"Animals don't behave like men… They have dignity and animality." Richard Adams's *Watership Down* and interspecies relationships in the Anthropocene

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Abstract
When thinking of animals in children's literature, the pictures that usually come to mind are those of anthropomorphized beasts "merely embodying human tropes" (Jaques 2015: 45), talking creatures that mirror human behaviour and oftentimes interact with men. However, in *Watership Down* (1972), thanks to the accurate study of rabbits' social organization as described in Lockley's *The Private Life of The Rabbit* (1964), Adams manages to offer the reader a full "immersion in lapine natural history" (Buell 2014: 411). In this anthropocenic world, the "contact zones" (Haraway 2008:4) between men and animals are configured as conflict regions where the rabbits fight their daily battle against their predators. Yet, while all other non-human animals "do what they have to do" driven by fundamental needs, human beings are the only creatures whose attitude is both gratuitous and catastrophic. The article focuses on the way in which Adams, by allowing the reader to adopt a defamiliarized point of view on human behaviour "gives agency to the earth" (Battista 2011: 159). Moreover, the study also analyses the relevance and consequence of the fact that in *Watership Down* animals are capable of fostering fruitful interspecies relationships and even forming alliances with other creatures. Hence, "humanity" becomes a derogative term effectively replaced by "animality" as the byword for a new, eco-centric non-exploitative attitude towards other fellow creatures.

Key-words: animality, animal studies, Anthropocene, children's literature, ecocriticism, ecofeminism, interspecies communication, nature, post-anthropocentrism, posthumanism.

Introduction

Let us imagine a small urban agglomeration, a maze of narrow alleys and dark tiny houses, poor and simple, but neat and well kept. The village teems with life and activity. Children play in the fields, the

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old rest in the sun, the young fret, dissatisfied with the rules set by the king, and the police assert their power with rough but not cruel strength. Then, let us imagine another group of rich and powerful people, who come from afar and do not speak the same language, and who have decided to build their home on that land. They put up a sign to proclaim their intention, but it is written in that foreign language that the village inhabitants do not understand. No representative is sent to negotiate the conditions of cohabitation. No other forewarning is given. One morning a group of soldiers irrupt into the village, seal off the escape routes and kill the inhabitants with a chemical weapon.

What a horrible, atrocious, inhumane – though, unfortunately, not unheard of – act of violence and prevarication! What precious metal or energy source might have prompted it? Which long-standing feud? Why did no one speak up for those people? Why did no superior authority condemn that crime against humanity? There were no precious metals or energy sources in the ground, no other compelling reasons, only a nice prospect. Nobody spoke up for the village inhabitants and no human rights advocate championed their cause because they were not human. They were rabbits. And the blood feud between men and "pests" dates back to the dawn of time. Men killed the rabbits just because they "were in their way … to suit themselves" (Adams 1972b: 155).

This brutal and gratuitous aggression, described in chapter 21 in a long analepsis and with a wealth of gory details hardly suitable for a children's book, is the event that sets the story into motion in *Watership Down* (1972). If the human property developers had decided to adopt Val Plumwood's "etiquette" (2002: 192) of interspecies encounters and convinced the rabbits to leave their warren without "unnecessary and disproportionate violence" (p. 171) – just like she did by throwing "some sandshoes to land within a foot or so of the sleepy" highly venomous tiger snake that had come to reside on her veranda (p. 192) – Richard Adams's novel would have had a completely different plot.

Almost fifty years after *Watership Down* was first published by Rex Collings, things may not have changed much for wild animals (or human minorities, to tell the truth) but ecocriticism – a burgeoning, still unlabelled discussion topic in the early seventies – is nowadays a well-established school of thought and it has spurred reflection on

themes which range from Plumwood's ecofeminism and interspecies relationships (1993; 2002), and Cary Wolfe's posthumanism and post-anthropocentrism (2003; 2010) to Rosi Braidotti's posthumanism and ecofeminism (2011; 2013), just to quote the thinkers that most inform this study. Since Rachel Carson's traumatizing *Silent Spring* (1962), Arne Naess's ambitious "The Shallow and the Deep…" (1973) and Peter Singer's radical *Animal Liberation* (1975), ecocritic scholars have often shared thoughts and battles with activists for animal rights (though some would refuse this definition[1] and also object to the use of the term "animal"[2]) and over the years there has been a flourishing of, if not proper calls to action, certainly "calls to rethink" with Donna J. Haraways' *Cyborg Manifesto* (1984) and *Companion Species Manifesto* (2003), Kendra Coulter's "Anifesto: The Promise of Interspecies Solidarity" (2016: 139-163) and even Eva Meijer's advocacy of an "interspecies democracy" (2019).

In the broad field of environmental humanities, children's literature occupies a special niche, marked by the belief that "children are somehow 'nearer' to nature and to animals than adults" (Cosslett 2006: 2) and driven by the widespread reliance on the assumption that "the reader identifies psychologically with the fictional characters and this dynamic stimulates and nurtures his/her 'sympathetic imagination'" (Hardy Beierl 2008: 215) and that, as a consequence, "imaginative literature can become an effective vehicle through which both psychological and cultural shifts in sensibility occur" (p. 216). However, as Lawrence Buell correctly observes about fiction for children published in the late Victorian age and during the first half of the twentieth century, "[f]ew of these books pursue overtly environmentalist agendas as primary concerns; and, relatedly, the other-than-human domains most of them conjure up are easily read as allegories of the human estate" (2014: 410). Indeed, when thinking of animals in children's literature, the pictures that usually come to mind are those of anthropomorphized beasts "merely embodying human tropes" (Jaques 2015: 45), talking creatures that mirror human behaviour and oftentimes interact with men. Undoubtedly, some of Adams's children's books fully

[1] For a detailed explanation of why the "rights" focus is not the most effective see Plumwood 2002: 152-155.

[2] See Derrida's coin of the neologism "animot" (2008:41).

adhere to such a description, with their collection of polite and gentlemanly tigers (*The Tiger Voyage*, 1976) who set sail on their yacht and risk starving in a forest once their stock of food runs out; playful and socially integrated kittens (*The Bureaucats*, 1985) who do the housework and write poems; and a home-made keen-eyed dragon (*The Adventures of Egg Box Dragon*, 2017) that becomes a hero thanks to his special gift of finding what has been lost.

