

Matthias Preuss / Sebastian Schönbeck

Bêtes Studies: Flaubert's and Balzac's Lessons in Natural History **(Abstract)**

- Full-length article in: JLT 9/2 (2015), 250–270.

Animal Studies are concerned with animals. Literary Animal Studies, more specifically, are concerned with animals in literature – that is *textual* animals, at least for the most part. These statements seem rather uncontroversial. However, complications arise if the ›animal‹ in ›Animal Studies‹ is taken for a singular noun that encompasses the whole range of objects of research. From this perspective ›animal‹ becomes legible as an ellipsis in danger of losing track of what it omits. To render differentiated multiplicities into manageable-enough abstract terms may very well be as violent as it is inevitable. In any case, a paradox is inscribed in the very name of the heterogeneous branch of research that is called ›Animal Studies‹.

Speaking with Jacques Derrida, Animal Studies have chosen to give themselves a *bête* name. In the first approximation ›*bêtise*‹ designates a foolish or untimely remark, a folly. In French it discloses its etymological affinity to the noun ›*bête*‹ (›beast‹) and the homophone adjective ›*bête*‹ (›stupid‹ or ›dumb‹). There is more to this affiliation of signifiers than can be covered by taking the obvious recourse to a supposed stupidity or stupefaction of beasts. It hints at a difficulty that is involved whenever we begin to think, speak or write about animals, a difficulty that cannot be avoided by replacing the singular with the corresponding plural.

The point of this contribution is to propose *bêtise* as a critical concept for the study of animals in literature. For this purpose ›critical‹ is meant to be read in four ways that are by no means exhaustive. Firstly, the concept can serve as a heuristic tool for literary criticism. Secondly, it can be a powerful means of critique that is effective in challenging essentialist and anthropocentric positions. Furthermore, it is a concept in constant crisis that triggers a process of auto-criticism, a reflection on conceptuality. As such it acts, lastly, as a permanent reminder of the paradoxes inherent in any discourse that claims to speak about or for animals. Moving *bêtise* into the focus of attention is supposed to keep the project that is called ›Animal Studies‹ on the edge. In short, we seek to establish *bêtise* as the thorn in Animal Studies' side.

In his seminar entitled *La bête et le souverain*, Jacques Derrida provides a brief but intense reading of Gustave Flaubert's unfinished and posthumously published novel *Bouvard et Pécuchet* (1881), which is consulted in order to develop the notion of *bêtise*. Instead of a conclusion at the end of the session Derrida leaves the audience and the reader with a paradox formula, defining definition as the very definition of *bêtise*. In Flaubertian terms this finding does not sound very different: »Oui, la bêtise consiste à vouloir conclure« (Flaubert 1973, 680).

Instead of trying to define *bêtise* and adding yet another paradox to the list, we are going to try to historicize, contextualize and poeticize the concept of *bêtise* in order to flesh out the theoretical issue Derrida raises. This happens with the help of exemplary literary texts, keeping in mind that *bêtise* is related to the way in which animals or the knowledge of animals take form or change their form in language.

In the development of our argument, we take four steps, examining a variant of *bêtise* each time. The first step consists in a rereading of Derrida's reading of Flaubert's fragmentary novel *Bouvard et Pécuchet*. As a second step, the protagonists' experiments on animals and the

›problem of species‹ they encounter as a nexus of poetics and natural history are accounted for. The historical context of Flaubert’s novel is considered in a third step. A recourse to Balzac’s preface to the novel *Les illusions perdues* (1837) and to the *Avant-Propos* (1842) to *La Comédie Humaine* serves to demonstrate how the poetics of the realistic novel in 19th century French literature addresses the context of natural history in order to constitute characteristics of the genre. Containing Balzac’s *bêtise* in a nutshell, these paratexts problematize the relation of literature and natural history and find an answer that differs from Flaubert’s. As the last step, one of the first texts of Flaubert, *Une leçon d’histoire naturelle. Genre commis* (1837) is read as an analogous attempt to think through the transmission of a certain view of nature to the spheres of society. The narrative introduces an ironic distance with regard to classification, denomination and conceptualization in natural history and reflects on the relationship between nature and society that occupies Balzac at the same time.

The questions that inspire the following considerations about *bêtise* include: How is it possible to think, speak, or write about animals (in texts)? What is the status of *bêtes* within the poetics of *bêtise*? How do lifeforms translate into literary form? How does the knowledge of natural history concerning the animal realm relate to the form of the novel and its literary theory?

