

Opponent's Report on Yana Gridneva's MA Thesis Rethinking the Animal: Post-Humanist Tendencies in (Post) Modern Literature

The thesis is an interesting and theoretically very demanding project of rethinking the representation of animals in modern and postmodern literature - starting with Joyce's *Ulysses* and ending with Coetzee's *Elizabeth Costello*. Although the theoretical discussion and individual interpretations of literary texts are quite advanced, and in most cases clearly and cogently argued, there are several problems on which this report is focused. These include

- 1) the selection of analysed literary works,
- 2) the treatment of the question of "post-humanism", in particular of the "post-human subjectivity",
- 3) the use of Deleuze's and Guattari's thought,
- 4) the tension between the discussion of the problems of ethics and representation, evident especially in the use of the concept of "sympathetic imagination".

Ad 1) Although I respect the fact that the choice of the analysed works was determined by the author's interest, I think the works which should be dealt with in much greater detail are Kafka's stories with animal protagonists. These pose the questions of identity, subjectivity and post-humanism in much more urgent way than Joyce's *Ulysses* or Woolf's *Flush*. What I have in mind are stories like "The Burrow" or "Josephine the Singer and the Mouse Folk", using parody and playful oscillation between features of human and animal identity, or "Investigations of a Dog", which would be an efficient antidote against the fiction of "sympathetic imagination" in *Elizabeth Costello*. The use of Kafka's animal story in the last mentioned work is intrinsic to Coetzee's agenda and does not tell much about Kafka's concept of animality, which is not satisfactorily dealt with in recent philosophy, whether by Deleuze and Guattari or by Derrida (for a most recent criticism, dealing, among others, with the influence of major Derrida's topics, like Law or Absolute Subjectivity or Sovereignty on the discussion of animality, see Ted Geier, *Kafka's Nonhuman Form: Troubling the Boundaries of the Kafkaesque*, Springer, 2016).

Ad 2) The concept of "post-humanism" is the product of the struggle with anthropocentrism and sometimes even anthropomorphism. What I do not understand is the use of term "unique personality" in relation to "otherness which cannot be conceptualized" (31). As it appears, personality is a derivative of a modern and, more specifically, romantic concept of subjectivity, which cannot be linked with "otherness" since it is based on the metaphor of organic form. The use of terms like "personality" here rather obscures the interpretation of animal otherness. One could rather say that Garryowen / Owen Garry is rather a product of a parodic play similar to that in Kafka's "Josephine the Singer".

Another setback is the author's resorting to Marjorie Garber's flawed witticism that "anthropomorphism is another word for empathy" (35) which does not at all justify the treatment of *Flush* as the "anti-anthropocentric project" (34). On the other hand, *Flush* seems to be used as an "anthropocentric" device of social criticism, realizing "the potential for subversion of patriarchal system" (42) and "civilization" (44) inherent in Woolf's fiction. Moreover, the dog's perception of smells in the streets of Florence is distinctly anthropomorphized, including synaesthesia ("acid shade" 47) emphasized at that time in I.A. Richards's aesthetics. The same can be said by the political use of the animal in the section aimed against fascism. Therefore it is difficult to see in *Flush* the "intention...to remind the reader about other-than-human modes of experiencing the world" (51).

Ad 3) In the reading of *Nightwood*, the notion of "Oedipal animal" emerges under the influence of *Anti-Oedipus* (59). The question is whether this notion should not be introduced earlier in dealing with Woolf's *Flush* (this would certainly reveal a different dimension of the story). Discussing the animality of Robin, the author could much more benefit from A

Thousand Plateaus, especially from the discourse of “becoming animal”, which is here much more appropriate than referring to Robin as a “wild animal”. The notion of “post-humanist subjectivity” would need much more critical reflection, using Deleuze’s and Guattari’s term “singularity”, “multiplicity”, etc. (*A Thousand Plateaus, The Logic of Sense* and elsewhere). To understand subjectivity on other grounds than identity is rather problematic. The problem returns in a rather reductive dichotomy “animal subjectivity” vs. “scientific objectivity” in the chapter on Brophy’s *Hackenfeller’s Ape*. The hero is said to represent “a typical animal as he embodies the omnipresent tendency to deny animals any kind of subjective experience” (80). The denial of “subjective experience” used to criticize scientific objectivity foregrounds a human problem of the crisis of modern sciences and does not introduce animality which would be independent from human criteria of individuality and freedom.

Ad 4) The problematic link between representation and ethic is revealed in Coetzee’s phrase “sympathetic imagination” which would deserve more consistent critical reflection. According to David Hume, “sympathetic imagination” creates fictions of the external world, which are “permanent, irresistible and universal” and therefore inevitable for humans, who would otherwise “perish” without them. “Sympathetic imagination” is thus defined as a deeply ambiguous faculty which both generates simulacra and phantasms while being simultaneously “an ultimate judge of all systems of philosophy” (Hume, *Treatise I*, part IV, §§2 and 4). The vantage point, from which these simulacra and phantasms could be distinguished from philosophical truths, is not available, and this is a source of anxiety in later works using this concept, especially Coleridge’s *Biographia Literaria*.

Since there is a deep gap between representational and ethical implications of Coetzee’s “sympathetic imagination”, it is rather unclear what “failure to practice sympathetic imagination” (97) actually means. Nonetheless, maintaining that sympathetic imagination “becomes the means to access this immense multiplicity [‘of other living things that cannot in any way be homogenized, except by violence or wilful ignorance’ – Derrida quoted earlier] and consequently to replace a single overbearing limit with constantly proliferating differences” (101) may somehow tackle the problem of representation but does not come to terms with the problem of responsibility. Here perhaps the reading of Derrida’s *Gift of Death* could be of some help, but even this book would, after consistent scrutiny, reveal an anthropocentric core of his philosophy. Do animals have secrets? And do we wish to understand them on that basis?

Although the thesis no doubt exceeds the standard of master dissertations at our department, the author sometimes seems to be at a loss when approaching and discussing the demanding and very wide agenda. I recommend the thesis for a defence and propose to grade it either “excellent” or “very good” depending on Yana Gridneva’s performance during the defence.

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prof. PhDr. Martin Procházka, CSc.