Nonetheless, Adams's first and most famous novel *Watership Down* offers a radically different approach to animal life depicting a posthuman, or rather, post-anthropocentric world seen through the eyes of wild rabbits. Thanks to the accurate study of rabbits' social organization as described in Ronald Lockley's *The Private Life of The Rabbit* (1964), Adams manages to offer the reader a full "immersion in lapine natural history" (Buell 2014: 411), illustrating in detail "how they feed; how they negotiate darkness, rain, cold, animal predators and human encroachments; how they oscillate between passive and aggressive; between focus and feckless distraction; their sense of distance and perspective, and so forth" (p. 411) [3]. In this way, Adams manages to give life to "real" talking animals which interact in an undomesticated environment, thus showing a "dual allegiance to the factual and to the fabular" (Cosslett 2006: 181). As Adams acknowledged in the introduction he wrote for the second edition of Lockley's monograph, without the ethologist's work his "rabbits would be little better than cute bunnies – as too many other rabbits have become, once trapped between the ears of authors and the covers of their books." (in Lockley 1976: 5) He also added: "From Ron Lockley I learned that rabbits (as Strawberry protests to General Woundwort) had dignity and 'animality' – the quality corresponding to 'humanity' in men and women. [...] Far from being childishly cute, they possessed by nature great courage and resourcefulness" (p. 5).

If Adams's animals are not meant to be "a sort of human being dressed up" (p. 6), then how are we to account for the fact that they are "humanized to such a degree that they can talk and reason like human

[3] It should be noted, however, that Adams's accuracy seems to fail when depicting the role of does in rabbits' social organization. For some studies focusing on gender issues in *Watership Down* see Lanes 1974, Resh Thomas 1977, Orestano 2009, Le Guin 2009, and Battista 2011.

beings" (Petzold 1987: 15)? According to Plumwood (2002: 56-59), we should distinguish between two different kinds of anthropomorphism, a strong and a weak one. Strong anthropomorphism – a monkey "dressed in human clothes" and "made to ride a bicycle" – denies or neglects "the animal's own differences and excellences" by ridiculing it "as a degenerate form of the human" and thus "it expresses a colonising dynamic" (p. 59). Adams's rabbits, instead, are portrayed as non-human animals in such a way as to attempt to preserve their difference from the human species but, at the same time, to endow them with "intentionality, subjectivity [and] communicativity" (p. 56), all features that no biologist nowadays would deny they possess in their natural condition. This "weak anthropomorphism" is unavoidable because any "representation of speech-content for a human audience will have to be an interpretation in terms of human concepts, and in that weak sense, a background level of anthropomorphism is always likely to be present" (p. 57).

Should we consider, then, as Adams loved to repeat, *Watership Down* as "just a story about rabbits" (in Brown 2018), "a jolly good story … told in the car" (in Flood 2015)? Over the years he professed several times that his novel was "never intended to be some sort of allegory or parable" (Adams 1972a: XVI), that he should be "very sorry if people tried to read deeper meanings into [it]" (in Kitchell 1986:16) and that "[a]ny idea of its being a mighty parable is frightful tripe." (p. 16) However, as Kenneth Kitchell shrewdly objects, "we must not always trust the comments of authors on their own works" (p. 16). One may perhaps not feel inclined to describe the novel as a "beast fable, a fantasy, a mythological tale, an epic, a political/ Utopian novel, and an allegory" (Miltner 1993: 63) and one may also want, just like Adams, to dismiss with a laugh[4] the most far-fetched political or religious interpretations which see it as a depiction of either the Second World War, the Cold War, liberalism, tyrannical regimes, the persecution of the Jews, a Christian parable or even a shamanistic myth[5]. However, in the light of Adams's life and works,

[4] In a Q&A session on a blog in September 2013 Adams so answered to a fan asking about his opinion on the disparate interpretations of his work: "The Marxist interpretation of *Watership Down* makes me laugh sometimes." (Adams 2013)

[5] See, among many, Abrahams 2018, Douthat 2019, Hauerwas 2001: 171-199; Kitchell 1986: 15-16 and Pennington 1993.

the "environmental agenda" of *Watership Down* cannot be called into question. Only two years after the publication of the novel, in May 1974, adopting a moral extentionist approach[6], Adams proclaimed that "the world is our responsibility" and that, as a consequence, "[w]e need to learn more fully how to understand and respect the animals, with whom we share the world" (in Lockley 1976: 6). Three years later he also explicitly acknowledged his debt to Ryder's *Victims of Science* (1975) and Singer's *Animal Liberation* (1975) in his Preface to *The Plague Dogs* (1977: xvi), his most radical book, which portrays the harrowing fight for survival of two dogs who had escaped from a vivisection lab. And not only does most of his literary production revolve around nature or animals, but he was also, as he himself declared in his autobiography, "up to the neck in the animal rights movement" (Adams 1990: 22), even serving as president of the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals for two years (1980-82) "before resigning in protest because he felt that the organization wasn't focusing enough on campaigning for animal protection" (Mullins, 2016)[7].

All considered, albeit in his last years he may have taken a more pragmatic, less "sentimentalist" stance towards animal welfare[8], the attempt to provide an ecocritical reading of *Watership Down* appears like the most "natural" – pun intended – approach to the work, and several scholars (though, perhaps, not as many as one might expect) have published interesting studies such as, just to name the most relevant, Colin Manlove 2003, Barbara Hardy Beierl 2008, Christine Battista 2011 and Lawrence Buell 2014. This paper's attempt, however, is that of going one step deeper into ecocriticism in order to propose an interpretation of the term *animality* not merely as "corresponding" (Adams in Lockley 1976: 5) to *humanity* but as a quality inherently different from it. Indeed, by adopting an ecofeminist and posthumanist lens and reflecting on the theme of

[6] "Animal welfarism reforms traditional ethics by extending moral consideration to nonhuman animals on the basis of some similarity they share with humans. Nonhuman animals get elevated to the status of full-fledged members of the moral club to which humans belong" (Warren 2000: 127).