In this article, we establish that every study dealing with animals in literary text is haunted by *bêtise* and is therefore *abête* study. We propose the concept of *bêtise* as a key concept for animal studies because it is effective as a critical reminder as to the limits of every act of categorizing and conceptualizing. By rereading Flaubert’s and Balzac’s texts we show that literary texts are prime examples for an exploration of *bêtise* as they reflect on the movement of animals into the form of language. It is literature that tells us: Literary Animal Studies are, literally, *Bêtes Studies*.

References

- Allerkamp, Andrea/Pablo Valdivia Orozco/Sophie Witt (eds.), *Gegen/Stand der Kritik*, Berlin/Zürich 2015.
- Balzac, Honoré de, Avant-Propos, in: H.B., *La Comédie humaine I*, édition publiée sous la direction de Pierre-Georges Castex, Paris 1976, 7–20.
- Balzac, Honoré de, Illusions perdues, in: H.B., *La Comédie humaine IV*, édition publiée sous la Direction de Pierre-Georges Castex, Paris 1977, 464–1056.
- Borgards, Roland, Affen. Von Aristoteles bis Soemmerring, in: Günter Oesterle/R.B./Christiane Holm (eds.), *Monster. Zur ästhetischen Verfasstheit eines Grenzbewohners*, Würzburg 2009, 239–253.
- Borgards, Roland, Tier, in: Hans Richard Brittnacher/Markus May (eds.), *Phantastik. Ein interdisziplinäres Handbuch*, Stuttgart/Weimar 2013, 482–487.
- Borges, Jorge Luis, Vindication de »Bouvard et Pécuchet«, in: J.L.B., *Discusión*, Madrid 1995, 117–122.
- Buffon, Georges-Louis Leclerc de, Premier Discours. De la manière d’étudier & de traiter l’Histoire Naturelle, in: G.–L.L.B., *Histoire Naturelle, Générale et Particulière, avec la Description du Cabinet du Roi*, texte établi, introduit et annoté par Stéphane Schmitt, Paris 2007, 129–224.
- Derrida, Jacques, Une idée de Flaubert. »La lettre de Platon«, *Psyché. Invention de l’autre*, Paris 1987, 305–325.
- Derrida, Jacques, *L’animal que donc je suis*, édition établi par Marie-Louise Mallet, Paris 2006.
- Derrida, Jacques, *Séminaire. La bête et le souverain*, Vol. I: 2001–2002, édition établi par Michel Lisse, Marie-Louise Mallet et Ginette Michaud, Paris 2008.

