Modern(ist) fables. Notes on Some Animals Inhabiting Early 20th-century Short Stories

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Abstract
This essay addresses the literary representation of animals in short fiction by Katherine Mansfield, Virginia Woolf, and Mary Butts. Its aim is to highlight how, by constituting a marginal literary space, the short story as a genre allowed these writers to reconfigure the encounter with the animal with a distinctive formal liberty, conjoining the heightened symbolic power of the literary animal with a lively rethinking of traditional models, most notably myth and fable. The short story, and in particular the short story featuring an encounter with an animal, is thus a privileged site of investigation as it conflates marginalised forces that, yoked together, illuminate many facets of the question regarding the animal during Modernism. It also sheds light on women writers' employment of this genre as a space for expressive freedom.

Key-words: human/animal relations, short story, fable, Modernism, Katherine Mansfield, Virginia Woolf, Mary Butts.

'O maister Esope, poet lawriate
God wait ye ar full deir welcum to me!
Ar ye not he that all thir fabillis wrate,
Quhilk in effect, suppois thay fenyeit be,
Ar full off prudence and moralitie?'.

(Robert Henryson, *The Taill of the Lyoun and the Mous*)

So che una vipera ha morso uno che m'odia.
Pari e patta.

(Federigo Tozzi, *Bestie*)

1. Introduction

When Gustav Janouch first read David Garnett's *Lady into Fox*, he suspected the Bloomsbury writer of plagiarising his friend Franz

ISSN 1824-3967

Kafka's famous short story *The Metamorphosis.* Confronted on the matter, Kafka markedly dissented: "It's a matter of the age," he maintained, "we both copied from that" (Janouch 2012: 21-2). In the spirit of this remark, I wish to approach some examples of literary animals that reside, just like Kafka's, inside short stories. Kafka's explanation for his fascination for the animal, as he delved into Garnett's book, is quite predictably connected to the sense of liberation 'caged' modern man was believed to be granted by animality. Yet he does not advocate for a supposedly "dormant, ideal animality at the heart of the human [...] to be unleashed" (Ryan 2018a: 321), but rather for a recognition of the animal's agency in a new and more thorough understanding of humanity.

Although a similar exchange concerning the place of animals in modern literature never occurred between Katherine Mansfield, Virginia Woolf and Mary Butts, each of these talented writers addressed the issue of the human/animal encounter in their short fiction. The choice of a female triptych is not entirely arbitrary, and it is aimed at re-orienting the discussion of animality in Anglo-American Modernism studies, usually dominated by such male figures as Ernest Hemingway and D. H. Lawrence. But more acutely than a gender issue, these pages will interrogate the genre implications of choosing to insert the animal into a literary form such as the short story, in a literary period like Modernism.

2. Modernist animals

The period between the late nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth was indeed a pivotal epoch for the re-orientation of traditional humanistic assumptions. Anthropocentric philosophical and aesthetical systems dominating Western civilization from the classical age onwards began to be questioned exactly at the turn of the century, with the barriers separating the human realm and the animal kingdom starting to slowly but steadily appear more permeable. The first cataclysmal paradigm shift was Darwinism, which provoked a metamorphosis of animals from mere subjects to entities that "in their mental faculties" showed "no fundamental difference" (Darwin 2009: 35) from humans. Darwinism had crucial reverberations in the literary domain, where the animal progressively evolved from being a mere figure or symbol to become a proper

"locus of identity construction and complication" (Rohman 2008: 11), and literary criticism contributed to "document[ing] the potent but sometimes evanescent dispositions that link humans and animals over time" (Armstrong 2008: 4).

Literary Modernism is unquestionably one of the most fertile sites for investigating the literary response of authors depicting human/animal encounters, first and foremost because Modernism was the prime aesthetic field where the deep impact of Darwin's theoretical assaults on received anthropocentric binary hierarchies can be ascertained. Thus, modernist animality functions as "a privileged site of alterity" against which we can appreciate the inner workings of "[h]umanity's identity formation through difference" (Rohman 2008: 20) by shifting the attention not to the relative value that the animal possessed in relation to the human, but rather to the analysis of the threshold itself (Bally 2011: 38; Ryan 2018a: 322). Modernist literary animals began to represent "figural and cultural representations which provoke powerful questions about how humans imagine themselves with and over against other animals" (Parry 2012: 2), and they consequentially ceased to be mere accessories as they were in such past literary forms as the fable, or the bestiary.

