

Animality as a Mirror of Humanity: Anthropomorphism in George Orwell's *Animal Farm* and Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*

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Abstract

Criticism of George Orwell's *Animal Farm* (1945) and Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* (1851) has treated their animals either as transparent vehicles of human meaning or as nonhuman beings to be recovered from allegory. This article argues that neither position accounts for the reflexive work anthropomorphism performs in the two texts. Combining close reading with comparative analysis, and drawing on Animal Studies and posthumanist theory (Berger, Derrida, Haraway, Wolfe, Hayles, Agamben), it reads anthropomorphism as a mirror that returns the human gaze upon itself. Orwell's political animals expose the mechanics of domination, and the closing indistinguishability of pig and man shows the "human" to be less a species than a position of mastery. Melville stages anthropomorphism's failure: Ahab's attribution of "inscrutable malice" to the whale is exposed as projection, while Ishmael's cetology collapses before a creature whose face cannot be read. Both texts thus use human-animal resemblance to unsettle rather than secure human exceptionalism. The study offers literary Animal Studies a comparative model of reflexive anthropomorphism.

Keywords: Anthropomorphism; Animal Studies; Posthumanism; Human Exceptionalism; Otherness; *Animal Farm*; *Moby-Dick*

1. Introduction

Anthropomorphism is among the oldest operations of narrative. From Aesop and the *Panchatantra* onward, literature has lent animals speech, motive and moral character. The natural sciences have long treated the device as a category error, an illegitimate projection of human mental states onto creatures whose inner lives cannot be verified (Kennedy); literary criticism has more often treated it as a transparent convention through which a fable's human meaning can be read off without remainder. Both attitudes assume that the line between human and animal is secure.

Orwell's *Animal Farm* (1945) and Melville's *Moby-Dick* (1851) unsettle that assumption. Orwell's compact beast fable, subtitled "A Fairy Story," satirizes the betrayal of the Russian Revolution; Melville's encyclopaedic romance of the whale fishery centres on an animal that never speaks and is seldom seen. Criticism has divided accordingly. *Animal Farm* has been read so overwhelmingly as allegory that, as Stewart Cole observes, it "is not generally regarded as being a book 'about' animals at all" (335), although McHugh, Cole and John Drew have since challenged the "anthropo-allegorical" frame (Drew). *Moby-Dick* has drawn sustained ecocritical and posthumanist attention, from Philip Armstrong on cetacean humanization (Armstrong) to Paul Hurh on scale (Hurh) and Sarah Leilani Parijs on the novel's "animal apocalypse" (Parijs). What remains missing is a comparative account of how the two texts use anthropomorphism itself, in its successes and failures, to interrogate

the human. Between the allegorical reading that dissolves the animal into the human and the recuperative reading that rescues it from the human, there remains the question of what anthropomorphism reveals about the one who anthropomorphizes.

This article argues that anthropomorphism in both novels is reflexive. It makes humans visible to themselves by way of the animal, exposing the hierarchies, violence and appetite for mastery of a civilization that insists on a species boundary its own conduct repeatedly crosses. Orwell humanizes animals until humans become indistinguishable from beasts; Melville animalizes humans while refusing the whale the human legibility his characters demand. The device most often accused of anthropocentrism thus becomes, under the pressure of literary form, an instrument for unsettling it.

2. Anthropomorphism, Animality and the Human-Animal Boundary

Anthropomorphism is the attribution of human form, cognition, emotion or intention to nonhuman beings. It differs from personification, which humanizes abstractions or inanimate things; from zoomorphism, which figures humans or deities in animal form; from animalization, which describes certain humans as beasts in order to degrade or dominate them; and from symbolism, which lets an animal stand for something beyond itself without endowing it with human qualities. The two novels deploy all these operations, and their critical force lies in the slippage among them: Orwell's pigs are anthropomorphized animals who end as zoomorphized men, while Melville's whale is anthropomorphized by Ahab, symbolized by Ishmael and commodified by the fishery.

Behind these distinctions lies human exceptionalism, the conviction that some property, whether reason, language, soul or the hand, separates humans in kind from other creatures and licenses their dominion. Derrida's *The Animal That Therefore I Am* shows how philosophy from Descartes to Heidegger secured that conviction by gathering the diversity of living creatures under the general singular "the animal," which exists chiefly to define the human by negation. His neologism *animot*, sounding the plural *animaux* within the singular *mot*, insists that the category is a word humans have given themselves the authority to bestow (Derrida). Agamben's *The Open* similarly describes an anthropological machine that produces the human by ceaselessly separating it from its own animality (Agamben). For both, the boundary is manufactured, and its manufacture is an exercise of power.

