Negative Capability, […] when man is capable of
being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without
any irritable reaching after fact & reason.
John Keats, Letter to George and Thomas Keats

I want to know what it is like to be a wild thing.
Charles Foster, *Being a Beast*

INTRODUCTION

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In 2013, Charles Foster chose a most peculiar way to know life as a wild creature when he decided to immerse himself in the habitats of other animals, not as an observer, but as experiencer. *Being a Beast*, the book which resulted from this experiment, chronicles Foster's life (or, rather, lives) as a badger, an otter, a fox, a red deer and a swift. This eccentric piece of nature writing, in which Foster details the lengths he went to in order to *be* each of these animals, can at least claim the merit of succeeding where "the excursion format" (Tallmadge 1998) –according to Randy Malamud– fails. Indeed, the human Foster and the nonhuman animals he temporarily lives with/as are rendered "coterminous; cohabitants; simultaneous, and thus ecologically and experientially equal" (Malamud 2003, 33). That is, up to a point.

Foster approaches the task of translating into human discourse these five forms of nonhuman experience with the self-awareness and humility required to render *Being a Beast* an interesting example of interspecies transcreation (Carretero-González 2021). From his particular situatedness as a human animal, he admits to having committed the two sins "that beset traditional nature writing: anthropocentrism and anthropomorphism" (Foster 2016, xiv), and acknowledges that, despite his original intentions, *Being a Beast* has too much of him in it (xvii). However, as the book title suggests, humility fades at the level of linguistic delivery. Foster claims to "describe the landscape as perceived by a badger, a fox, an otter, a red deer and a common swift. […] When I'm being a badger, I live in a hole and eat earthworms. When I'm being an otter, I try to catch fish with my teeth" (xiv). Although his whimsical rhetoric prevents readers from taking such assertions at face value, they nonetheless hint at a vindication of embodiment (imitation, rather) as a most reliable key to knowledge, as if catching fish with one's teeth or scavenging for food will provide a more accurate tool for understanding –*knowing*– life as an

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otter or a fox. With different sensory receptors how can one *know* what it is like to be a deer? In order to walk into someone else's shoes, isn't having feet a prerequisite?

Humanity's cultural history overflows with all sorts of art forms that reveal *homo sapiens'* fascination with other animals, and the ways members of our species have conceived of, experienced, and represented their relationship with the nonhuman. For the most part, nonhuman animals have occupied the position of a complement –direct, indirect, or prepositional– in human syntax. The human animal loves, admires, kills, eats, liberates, exploits, mourns, looks at, cares for, lives with other animals. When any other animal occupies the subject position in a narrative, the human one ceases to be on safe ground, and no amount of earthworm-eating will make it any wiser. To think oneself into the being of any Other (Coetzee 1999, 35) requires the sympathetic imagination to perform acrobatics that become more complex as the phylogenetic distance between species widens: thinking one's way into the existence of any other human being would require more or less basic forward rolls; doing the same with an octopus or a bat would ask for the equivalent of a Produnova vault. Daunting, but not impossible. After all, Elizabeth Costello claims, "there is no limit to the extent to which we can think ourselves into the being of another. There are no bounds to the sympathetic imagination. [...] If I can think my way into the existence of a being who has never existed, then I can think my way into the existence of a bat or a chimpanzee or an oyster, any being with whom I share the substrate of life" (Coetzee 1999, 35).

The Animal Turn in literary and cultural studies has brought about a paradigm shift in the way human animals have started thinking about other-than-human animals and the many forms humanimal relationships take. Critical Animal Studies scholars meet animals as subjects, "not as shadows to human stories, or as beings we want to understand biologically or for purely our benefit, but as beings who have histories, stories, and geographies of their own" (*The Animal Turn*). The articles in this special issue look into some of the ways in which the human animal has looked at, perceived, (mis)understood, and represented nonhuman animals in written and filmic texts. Their analyses challenge traditional anthropocentric perspectives and reveal the extraordinary potential of literature and other artistic discourses to affect humans' treatment of animals. In the pages that follow, readers will encounter and be invited to think with cats, performing dogs and horses, captive orcas, rodents, insects, and imaginary dragons; question the ethics of animal suffering at the hands of humans in laboratories and slaughterhouses; and confront the moral implications of human actions towards nonhuman beings.