Medieval bestiaries, for instance, did in fact encapsulate an epistemological paradigm where animals – whether real or imaginary – were ranked according to a classifying principle that followed a core exemplary aim, that of portraying human virtues or vices *through* the animal. This moral agenda would later transform itself, as Michel Foucault described in *The Order of Things*, into a classifying fury, where

> [t]he whole of animal semantics has disappeared, like a dead and useless limb. The words that had been interwoven in the very being of the beast have been unravelled and removed: and the living being, in its anatomy, its form, its habits, its birth and death, appears as though stripped naked. Natural history finds its locus in the gap that is now opened up between things and words – a silent gap, pure of all verbal sedimentation, and yet articulated according to the elements of representation, those same elements that can now without let or hindrance be named. (Foucault 2002: 141)

The early-twentieth-century scientific revolutions seemed to 'reallocate' words to the animal through modes of expression that, in literature, excluded the veneer of scientificity but rather

opened a dialogue that would progressively abate the threshold that traditionally divided the human and animal realms, recognizing to the animal a self-sufficiency it conspicuously lacked in humanistic philosophical systems (Calarco 2015). This new experimentalism towards the animal and all the forms traditionally associated with it was a constant trait of Modernism (Norris 1985: 6), ultimately leading to a full-fledged anti-anthropocentric paradigm.

Though profound and irreversible, the shift that unquestionably characterized Modernism was not abrupt. Some authors did retain some of the vestiges of the old anthropocentric frame of mind, for instance Guillaume Apollinaire, whose *The Bestiary, or Procession of Orpheus* (1909) maintained a discernible pious sentiment of moral instruction[1], or Franz Blei's *Das Große Bestiarium der Literatur* (1922-24), that parodied the original classifying goal of natural history while listing literary authors where medieval compilers once ranked beasts, birds, bugs and other brutes. The three female writers here under scrutiny can also be considered notable exceptions, as they combined a serious involvement with animals as entities which were unquestionably being liberated from subjection to human standards, with a playful commitment to the anthropocentric literary forms until then charged with the representation of animals. In other words, they were able to yoke together a vision of the animal as representative of a state of abjection, of "the in-between, the ambiguous, the composite" (Kristeva 1982: 56) that pigeonholed all the ostracized entities in modern civilization, with a formal appropriation of genres and modes of expressions that reflected the subalternity animals had always embodied.

[1] Only half a century after the three short stories that will be described here were composed, painter Graham Sutherland decided to illustrate Apollinaire's poem, in what would become his last work. Such a marvel of insight can be considered an apt summing up of the importance of the modernist animal legacy in later twentieth century, as well as in more recent times. What Sutherland – himself enmeshed with modernity's tide in its fullness – managed to achieve was a vivid depiction of the unstable dimension in which the animal world was thrown after Modernism, which could still be enshrined in miniatures open to be interpreted as entangled with human existence. Perhaps most acutely in "The Flea", a plate obviously mimicking Kafka's cockroach, whose bed can also acquire further dimensions, considered how English literary heritage most famous flea – i.e. Donne's – might open up to more eroticized scenarios.

3. Marginal fables

This attitude is in itself an act of nonconformity, carried out by resorting, on the one hand, to a narrative genre – the short story – envisaged as a versatile liminal space allowing significant formal and structural liberties, and, on the other, to the multifarious and unstable ontological nature of animality, granting the freedom to rethink received hierarchies. In a feminist perspective, authors of short stories could thus employ the genre's constitutional power to "contest the dominant beliefs in social progress and formal cohesion" (Hunter 2007: 232) to further problematize their portrayal of nonhuman animals' life.

As far as Mansfield's, Woolf's and Butts's stories are concerned, the short stories in which they stage encounters with animals could provocatively be considered a modern analogue of the classical fable, as their animals all seem "to yield a meaning that can be transferred to the human sphere" (Manning 2009: 36). Although critics warn of the interpretation of the fable (a typically classical genre) by modern standards (van Dijk 1997: 14ff), it has been chosen here as a referent because of the substantial anthropocentric heritage it provided to writers still embroiled with a traditional framework. If Derrida later points to the fable as a cumbersome vestige of anthropocentric thoughts[2], in the case of Mansfield, Woolf and Butts it can be envisaged as a genre to look back to for the crafting of an alternative view on the animal that the short story, being on the fringe of major literature, can offer.

