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Introduction: Animals and the American Imagination

Thomas Pughe

- 1 In *Walden*, Henry David Thoreau devotes a celebrated chapter to his “Brute Neighbors,” as he calls the animals, mostly wild, who share his living space on Walden Pond. They play an essential part in shaping Thoreau’s experience of the place he inhabits or, rather, co-inhabits. His biocentrism inaugurated a powerful current in American culture, a current that is still being nourished today by Thoreau’s heirs (Rick Bass, Annie Dillard, Gretel Ehrlich, Barry Lopez, David Quammen and many others). Over and above its status as one of the constitutive documents of American culture, *Walden* – and the “Brute Neighbors” chapter in particular – offers just one example of the way the representation of animals, from the earliest cave drawings to present-day wildlife documentaries, from colonial narratives of travel and exploration to contemporary nature writing, has served Americans in defining essential aspects of their geographic (local, regional, territorial), their cultural and their social identity. Even an “asphalt jungle” implies some kind of animal other. “It is hard to count the ways in which other animals figure in the stories that environmental historians tell,” as Harriet Ritvo points out (129).
- 2 Of course, Thoreau’s idea of neighborhood with “other animals” relies on an anthropomorphic trope. Yet anthropomorphism, as the tradition of the beast fables attests, has always been potentially subversive, blurring the dividing line between human and non-human animals at the same time as it tries to affirm it. Such blurring is particularly noticeable from the romantic revolution onwards. The primitivist current in American poetry, for example, flows strong throughout the 20th century (Robinson Jeffers or Gary Snyder come to mind). Of course, in much modern science, in Thoreau’s time as still today, anthropomorphic tropes have been considered as a logical fallacy. They are also treated with suspicion by environmentalists and ecocritics who tend to interpret them as symbolic exploitations of nonhuman nature. And yet, to many contemporary ethologists, socio-biologists and anthropologists, as well as to poets,

such tropes suggest ways of representing human-animal relations beyond the traditional boundaries.

- 3 If Thoreau's metaphor of the animal as "neighbor" may be read as the expression of an emerging "environmental ethic" in the 19th century, such an ethic is far from having become the norm in contemporary America, as Jonathan Safran Foer (among many others) shows in his polemical tract *Eating Animals*. Safran Foer's concern is not with wild (though harmless) animals as is Thoreau's but with the millions of poultry, pigs and cows (one can also add aquaculture fish and shrimp) raised for industrial food processing. Today the majority of animals in America, as Safran Foer points out, are not wild, nor are they cherished companion animals, but languish on industrial farms—living machines producing animal protein. He describes, often in graphic detail, the brutal (the allusion to Thoreau's phrasing is intentional) treatment of these animals on their miserable way to the slaughterhouses; theirs is suffering most of us are aware of but probably prefer not to think too much about. The America Safran Foer denounces is an extension of Upton Sinclair's vision in *The Jungle*; in both Sinclair's and Safran Foer's books animals stand for the mass-consumption of meat in largely urbanized America and, more generally, for the domain of "animality" or, rather, "bestiality" to which certain human animals, less equal than others for reasons of ethnic origin or gender, can conveniently be relegated. Note that even today abattoir workers are frequently African-Americans or immigrants from Central and South America.
- 4 Thoreau's *Walden* invites us to approach the natural environment bio-centrally, as shared habitat in which different forms of life, animal and vegetable, have a value in and of themselves. In one of those remarkable phrases that ring with stinging irony today, Thoreau claims that instead of domesticating wild animals he would prefer to "naturalize" them, by which I take him to mean: respect their life-forms and habitats, even as they are assimilated to an environment in which they are the neighbors of human animals (*Walden*, 116). Safran Foer's *Eating Meat*, by contrast, decries a purely exploitative and utilitarian relation to the natural environment in which animals have come to symbolize what Caroline Merchant has called "the death of nature." *Silent Spring*, Rachel Carson's influential study of the effects of industrial pollution, is built on the absence of those "sounds" from our brute neighborhood that provide the author of *Walden* with the material for one of his most original chapters. Safran Foer's is essentially an America of the "brave new farm" (Mason and Finelli) or production facility, catering to mass-consumption, and of the devastating effects industrial forms of agriculture and aquaculture have had on the American landscape; e.g., a large percentage of farm land is used to feed animals (more than 300 million hectares according to Nibert, 183). Needless to stress that meat production on such a gigantic scale causes major pollution (not to mention its effects in Central and South America which produce considerable amounts of beef for the United States). *Eating Meat* is more than an outcry against cruelty to animals in contemporary societies, it also chronicles the disappearance of agricultural America in favor of agri-business. This is an America where cattle, pigs and poultry are perceived in terms of "hamburger" and "chicken from the colonel"—yet where concomitantly dogs, cats, rodents, reptiles and certain larger mammals like horses are cherished as pets. Though many Americans still conceive of their country as essentially agricultural and "green" (Buell, 32), it is doubtlessly Stanley Elkin who, celebrating MacDonald's and Kentucky Fried culture in the opening paragraph of his novel *The Franchiser*, is closer to the truth:

Past the orange roof and turquoise tower, past the immense sunburst of the green and yellow sign, past the golden arches, beyond the low buff building, beside the discreet hut, the dark top hat on the studio window shade, beneath the red and white longitudes of the enormous bucket, coming up to the thick shaft of the yellow arrow piercing the royal blue field, he feels he is home. (...) Somewhere in the packed masonry of states. (*Franchiser* 3)

- 5 It indeed makes little difference where “in the packed masonry of states” you are because, as Elkin’s narrator points out in the course of his uncanny and ironic paean, *it is America everywhere* – a neighborhood and “home” where non-human animals exist mainly as meat.
- 6 Historically the rise of agri-business and of the meat-industry in particular is connected more or less directly with the processes of species extinction. Americans consume beef and mutton rather than bison. Of course, the extinction of American wildlife under the stress of expanding European civilization was already well underway when Thoreau embarked on his experiment in alternative living. Witness Natty Bumppo in *The Pioneers*: “‘Ah ! The game is becoming hard to find, indeed, Judge, with your clearings and betterments,’ said the old hunter, with a kind of compelled resignation” (20). The last wolf had been shot in the forests around Concord a few decades before Thoreau squatted Emerson’s land on the pond, a landscape which, incidentally, had changed considerably since his childhood due to the exploitation of the surrounding forests for lumber and the construction of the Boston-Fitchburg railway. And so the undertone of Thoreau’s pastoral song – in the celebrated “Ponds” chapter, for example – is a somber “going, going, gone.” Do the reflections on his “brute neighbors,” one could by consequence ask, contribute to rendering Thoreau’s pastoral vision more plausible or more utopian ? Could the anthropomorphic image of the “neighbor” be one way in which Thoreau tried to express his dissenting vision of America, of both its agrarian and its industrial versions ? Pastoralism from the American Renaissance to the present, according to Leo Marx, has been one of the preferred American modes of expressing dissenting attitudes to the mainstream, and so perhaps Thoreau’s friendly relations with his non-human neighbors have a flavor of political solidarity.
- 7 However this may be, animals have always played an important role in pastoral; American pastoralism “naturally” features animals, though less Thoreau’s neighborly forest dwellers than more conventional and less romantic farm animals: cattle, hogs, horses, poultry, dogs – in short, the working animals involved in traditional farming. Today health-conscious consumers as well as those sensitive to the issue of cruelty to animals look for *family* farm rather than *factory* farm products, though the choice in the supermarket often proves difficult to the uninitiated since the packaging of industrially produced meats makes intensive use of the stereotyped pastoral image (“naturally natural”, as the advertisements suggest). The images employed in food packaging correspond to the sentimental, stereotyped kind of pastoral that Philip Roth’s *American Pastoral*, a novel set during the Vietnam War years, attacks. The novel’s hero owns a country retreat that includes beef cattle to reinforce this city dweller’s sense of his home being a working or family farm rather than a pastoral museum. Yet back in the city, Roth’s main character makes his comfortable living as a manufacturer of gloves, an industrial activity requiring the skins of countless animals and whose implied violence and cruelty (the production of “kid” gloves, for example: “There is something called butcher cuts that occur if the animal was cut too deeply when it was flayed” [223]) counter-acts the caring relation with animals back at the farm. “What we forget

about animals we begin to forget about ourselves,” observes Safran-Foer (37). Roth’s Seymour Levov “forgets” that the price for his pastoral America (symbolized by his wife’s prize Simmentals) is paid by the animals slaughtered to provide the leather goods industry with hides. Such hypocrisy is doubtlessly one of the reasons why Levov’s daughter includes her father in her protest against the War. In blowing up the local post-office to bring “the War back home,” she seems to follow a tortured logic that is already present in her family’s American Dream. It is no coincidence that Merry Levov, the bomb-planting daughter, after several years underground, re-emerges as an employee of a home for stray cats and dogs and as a convert to Jainism, an ancient Indian religion that does not recognize any claim to human particularism. Roth’s *American Pastoral* is constructed upon a logic of suffering, of “pathos,” that connects the fates of humans and of animals. In this sense, it can be seen as the reverse side of Thoreau’s pastoral coin.