[7] See also Ang 2016.

[8] In 2011, during an interview with Rex Fontaine he famously declared "I'm not a fluffy-bunny sort of person at all. If I saw a rabbit in my garden, I'd shoot it" (Adams 2011).

interspecies communication as presented in the novel, it is possible to view *Watership Down* as a book which performs a "decentring of anthropocentrism" (Braidotti 2013: 58) towards a more eco-centric perspective and that, contextually, preaches the idea of interspecies respect and solidarity.

Rabbitcene and Anthropocene

According to Francisco Collado-Rodríguez "to a large extent the success of Adams's book is due to the fact that it subjects the reader to a two-sided defamiliarization" (1985: 40). The first, more traditional device "consists of the effect provoked in the reader when he is made to perceive external reality from a rabbit's point of view" (p. 40). The second, instead, is obtained by the contraposition between the classic structure of the monomyth and the fact that "the mythical hero who fights almost to the death to fulfill his quest is a simple small rabbit – or, to be more precise, a group of rabbits." (p. 42). In this "lapine Aeneid" (Petzold 1987: 18), where "the rabbits move and eat like rabbits yet talk like warriors" (Tucker in Adams 1972b: 474), the mission to accomplish is the search and conquest of a new home, a promised land of "[h]igh, lonely hills, where the wind and the sound carry and the ground's as dry as straw in a barn." (Adams 1972b: 51) Only in such a place, where the rabbits can spot from a distance any trace of *elil* (the name in the Lapine language invented by Adams which describes all predators such as "fox, stoat, weasel, cat, owl, man" (p.: 4-5n)) will our heroes finally feel safe enough to set up their new warren. Because for the wild animal the world is full of dangers and fear, its "life is cheap and expendable, and to survive one must remain alert to each movement in the environment" (Lockley 1964: 20).

Early in the novel, in chapter 6, Adams allows the narrative to depart from the attempt to provide a realistic depiction of the rabbit world and of the protagonists' first steps away from their warren and takes a plunge into a cosmogonic myth in which the supreme divinity Frith (the sun) made the world, the stars and all living creatures. Just like in a sort of Edenic golden age, Frith made the animals "all the same. The sparrow and the kestrel were friends and they both ate seeds and flies. And the fox and the rabbit were friends and they both ate grass. And there was plenty of grass and plenty

of flies, because the world was new and Frith shone down bright and warm all day" (Adams 1972b: 25-26). The original sin, the act of defiance against the god is performed by the rabbits' mythological hero El-ahrairah – "The Prince with a thousand Enemies" (p. 23). El-ahrairah's people multiply excessively and eat up all the grass so that it "began to grow thin and the rabbits wandered everywhere" (p. 26). At Frith's request that he controlled his offspring, El-ahrairah's answer is proud and insolent: "My people are the strongest in the world, for they breed faster and eat more than any of the other people. … You must realize, my lord, how important they are and not hinder them in their beautiful lives" (p. 26).

Two elements of interest emerge from the analysis of this first part of Adam's lapine cosmogony. The first is what we might call – perhaps a bit pretentiously – a primordial *rabbitcene*, that is, adapting Clark's definition of anthropocene, an era in which "[rabbit's] impacts on the entire biosphere have achieved an unprecedented and arguably dangerous intensity" (2015:1). Overpopulation, lack of self-restraint, and greed lead to the exhaustion of natural resources thus affecting the living conditions of all other animals. The second element is the assumed superiority of the rabbit species (they are more voracious and more fertile than all others) which El-ahrairah invokes to condone the behaviour of his people. The allusion to the present situation is unmistakable. Not only are we living in the Anthropocene – "the historical moment when the Human has become a geological force capable of affecting all life on this planet" (Braidotti 2013: 5) – but also, thanks to posthumanism, we are finally questioning the notion of "human exceptionalism that rest[s] on some idealization of human reason or reflection as transcending the natural world" (Clark 2014: 284). Though the concepts of Anthropocene and posthumanism might have been stranger to Adams at the time he wrote his novel, the reading of the cosmogonic myth of El-ahrairah as an allegory of the destructive impact of human actions on the environment is self-evident and was certainly greatly influenced by Lockley's study of the rabbit in which – with the dry and callous tone of the detached scientist[9] – he observed that:

[9] Notable for its insensitivity is his observation about abortion: "[Man] may one day learn from a study of the rabbit, perhaps, how to control his population problem by a resorption technique as well as by the present use of oral and other

> Man is rapidly approaching a state of overcrowding in his small world such as we have seen mirrored in the conditions of rabbits confined on small islands. … at present man continues to breed almost uncontrolled, and like the rabbits is rapidly destroying his environment [...] He is destroying his heritage; he is heading for a crash, and this may be triggered off as in the rabbits by mechanisms beyond his control, that is to say, beyond the control of the sane majority of men. That trigger is likely to be a nuclear one, pulled by some dictator or other madman whose endocrine glands, under territorial stress (fear mania), like those of the rabbit in the same situation, are suddenly deranged metabolically. (Lockley 1964: 113)

In order to restore the population balance, Frith simply applies one of the key tenets of every ecosystem, that is *more prey – more predators*. He differentiates the species and turns some of the animals into carnivores: "And so in their turn came the fox and the stoat and the weasel. And to each of them Frith gave the cunning and the fierceness and the desire to hunt and slay and eat the children of El-ahrairah. And so they went away from Frith full of nothing but hunger to kill the rabbits" (Adams 1972b: 26-27). The *rabbitcene* thus comes to an end and enters the Anthropocene, a world in which the "contact zones" (Haraway 2008: 4) between the prey and the predators or, more in general, men and non-human animals, far from being places of peaceful cohabitation – "of mortal world-making entanglements" (p. 4) – are configured as conflict regions where the rabbits fight their daily battle against the *elil*, and the weaker creatures must live by their wits if they want to survive. Hence, Adams's characterization of El-ahrairah as an "archetypal trickster hero" (Bridgman 1993: 13) is extremely effective in its attempt to "embody the survival powers of the weak against the strong" (p. 13).