Among the many pronouncements about issues of marginality and literary 'second-class citizenships', Deleuze and Guattari's concept of minor literature remains one of the most fascinating. Their philosophical speculations, revolving around Franz Kafka's short fiction, allow us to bridge the gap between the interest in the short story and the role of the animal in it. Animality is considered as one of the most interesting triggers of Kafka's landmark "deterritorialization" (Deleuze and Guattari 1986: 16) of human existence:

[2] In his *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, Derrida, the very champion of anti-anthropocentric thought, dismissed the fable as "an anthropomorphic taming, a moralizing subjection, a domestication. Always a discourse *of* man, on man, indeed on the animality of man, but for and in man" (Derrida 2008: 37).

> To become animal is to participate in movement, to stake out the path of escape in all its positivity, to cross a threshold, to reach a continuum of intensities that are valuable only in themselves, to find a world of pure intensities where all forms come undone, as do all the significations, signifiers, and signifieds, to the benefit of an unformed matter of de-territorialized flux, of nonsignifying signs. (Deleuze and Guattari 1986: 13)

According to one of the most beguiling descriptions of the genre, short stories seem to find their very essence in the fact that the characters and situations they describe pertain to the margins of human society: in this light, Frank O'Connor's famous pronouncement on the short story as the literary haven for "submerged population groups" (2004) striving to find a distinctive voice in the tide of modernity cannot but be taken as one of the most convincing stances on the subject. Focusing on marginalised social clusters, such as "Gogol's officials, Turgenev's serfs, Maupassant's prostitutes, Chekhov's doctors and teachers, Sherwood Anderson's provincials, always dreaming of escape" (O'Connor 2004), the short story is the quintessential eccentrical and centrifugal form, a "fragmented and restless form" (Gordimer 1987: 180) basically immune to the sometimes grand representation of human existences in its entirety, and more preoccupied with glimpses of single situations, which are aimed "to introduce new (and possibly stigmatized) subject matters to the literary arena" (Pratt 1981: 187).

In addition to suiting the representation of the animal, this marginal framework is also cut out for the expression of female voices. The short story has always been one of the privileged sites for British female authors, and one particularly suited to the verbalization of an outsider's point of view (Sacido-Romero and Lojo-Rodríguez 2018: 4ff). Early-twentieth-century female vanguardist practitioners, like the triad here considered, contributed enormously to the shaping of modern(ist) shorter fiction (Krueger 2014), adding, to use Woolf's famous words on Chekov, a "note of interrogation" (1987: 245) easily legible as a doubtful approach towards any recognized literary *Diktat*. The idea of working within the edges of a 'minor' genre allowed a considerable amount of freedom and a significant opportunity to craft an alternative voice. Telling short stories as women in a patriarchal society is indeed an act of resistance and entails subtle and strategic re-orientations of the genre (Drewery

2011). Furthermore, deciding to insert into its marginal entities was a supplementary mutinous act, ultimately offering readers a redoubled peripheral point of view.

4. Counterparts

The first author that will be put under scrutiny serves as an example, since in her critical history, the very theme of margin(alisation) has been paramount. Sanctioned in the collective volume *Katherine Mansfield: In from the Margin* (1995), Mansfield's ability to influence, as a geographical outsider, Anglo-American literary practices has earned her a place in the empyrean spheres of modernist authors, where she features as a "pre-eminent figure towering at once over colonial and metropolitan fields of writing at the beginning of the twentieth century, chiselling her fine, self-consciously modernist aesthetic in both arenas, interacting with both as imaginative domains" (Boehmer 2011: 59). With her threshold presence, oscillating between centre and periphery, Mansfield endowed the short story with a defamiliarizing power that is connected to the very marginality of her being a woman and a writer of short fiction (Kimber 2015: 6). Drawing strength from the very limits of these specific conditions, Mansfield managed to reject traditional features while innovating narrative techniques through the depiction of human psychology, the intertwining of points of views and, obviously, the able inlay of "blazing moments" into the "cotton wool of daily life".

Mansfield's female and colonial voice can be considered an essential motor of her art, and it certainly contributed to fuelling her experimentations, a sort of revolutionary principle of her figure as artist (Duffy 2021: 25). In her fascinating, though small corpus, Mansfield's attitude towards animals significantly evolved over time and imposed itself as among the most remarkable features of her oeuvre.

