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## The Sticky Temptation of Poetry (Abstract)

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Sometime around 1900, a fundamental shift occurred in the way animals were represented in works of Western literature, art, and philosophy. Authors began to write about animals in a way that was unheard-of or even unimaginable in previous epochs. Traditionally, animals had fulfilled a symbolic, allegorical, or satirical function. But in the period around the turn of the twentieth century these animals begin, as it were, to »misbehave« or to »resist« the metaphorical values attributed to them. There is a conspicuous abundance of animals in the literature of this period, and this animal presence is frequently characterised by a profound and troubling ambiguity, which is often more or less explicitly linked to the problem of writing, representation, and language – specifically poetic or metaphorical language.

Taking the Austrian literary scholar Oskar Walzel's 1918 essay »Neue Dichtung vom Tiere« as its starting point, this essay explores the historical and philosophical background of this paradigm shift as well as its implications for the study of animals in literature more generally. Zoopoetics is both an object of study in its own right and a specific methodological and disciplinary problem for literary animal studies: what can the study of animals contribute to literary studies and vice versa? What can literary animal studies tell us about literature that conventional literary studies might otherwise be blind to? Although animals abound in the literature of almost every geographical area and historical period, traditional literary criticism has been marked by the tendency to disregard this ubiquitous animal presence in literary texts, or else a single-minded determination to read animals exclusively as metaphors and symbols for something else, in short as »animal imagery«, which, as Margot Norris writes, »presupposes the use of the concrete to express the abstract, and indeed, it seem[s] that nowhere in literature [are] animals to be allowed to be themselves« (Norris 1985, 17). But what does it mean for literary theory and criticism to allow animals to »be themselves«? Is it possible to resist the tendency to press animals »into symbolic service« (ibid.) as metaphors and allegories for the human, whilst also avoiding a naïve literalism with respect to the literary animal?

The pervasive uneasiness regarding the metaphorical conception of the animal within recent scholarship in animal studies stems from a more general suspicion that such a conception serves ultimately to assimilate the animal to a fundamentally logocentric discourse and hence to reduce »animal problems to a principle that functions within the *legibility* of the animal: from animal to *ani*-word« (Burt 2006, 166). The question of the animal thus turns out to have been the question of language all along. Conversely, however, we might also posit that the question of language has itself also always been the question of the animal. What would it mean for literary studies if we were to take the implications of this involution seriously? How can we be attentive to the specific way animals operate in literary texts as »functions of their literariness« (McHugh 2009, 490)? In other words, not merely as one trope in an author's poetic arsenal that could easily be replaced by any other, but rather as a specific problem to and for language and representation as such.

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