

Viktor Link

On the Development of the Modern Animal Story

William H. Magee's article in the *Dalhousie Review*¹ gives an interesting survey of the development of the animal story at the end of the nineteenth century. He contrasts the use of "consistently realistic animals" in late nineteenth-century literature with earlier usages for purposes which discouraged realistic characterization "to point up human morals for human readers", in allegory, fable and satire. Two changes had to occur, according to Magee, before the creation of realistic animal heroes became possible: "First, the nonhuman heroes had to live for their own ends, not just to echo the concerns of the human readers. Second, some new techniques had to be found for drawing in words a truly representative character study of animals". These changes, Magee believes, occurred under the impact upon literature of Darwin's doctrines, which made possible "the sudden creation of animal heroes in the closing quarters of the nineteenth century".

In my article I wish to draw attention to a comparable development toward a more realistic characterization of animals in English literature at the end of the eighteenth century. In part I, I shall describe a few of these animal stories. In part II, I shall compare the role of animals in these stories with the role animals play in earlier eighteenth-century literature and in post-Darwinian stories at the end of the nineteenth century.

I

In 1799 *The Lady's Monthly Museum* (vol. 3, p. 151) reviewed an anonymous book entitled *The Crested Wren* (1799)², praising it as something quite new in literature:

This is a new species of literature, which we doubt not may have its admirers . . .

The work contains, beside the natural history of the Wren, many entertaining sketches of other birds which generally rank among its friends or its foes.

A similar review of a work entitled *The Canary Bird. A Moral Fiction* (1799)³ was published a year later in *The Young Gentleman's and Lady's Magazine* (1800, vol. 2, pp. 419 f.):

[the author] has much merit for giving an accurate outline of the natural history of each animal he has made the subject of his volumes. This is no trivial advantage; it promotes a taste for farther inquiry into the delightful field of nature, and fixes the impressions irresistibly on the heart. When we have only a confused idea of the object, it is impossible that it can gain so strongly on the affections, as when we are acquainted with its habits and qualities.

The author of both books, whose name is Edward Augustus Kendall (1776 ? - 1842), was well known in his day for his technique of combining fiction with realistic biological detail. He also wrote *Keeper's Travels in Search of his Master* (1798),⁴ *The Sparrow* (1798),⁵ *The Swallow: a Fiction Interspersed with Poetry* (1800) and *Burford Cottage and its Robin Redbreast* (1835). The number of rapid succession of these works and their very favourable reception by the critics testify to the great popularity of Kendall's way of writing, which lasted well into the nineteenth century. *Keeper's Travels*, the most successful of Kendall's works, ran into its sixteenth edition in 1837 and there was, according to the *BMC*, at least one more edition in 1879. *Burford Cottage* received a new edition as late as 1861, which was reprinted in 1865. Laura Valentine, the editor, emphasizes the continuing popularity of Kendall's works:⁶

The work now offered to the youthful public is one which delighted children in years gone by. It was written by the late Mr. Kendall (Author of the very popular work, entitled "Keeper's travels", and of others of a similar character), by the desire of the late Mr. Tegg (father of the present publisher)

The realistic tendency in the presentation of animals, for which Kendall was well known, can be seen in all his works. The first chapter of *The Crested Wren* sounds like a zoological manual rather than a work of fiction. The author's synopsis of the first chapter runs as follows:

SKETCH of the Natural History of Wrens: - common Wren; its Varieties: - Wren of Buenos-Ayres; Wren of Louisiana; - North-American Wren: - Yellow Wren: - Crested Wrens: - Ruby-crowned Wren; - Red-headed Wren; - Titmouse Wren; - Gold-crested Wren.

The bird, who acts as the narrator, even lists the various names he bears in the different countries which his species inhabit. In chapter II the bird proceeds to give an account of his infancy "within the territories of the duchy of Wirtemberg".¹⁴ The next chapter takes place in the market place at Nuremberg, where he is bought from a bird-catcher by an English family. He is taken to England, and eventually to Scotland. He escapes from his cage and lives in the wild for several years. One winter day, however, he is obliged to seek out human habitations for food. He meets again the girl who fostered him when he was still living in a cage. Although both bird and girl are delighted by the meeting, the bird prefers to continue his outdoor life.

Kendall's other stories follow a similarly simple outline. *The Canary Bird* is about a canary who leaves his cage, is obliged to find food and build a nest and meets other birds with whom he exchanges experiences. In the end the canary, unlike the wren is safely back in his cage and quite happy. *The Sparrow* emphasizes the sufferings birds receive at human hands. *Keeper's Travels* tells the doleful tale of a poor dog who loses his master, and in search of him experiences a variety of adventures, and undergoes many mortifications and hardships. Ultimately, however, all ends happily and the dog is restored to his master.