Anthropomorphism stands ambiguously toward that manufacture. It can confirm exceptionalism by making the human the measure of all meaning; Berger argues that modern culture, having marginalized animals materially, reproduces them as spectacle and image (Berger). Yet de Waal warns that reflexive suspicion of anthropomorphism can become "anthropodenial," a refusal of real continuities between species (de Waal), and Daston and Mitman treat anthropomorphism as a historically variable way of thinking with animals (Daston and Mitman). Haraway's "significant otherness" describes humans and animals as co-constituted without either collapsing into the other (Haraway, *Companion Species Manifesto*). Wolfe's posthumanism questions the schema that makes a sovereign rational subject the bearer of value (Wolfe), and Hayles reads the posthuman as the end of the liberal self

as autonomous and bounded (Hayles). These positions frame the question pursued here: when Orwell and Melville make animals resemble humans, or refuse to, what image of the human is reflected back?

3. Political Animality in *Animal Farm*

Orwell's account of the novella's genesis already contains this reflexive structure. In the preface he wrote in 1947 for the Ukrainian translation, which survives only as a back-translation, he recalls a boy whipping a cart-horse and reflecting that "men exploit animals in much the same way as the rich exploit the proletariat"; analysing Marx "from the animals' point of view," he concludes that "the true struggle is between animals and humans" (Orwell, "Preface"). The allegory begins with a literal scene of interspecies domination, lending substance to McHugh's observation that critics have moved toward reading the book "as a straightforward animal narrative" (28).

Old Major's speech supplies the farm's founding anthropology: "Man is the only creature that consumes without producing. . . . Yet he is lord of all the animals" (Orwell, *Animal Farm*, ch. 1). The speech inverts the humanist hierarchy: Man is distinguished not by reason but by parasitism, and his sovereignty rests on appropriation rather than capacity. Major's warning, "in fighting against Man, we must not come to resemble him" (Orwell, *Animal Farm*, ch. 1), announces a fable of resemblance in which the revolution's failure is measured by how closely its leaders come to look like the species they overthrew. Snowball's maxim "Four legs good, two legs bad" then makes the species boundary the principle of political identity: "The distinguishing mark of man is the HAND, the instrument with which he does all his mischief" (Orwell, *Animal Farm*, ch. 3). The pig performs, in parodic miniature, Agamben's anthropological machine, isolating one anatomical trait as a criterion of enmity and exposing the arbitrariness of a humanist tradition that prized the hand as the mark of human distinction. The farm's politics thus begin by inverting, and thereby reproducing, the logic of species exceptionalism.

The pigs rise through precisely the faculties humanism claims as distinctively human: literacy, rhetoric and the management of memory. Squealer, who "could turn black into white" (Orwell, *Animal Farm*, ch. 2), justifies the pigs' appropriation of food with parodic science, "Milk and apples (this has been proved by Science, comrades) contain substances absolutely necessary to the well-being of a pig," and ends in threat: "Jones would come back!" (Orwell, *Animal Farm*, ch. 3). Capitain shows that the pigs' dominance rests on their command of reading and writing, set against the communal medium of song (Capitain). Orwell thereby reverses the humanist valuation of language itself: speech here is not the guarantee of rational community but the instrument by which hierarchy is naturalized, and the more "human" the pigs become in linguistic accomplishment, the more efficiently they dominate.

Boxer and Benjamin figure the governed. Boxer's maxims, "I will work harder" and "Napoleon is always right" (Orwell, *Animal Farm*, chs. 3, 5), condense the strength and loyalty that power exploits. His removal in a van marked "Alfred Simmonds, Horse Slaughterer and Glue Boiler" (Orwell, *Animal Farm*, ch. 9) is allegorical and literal at once: the betrayal of the proletariat and the ordinary end of a working horse,

made palatable by Squealer's report of a peaceful death in hospital. Here the anthropomorphic surface thins, exposing the animal body as a commodity that no revolution has altered. Benjamin's "Donkeys live a long time. None of you has ever seen a dead donkey" (Orwell, *Animal Farm*, ch. 3) and his conviction that life would go on "as it had always gone on—that is, badly" (Orwell, *Animal Farm*, ch. 5) render the quietism of the educated observer, who sees clearly and refuses to act, while the sheep, bleating slogans over every debate, embody the conformity propaganda requires.

