three is paradigmatic of the quest for the diegetic animal: here Roland Borgards himself reads a little-known story by E. T. A. Hoffmann, "Haimatochare" (1819), about a louse (whose scientific name, *Haimatochare*, means "delighting in blood" in Greek) in colonial Hawai'i, using Bruno Latour's actor-network theory. Borgards shows how Latour's theory allows us to identify animal agency beyond the constraints of traditional human "abilities," and, moreover, that this "agency" in turn questions and deactivates the zoological hierarchies and taxonomies of Western colonialism—and human exceptionalism more generally. The true potential of the diegetic animal is in fact the critique of human exceptionalism in-

trinsic to and hidden in every literary animal representation. In chapter four, Federica Claudia Abramo performs the same critique of the species boundaries in her reading of Georg Büchner's play *Woyzeck* (1837), highlighting, however, not shared agency but common submission: Abramo adopts a biopolitical perspective to show that, through Woyzek's madness, the human is animalized and domesticated, but, on the other hand, through his personal relation with a horse, the animal is also humanized. The biopolitical frame, highlighting the common subjection and exploitation of humans and nonhumans, contributes to the erosion of species boundaries.

Chapter five by Oliver Jahraus analyzes the presence and meaning of horses in a number of texts from the nineteenth and twentieth century, focusing in particular on two novellas, one by Hugo von Hofmannsthal and the other by Alexander Lernet-Holenia. This chapter not only presents a wider focus that traverses the turn of the twentieth century, but is also more theoretical and further supports the general framework proposed by the two editors in the introduction. The main focus here is not animalization, agency, or biopolitical commonality, but rather empathy: Jahraus argues that, against the mechanistic view of science and most philosophy, literature searches, exposes and illuminates what he calls the "soul" of animals, that is their emotional, psychological, and even intellectual dimension that can elicit empathetic feelings and thereby bridge the "great divide". Thus literature, Jahraus argues, is a "school" of mutual acknowledgement and empathy. In the past few decades, this argument has had a number of important proponents, from Iris Murdoch to Martha Nussbaum, from Mary Midgley to Cora Diamond, J. M. Coetzee, and others — though none are mentioned in this volume. This is, moreover, an argument that provides a strong theoretical support for Literary Animal Studies, since it endows the quest for the diegetic animal with an ethico-political thrust that sometimes remains all too implicit. And the fact that this is the case in most chapters of this volume is perhaps a shortcoming.

However, by identifying and illuminating the traces of nonhuman animals in literary and poetic works, Literary Animal Studies does

emphasize that the cultural imagination, just like human life and community more generally, is co-shaped by humans and nonhumans. This, in itself, is already something of an ethico-political intervention. And thus even the “mere” literary analysis of the presence of mice in the writings of Kafka, Musil, and Benjamin, as performed by Micaela Latini in chapter six, is important, since it shows how this presence is grounded in the common life and destiny that humans and mice shared in the trenches of World War I. This comparative approach is particularly fruitful because it emphasizes the transversal presence of themes and motifs that illuminate each other in the comparison. The same holds for chapter seven, in which Isolde Schiffermüller again compares texts by Rilke, Musil, and Kafka to argue that, in the first half of the twentieth century, the literary and philosophical representation of nonhuman animals was a sign and symptom of a profound crisis in literature and the humanities that questioned the traditional definition of humans and their place in the world. Schiffermüller essentially follows the analysis of the human–animal relationship proposed by Giorgio Agamben, but also refers to this questioning role of the animal presence in literary texts as “zoopoetics”, a term that has a much wider scope and that she has been using for a long time but that unfortunately she leaves here undefined and unexplored.<sup>7</sup>

Chapters eight and nine explore the animal presence in the entire oeuvre of two authors: Jelena Reinhardt focuses on Elias Canetti’s work, and Raul Calzoni on that of W.G. Sebald. Both chapters argue that in the two writers the presence of nonhuman animals is pivotal in the search for a non- or post-anthropocentric perspective, which in Canetti is also part of a dismantling of the traditional idea of humanity, whereas in Sebald it revolves around the shared vulnerability of the body. Reinhardt focuses in particular on the idea of metamorphosis, which, she argues, threatens and finally dissolves the species barriers in Canetti’s depiction of humans and animals;

<sup>7</sup> See Isolde Schiffermüller, “Das Grübeln der Tiere. Zur Zoopoetik Franz Kafkas,” *Studia theodisca* 10 (2003): 37–49; “Kleine Zoopoetik der Moderne. Robert Musils Tierbilder im Vergleich mit Franz Kafka”, in *Die kleinen Formen in der Moderne*, ed. Elmar Locher (Bozen: Sturzflüge, 2001), 197–218. Cf. Kári Driscoll and Eva Hoffmann, eds. *What Is Zoopoetics? — Texts, Bodies, Entanglement* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

Calzoni, on the other hand, shows how in Sebald the animal is a figure of common suffering that could, or should, lead to an alternative reading of history.

In these two chapters the traces of the diegetic animals are almost invisible, and it is rather the semiotic function that informs the analysis. This is of course partially the case also in other chapters of this volume (especially chapters two, six, and seven), and the slippage between the two functions is a general risk of Literary Animal Studies, since the line dividing the diegetic from the semiotic animal is rather blurred — both are ultimately “made of words”. In the final chapter, Lorella Bosco reads the figure of the lion in Sibylle Lewitscharoff’s 2011 novel *Blumenberg*, born out of the philosopher Hans Blumenberg’s lifelong fascination with this animal (and of the recent volume that collects his texts on this subject under the title *Lions*).<sup>8</sup> Though the lion here is a figment of the imagination of an imaginary version of the German philosopher, Bosco emphasizes that for Lewitscharoff the animal presence retains its “oddness” and enigmatic nature that complicates or deactivates any exclusively anthropocentric (i.e. purely semiotic) reading.

The animals of Literary Animal Studies are certainly “made of words” and only intermittently and contingently succeed in breaking the constraint of their semiotic cage. But the semiotic/diegetic schema is only one possible way of approaching the animal question in literature, and even if the editors of this volume present it as their theoretical grid, the chapters here collected use also a combination of other theoretical approaches, all of which ultimately converge in contributing to the reconceptualization of animality and of human–animal relations. This is, I would argue, what makes this field — and this book — interesting and valuable.

8 Hans Blumenberg, *Lions*, trans. Kári Driscoll (London: Seagull Books, 2018).