Kendall's works deserve to be called "animal stories". The main concern is with the animal's adventures, not those of the human beings it comes into contact with. The animals are used realistically in that they do not serve an underlying allegorical or satirical purpose. They "live for their own ends", as far as this can be expected of domesticated or half-domesticated animals.

At the end of the eighteenth century, Kendall's works were not unique in these respects. I wish to mention two more works which employ similarly realistic animals. *The Hare; or, Hunting incompatible with Humanity. Written as a Stimulus to Youth Towards a Proper Treatment of Animals* appeared anonymously in 1799. It was also published in Philadelphia (1800) and Dublin (1800) and was very favourably reviewed.

The Hare is much more of a unified work of fiction than Kendall's stories. The animal's joy in life, his awareness of his beautiful surroundings, his favourite haunts in the ferns, his strong desire for

peace and freedom which is most passionately roused when he witnesses a fowling expedition and watches a dying bird drop in front of him, and, later when he is himself hunted: all these elements produce a unity of mood totally different from anything we find in Kendall. In the course of his eventful life the hare loses and refinds his mother, is trapped by a poacher and sold to stock the fields for a chase. The animal's anxieties during the chase are vividly depicted. In the end, however, he falls into merciful hands and is allowed to live in a park:⁸

Undisturbed I take up my residence as inclination or the season invites . . . Mine is the sunny bank of firs, mine the dark shrubbery . . . Here neither the hourly fear of death nor bondage is before my eyes: here autumn has no terrors, and winter itself is disarmed of its rigors

At a last example I should like to mention the anonymous *Memoirs of Dick, the Little Poney*, published serially in twelve parts from 1799 to 1800.⁹ A revised and enlarged edition in book form was advertised (1800, vol. 2, p. 350) and reviewed (1800, vol. 2, p. 421) by *The Young Gentleman's and Lady's Magazine* and two more editions followed in 1804 and 1821. The unknown author wrote at least one more animal story: *The Dog of Knowledge, or Memoirs of Bob the Spotted Terrier* (1801, 1809).

Although the pony remains a domestic animal throughout, the story concentrates on the animal's (not his various masters') fortunes: Dick is stolen by gypsies, his tail is docked, he is gelded and forced to run races which ruin his health. In the end, however, he is given a paddock and a shed, takes children for an occasional ride and all ends happily.

II

Eighteenth-century critics do not explain what is new about the role of animals in these stories, but they emphasize that nothing comparable had been written before. One critic (of *Dick, the Little Poney*) mentions *Pomey the Little*¹⁰ but doubts "if any comparison can be drawn between works so very different in their structure and tendency".¹¹ The reference to *Pomey the Little* is significant as it draws attention to a work which, in fact, startled the public with its introduction of an animal hero, a work which became a model for dozens of similar stories employing animals as "spies". In spite of their titles, *Pompey the Little* and its

imitations are not genuinely concerned with animal adventures at all, but use animals to satirize social stereotypes and notable persons and events of their day.¹²

It is obvious that when an animal is employed in such a way it cannot be characterized as "living for its own ends", as Magee puts it. The foreground of the story being reserved for the human characters who are the object of the satire, the satiric observer is bound to remain in the background. The function as observer makes it impossible for the animal to be conceived realistically in the manner of the stories mentioned above. Pompey's role of observer implies the suppression of his natural instincts and desires in favour of a somewhat unrealistic passion for observing human beings.

To explain the transition from a detached satirical observer to an increasingly self-conscious observer is outside the scope of this article. Ronald Paulson has analysed this process in eighteenth-century satirical literature.¹³ The satirical animal story is also affected by this development: the satirical animal observer himself becomes the principal object of interest in the story and satire, if it still occurs, is directed at cruel treatment of animals. The author of *The Hare* significantly mentions in his "apology" that his animal is to be "eloquent in its own cause".

The structural changes in satirical literature allowed the emergence of new narrative techniques for a more realistic treatment of animals. Again, it is outside the scope of this article to discuss the changes in sensibility which made possible those structural changes in satirical literature. We are concerned only with that aspect of it which led to an interest in the animal world for its own sake. This aspect of the new tendency toward sensibility is connected with the philanthropic movement. In the early stage of the animal story which concerns us here, the realism is motivated as part of the strategy of didactic philanthropism. Kendall in his preface to *The Sparrow* observes the tendency in children "to inflict pain upon creatures that fall within their power" and concludes:

Our whole business, then is . . . to convince the child that he has no right to use the bird as a *toy*: that the animal has feelings In order that the child may understand the feelings of the creature, we propose that they should be compared with his own. With this intention we have . . . introduced a bird which, while we have attended to its nature and habits we have, nevertheless, represented in such a manner that the child may consider him as a companion.