As a letter to Middleton Murry from November 19, 1922 attests, in that period her artistic trajectory attained the most profound entanglement with the animal kingdom:

> I am becoming absorbed in animals, not to watch only but to know how to care for them & to know *about* them. Why does one live so far away from these things? (Mansfield 2008: 325)

Mansfield's foregrounding of a sought communion between human and animal experience does not imply a rejection of western anthropocentrism, and "to claim that her writing overcomes the distinction between human and animal, is to overstate the significance and to overlook the complexity of her description of animals" (Ryan 2018b: 30). As a matter of fact, the very idea of "becoming absorbed in animals" rather points to an aesthetical preoccupation with the proper manner in which one can pin down experiences that exceed the familiar realm of human life:

> When I write about ducks I swear that I am a white duck with a round eye, floating in a pond fringed with yellow blobs and taking an occasional dart at the other duck with the round eye […] in fact the whole process of becoming the duck … is so thrilling that I can hardly breathe, only to think about it. For although that is as far as most people can get, it is really only the 'prelude'. There follow moments when you are *more* duck, *more* apple or *more* Natasha than any of these objects could ever possibly be, and so you *create* them anew. (Mansfield 1984: 330)

This eminently creative interest in animals is the real shared trait of much modernist literature, and for Mansfield it passes through a preliminary impersonation – what she labels 'prelude' – and ends with creation. In fact, this final stage of creation aims at a literary presence of the animal that in many ways remains tangled up in an allegorical mirroring between human and animal. In two short stories that appeared posthumously in *The Dove's Nest*, "The Fly" and "The Canary", animals stand out as theriomorphic symbols that acquire meaning only in relation to the human domain.

The fly of the eponymous story, a patent emblem of the "inhuman effects of the First World War" (Alpers 1984: 576-7) that finds its untimely death by ink, musters many interesting literary echoes: from Gloucester's famous "flies to wanton boys" in Shakespeare's *King Lear*, to Chekov's "Small Fry" (1885), where a clerk kills a cockroach out of boredom and frustration. The story opens with the visit of Mr Woodfield, a man "boxed up in the house" (Mansfield 2002: 122) after the loss of his son, to a friend broadly referred to as the boss. The state of dejection of Woodfield is underlined by a sort of amnesic dementia, as he is portrayed in his inability to remember the very things he has come to say. After the first moments, the

shared trauma of paternal sorrow emerges, as we understand that both Woodfield and the boss lost their sons in the Great War. Their opposite reactions to loss emerge in the central part of the story, when the gulf of the boss's despair, which he managed to control during Woodfield's visit, emerges in all its excruciating vividness through a painful stream of consciousness that is interrupted by the entrance of a fly:

> At that moment the boss noticed that a fly had fallen into his bread inkpot, and was trying feebly but desperately to clamber out again. Help! Help! Said those struggling legs. (Mansfield 2002: 132)

The personification of the fly is clear enough thanks to the use of ventriloquism, yet the boss does not allow any image of his son dying on the Continent to linger freely in his conscious train of thought. He rather abruptly decides to impersonate the same merciless Fate that took his son's life and starts torturing the insect with his ink and pen. When the fly finally dies, the boss leaves his office realising that he too, like the dejected Woodfield, has forgotten something:

> 'Bring me some fresh blotting paper,' he said sternly, 'and look sharp about it.' And while the old dog padded away he fell to wondering what was it he had been thinking about before. What was it? It was … He took out his handkerchief and passed it inside his collar. For the life of him he could not remember. (Mansfield 2002: 136)

Amnesia, symptomatic of his psychological distress, preludes to the boss' surrender to his emotional pain, ultimately sanctioned by a figural theriomorphic metamorphosis where he is described as an "old dog" that "pads away" from, we might easily assume, his own awareness of the loss of his son.