Not all *elil* are the same, though: most of them only "do what they have to do and Frith moves them as he moves [the rabbits]. They live on the earth and they need food." There is a sort of ruthless harmony in this statement, an indomitable acceptance of the rules of nature in which the prey knows that it might be killed but will keep striving to survive and prosper despite the ever-present threat. In *Watership Down* rabbits are not immune to a certain form of

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contraceptive methods, and stop unwanted human pregnancy early in the gestation period without the dangers and unpleasantness of abortion" (Lockley 1964: 113).

speciesism[10]: cats are cowardly horrible things (Adams 1972b: 203, 465), dogs are disgusting brutes (p. 395) and foxes stink (p. 34). But, all in all, they know that they can rely on the fact that once the predator's hunger is sated, they will stop hunting (p. 387).

Men, however, are another matter. In chapter 21, when Holly tells the heart-wrenching story of the destruction of the Sandleford warren, Fiver so reacts: "There's terrible evil in the world" (p. 149). Holly's reply to this is final and implacable: "It comes from men … Men will never rest till they've spoiled the earth and destroyed the animals" (p. 149). Human beings are the only creatures whose behaviour is both gratuitous and catastrophic and the term Anthropocene exudes a dark aura of irreversible destruction that the analogous terms – Pleistocene, Holocene etc. – do not convey[11]. As the story unfolds, it becomes clear that all major evils for the rabbits do indeed come from men. Not only is the Sandleford warren destroyed to make room for "high class modern residences" (p. 8), but the life of the other two warrens which the rabbits get to know during their wanderings are profoundly upset, denatured by the actions of the humans. The rabbits in Cowslip's warren "have made themselves the 'cattle' of a farmer who can snare them when he will for their meat. These rabbits have the fatalistic emptiness of those who have given themselves away" (Manlove 2003: 122). Their natural resourcefulness and their propensity for tricks are forsaken and replaced by a melancholic resignation and a forced oblivion of their fate. Similarly, Efrafra's unnatural discipline is imposed by the terrible General Woundwort as the only way to hide the warren from men because, if they found them, they would "infect them with the white blindness" (Adams 1972b: 231). The reference here is to Myxomatosis, an extremely contagious and devastating disease which, over the years, was intentionally spread by farmers to get

[10] "[…] a prejudice or attitude of bias in favor of the interests of members of one's own species and against those of members of other species" (Singer 1975: 6).

[11] In her 2016 work Haraway objects to the use of the term Anthropocene and proposes another word "Chthulucene" which rejects the anthropocentric positioning of man as the only creature able to affect the world and privileges, instead, a tentacular, sympoietic thread "of ongoing multispecies stories and practices of becoming-with" (55). Despite her denial of Lovecraft's monstruous ancestor, though, to a literature scholar's ear "Chtulucene" still rings somewhat gloomily.

rid of wild rabbits (Lockley deals with this plague extensively in his book (see all chapter 12)[12]).

In consideration of all this, Strawberry's grim statement sounds more than justified: "Animals don't behave like men … If they have to fight, they fight; and if they have to kill they kill. But they don't sit down and set their wits to work to devise ways of spoiling other creatures' lives and hurting them. They have dignity and animality" (Adams 1972b: 235). What is the origin of this "unnecessary and disproportionate violence" (Plumwood 2002: 171), of this "tyranny of human over nonhuman animals" (Singer 1975: xx)? Plumwood attempts an explanation which is both challenging and, at the same time, compellingly consistent with Strawberry's words. With her usual acumen, the ecofeminist philosopher takes issue with the traditional environmentalist thinking according to which the source of all evils, what "has led us astray ecologically", is nothing other than the human nature, the "symbolically-female, nature side of the hyperseparated and warring pair, reason versus nature" (2002: 6). If it were so, then reason would be "our hero and saviour, in the form of more science, new technology, a still more unconstrained market, rational restraints on numbers and consumption, or all of these together" (p. 6), a vicious circle "leading us to reproduce continually the same elements of failure" (p. 6). Instead, she maintains that "[o]ur current debacle is the fruit of a human – and reason-centred culture that is at least a couple of millennia old, whose contrived blindness to ecological relationships is the fundamental condition underlying our destructive and insensitive technology and behaviour" (p. 8). If the corruption of men is then provoked by an excess of reason, by their "sit[ting] down and set[ting] their wits to work to devise ways of spoiling other creatures' lives and hurting them" (Adams 1972b: 235), then the answer might be found in a return to nature, or rather, a resolution of the dualism reason/nature, a rediscovery of the natural essence of the human animal, of their lost "dignity and animality" (p. 235). Indeed, as Felice Cimatti explains, "the urgent problem is not to enhance or preserve humanity; the problem is to imagine a way of being human that does not imply the destruction

[12] The barbaric practice was made illegal in Britain in 1954. See https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1954/nov/10/new-clause-spreading-of-myxomatosis, last accessed July 2021.

of nature" (2017: 118) and posthumanist philosophy precisely points the way for a "humanity which finally can become animal (and vegetal)" (p. 120).

Lapine lingo and interspecies relationships

When Adams equated "animality" to "humanity" and stressed the importance of seeing "the animals as they really are" (in Lockley 1976: 6) he was pinpointing two key tenets of ecological thinking. The first is the idea of the *difference* of the animal, a difference, however, which does not stem from the traditional humanist, anthropocentric dualism man/animal, where the animal is, as Braidotti explains, "the necessary, familiar and much cherished other of *anthropos*" (2013: 68). That idea of difference, like in the case of the binary opposition man/woman, turns the concept of the animal into an "'Otherness', understood as pejorative difference, or as being-worth-less-than" (p. 81) and must then be mitigated by searching for "similarities to humans" (Jaques 2015: 12) in order to grant them fundamental rights. By foregrounding the "animality" of animals, instead, and adopting what Haraway would call a "robust nonanthropomorphic sensibility" (Haraway 2008: 90) Adams celebrates their "irreducible differences" (p. 90). Secondly, as the author makes clear by choosing to use wild rabbits as the protagonists of a heroic quest and by narrating the story from their point of view, in *Watership Down* animals are granted an articulated inner world which calls for a recognition that must go well beyond the primary concession that the animals can suffer like human beings do[13]. In the novel it appears evident that earth others (as Plumwood calls them) are endowed with feelings, personality and agency, a "rich intentionality" (Plumwood 2002: 177) that challenges the humans to acknowledge not only the animals' "right to live and blossom" (Naess 1973: 96) but also to view them as "originator[s] of projects that demand our respect" (Plumwood 2002: 177-178).

