

Animal tracks on textual surfaces

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Ann-Sofie Lönngren: *Following the Animal. Power, Agency, and Human-Animal Transformations in Modern, Northern-European Literature*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing 2015.

In her book *Following the Animal* (2015) Ann-Sofie Lönngren discusses traditions of literary depictions of human-animal transformations in the West, more specifically in the modern Northern European context. She also presents reading strategies that contribute especially to the field of human-animal literary studies and illuminate how more-than-anthropocentric literary meanings emerge from the narratives of human-animal transformations that she has chosen for closer analysis.

Following the Animal is comprised of five chapters. In the first Lönngren presents the Western literary tradition that forms the background for examining human-animal relations in literature. The story of Circe turning Odysseus's men into pigs serves as an example of the way human-animal relations were seen in ancient Greece: for a human to turn into an animal is something hor-

rendous. However, as Lönngren presents, there are other narratives that offer routes to "more-than-anthropocentric" ways of thinking. In Plutarch's continuation of the story, Odysseus returns to Circe's island only to find out that the pigs that once were men prefer their animal form to being human. Furthermore, in Old Norse mythology the god Loki is a character who constantly transgresses the boundaries of gender, sexuality and species. Lönngren argues that in Loki's transformations from a human-like form into different animals he represents an anthropocentric world view that is contrasted with another character whom he (quite fittingly) kills: Otr, a character, who embodies otter-like traits in a way that does not divide his human-like self from the animal. Lönngren argues convincingly that the anthropocentrism of the Western tradition becomes visible through



these counter-characters that reveal possibilities for more-than-anthropocentric ways of thinking.

The focus of *Following the Animal* is in modern Northern European literature, but as the book's introduction makes clear, the history of representations of human-animal transformations is long and complex. The anthropocentrism of the Western tradition is concisely presented from the pre-modern to the modern era, on which the literary analyses of this book mainly focus. The influences of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment on modern conceptions of human-animal relationships are briefly discussed as well as the influences of Charles Darwin and Sigmund Freud. Leading the reader through the ways in which the ideas concerning human-animal relations have evolved, Lönngren finally presents the paradox of the 21st century – that we have at the same time come to understand animals as something that we can both subjugate, kill and consume, and keep as pets, friends and family members. This tension, as Lönngren points out, can be seen manifesting itself in the dehumanization of certain groups of people in order to justify killing them. In modern Western society, Lönngren argues, the definitions of "human" and "animal" are directly related to what kinds of lives are morally worthy.

"The question of the animal" as introduced by Jacques Derrida brought

the conditions of philosophical thought under scrutiny. Closer inspection of human-animal relations has become more prevalent in the field of philosophy, but, as Lönngren argues, has taken a little longer to become central in literary scholarship. *Following the Animal* calls for a more coherent method of more-than-anthropocentric knowledge production, and addresses this lack of methodology by looking into the ontology of the literary text as well as the methodological problems of the anthropocentric tradition of reading. Lönngren references the theoretical discussions on the relevance of reading from a more-than-anthropocentric point of view, and introduces a method of reading called "following the animal". This she applies in her analyses of *Tschandala* (1887), a novel by Swedish author August Strindberg, *The Wolf's Bride* (1928), a novel by Finnish author Aino Kallas, and "The Monkey" (1934), a short story by Danish author Isak Dinesen (or Karin Blixen). Reading the surface of the text (instead of trying to analyse its "deep" level, which most often turns animal representations into metaphors for human emotions or experiences) and "following the traces that the animals have left on it" is a guideline for this method of reading that allows one to interpret literary texts in a way transgressing the presuppositions and prejudices of the anthropocentric mindset prevalent in the Western tradition.

Lönngren illustrates the method of "following the animal" eloquently in her analyses of the three aforementioned literary works and looks briefly into a number of other works as well, thus giving the reader an extensive overview of human-animal transformations in modern Northern European literature. Lönngren looks into the ways in which these narratives have previously been analysed within the tradition of "symptomatic reading", and offers her own contribution from the perspective of human-animal studies. She convincingly argues that approaching literary animals as representing actual animals, instead of seeing them primarily as metaphors, is necessary and valuable, since this approach makes the texts function as sites where knowledge of human-animal relations is produced.

In her readings, Lönngren is in constant dialogue with previous research while at the same time emphasizing that "animal" and "animality" are two different concepts. In previous research, *Tschandala*, for example, has often been regarded as a Gothic novel and therefore the animals in it have been seen either as generic features or as allegorical. Lönngren, however, takes a different route and regards them as animals – and this reading produces somewhat different results. Lönngren delves into how ideas of pet-keeping, gender, sexuality and social norms play a part in *Tschandala*, and how the violence depicted in the novel relates

to anthropocentrism.

The third chapter of the book concentrates on *The Wolf's Bride*. This novel is usually regarded as a feminist narrative, depicting a woman who escapes the realm of family and home by transforming into a werewolf to explore what is normally forbidden from her. Lönnberg discusses the long tradition of woman-animal transformation as a literary figure and offers her own contribution by turning the focus on the transformation not only as a gender-politically liberating event, but also as a way to produce literary meaning and knowledge about human-animal relationships. She highlights that the categories of, for example, gender and sexuality are not separate from human-animal relationships, but should be seen as intra-acting with each other.

The fourth chapter discusses "The Monkey", in which one of the central characters, a prioress of a convent, transforms into her pet monkey and vice versa. Among other things, this transformation has been interpreted as signifying the prioress's dark and repressed personality traits. Lönngren, however, suggests that when reading the surface of the text a different kind of interpretation emerges – one in which the character of the pet monkey is the one who (instead of the human characters) holds the power in the convent and displays this power in ways that undermine anthropocentric views on human-animal relationships.

Finally, in her conclusion, Lönngren draws attention to the moral urgency of rethinking the anthropocentric views on human-animal relationships that are especially prevalent in Western thought. All in all, her book is a valuable contribution to the literary discussion about animal representations. It illustrates a useful method for reading in a way that makes use of literary texts as ways to look into and gain knowledge of human-animal relations.