The other story in the collection which attracts attention for its representation of a particularly poignant human/animal encounter is "The Canary", written as a gift for Dorothy Brett and often dismissed by critics as a "mawkish effort" (Tomalin 1987). The story conjoins Mansfield's observational abilities – of actual caged canaries nurtured by a lady in a building in front of the Victoria Palace Hotel where she was residing in 1922 – and her ability to appropriate and innovate the somewhat trite image of the artist as a caged bird, an equation she openly addressed in a letter to Murry

where she was trying to delineate her own aesthetic principles, as often happened in her private correspondence:

> Oh, it is agony to meet corruption when one thinks all is fair – the big snail under the leaf – the spot of the child's lung – what a *wicked, wicked* God! But it is more than useless to cry out. Hanging in our little cages on the awful wall over the gulf of eternity we must sing-sing. (Mansfield 1951: 334)

These reflections point to the fact that Mansfield's conception of the artist in the modern world was easily comparable to the nonhuman animal state (Zinman 1978: 458-60). And the caged canary of the story becomes a sort of key to the moral of the whole narrative, given how explicitly the final musings of the bird's elderly owner address the melancholy essence of human existence, ignited by the aching feeling of exclusion she feels, not least because of the mockery she is subjected to by her lodgers:

> … All the same, without being morbid, and giving way to – to memories and so on, I must confess that there does seem to me something sad in life. It is hard to say what it is. I don't mean the sorrow that we all know, like illness and poverty and death. No, it is something different. It is there, deep down, deep down, part of one, like one's breathing. (Mansfield 2002: 146)

5. Rewarding

Interspecies companionships have been a frequent literary theme, most significantly sanctified in modern times by Gustave Flaubert's *A Simple Heart* (1877). Like Flaubert's Félicité, the unnamed lady in Mansfield's story epitomizes the affective bond that unites an elderly, and thus increasingly fragile, human being and the otherness of animal life. Thus, one of the most underrated of Mansfield's stories turns out to fit a recurrent paradigm within animal studies, the one that links the representation of the human/animal divide with that of disability in order to encourage readers "to rethink questions of ethical and political responsibility" (Wolfe 2009: 127). Flaubert's Félicité looms large also in "The Widow and the Parrot: A True Story", one of Virginia Woolf's most neglected short stories. Written around the same time as Mansfield's "The Widow", this children's story was published in a family newspaper

edited by Woolf's nephew, later to become her first biographer, Quentin Bell.

The story's protagonist is an old, limping woman who is immediately connoted as a sincere and dispassionate lover of animals. Insisting on Mrs Gage's interspecies solidarity, Woolf brings to the fore her own "bioethical concerns" (Williams 2020: 106). Although conveying them under the apparently reassuring colours of the moralistic fable, "The Widow and the Parrot" is in fact deeply concerned with prejudices related to ableism – an attitude embodied by several characters in their condescending approach to the human protagonist – and the connection between a prejudicial marginalization of the female (elderly and incapacitated) body and that of animals in anthropocentric societies (Taylor 2018; Tzrak 2020). Easily readable as a fable with a strong didactic tone, the story centres on Mrs Gage's inheriting a parrot named James from her deceased brother. Her kindness towards the bird is rewarded at the end with a treasure James helps her discover under the floor of her late brother's house.

Simple and straightforward as it might appear at the level of plot and language, "The Widow and the Parrot" is nevertheless a literary space in which Woolf expands upon her "inhuman aesthetics" (Rohman 2018: 70), by isolating an example of interspecies interdependence which defies both anthropocentric and ableist assumptions. Like the elderly widow, who is portrayed as "lame, and rather short sighted" (Woolf 1989: 162), the parrot is described as a somewhat odd, decaying relic of a home which is just as bleak. What Woolf underscores is the powerful recognition of a communal state between these two beings, which is transposed into Mrs Gage's desire to make a connection with the bird upon their very first encounter. It is through yet another marginalized character, a local old village woman, that the widow and the bird are introduced to one another:

'Who was that shrieking out "Not at home"?' said Mrs Gage. 'Drat the bird!' said Mrs Ford very peevishly, pointing to a large grey parrot. 'He almost screams my head off. There he sits all day humped up on his perch like a monument screeching 'Not at home' if ever you go near his perch.' He was a very handsome bird, as Mrs Gage could see; but his feathers were sadly neglected. 'Perhaps he is unhappy, or he may be hungry,' she said.

> But Mrs Ford said it was temper merely; he was a seaman's parrot and had learnt his language in the east. However, she added, Mr Joseph was very fond of him, had called him James; and, it was said, talked to him as if he were a rational being. Mrs Ford soon left. Mrs Gage at once went to her box and fetched some sugar which she had with her and offered it to the parrot, saying in a very kind tone that she meant him no harm, but was his old master's sister, come to take possession of the house, and she would see to it that he was as happy as a bird could be. (Woolf 1989: 163)

Mrs Gage's offer illustrates her firm intention to protect the nonhuman animal's existence, and her desire to make James a part of her habitat. This instinctive kindness is openly contrasted with her deceased brother's past cruelty towards animals: he was in effect "a cruel little boy", who enjoyed "worrying the poor insects" (Woolf 1989: 164). In a sort of redemptive act of kindness towards the animal kingdom on behalf of her own family, Mrs Gage leads a life of utmost compassion towards nonhuman animals, in particular her dog Shag.