- 8 With its implications of respectful – though frequently sentimentalized – relations between humans and animals, pastoralism is a privileged American form of imagining non-human nature. The concept of *wilderness* is another. Aldo Leopold, one of the most influential early advocates of wilderness preservation as a form of land use, puts forward the following argument in favor of wilderness:

Public wilderness areas are essentially a means for allowing the more virile and primitive forms of outdoor recreation to survive the receding fact of pioneering. [...] [they], if anything, are the indigenous part of our Americanism, the qualities that set it apart as a new rather than an imitative contribution to civilization. Many observers see these qualities not only bred into our people, but built into our institutions. (80)

- 9 These lines are remarkable for the amalgam of nature preservation and of cultural chauvinism that shines up in sentences like “the indigenous part of our Americanism” or “the qualities that set us apart as a new rather than an imitative contribution to civilization.” Of course, primitive (“virile”) outdoor recreation essentially includes encounters with wild animals in the course of hunting expeditions or wildlife observation. Such encounters with the “the wild freedom of America’s past [provide] a highly attractive alternative to the ugly artificiality of modern civilization” (Cronon 482), and with the factory farm in particular. The attractive alternative of wilderness has come to be symbolized by certain wild animals, all the more effectively, no doubt, because many of the most emblematic representatives like grizzlies or wolves have had to be or will soon have to be included in the long list of endangered species. The spirit of Aldo Leopold’s wilderness philosophy has clearly presided over the constitution of Anderson, O’Grady and Slovic’s influential environmentalist anthology *Literature and the Environment. A Reader on Nature and Culture* (1999) in which wilderness writing is amply represented, not least in the anthology’s first part entitled “The Human Animal” (the second and third parts are “Inhabiting Place” and “Economy and Ecology”, respectively). For the editors the most immediate point of contact in the relationship between humans and their environment are non-human animals. Contaminated by the sickness of civilization, they argue, “some still-wild part of us searches for a way to reconnect with the natural world. Our longing inevitably returns us to our ancient ties with other animals” (XXIII). Notice here the egalitarian phrase *our ancient ties with other animals*, which is meant to symbolize the wholeness (or haleness) we moderns are said to yearn for. Regeneration through wildness: this is what encounters with animals in America’s wilderness areas seem to promise. Edward Abbey’s *Desert Solitaire* (1968)

offers both an example and a critique of the idea of regeneration through wildness, as does John Krakauer's *Into the Wild* (1996; converted into a celebrated motion picture by Sean Penn in 2007).

- 10 If we are to believe environmentalists like Leopold and literary critics like the editors of the *Literature and the Environment*- anthology, this primitive longing for restored ties with wildness, incarnated by animals, holds a privileged place in North-American culture. The literary canon, at any rate, provides numerous examples, not least Thoreau himself, of course. Here is Walt Whitman in "Song of Myself"; while contemplating a "gigantic beauty of a stallion," he has the following reflection on ties long lost:

I think I could turn and live with animals, they're so placid and self-contain'd,
I stand and look at them long and long.
[...]
So they show their relations to me and I accept them,
They bring me tokens of myself, they evince them plainly in their possession.
I wonder where they get those tokens.
Did I pass that way huge times ago and negligently drop them? (Quoted from
Anderson, O'Grady and Slovic 67)

- 11 Whitman seems to suggest that his sense of self has roots that reach much further back into pre-history ("huge times ago") than the more recent pioneering past Leopold evokes in his defense of wilderness (a concept that acquired its modern association with nature preservation in the 19th century). Rather, his musing seems to evoke Native American myths like the one of "Turtle Island," the name by which many First Nations people today refer to the continent. In his celebrated collection of poems by the same title, Gary Snyder, tapping into this animistic tale of the continent's animal origin ("North America, Turtle Island, taken by invaders"), seems to proffer a response to Whitman.

- 12 Leslie Silko's "Story from Bear Country" (1986), a poem drawing on the tradition of Native American tale telling, explores the longings with which American culture has sometimes invested wild animals. The bears referred to in the title are never actually specified beyond the plural personal pronoun. Their presence is suggested through signs and through the inexplicable attraction "they" have on the poem's "you", tempted, it seems, by Leopold's primitive forms of outdoor experience and with whom the reader is invited to identify:

The problem is
You will never want to return.
Their beauty will overcome your memory
Like winter sun
Melting ice shadow from snow. (quoted in Anderson, O'Grady and Slovic 110)

