

## Spanish American Literary History Reconsidered

MARIIA NISKAVAARA  
 mariia.niskavaara@gmail.com

Scott M. DeVries: *Creature Discomfort: Fauna-criticism, Ethics and the Representation of Animals in Spanish American Fiction and Poetry*. Brill 2016.

In his book, *Creature Discomfort: Fauna-criticism, Ethic and the Representation of Animals in Spanish American Fiction and Poetry* (2016), Scott M. DeVries re-evaluates Spanish American literary canon from the perspective of animal ethics. In doing so, he also scrutinizes the traditions of animal studies from the perspective of animal sentience, regional writing, and literary history. The book has an ambitious aspiration: DeVries attempts to recreate Spanish American literary canon and, at the same time, suggests a new, critical way to study literary history from the perspective of nonhuman agency. This critical approach he calls fauna-criticism.

Fauna-criticism, as DeVries formulates in his book, attempts to create new literary history by a reconsideration of canonical texts that are not traditionally studied from the perspective

of nonhuman agency or animal ethics. DeVries argues that the reformation of literary canons is especially important for animal advocacy because fiction is often more able to bear ethical messages than academic or philosophical genres. He notes that even though other text types may explicitly reason why animals should be treated ethically, fiction has the ability to affect reader's empathy and thus has more profound impact to raise awareness of animal ethics. In a nutshell, fauna-criticism is for animals what ecocriticism is for the environment; a critical approach to study literature so that new knowledge about the depictions of nonhuman lives may be recognized.

The concept of fauna-criticism that DeVries presents is a well-founded declaration for a more animalcentric way to approach literary history. In the introduction of his book, DeVries specifies

the aims of fauna-criticism: Firstly, fauna-criticism continues and clarifies the discussion between different angles of animal studies, using literary sources as its material of argumentation. As DeVries suggests, Fauna-criticism aims to reform conventional literary history and canon from the animal perspective, identifying at the same time new animalcentric texts outside the canon. Through its critical view to literary history, fauna-criticism maintains awareness of the humancentric language that keeps positioning non-humans from the perspective of human exceptionalism.

After the introduction, the book is divided into three parts, each of which considers its own canonical periods and themes. The Spanish American canon is studied beginning from the nineteenth century and up to recent literature. Examples of literature from the different periods are well connected to the regional political history. Interestingly, the historical approach exposes the allegorical and political purposes of animal stories and thus implies that fictional nonhumans represent, in fact, humans. This makes it difficult, from time to time, to agree with DeVries's arguments about fiction's ability to improve the readers' awareness of animal ethics: if fictional animals are more plausibly identified as humans, their actions as allegories of human behavior, their cognition and emotions as those of the human mind, and their colonies as

human societies, it is not credible to assume that reader would choose a nonhuman positive reading when there is a human positive, allegorical – and thus more conventional – reading available.

On the other hand, DeVries also offers well-nuanced analyses on animal ethics that the selected texts illuminate. In the course of the book, a multitude of themes is considered: to mention a few, DeVries writes about nonhuman sentience, animal abuse, hunting, forestry, factory farming, nonhuman language, pets and zoos. In doing so, DeVries addresses the diversity of nonhuman representation in Spanish American literary history. The variety of themes has, however, its Achilles's heel: because the themes are many, only a few of them can be scrutinized in depth in the book. This is, of course, the difficulty of pioneer work: DeVries has chosen to study the whole regional canon with a rather wide time span. As he also himself notes, this must be done first before certain themes, styles, genres, periods or critical questions may be studied further. All in all, DeVries does a notable work creating a solid ground for research to come.

In the first part of his book, DeVries studies animal ethical concerns in fictions of José Marroquín, Hernán Robledo, Horacio Quiroga and Luis Sepúlveda. Comparing these four writers, DeVries focuses especially on the representation of animal sentience. Through his

literary analyses of the selected texts, DeVries argues that nonhuman sentience is represented as equal or even superior to the human mind in various South American texts, and that this is a way of questioning human exceptionalism and anthropocentric culture.

The second part of the book continues the discussion on animal sentience and subjectivity but now considers highly literary texts, such as poetry and stylized prose. DeVries especially studies *Modernismo*, a literary period that spans the years 1880-1920, but he also studies some more recent writers such as Pablo Neruda, Homero Aridjis, and José Emilio Pacheco. DeVries suggests that aesthetic textual modes may, in some cases, hold more philosophical or ethical potential than more formal textual modes. Especially interesting are DeVries's views on Pablo Neruda's poetry and on his way of using poetic images to illustrate nonhuman suffering and human-caused animal death.

In the third and last part of his book, DeVries extends his reading to the most recent fiction, focusing most deeply on questions about the animal industry, animal domestication, and circus. He also examines novels that interact between indigenous communities and nonhuman beings. Interestingly, he notes that in such texts the suffering of indigenous people and of local animals in the hands of foreigners is often portrayed similarly.

Among the various themes mentioned above, a particular focus of DeVries's discussion is animal sentience and animal focalization. DeVries suggests that literature which depicts animals as creatures with a humanlike mind and language is particularly important for animal advocacy. According to DeVries, the representation of nonhuman sentience and emotions reminds the reader that also nonhuman animals should be treated ethically, since they are no different from humans in their capacity to feel and think. However, DeVries does not put too much weight on the consideration of the contradictory nature of anthropomorphic representation of nonhuman animals. While anthropomorphic depictions of nonhumans may very well make the reader empathize with nonhuman animals, whether real or fictional, anthropomorphic representations may also suggest that nonhumans have a real value only if they meet certain qualifications: a humanlike mindset and emotions, the capability for moral judgment familiar to human society, and word-based language. Even though DeVries' focus is more on the reconsideration of regional literary history than on narratological problematization of the ethics of nonhuman focalization, it could be valuable to contemplate further, why especially texts that we recognize to have animal ethical tendencies so often represent animals in a very anthropomorphic way.

All the same, DeVries's work on Spanish American literary canon is important and remarkable. Referring to Erica Fudge's study on the nonhuman presence in texts of early modern English writers (*Brutal Reasoning: Animals, Rationality, and Humanity in Early Modern England*, 2006), DeVries points out that due to their lack of attention to the animal, readings of Spanish American literature have been incomplete. This lack in former readings DeVries corrects laudably. All in all, this book is an excellent example of how regional literature history may be re-evaluated and reorganized to answer the urgent need for more species-inclusive literature canons.