Despite being the centre of a moral tale and differently from many classical or eighteenth-century fables, James the parrot does not possess preternatural anthropomorphic qualities other than his biological ability to repeat fragments of human speech, which leads Mrs Gage's brother to think he is a rational being. In opposition to Woolf's treatment of Elizabeth Barret Browning's spaniel in *Flush* (1933), the narrative perspective is limited to the human world, with no animalistic incursion[3].

That Woolf resorted to animals in her rare attempts at children's literature is surely a noteworthy fact, and it should be compared, as far as her short fiction is concerned, with more canonically highbrow animal presences such as the white herons passing "over the church beneath the sky" (Woolf 1989: 137) in "Monday or Tuesday". The differences between such an experimental, impressionistic depiction

[3] Being perhaps Woolf's most popular animal presence, Flush is enmeshed in quite a recognizable generic dynamics, like the animals in Woolf's shorter fiction here analysed. Similarly to Mrs Gage's pets and Mrs Lugton's embroidered seraglio, Flush allows Woolf to explore and push the genre of biography to its limits, re-modelling it according to the new 'necessities' that she felt modernity required from anyone dealing with life-writing in her times. On this genre-oriented position see (Ryan 2020).

of the nonhuman and the apparent straightforward simplicity of "The Widow and the Parrot" are confirmed in another children's tale Woolf penned in the same period, "Nurse Lugton's Curtain".

By falling soundly asleep while she is decorating a blue curtain with a plethora of exotic animals, Nurse Lugton gives a chance to all the animals she is embroidering in the fabric to commence a vibrant dance that is quite alluring in its majestic simplicity:

> The animals began to move. First went the elephant and the zebra; next the giraffe and the tiger; the ostrich, the mandrill, twelve pelicans waddled and waded, often pecking at each other, alongside. Over them burnt Nurse Lugton's golden thimble like a sun; and as Nurse Lugton snored, the animals heard the wind roaring through the forest. Down they went to drink, and as they trod, the blue curtain […] became made of grass, and roses and daisies; strewn with white and black stones; with puddles on it, and cart track, and little frogs hopping quickly lest the elephants should tread on them. (Woolf 1989: 160)

The passage shows how the fable-like scenario allows Woolf to introduce nonhuman animals as magical components suddenly roused by the drifting into sleep of the human protagonist. Their dynamism appears as a sudden awakening of vitalistic forces that thrive in a moment where the rules and limitations of rational description are dimmed by sleep. The same state of drowsiness Woolf had explored in another short lyrical prose entitled "In the Orchard", where the slumber of a young woman called Miranda attracts a set of small fowls that frame the beautiful image:

> Her purple dress stretched between the two apple trees. There were twenty-four apples in the orchard, some slanting slightly, others growing straight with a rush up the trunk which spread wide into branches and formed into round red or yellow drops. Each apple-tree had sufficient space. The sky fitted the leaves. When the breeze blew, the line of the boughs against the wall slanted slightly and then returned. A wagtail flew diagonally from one corner to another. Cautiously hopping, a thrush advanced towards a fallen apple; from the other wall a sparrow fluttered just above the grass. The uprush of the trees was tied down by these movements; the whole was compacted by the orchard walls. (Woolf 1989: 151)

These examples all concur in attesting to the pervasiveness of the animal and, more importantly, its ability to permeate many literary

forms and become a sort of testimony to the creative act. This feature is expounded more clearly in the case of Nurse Lugton, who can be considered as a sort of fictional analogue to the writer herself, via a straightforward association between sewing and writing (Morgan 1997, Okumura 2008) which is common in Woolf's oeuvre, but which becomes even more cogent in the context of children's literature:

> Framing this narrative for children allows Woolf to be less rigid or prescriptive in her artistic and high modernist expectations of herself as a stylist and a thematic innovator. She can play with the analogue between sewing and writing more easily, without censoring her own conclusions, or judging them as 'childish' or naïve. That is, she can work in a space that is generically removed from the all-too-human, internalized censor that demands respectable, elaborate themes in the serious-minded novel. (Rohman 2018: 66)

Similarly to Nurse Lugton in her slumber, the female writer of short stories can easily abandon herself to a state of creative frenzy in a space where she can compose freely, drawing inspiration from such traditional forms of storytelling as the ones Woolf might remember as distinctive of her female nursing entourage when she was a child (Martin 2005).