[13] Bentham's fundamental argument "The question is not, Can they reason? nor, Can they talk? but, Can they suffer?" (1823: ch. VI footnote 122) resurfaces in the writing of many ecocritical thinkers (see Derrida, Garrard, Haraway, Meijer, Naess, Singer, Warren, Willett, Wolfe), if only, sometimes, to take issue with it.

When seen through a posthumanist lens, the weak anthropomorphic device of allowing rabbits to speak in a language that the author "translates" in order to make it intelligible to human beings, appears charged with layers of ecocritical significance. Though Lapine is "simply a motley collection of substantives, adjectives, and verbs" without "grammar or construction" (Adams 1972a: xiv) it still effectively accounts for the need of another species to have specific words – such as "silflay" – to refer to actions and situations alien enough to human beings to be rendered only with a circumlocution like "going above ground to feed" (Adams 1972b: 78). The postulation that animals can speak is *per se* a powerful assumption in that it unhinges the concept of human exceptionalism which lies at the core of humanism and transhumanism.

Over the centuries, language has been considered as the mark of superior intellect, the "human enterprise" (Meijer 2019: 3) that most embodies human difference and, as a consequence, validates its supremacy over earth others. In *Watership Down,* rabbits cannot understand human language, let alone read a sign, a fact that damns most of them to a terrible death in Sandleford warren. During one of his prophetic dreams, Fiver meets a man who is putting up another sign: "How – how can a board say anything?" he asks and the answer is precisely the corroboration of the age-old prejudice: "Ah, but it do, see?" replied the man "That's where we knows what you don't. That's why we kills you when we 'as a mind to" (Adams 1972b: 224-225). Indeed, "[v]iewing other animals as silent and incapable of language and speech – which is often connected to other negative stereotypes, such as seeing them as unruly, unreasonable, or just plain stupid – reinforces their status as objects that we can treat in any way we wish" (Meijer 2019: 32).

However, "[r]ecent research in biology and ethology shows that many non-human animal species have their own complex and nuanced ways of communicating with members of their own and other species, including humans" (p. 38) and, as a consequence, "these expressions need to be taken into account if we want to adequately address how they have been silenced in the philosophical tradition, and more especially if we want to move beyond that" (p. 31). Meijer's example of the language of prairie dogs – which can "describe humans in detail, including the color of their T-shirts and hair" (p. 6), "use(s) verbs, nouns, and adverbs, which they can

combine to make new expressions for unknown predators" (p. 51) and emit calls that "change meaning when the order of elements in a sentence changes, which can be compared to grammar in human sentences" (p. 51) – makes Adams's invented Lapine lingo seem much less unrealistic than it may appear at first glance.

Moreover, the fact that it has been proven that animals have ways to enact forms of interspecies (or cross-species, heterospecific or interspecific) exchange – as, for instance, in the case of alarm calls[14] – supports Adams's additional step into the realm of animal language: the invention of a "hedgerow patois" (Adams 1972b: 179), a "very simple, limited *lingua franca* of the hedgerow and woodland" (p. 143). Of course, in real life, animals communicate with each other and individuals of other species "through visual, aural, gestural, olfactory, pheromonal, and neurochemical transfers" (Willett 2014: 80) while Adams seems to confine the range of their interactions merely to the oral/aural channel – and it is difficult to tell if this is due more to the nature of the medium (a tale told in a car transformed into a written book) or to a biased, anthropocentrically limited idea of what language consists of. However, the existence of a hedgerow dialect which allows rabbits to talk to mice, rats and seagulls (and occasionally also to cats and dogs) reverses the issue of animal incommunicability and puts the onus on men for their inability to understand them. But more of this later.

Once the crucial question "can animals talk?" has been answered affirmatively, the issue at hand becomes "what do they say?" or, even better, "what do they do with the words they exchange?" The day after Holly and Bluebell's arrival at the Honeycomb (chapter 20), the group of heroes observe a strayed field-mouse as it risks being attacked by a kestrel. While the other rabbits callously attend the inevitable unfolding of the killing, Hazel, their "thoroughly democratic leader" (Petzold 1987: 18), leaves the protection of the burrow to reach the "[p]oor little beast" (Adams 1972b: 142) and invites it to take shelter with them: "Run," he said. "Here; quick" (p. 143). This is the first occurrence of the hedgerow patois and it introduces an unexpected act of kindness between *non-elil* creatures, an example of interspecies solidarity (which "involves support

[14] See for instance Templeton 2018 and Meijer 2019: 3, 51.

despite differences" (Coulter 2016: 150)) that earns the rabbits the gratitude of the entire community of mice, as the saved creature pledges: "You 'elp a mouse. One time a mouse 'elp a you. You want 'im 'e come" (Adams 1972b: 147). The episode is even more striking thanks to its being presented as an interlude between the arrival of the survivors from the Sandleford warren and their dramatic account of its destruction. Thus, the saving of the field-mouse is juxtaposed to the brutal extermination of the rabbits performed by men. In *Watership Down*, while human animals heartlessly torture, slaughter, take captive and enforce subjection on earth others, non-human animals do not inflict unnecessary violence (except for the "unnatural" General Woundwort (Adams 1972b: 464)), are capable of fostering fruitful interspecies relationships and even form alliances with *non-elil* fellows: "Rabbits don't usually have much to do with them, but their enemies are our enemies, for the most part. I think we ought to do all we can to make these creatures friendly" (p. 161) affirms Hazel.