One of the reviewers of *The Sparrow*, who is more outspoken than the author, reveals that the philanthropic animal story is still, in the last resort, occupied with "pointing up human morals for human readers":¹⁴

It is a fact recorded in history, that some of the most execrable tyrants that ever disgraced human nature, began their career of cruelty with killing flies, and progressively went on to murder their fellow-men . . .

The realism of the philanthropic animal story is both motivated and curbed by its didactic aims. While writers like Kendall depict animals much more realistically than had been done before to increase the intensity of their philanthropic message, philanthropism at the same time puts certain restrictions on the authors. To make their message convincing they are obliged to draw on a fairly limited cross-section of the animal world: their animals tend to be harmless, helpless and even touching creatures. These characteristics derive from the philanthropic perspective of the animal story, for the same animals might appear different if viewed in relation to other animals, for instance those animals they prey upon. As may be expected, animals who are not dependent on human kindness or are even dangerous to man, figure much less in the philanthropic animal story.

Although philanthropic animal stories are still frequent at the end of the nineteenth century, the best and most characteristic stories of the time are very different in their tendency. Charles G.D. Roberts' stories, for instance, emphasize that animals lead an entirely different existence from man. In some of his stories man does not occur at all, and animals are very often depicted not as dependent but as superior creatures, possessing, for instance, a majesty which is lacking in man (cf., e.g., "The Lord of the Air" from *The Kindred of the Wild*). Ernest Thompson Seton depicts animals as both physically and morally superior (cf., e.g., "Lobo, the King of Currumpaw"). In such stories, no doubt, the animal leads a much more autonomous existence than in the philanthropic stories, and obvious didacticism is for the most part suppressed. This does not mean that the characterization of the animal is necessarily more realistic, and devoid of "human morals for human readers". The typical post-Darwinian animal story tends to attribute to the animal world virtues human society is felt to be deficient in. The popularity of the animal hero or the lone leader of the "Cruel master animal" imply critical or didactic or nostalgic tendencies which are also familiar in the popular philosophy and political theory of the time.

Magee's emphasis on Darwin's impact upon the late nineteenth-century animal story certainly contributes towards our understanding of it. But the development toward a realistic portrayal of animals in literature was not, I believe, a "direct if minor effect on literature of the controversy over that theory", as Magee puts it, nor was it a "sudden creation" of the closing quarters of the nineteenth century.

It may be helpful to conclude with a brief summary of our discussion of the animal story: The realistic animal story in English literature dates back to the last years of the eighteenth century. In earlier stories animals had functioned as satirical observers of human society. In the course of the decline of satirical literature, the emphasis shifted from the human society satirized in the animal stories to the animal itself. The new philanthropic sensibility which caused this genuine interest in the animal world was, at the same time, responsible for the somewhat narrow, sentimental point of view from which the animal is characterized. The impact of Darwin's theories on the development of the animal story was to draw attention to quite different, even heroic aspects of the animal world, to point a contrast, implicitly or explicitly, with a decadent human society.

NOTES

1. William H. Magee, "The animal story: a challenge in technique", *Dalhousie Review*, 44 (1964), 156-164.
2. For another review of *The Crested Wren* cf. *The Critical Review*, 26 (1799), 472.
3. For another review of *The Canary Bird* cf. *The Monthly Mirror*, 9 (1800), 90.
4. For reviews of *Keeper's Travels* cf. *The Monthly Mirror*, 6 (1798), 290; *The Lady's Monthly Museum*, 1 (1798), 154 f.
5. For reviews of *The Sparrow* cf. *The British Critic*, 12 (1798), 686; *The Young Gentleman's and Lady's Magazine*, 1 (1799), 64-66.
6. The quotation is from p. v of the 1865 edition.
7. Cf. *The Critical Review*, 27 (1799), 466; *The Monthly Mirror*, 8 (1799), 28; *The Lady's Monthly Museum*, 3 (1799), 150 f.; *The Young Gentlemen's and Lady's Magazine*, 2 (1800), 51-53.
8. I quote from pp. 146 f. of the Dublin edition.
9. *Memoirs of Dick, the Little Pony. Supposed to be Written by Himself. (The Young Gentleman's and Lady's Magazine*, 1 (1799), 78-82, 108-114, 223-230, 266-271, 336-338, 421-425; 2 (1800), 25-29, 98-101, 201-206, 263-268, 341-350, 408-417.
10. Francis Coventry, *Pompey the Little, or the Adventures of a Lap-dog*, 1751.
11. *The Young Gentleman's and Lady's Magazine*, 2 (1800), 421.
12. Cf. Mary Wortley Montague, *Letters*, ed. by R. Halsband, 3 vols., Oxford, 1965-67, vol. 3, pp. 4-5, 16 Febr. 1752 (to Lady Bute).
13. Ronald Paulson, *Satire and the Novel in Eighteenth-Century England*, New Haven, 1967.
14. *The Young Gentleman's and Lady's Magazine*, 1 (1799), 64 f.