6. Renewal

The last voice in this modernist triptych is Mary Butts, one of British Modernism's most neglected authors, indeed an odd presence in the pantheon of highbrow figures that form *The Criterion* set or The Bloomsbury Group. Her notorious biographical fascination with occultism, along with a more literary significant penchant for decadence (Cluckey 2014) contributed to a swift ruling out of her name from the list of required modernist readings. Her career as a short-story-teller might possibly be envisaged as an even more obscure realm, cultivated alongside her more florid novelistic output. Butts's contribution to Modernism resides in her managing to create an alternative pattern of experimentation that integrated Decadent and Neo-Romantic echoes against the grain of Eliot's and Pound's sharp rebuttal of such traditions. The distinctive trait of such a synthesis was her consideration of magic as a prime element of fiction, conceived as "a physically traumatizing experience

necessary to achieve heightened perception of psychical worlds" (Clukey 2014: 80).

Animal presences feature very interestingly in two stories from Butts's first collection, *Speed the Plough* (1923). The eponymous story retraces the experience of a First World War veteran who is spending some time in the country as a way to resurface from the depths of shellshock. This unnamed young man is unable to merge with the natural setting, and rather pines and longs for the metropolitan scenario his countryside retreat is denying him. Despite his unease, he has a rather extraordinary ability to establish a connection with the animal world, in particular with "the horned beasts" (Butts 2014: 23) he purposely tries to ignore. The milking activity draws him from the passive domain of the onlooker to an active entrance in the realm of beasts, whose intensity is accurately described by Butts in physical terms:

> He squatted on the greasy milking stool, spoke softly to his beast, and tugged away. The hot milk spurted out into the pail, an amazing substance, pure, and thick with bubbles. Its contact with caked hides and steaming straw sickened him. The gentle beast rubbed her head against her back and stared. He left the stall and her warm breath. The light was gaining. He could see rows of huge buttocks shifting uneasily. From two places he heard the milk squirting in the pails. He turned to it again, and milked one beast and another, stripping each clean. (Butts 2014: 24)

This corporeal communion with the natural landscape is intended to be curative and would later become the undertone of much of Butts's production, most notably her novel *Armed with Madness* (1928), where she offers her own modernist remediation of the Grail myth. Yet, the young veteran seems impermeable to the beneficial power of Nature, catalysed by the cow's udders, and he markedly prefers to be lulled by past recollections of metropolitan memories at the theatre. Such a predilection for the affected fictions of the city Vaudeville and the refusal of the authenticity of the genuine pleasures of the countryside are connected quite straightforwardly by Butts to the sexual dimension of the wounded soldier's psyche, as his decision to abandon the pastoral retreat is ignited by the view of a finely dressed woman, a sort of "reassertion of a male protagonist's extrovert virility" (Radford 2014: 163):

A woman came out of the inn. She wore white furs swathed over deep blue. Her feet flashed in their glossy boots. She wore a god in green jade and rose. Her gloves were rich and thick, like molded ivory. […] He drank his beer and went out into the pure cold evening. […] A cart came storming up the hill, a compelling noise, grinding wheels and creaking shafts and jingling harness; hard breathing, and the rough voice of the carter to his beast. […] Something happened to him, resolving his mind of all doubts. He saw the tail lights of a car drawing through the vast outskirts of a city. An infinite fine line went out from it and drew him also. That tail lamp was his star. Within the car a girl lay rapt, insolent, a cigarette at her lips. (Butts 2014: 25-26)

The fact that the protagonist of the story is a war veteran invests the choice to walk away from the authenticity of Nature as an implicit acceptance and celebration of the very same civilization that had produced such a disastrous conflict as WWI, and the short story in this case can aptly encapsulate the disease and discomfort of these young men that, once back in their proper sphere, were often questioned in the very essence of their masculinity (Einhaus 2013: 68), thus becoming part of the female 'submerged' societal stratum. In this sense, the young man's rejection of the Ur-female symbol of the cow's udders can be read also as a ritual refusal of an assimilation into the female world, that ultimately entails a refusal of the regenerative powers of Nature as well (Kroll 1999).