- 13 Mystic emanations of the wild, Silko's bears represent sacred powers animating the land. The poem's "you" loses not only his or her memory, or mind, but also his or her human shape, for the bears incarnate themselves in "you: "Your eyes will see you / dark shaggy thick" (110). "You" sees a bear not a "self"; s/he has organs to see but not a mind independent of the senses that makes sense. If this transformation from human to bear evoked in the first part of the poem can be identified as the kind of anthropomorphism typical of "primitive" cultures, the second part of the poem renders readers' dissociation from "you" more problematic. It begins with a challenge:

Whose voice is this?
You may wonder

Hearing this story when
 After all
 You are alone
 [...]
 But you have been listening to me
 For some time now
 From the very beginning in fact
 And you are alone in this canyon of stillness. (Anderson, O'Grady and Slovic 111)

- 14 As the voice of the poet and the bearish music of the wild seem to merge, the reading process itself becomes a ramble through bear country ("this canyon of stillness"). Indeed, the story of the bear gods luring human animals off civilization's beaten track towards their animal selves, is told a second time: as the reading of that story. Moving through the poem as if through the wilderness, "your" traces – the way you have realized the poem in your mind – are imprints of "your" animality:

Go ahead
 Turn around
 See the shape
 Of your footprints
 In the sand. (Anderson, O'Grady and Slovic 112)

- 15 And so, as the poem dramatizes its own reading, the primitive and the literary commingle, at once lure of the wild and textual trap. Clearly, from Silko's point of view, the excursion into bear country is not a source of outdoor recreation designed to steel the modern city dweller for a return to urban America, a taste of that pioneering experience which, according to Leopold, is the essential ingredient of Americanness; instead, it is a liminal experience in that it blurs the frontier between civilized and wild, human and animal, rationality and animism. Silko's text enacts, in Cary Wolfe's term, an "animal rite" during which Native American and European-American cultural ideas are confronted.
- 16 Indeed, the American imagination has brought forth a rich variety of such "animal rites" allowing Americans to represent themselves in the company of animals as a way of dramatizing their sense of their position in the world. This essay has attempted to sketch some of the representative forms they may take. In contrasting Thoreau and Safran-Foer, my reflections on American "animal rites" touch on the debate over the *rights* that could or should be granted animals by their human neighbors; in comparing Roth, Whitman and Silko we may detect in the word *rites* a pun on *writes*. All the examples mentioned participate, at some level, in that "discourse of species" which, according once more to Cary Wolfe, defines Western civilizations which "rel[y] on the tacit agreement that the full transcendence of the 'human' requires the sacrifice of the 'animal' and the animalistic" (Wolfe 6). Between the opposed concepts of the animal as neighbor and of the animal as a product of the meat industry, the challenge of describing the animals of the American imagination, and thereby analyzing the evolution of "the discourse of species," is considerable. Indeed, as even the brief overview given in this essay may suggest, studying the representation of animals in a variety of cultural documents must inevitably evoke some of the central themes of American history: nature and environment, wilderness and wildness, nation and region, country and city, hunting and pastoralism, industrialism and agriculture, slavery and racism, science and spirituality, imperialism and first nations. To all of these themes, and to many others, the representation of the animal is central: as symbol, as myth, as allegory, as non-human other, as pack, as pet, as pest, as prey, as

companion or as beast of burden, as product, as scientific object; and, finally, as a challenge to representation itself, a problem that is raised, to cite the example of Cary Wolfe once more, in contemporary debates about post-humanism.

- 17 It may of course be objected that the kinds of human-animal relations described in this introduction are not sufficiently contextualized to be representative. But it would be hard to deny that animals in American cultural history are what anthropologist Donna Haraway calls “significant others.” True, in most cultures animals play the (often thankless) role of significant otherness – this being the principal theme vehicled by the “discourse of species” –, but American culture does have an exceptionally rich and varied history of imagining itself through its relationship with animals. The essays collected in this issue of *Transatlantica* should begin to substantiate this claim and to demonstrate the complexity of the issue. They range from the study of the connection between animality and slavery in Crèvecoeur’s *Letters to an American Farmer* to the influence of Derrida on contemporary post-humanism; they include readings of animal poetry from the American Renaissance to the present day (with a particular focus on bees and spiders); they take into account Hawthorne’s critique of the “discourse of species” in *The Marble Faun*; describe Kerouak’s beat aesthetic as a form of neighborhood with animals; finally, they consider the ways in which the history of photography, and in particular of the Daguerrotype or “Dog-Type”, can be narrated in terms of human-animal relations. They all demonstrate, in sum, that reading American cultural history with special attention paid to the “discourse of species” that runs through it leads to stimulating reappraisals of its different manifestations.

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