The purges disclose the logic beneath the fable. The executions continue until "the air was heavy with the smell of blood, which had been unknown there since the expulsion of Jones" (Orwell, *Animal Farm*, ch. 7). Since Jones's regime rested on slaughtering animals, the pigs have not merely imitated human tyranny but internalized the human relation to the animal as killable life. Napoleon becomes "human" precisely by treating his fellow animals as humans treat livestock. The final chapter turns allegory into mirror: the pigs walk upright, the sheep bleat "Four legs good, two legs better!" and the commandments shrink to "All animals are equal but some animals are more equal than others" (Orwell, *Animal Farm*, ch. 10). The animals at the window look "from pig to man, and from man to pig, and from pig to man again; but already it was impossible to say which was which" (Orwell, *Animal Farm*, ch. 10). Beyond its allegorical sense of a revolutionary elite merging with the class it displaced, the scene permits a further reading. If pig and man cannot be told apart, "human" names not a biological given but a position: the one who walks upright, holds the whip and consumes without producing. The reader, placed with the creatures outside, sees the human from without.

4. Animality, the Whale, and Human Perception in *Moby-Dick*

If Orwell's anthropomorphism works by excess, Melville's works by failure. Ishmael's opening invokes Narcissus, drowned because "he could not grasp the tormenting, mild image he saw in the fountain"; "that same image, we ourselves see in all rivers and oceans. It is the image of the ungraspable phantom of life; and this is the key to it all" (Melville, ch. 1). The sea and its creature become a reflecting surface, and what destroys the novel's humans is the inability to distinguish image from depth.

Ahab is the novel's great anthropomorphist. For him "All visible objects, man, are but as pasteboard masks," behind which "some unknown but still reasoning thing" hides: "If man will strike, strike through the mask!" In the whale he sees "outrageous strength, with an inscrutable malice sinewing it" (Melville, ch. 36). Attributing malice converts an animal's defensive violence into moral intention fit for revenge. Ishmael names the mechanism: "all evil, to crazy Ahab, were visibly personified, and made practically assailable in *Moby Dick*" (Melville, ch. 41). Upon the whale's white hump, Ahab "piled . . . the sum of all the general rage and hate felt by his whole race from Adam down" (Melville, ch. 41). He does not discover malice in the whale; he deposits it there, making the whale's body an archive of humanity's grievance against a universe that will not answer. Starbuck objects, "Vengeance on a dumb brute! . . . To be enraged with a dumb thing, Captain Ahab, seems blasphemous" (Melville, ch. 36), but in refusing anthropomorphism he reasserts a

Cartesian view of the animal as mechanism. The novel endorses neither position: the whale's final charge is narrated as "Retribution, swift vengeance, eternal malice" (Melville, ch. 135), and whether this describes the whale or the crew's perception remains undecidable. Melville suspends the reader between anthropomorphism and anthropodenial, making the animal's meaning inseparable from the observer's position.

Ishmael's cetology fails in another key. Classifying whales against Linnaeus, he takes "the good old fashioned ground that the whale is a fish," defining it as "A SPOUTING FISH WITH A HORIZONTAL TAIL" (Melville, ch. 32), sorts them like books into Folios and Octavos, and concedes: "God keep me from ever completing anything. This whole book is but a draught—nay, but the draught of a draught" (Melville, ch. 32). Taxonomy, the instrument of Enlightenment mastery over nature, is exposed as a provisional textual order imposed on living bodies.

The failure reaches the face, where Western ethics locates the claim of the other. "I but put that brow before you. Read it if you can," Ishmael says (Melville, ch. 79), and later: "I know him not, and never will. . . . how comprehend his face, when face he has none?" (Melville, ch. 86). Derrida's seminar turns on being looked at by his cat and finding in that gaze a point of view philosophy refused to acknowledge (Derrida). Melville's whale offers no such reciprocal gaze, yet the absence has an analogous ethical effect: a creature that cannot be read as a human face cannot be absorbed into human meaning. Its otherness exemplifies Nagel's experience that may be real yet inaccessible from the human standpoint (Nagel). "The Whiteness of the Whale" generalizes this into metaphysics, a blankness that "shadows forth the heartless voids and immensities of the universe" (Melville, ch. 42). The whale's colour is the colour of withdrawn meaning, returning whatever is projected upon it. *Moby Dick* thus becomes less a figure of evil, God or nature than a figure of the human compulsion to make the nonhuman signify.

Melville does not wholly discredit anthropomorphism. In "The Grand Armada," nursing whales rest calmly at the centre of a panicked herd, and Ishmael finds in them a figure for his own inner calm "amid the tornadoed Atlantic of my being" (Melville, ch. 87). Here the analogy reverses direction: the human is understood through the whales. Armstrong situates such moments within a nineteenth-century shift in feeling toward cetaceans, in which sympathy for the hunted whale coexisted with the industrial logic of its slaughter (Armstrong). Melville's anthropomorphism registers the emergence of compassion within an economy of extraction without resolving the contradiction.