The difficulties in interconnecting the natural (and therefore animal) world and the spiritual and psychic balance of an individual are a major issue in another story from the same collection, which bears the telling title of "The Golden Bough". Like "Speed the Plough", it was composed thinking of the devastating psychiatric effects of war. Yet the ideological structure of this short story is further elaborated by Butts's close reading of J. G. Frazer's anthropological classic by the same title. The Frazerian blueprint allows for a very interesting remark about the destiny of animality in Butts's vision of the modern world, most importantly because it illustrates the common fate that awaited in equal measure both sacrificial animals and sacrificial young humans. The story is indeed very clear in hinting that its climactic moment will include a sanguinolent ceremonial, as the drunk Steevens ominously foretells while philosophizing over a pile of overcoats during the house party where he meets Anne, the female protagonist of the story:

'Have you enjoyed yourself?' 'I can't say that I have'. 'Why not?' 'You are all such dreadful people.' 'Why?' 'You drink and you pretend you are in love with those girls, and you believe in ghosts.' 'You are not used to the idea of people moving about and watching themselves try new combinations.' 'What is it all about?' 'I knew you would ask that. I rather agree that it's a question. As a matter of fact, I think it has to go to a time when a little death would do our set good. No, I don't mean another war, rather a ceremonial blood-letting. A ritual death. Not another suicide. Besides, an old order's changing, we must inaugurate. I haven't got my eye on a victim yet … What are you interrupting for, You can stand sexual talk, why not this?' (Butts 2014 93-94)

In the second half of the story, these sinister predictions do indeed fulfil themselves. Anne makes the acquaintance of Leo Pollard, a young man Steevens met at an asylum after the war, and during a pastoral outing she seems enthralled by supernatural forces to enact a vegetation ritual entailing running and climbing:

'Lift me up on your shoulders, Leo, and I'll climb it.' He lifted her up. She wound her skirts tight round her knees, and mounted one after another the huge arms. She dropped a leaf into his hair. He looked up and away, and began to throw sticks at his dog. The leaves filled in their net. She was shut up in a tree. There was a green room with holes in the floor, and a brilliance over her head. She rested a moment. A breeze, stopped in the breathless wood, broke through. The light filled the upper rooms. She went up them, and stepped out on the treetop. Above the forest the hill came over to the tree. She leaned back on the main shaft and opened her arms along two boughs, and began to sing in German, which she knew he did not understand. There was an empty six feet between the lowest branch and the ground. He came over, and she slid through his arms, and tore away. 'Come on, let's run a race.' They ran again and again. He left her to match himself with his dog. (Butts 2014: 97)

Leo misses the solemnity of the scene, confirming how modern masculinity, wounded by the conflict, could never be re-aligned with the natural world of ritual and romance that seems to be an atavistic guarantee of stability. As with the unnamed young man in "Speed the Plough", Leo's epiphany *manquée* entails the presence of an animal, the dog, which disrupts the magical practice and excludes the male actant from the revitalizing prospect of the arboreal rite. As Leo is going to die after a run into which Anne drags him, he

himself becomes a sort of scapegoat, overtly identified with Adonis (Butts 2014: 99). Thus the dog, like the wild boar in the Venus and Adonis myth, is a sort of psychopomp theriomorphic deity that sanctions Leo's deadly destiny, as it is the excessive distress of the run – not the tree ritual – to cause his (eventually) fatal paroxysm of haemoptysis.

7. Conclusion

Although many other examples might be quoted, it is clear that the interest of these female short story writers in the animal world and its interaction with the human sphere was symptomatic of both an intellectual curiosity for the marginal state – which in many significant ways linked the nonhuman animal to the 'nonmale' writer –, and their ability to mould and adapt traditional forms of expression, like the classical animal fable, to the modern scenario. By sketching animals as counterparts for marginalized human beings – veteran soldiers, dead or alive, old women, etc. – and by designing the actions of the stories as ways to perform good actions – helping those in need, or recovering from psychological injuries – or ritualistic acts – the sacrifice of a scapegoat –, these authors illustrate how the patterns of animal fables were still relevant to modernist culture and might still provide viable patterns for the depiction of contemporary life.

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