One might object that Hazel has a – not so hidden – agenda when recommending: "If anyone finds an animal or bird, that isn't an enemy, in need of help, for goodness' sake don't miss the opportunity." (p. 161) His intent is that of gathering information about the territory they have decided to live in – which, as previous inhabitants, the mice know well – and to find does to invite to join their all-male warren – for which purpose the aerial view of the seagull Kehaar will prove essential. However, reading *Watership Down* through Haraway, we might observe that the fact that rabbits, mice, and birds are, as she states, "in a relation of use to each other is not the definition of unfreedom and violation. Such relations are almost never symmetrical ('equal' or calculable)" (2008: 74). On the contrary, as implied by the same etymology of the term "companion species" that she chooses to use, "the ecologies of significant others involve *messmates* at table, with indigestion and without the comfort of teleological purpose from above, below, in front, or behind" (p. 74, italics added). Indeed, what *Watership Down* portrays is not a disinterested, purely chivalrous solidarity but, rather, a respectful, non-exploitative confederacy of mutual help and collaboration between different species. In this respect "[t]he way in which these animals interact with the natural world radically challenges Western modes of inhabitation" (Battista 2011: 160).

Needless to say, nothing is perfect under the sun and indeed Adams's rabbits are not immune to some form of speciesism, which is not limited to the abovementioned case of *elil* but is also directed to "lower" forms of *non-elil* creatures: "These small animals are more to be despised than relied upon, I reckon. What good can they do us?" asks Silver when Hazel discloses his plan (Adams 1972b: 161). In addition to this, they sometimes resort to violence not only as a form of self-defence but also as a way to coerce other individuals to comply with the decisions of the group: "One respect in which rabbits' lives are less complicated than those of humans is that they are not ashamed to use force." (p. 103) While the discriminatory language is probably meant to mirror human attitude towards earth others, it seems possible to ascribe the latter observation to Adams's attempt to avoid "being sentimental" (in Lockley 1976: 6). Hence, rabbits are represented like "real" animals, which, according to Cynthia Willett, are "neither natural innocents nor savage brutes in some mythic state of nature." (2014: 80). Instead, as the ecofeminist philosopher explains when describing animal capacity to demonstrate an ethical response, "[l]ike us, they are citizens and coworkers armed with various ethical capacities and communicative technologies in a postlapsarian world of good and evil" (p. 80).

Willett's postulation of interspecies ethics (2014) and Meijer's exploration of the possibility of an interspecies democracy (2019) are useful to introduce one final reflection on whether the idea of *animality* as proposed in *Watership Down* might be expanded from being a better alternative to humanity (as referring to "the condition, quality, or fact of being human" (OED), which is degraded in the novel to a derogative term) to encompassing as well what the Oxford English Dictionary indicates as the first sense of *humanity*: "the quality of being humane" (OED). In their works, the two scholars provide thought-provoking examples of how animals are sensitive to injustice, exert resistance and express solidarity, in other words, "demonstrate elements of ethical response" (Willett 2014: 81): there are elephants that, while reacting to the violence they receive, "refrain from retaliating against unintentional crimes or innocent bystanders" (p. 50), a bonobo monkey in a zoo which assisted a bird "by spreading its wings so that this fellow creature might fly away to freedom" (p. 81) and several cases of both domesticated and wild creatures that helped "members of their own group, as well as other

animals, to escape from enclosures or teach them how to do it from a distance" (Meijer 2019: 187).

In *Watership Down*, the warren bucks help the farm rabbits escape from their cage, protect the field-mouse, feed the injured seagull Kehaar, earn its help in the search and liberation of the Efrafran fugitives, and even receive the support of a rat when chased by a dog (Adams 1972b: 442-443). Furthermore, Hazel expresses on several occasions his intention to establish in his warren an inclusive and egalitarian society, where even the weakest rabbits like Fiver or Pipkin or the survived Efrafran soldiers will not be bullied by the stronger bucks, and Kehaar and Bigwig develop an interspecies friendship that will last all their lives. In his novel Adams does not only acknowledge the animals' agency, interiority and intentionality but also makes sure that the reader cannot ignore the presence in them of, borrowing Willet's words, "the core elements of ethics" (2014: 81). Once all aspects have been analysed and dissected, it is possible to affirm without fear of exaggeration that Adams's *animality* is undoubtedly *humane*.

Learning Animality (through Fiction)

The novelist's introduction to Lockley's second edition of his monograph has already been quoted several times in the above pages as proof of Adams's commitment to the development of an ecologic sensibility. There is, still, one remaining part of his writing which has to be addressed, namely, his statement that "as civilization advances (if it does), one of our more important responsibilities must be to look after the animals. Certainly *we should control them and surely we may make use of them*, but we should do these things thoughtfully and we must learn not to abuse or waste the animals" (in Lockley 1976: 6. Italics added). To be perfectly honest, this proposition might appear potentially incongruous with the most radical ecological reading of *Watership Down*. It certainly seems to clash brutally with Singer's ideals, but we should remember that *Animal Liberation* was published in 1975, one year after Adams wrote his introduction (which is dated May 1974) so his "debt" (Adams 1977: xvi) to the animalist philosopher's thought had not been contracted yet. Rather, his position appears similar to the one expressed by Naess as the second of the main principles of the Deep

Ecology Movement: "Biospherical egalitarianism – in principle. The 'in principle' clause is inserted because any realistic praxis necessitates some killing, exploitation, and suppression." (1973: 95) Strawberry's definition of the essence of animal behaviour in *Watership Down*, "if they have to fight, they fight; if they have to kill, they kill, etc." (Adams 1972b: 235), seems to corroborate the idea that "making use" of animals without "abuse or waste" is in the nature of every ecosystem. Thus, Adams's idea looks like a not-so-distant ancestor of Plumwood's exhortation to go beyond the rights theory and avoid the "dissociation of use and respect" (2002: 160) in order to:

> make potentially ethically available forms of use that respect animals as both individuals and as community members, in terms of respect or reverence for species life, and […] rethink farming as a non-commodity and species-egalitarian form, rather than to completely reject farming and embrace an exclusively plant-based form of existence that is doubtfully viable and alien to our own human species life. (p. 156)

Furthermore, Lockley's attention to the problem of rabbit overpopulation might account for Adams's feeling that it is part of the humans' responsibility to "control" the animals. In a moment in which, due to a worldwide pandemic (a zoonotic disease connected to the wildlife trade and human encroachment on natural habitats), men have seen their existence transformed by quarantine and lockdown and transferred their sociality into the online world to an unprecedented level, Lockley's preoccupation with rabbit and human overpopulation seems uncannily long-sighted:

> Up to the time of the final crash [man] will live in a synthetic burrow, feed on frozen and tinned supermarket produce and pills, drink some of his excrement (already today his excrement is discharged into rivers which are pumped into reservoirs to supply his medicated drinking water) and become as automated as, and even more helpless to avert disaster than, the rabbit. (1964: 114)

Indeed, by adopting the rabbits' point of view and showing the world as an interconnected web of mutually antagonistic and inter-dependent existences which struggle to live and thrive in a fragile and yet resilience environment, *Watership Down* presents the reader

with the inescapable posthumanist awareness that, as Wolfe declares, "the human occupies a new place in the universe, a universe now populated by what I am prepared to call nonhuman subjects" (2010: 47). Adams's insistence that "the world is our responsibility […] one of our more important responsibilities must be to look after the animals" (in Lockley 1976: 6), then, might not be too far from Wolfe's call for an "increase in the vigilance, responsibility, and humility" towards "nonhuman subjects" (2010: 47) – a challenge that requires "all hands on deck" (p. 47).

The connections between *Watership Down* and some of the mainstays of posthumanism do not end with the just mentioned appeal for responsibility. Retracing one of the classic arguments about posthumanism, that is the fact that "[t]he 'post' of posthumanism does not refer to an improved form of humanity" and that, instead, it refers to "human animal, however an animal who does not think of itself in a humanistic manner", Cimatti points out that this new kind of humanity should be composed of "[s]omeone – or something – who does not think that such a thing like 'human dignity' exists" (2017: 118). Indeed, man is nothing "special in respect to the rest of nature and life" (p. 118) and the final aim of posthumanist philosophy is "to attenuate or cancel all the proud and presumptuous humanistic characters of humanity" (p. 118) to the point of invoking a "Human Animality" where the term *animality* "is a radically different way of thinking the very question of humanity" (p. 118). Though the Italian philosopher does not refer to Adams's novel in any part of his study, the assonance between Strawberry's statement that animals "have dignity and animality" (Adams 1972b: 235) sounds formidably compatible. Even more so, when one has ascertained, as the above pages have tried to do, that *animality* is more *humane* than humanity itself.

How to respond, then, to Adams's appeal? How can humans learn how to be more animal? Over the years, biologists, anthropologists and moral and language philosophers have explored several possibilities for human beings to amend their behaviour towards earth others. As early as 1975 Singer invited his readers to "change the policies of our government" and "change our own lives, to the extent of changing our diet" (1975: 23) in order to stop killing and inflicting pain on animals, starting from a "basic principle of equality" (p. 2) which is "a moral idea, not an assertion of fact"

(p. 4). Slowly, ideals such as those of *justice* and *solidarity* have consolidated, so that in 2002 Plumwood could affirm that "in neither case, *as a matter of justice*, are you entitled to initiate unnecessary and disproportionate violence, shooting the snake, or the difficult human, for example, just on the grounds that they may become a problem, and without trying less punitive solutions" (2002: 171). Her idea of solidarity, which "requires not just the affirmation of difference, but also sensitivity to the difference between positioning oneself with the other and positioning oneself as the other, and this requires in turn the recognition and rejection of oppressive concepts and projects of unity or merger" (p. 202) paved the way for Coulter's subversive idea of protecting the rights of animal workers. Interspecies solidarity "is the ethical thing to do" (Coulter 2016: 150), it "can help create change inside and outside of spaces of work and inspire not only different relationships, but societies that advance social solidarity within and across species" (p. 150-151). Meijer is perhaps even more ambitious when she contemplates the possibility for humans to engage in "interspecies dialogues" (2019: 220) which "can and should inform legislation, and offer starting points for new interspecies political institutions" (p. 220) leading to the ideal interspecies democracy after which she named her book.

Meijer's attention to animals' speech and Willett's hope that human beings "might relearn" the "social signaling and affective cognitive capacities" that the animals use to communicate "across disparate species" thanks to the "assistance of post-positivist sciences and technologies that recover otherwise imperceptible communicative channels" (2014: 98) are useful to reintroduce the theme of animal/human incommunicability that has been mentioned above. If, thanks to posthumanism, we can refute the idea that it is the animals' fault if they do not understand us – if they cannot read our "board" – and instead start considering that it might be us who cannot speak their language, the matter takes on a whole new form. In the past decades, as Plumwood cogently summarises, the possibility of communicating with other species has been "precluded by the arrogance and human-centredness" of our culture and has forced animals "to learn a human language but not vice versa", thus biasedly disadvantaging them and confirming "our delusion that [they] are inferior" (2002: 189). Should we try, instead, to implement forms of "[e]mbodied communication involving dramatic action"

(p. 192) or, as the experiment cited in Meijer of Herzig's study of dolphin language, try to "us[e] technologically advanced equipment to translate their language into human language, and vice versa" (2019: 55) we might perhaps be able to reach a better understanding of each other's world and point of view.

To a degree, this is precisely what Adams achieves in *Watership Down* with his invented Lapine lingo. In his novel, the author first postulates the existence of an animal language, secondly he tries to convey a different perspective on reality thanks to the possibility of using words which do not exist in English, thirdly he translates it for the reader. Lastly, he goes even further: he makes us *learn it*. As the story unfolds, he introduces terms in Lapine and explains their meaning and usage, then he systematically repeats them along the narration so that the reader can become familiar with their use and, even, their morphology: "silflay" is both a verb and a noun (Glossary 1972a); hrair indicates "[a]ny number above four" (Adams 1972b: 4) and with the article "u" can be translated as "The Thousand" (p. 4) while, with the diminutive "oo" means "Little thousand" (p. 5); "hlessi" and its plural "hlessil" stand for "rabbit living in the open" (p. 127) and to this Adams also adds a sort of translator's note: "which I have rendered in various places in the story as wanderers, scratchers, vagabonds" (p. 127). As Oltermann cleverly observes:

> During the climax of the siege of Watership Down, Bigwig shouts "Silflay hraka, u embleer rah!" as he launches himself at the enemy. It's the first time in the book Adams doesn't provide a footnote, but careful readers can string together a translation: *silflay* means to feed, *hraka* are droppings, *embleer* is to stink like fox, and *rah* denotes a chieftain or leader. Adams knew what anyone learning a new language eventually realises: once you can instinctively swear in it, you're cruising! (2015)

And indeed, not only did the readers of *Watership Down* grow intimately familiar with the meaning, and the *use*, of Lapine words, but ten years after the first publication of the book (or, perhaps, four years after the animation film), the sociolinguist Murray found that farmers in Missouri used the term *silflay* while completely unaware of its origin: they "had made it an active part of their vocabularies" (1985: 372). He then concludes:

whereas the Russians may or may not be coming, the rabbits have definitely already come and gone, and in their short stay have left a significant linguistic imprint on a sizable portion of the American population. […] what of the other terms that Adams created […] Will one or more of them charm some innocent lover of bunnies into increasing his or her vocabulary and thus propagating other aspects of the lapine lingo? (p. 375)

Apart from the natural amusement provided by the fact that a Midwest farmer has actually expressed the wish that "the damn thing [a wild rabbit] would go silflay somewhere else" (p. 372), Murray's study is extremely relevant because of what it proves about the impact that a work of fiction can have in affecting the understanding and the attitude of people towards animals. Certainly, in this specific situation, the farmers' idea that wild rabbits are pests may not have been dented (not surprisingly, perhaps, considering that most of them had never heard of *Watership Down*), but it appears evident that their knowledge of the animals' habits found an effective illustration and, also, received additional accuracy thanks to the use of a word belonging to a fictional language. More recently, several scholars have been conducting interdisciplinary research on the short and long-term impact that animal stories and climate change fiction can have on readers. Under the label of "Empirical Ecocriticism"[15], they have performed blind tests and surveys that prove, though still somewhat tentatively, that "even if we still do not know whether narrative empathy changes the way we behave toward animals, we at least now have experimental evidence that it changes the way we think about them" (Malecki, Pawlowskib, Sorokowskic, Oleszkiewicz 2019: 6) These studies are useful in giving strength to the widely accepted idea that "[i]maginary literature […] can engender a sudden intuitive realization that makes the essence of an abstract rule or maxim crystal-clear. Empathy not only leads people to recognize what is morally good, it also teaches them to embrace it and act on it" (Hardy Beierl 2008: 216). Hence, Singer's invitation to "alter the stories about animals that we read to our children" (1975: 215) just like the feminist movement had already done, was anticipated by *Watership Down* in which "[b]y giving voice, agency and reason

[15] See also Malecki, Pawlowskib, Ciénskia, Sorokowskic 2018 and Schneider, Mayerson, Von Mossner, Malecki 2020.

to a group of rabbit protagonists, Adams inalterably gives agency to the earth. He urges us to identify with the nonhuman world so that we might begin to transform our anthropocentric orientation into a more ethical, ecocentric perspective" (Battista 2011: 159).

Conclusion

Reading *Watership Down* from an ecofeminist and posthumanist perspective is a bit like looking at the world through rabbit's eyes. The narrative technique of defamiliarisation recalls the posthumanist refusal of anthropocentrism and its embracing of an eco-centric mindset. Frith's punishment of El-ahrairah for allowing rabbits to eat up all the grass evokes the destruction of the environment performed by men and prefigures the darkest omens connected with the notion of Anthropocene. Rabbits' ability to communicate with their fellows and with animals of other species contends men's supposed intellectual superiority and paves the way towards new forms of interspecies relationships. The same notion of *humanity*, once the behaviour of human creatures towards non-human beings is appraised, becomes a derogative term and is replaced by the idea that *animality* is a better, more inclusive, less-exploitative, more *humane* essence to be embraced (or principle to be adopted).

If, then, "[a]nimals don't behave like men" because "they have dignity and animality" (Adams 1972b: 235), could men start behaving like animals? Can animality be learnt? In 1949 De Beauvoir argued that "[o]ne is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (1949: 273) in the attempt to affirm that *femininity* is not a scientifically fixed entity – which "never existed" (p. 13) – but rather a culturally learnt construct of otherness that has little or nothing to do with the fact of being "equipped with a uterus" (p. 13). Moving from De Beauvoir's notion of the dualism man/woman, Braidotti proposes to adopt a "monistic philosophy, which rejects dualism, especially the opposition nature–culture and stresses instead the self-organizing (or auto-poietic) force of living matter." (2013: 3) Hence, if women "never quite made it into full humanity" (p. 81), and post-anthropocentrism opens an "ontological gap" (p. 67) in "the common standard for 'Man'" (p. 67) in which "other species come galloping in" (p. 67), every concept can be questioned, even language which is "the anthropological tool par excellence" (p. 67)

The same idea of humanity, then, can be challenged, as Cimatti clarifies:

> [s]ince 'humanity' is deeply involved in language, this means that a human infant becomes *human* – in the sense that if she is able to speak she can actively participate to an enormous set of knowledge and traditions that otherwise remain unattainable – through an extensive interaction with its own environment only. Put in other words, this means that the 'humanity' of every member of the Homo sapiens species is not contained within 'its' original bodily endowment. (2017: 112)

Once we have got rid of all dualisms and constructs, even of the same notion of the humanity of humans, what is left? Refuting Cimatti's conclusion that "[t]he human being is an animal born incomplete. Humanity is this incompleteness" (p. 112), it might be possible to contend that, rather than "born incomplete", the human being *becomes* incomplete by forsaking its animality. In 2001, Melson published innovative research on a little explored area of developmental psychology, that is the study of the relevance of "children's ties to animals" (2001: 12) in child development. In her work she concludes that "[y]oung children have an intuitive grasp of the truth that we are human and animal" (p. 157) that "life begins with an openness toward animals as creatures in equal standing with us" (p. 158) and that in children's "intimacy with other species, in their ease at crossing species lines, lie the seeds of their future stewardship of the planet" (p. 157). Apparently, then, it is not a matter of *learning* animality but rather of not *unlearning* it and, for that purpose, children's literature and animal fiction like Adams's *Watership Down* appear to be an invaluable tool.

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