5. Animality as a Mirror of Humanity

The two novels move in opposite directions across the human-animal boundary yet converge on one effect. Orwell humanizes animals until the human appears as a set of practices (owning, commanding, lying, killing) rather than a natural kind. Melville animalizes humans while denying the animal human legibility, so that interpreting the whale reveals the interpreter. Orwell's mirror is satirical, magnifying familiar features into grotesqueness; Melville's is the fountain of Narcissus, returning an image that cannot be grasped.

Violence clarifies the comparison. On the farm it flows down a hierarchy whose instruments, the dogs, the whip and the knacker's van, are borrowed from the human order. On the *Pequod* it underwrites the whole enterprise, and Melville turns the language of savagery back upon the civilized. Picturing a meat market's crowds "staring up at the long rows of dead quadrupeds," Ishmael asks: "Does not that sight take a tooth out of the cannibal's jaw? Cannibals? who is not a cannibal?" (Melville, ch. 65). The question collapses the distinction between Christian and "savage." Fleece's sermon to the sharks, granting that their voracity "is natur, and can't be helped" (Melville, ch. 64), lands less on the sharks than on Stubb, feasting on whale steak above them, and Queequeg concludes that "de god wat made shark must be one dam Ingin" (Melville, ch. 66). Melville's animals rarely speak, yet through them the humans are made to hear what they are. Orwell's farm, meanwhile, maps species onto class, showing how hierarchy naturalizes itself as biology: "more equal than others" is the formula of every regime that presents domination as nature. Ahab's "I'd strike the sun if it insulted me" (Melville, ch. 36) voices the sovereign subject Hayles critiques, destroyed by the nonhuman force it cannot master.

Agency diverges too. Orwell grants his animals full reason, which proves chiefly the faculty of rationalization. Melville withholds human-style agency from the whale, yet Moby Dick acts decisively; Paes de Barros argues that he refuses to be a passive screen for human fantasy (Paes de Barros). Orwell's animals are agents whose agency mirrors human corruption; Melville's whale mirrors nothing, and thereby exposes the human desire for a mirror. Morally, Squealer's "Science" and Ahab's "malice" do the same work, converting the will to dominate into justification, ideological in one case and metaphysical in the other. Both reveal a common human operation: projecting one's own appetite onto the world, then punishing the world for possessing it.

6. Anthropomorphism and Human Exceptionalism

Anthropomorphism both reinforces and challenges the human-animal hierarchy, and the novels are instructive because they do not resolve the tension. Orwell's fable is anthropocentric in design, and, as Drew argues, its pedagogical tradition has reproduced a de-animalized reading (Drew); Melville's sublime rhetoric of the whale coexists with relish for the hunt.

Yet anthropomorphism's success unsettles its premise. Orwell's animals reason, argue, organize and deceive, demonstrating that none of these capacities secures the moral superiority humanism has attached to them; qualities shown to be shareable across species cannot remain exclusive marks of human distinction. Orwell's pigs become human not by acquiring a soul but by acquiring a whip, so exceptionalism survives only as an exceptionalism of domination. Melville approaches the same conclusion from the opposite side. Staging anthropomorphism as projection, he reveals the human as the creature that cannot encounter the nonhuman without remaking it in its own image; figuring whalemens as cannibals, he relocates the human within the animality from which it claimed exemption. What emerges is not the elevation of the animal but the relocation of the human.

Neither Orwell, an avowed humanist, nor Melville undertakes a posthumanist project, yet their texts perform the move Wolfe describes, questioning the frame in which the human is constituted as bearer of value (Wolfe). Anthropomorphism becomes what Haraway calls a contact zone, where human and animal meet without either remaining wholly itself (Haraway, *When Species Meet*). The device that seems to confirm the human as the measure of all things shows, under narrative pressure, that the measure was always borrowed.

7. Conclusion

Anthropomorphism in *Animal Farm* and *Moby-Dick* is not merely a stylistic technique but a critical strategy through which human identity is examined and destabilized. Orwell's animals expose power by stripping it of humanist dignity until humanity appears a position of mastery; Melville's whale defeats every attempt at anthropomorphism, revealing the limits and projective violence of human interpretation. For Animal Studies and posthumanist criticism, the finding is that the choice between allegorical and recuperative readings is too stark: anthropomorphism read reflexively records not what animals are but what humans do when they look at animals. Despite their different genres and centuries, both novels place an animal before the human gaze and then turn the gaze around. The creatures at the window cannot tell pig from man; Ishmael, looking into the sea, finds Narcissus and a brow he cannot read. In both, the mirror of animality returns to the human not a confirmation of its exceptional status but a question about it.

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