The first article in the collection, Katarzyna Łogożna Wypych's "The Supercats. Portrayals of Cats in Texts of Celtic Origin," is a case in point of classic anthropomorphic narratives where animals have been used as mere tools for moral instruction or entertainment. In her exploration of her chosen texts –in which cats are often depicted as treacherous creatures– Wypych not only reveals the way anthropomorphism strips animals of their specificity, but also illustrates the inconsistent and contradictory nature of the human-feline relationship throughout history.

In contrast, the nonhuman animals in Lorna Crozier's poetry appear to tell a very different story, judging by Núria Mina Riera's exploration of the Canadian poet's work. Drawing on literary animal studies theory, ecopoetry, and material ecocriticism, Mina Riera analyzes the collections *The Wild in You* (2015), *The House the Spirit Builds* (2019), and *God of Shadows* (2018), and concludes that Crozier's poetry denounces human abuse of the nonhuman world and advocates for a shift from anthropocentrism to biocentrism. By granting saliency to often overlooked species such as insects, rodents, amphibians, and reptiles, Crozier's poems invite readers to embrace a more inclusive perspective on the natural world.

The contributions by Ignacio Ramos-Gay and Matthias Klestil look at anthropomorphism from a different angle, exploring the value of the language of sentiment in appealing to emotions and evoking empathy. In his essay on Eliza Fenwick's canine autobiography *The Life of Carlo, or the Famous Dog of Drury-Lane Theatre* (1806), Ramos-Gay examines Fenwick's narrative through the lens of melodramatic conventions, while Klestil chooses two animal autobiographies by Mark Twain, the short story "A Dog's Tale" (1903) and the novella *A Horse's Tale* (1906), to reveal Twain's use of sentimental anthropomorphism as Anthropocene critique. These fictional autobiographies offer alternative narratives that challenge species boundaries and advocate for collective ethics of care. By rescaling the imagination through anthropomorphised characters, Twain's narratives invite readers to reconsider the arbitrary constructions of species and race, while Eliza Fenwick used melodramatic theatrical aesthetics to connect the humane values of animal protection to feminism.

Vanesa Roldán Romero's article underscores the power of speculative fiction to defamiliarise humanimal relationships and look at them afresh when placed in a secondary world inhabited by animals that only exist in the human imagination. Her assessment of human-dragon relationships in Rebecca Yarros' *Empyrean* series through the lens provided by ecocriticism and critical posthumanism, reveals a bond that challenges traditional anthropocentric hierarchies and calls on interspecies cooperation, mutual dependence, and agency as a posthumanist response to the environmental crisis of the Anthropocene.

The last two essays in this special issue take readers away from the world of literature and into the realms of direct animal advocacy: Ana Muñoz Bello's vindicates the pioneering efforts of Emarel Freshel and The Millennium Guild in advocating for animal rights in early 20th-century North America, while Claudia Alonso-Recarte's takes Gabriela Cowperthwaite's *Blackfish* (2013) and William Neal's *Long Gone Wild* (2019) to explore representations of orcas on animal advocacy documentaries and connect them to the wider context of the marine park industry. Freshel's comprehensive approach to animal justice, from her fierce opposition to vivisection and the use of fur and feathers in fashion to her enthusiastic promotion of vegetarianism, paved the way for future abolitionists and renders her an interesting figure to explore from an ecofeminist perspective; Cowperthwaite's and Neal's documentaries insist on close-up presentations orca faces and gazes to evoke moral shock and ethical reflection, highlighting the dichotomy between captivity and wilderness.

To close this special issue on Critical Animal Studies, Ida M. Olsen's review of *We Loved It All: A Memory of Life* (2024), American novelist Lydia Millet's debut into the world of non-fiction, invites further reflection on what modern society has done to humanimal relationships and the brutality with which humans have historically treated other species we claim to love.

As a form of academic activism, Critical Animal Studies underscores the importance of interdisciplinary approaches in understanding and advocating for other-than-human animals. I would like to extend my gratitude to Juan Ignacio Oliva for entrusting me with the edition of this special issue, and to the contributors for their rigorous scholarship and compassionate advocacy, which urge for an ethical reconsideration of humanimal relationships.

To them, for them.

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