- Farber, Paul, Buffon and the Concept of Species, *Journal of the History of Biology* 5:2 (1972), 259–284.
- Fargeaud, Madeleine, Notes – Avant-Propos, in: Honoré de Balzac, *La Comédie humaine I*, édition publiée sous la Direction de Pierre-Georges Castex, Paris 1976, 1110–1142.
- Flaubert, Gustave, Bouvard et Pécuchet, in: G.F., *Œuvres II*, texte établi et annoté par A. Thibaudet et R. Dumesnil, Paris 1952, 711–987.
- Flaubert, Gustave, *Correspondance*, Vol. 1, édition établie, présentée et annotée par Jean Bruneau, Paris 1973.
- Flaubert, Gustave, *Correspondance*, Vol. 2, édition établie, présentée et annotée par Jean Bruneau, Paris 1980.
- Flaubert, Gustave, *Correspondance*, Vol. 4, édition établie, présentée et annotée par Jean Bruneau, Paris 1998.
- Flaubert, Gustave, Une Leçon d’Histoire Naturelle – Genre Commis, in: G.F., *Œuvres I*, texte établi et annoté par Claudine Gothot-Mersch et Guy Sagnes, Paris 2001, 195–201 (Flaubert 2001a).
- Flaubert, Gustave, Quidquid Volueris, in: G.F.: *Œuvres I*, texte établi et annoté par Claudine Gothot-Mersch et Guy Sagnes, Paris 2001, 243–272 (Flaubert 2001b).
- Foucault, Michel, *Abnormal. Lectures at the Collège de France 1974–1975*, ed. by Valerio Marchetti and Antonella Salomoni, transl. by Graham Burchell, London/New York 2003.
- Griem, Julika, *Monkey Business. Affen als Figuren anthropologischer und ästhetischer Reflexion 1800–2000*, Berlin 2010.
- Herschberg Pierrot, Anne (ed.), *Flaubert, l’empire de la bêtise*, Nantes 2012.
- Lepénies, Wolf, *Das Ende der Naturgeschichte. Wandel kultureller Selbstverständlichkeiten in den Wissenschaften des 18. und 19. Jahrhunderts*, Frankfurt a.M. 1978.
- Lepénies, Wolf, Der Wissenschaftler als Autor. Buffons prekärer Nachruhm, in: Georges-Louis Leclerc de Buffon, *Allgemeine Naturgeschichte*, (Neuausgabe der deutschen Fassung, Berlin 1771–1774) Frankfurt a.M. 2008, 1121–1148.
- Linnæus, Carolus, *Systema naturæ sive regna tria naturæ systematice proposita per classes, ordines, genera, & species*, Haak 1735.
- Lovejoy, Arthur, Buffon and the Problem of Species, *The Popular Science Monthly* 79 (1911), 464–473.
- Lovejoy, Arthur, *The Great Chain of Being* [1936], Cambridge/London 2001.
- Piveteau, Jean, Introduction, in: *Œuvres philosophiques de Buffon*, texte établi et présenté par Jean Piveteau, Paris 1954, X–XXXVII.
- Rieppel, Oliver, Georges Cuvier (1769–1832), in: Ilse Jahn/Michael Schmitt (eds.), *Darwin & Co. Eine Geschichte der Biologie in Portraits*, Vol. 1, München 2001, 139–156 (Rieppel 2001a).
- Rieppel, Oliver, Étienne Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire (1772–1844), Ilse Jahn/Michael Schmitt (eds.), *Darwin & Co. Eine Geschichte der Biologie in Portraits*, Vol. 1, München 2001, 157–175 (Rieppel 2001b).
- Roger, Jacques, *Buffon. A Life in Natural History*, Ithaca 1997.
- Roman, Hanna, Naming as Natural Process and Historical Narrative in Buffons Histoire Naturelle, *Romance Studies* 31:3–4 (2013), 238–250.
- Schnyder, Peter, »Am Rande der Vernunft«. Der Orang-Utan als monströse Figur des Dritten von Herder bis Hauff und Flaubert, in: Günter Oesterle/Roland Borgards/Christiane Holm (eds.), *Monster. Zur ästhetischen Verfasstheit eines Grenzbewohners*, Würzburg 2009, 255–272.
- Scholler, Dietrich, *Umzug nach Encyclopaedia. Zur narrativen Inszenierung des Wissens in Flauberts Bouvard et Pécuchet*, Berlin 2002.
- Scholler, Dietrich, Flauberts *Bouvard et Pécuchet* im Spiegel der Forschung, Teil I (1881–1999), *Zeitschrift für französische Sprache und Literatur* 116:2 (2006), 131–173.

- Scholler, Dietrich, Flauberts *Bouvard et Pécuchet* im Spiegel der Forschung, Teil II (2000–2004), *Zeitschrift für französische Sprache und Literatur* 117:2 (2007), 133–158.
- Séginger, Gisèle, Forme Romanesque et savoir. *Bouvard et Pécuchet* et les sciences naturelles, *Revue Flaubert* 4 (2004), <http://flaubert.univ-rouen.fr/revue/revue4/02seginger.php> (15.06.2015).
- Shukin, Nicole, *Animal Capital. Rendering Life in Biopolitical Times*, Minneapolis/London 2009.
- Siegert, Bernhard, Frivoles Wissen. Zur Logik der Zeichen nach Bouvard und Pécuchet, in: Hans-Christian von Herrmann/Matthias Middell (eds.), *Orte der Kulturwissenschaft*, Leipzig 1998, 15–40.
- Somerset, Richard, The Naturalist in Balzac: The Relative Influence of Cuvier and Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire, *French Forum* 27:1 (2002), 81–111.
- Toepfer, Georg, Art, in: G.T., *Historisches Wörterbuch der Biologie. Geschichte und Theorie der biologischen Grundbegriffe*, Vol. 1, Stuttgart/Weimar 2011, 61–131.
- Unwin, Timothy A., Flaubert's early work, in: T.A.U. (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Flaubert*, New York 2004, 34–50.
- Vinken, Barbara, *Flaubert. Durchkreuzte Moderne*, Frankfurt a.M. 2009.
- Vogl, Joseph/Anne von der Heiden (eds.), *Politische Zoologie*, Zürich/Berlin 2007.

2015-09-28

JLTONline ISSN 1862-8990

Copyright © by the author. All rights reserved.

This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and JLTONline.

For other permission, please contact [JLTONline](#).

How to cite this item:

Abstract of Matthias Preuss / Sebastian Schönbeck, *Bêtes Studies: Flaubert's and Balzac's Lessons in Natural History*.

In: JLTONline (28.09.2015)

Persistent Identifier: urn:nbn:de:0222-003176

Link: <http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0222-003176>