

Hans-Heino Ewers

18th Biennial congress of IRSCL
Theme: Power and Children's Literature: Past, Present and Future
August 25-29, 2007, Kyoto International Conference Centre

Modern Animal Fiction of the late 19th and early 20th Century as Political Literature.

In Germany and other European Countries the traditional animal fiction genre, i.e. essentially animal fables, comical animal tales and animal epic, gave way to something new during the course of the 19th century, namely the modern animal story or animal novel. This new kind of animal fiction is marked by three basic features. Never before literary descriptions of animals had been so naturalistic and never before the authors had abstained from any form of anthropomorphizing that distorts and denaturalises the animal characters. This move can be perceived as a response to the rise and popularization of modern natural sciences. The comprehension of the animal world is more and more shaped by modern zoology the essence of which is widely disseminated through Alfred Brehm's illustrated encyclopedia of animals which consists of 10 volumes and was published from 1863 onwards. Up to the present authors of modern animal stories resort to natural history, zoology and studies on biological behaviourism if they cannot revert to their own meticulous observations of the natural world as for instance Jack London, Ernest Thompson Seton or Richard Adams in the United States and Great Britain, Hermann Löns and Waldemar Bonsels in Germany and Felix Salten in Austria.

Although this did not mean that anthropomorphizing animal characters was no longer practised at all, but writers were more conscious about it because it was strongly limited. It was still feasible to present human or social issues through the depiction of non-human creatures but only under the condition that the natural characteristics of an animal precisely were apt to express or to refer to something human. Because of this change, traditional and socially approved links between animal characters and human character types dating from the ancient fables were for the most part no longer effective. Through the eyes of modern zoology

the animal species were now checked for their natural suitability to serve as allegories of human life affairs.

The name of Hans Christian Andersen is only seldom mentioned in studies on modern animal stories although his animal tales written in the midst of the 19th century in my opinion belong to the earliest works of modern animal fiction. Andersen avoids any distortion and deformation of the natural animal character which he describes scrupulously. Andersen's animal world acquires its allegorical character not through the author's attempt to anthropomorphize and possibly disfigure the animal characters but on the contrary through the meticulous description of their way of life. Paradoxically the more Andersen's animal characters are depicted accurately, the more they seem to be metaphors for human and social issues. His animal characters are no longer merely symbols of human attributes; their natural character and behaviour rather conforms in detail with that of human beings. In other words: conventional signs became iconic ones. In a period when realistic and naturalistic depiction modes prevailed Anderson still dares to use allegories. In doing so he has to abstain from any distortion of the animal characters due to the fact that the latter can only serve as allegory for human values unless their preserved animality is suitable for it. Andersen succeeds in writing allegorical fiction without affecting the view natural sciences have established of non-human, animated nature. He depicts objects, plants and animals as they are and nevertheless the reader perceives them as allegories of human affairs.

Andersen's animal stories are also a rich source of the second basic feature of modern animal fiction. The animal world has lost its idyllic charm and now appears to be an endless struggle for surviving and self-assertion, it is a world marked by cruelty and rivalry. The suppression and banishment of the ugly little duck caused by its alleged co specific provides a good example of this "new" feature. Animal fiction corresponds in this respect with the view of modern natural sciences according to which the evolution of the species is the result of natural selection and fight for survival.

The third basic feature of modern animal fiction, at least as far as we think of fiction with allegorical intentions, is the broad and eventually unlimited field of themes. The subject-matters of traditional animal fiction comprised of the portrayal of human cleverness and its opposite human foolishness, further the depiction of rather primitive forms of power. Andersen, however, manages to use a fowl run story as an allegory of the complicated modern

artist-society relationship. Other themes treated by him are the middle and upper classes' conceit, their pride and arrogance and also the rude utilitarianism and materialism in the rising capitalistic society, not to forget the latter's vehement dislike of art. It is through its exact and naturalistic depiction that Andersen's animal world turns into a mirror of modern class society. Both worlds are marked out by merciless fights for survival. Modern animal fiction, therefore, provides a perfect vehicle for satirising modern capitalistic societies.

Very soon people doubted that children would be able to grasp the underlying satiric meaning of this new sort of animal stories. The rather accurate depiction of animals leads children to take the stories as authentic portrayals of animals. Indeed, Andersen's well balanced way to describe the animal world in a naturalistic manner and at the same time use them as allegories allows the reader to focus on what happens in the foreground and to neglect possible underlying messages. I think that what is presented here as the typical way in which children perceive this new form of allegorical animal fiction is strictly speaking nothing else but the projection of popular middle-class thinking of the 19th century. Readers of modern animal stories seem to be much more interested in the description of the authentic animal world than in any kind of covert social criticism. Some writers of modern animal fiction respond to this preference by obscuring their stories' underlying satirical references to human matters in order to leave it to the reader to either completely disregard or pursue these allusions further.

In our context naturalistic animal depiction always means animal portrayals that take into account the latest generally known zoological findings of the epoch. These findings, however, do not automatically coincide with the discipline's actual results of research. Irrespective of whether writers take notice of natural history matters or popular general knowledge their animal depictions only seldom prove to be coherent. We often find a mixture of naturalistic and anthropomorphic features and clear boundaries between "human" and "animal" are scarcely identifiable. Although naturalistic depictions prevail and are often underscored by textual statements it happens again and again that single animal characters deviate from the rule. This applies in particular for animal novels that are intended to convey a more or less covert political message.

Rudyard Kipling's portrayal of jungle animals can count as an example of intermingling naturalistic and anthropomorphic ways of animal character construction. The novel I want to treat here is „Maya, the Bee“, an animal biography written by the German Waldemar Bonsels

and first published in 1912. The author has depicted many of the animal characters very accurately and without any underlying reference to human issues. He gives a drastic account of eating and death by predation and of the cruelties of woodland life. On closer examination, however, some of his animal characters exhibit as allegories of specific human characteristics. In these cases Bonsels has kept a Balance between naturalism and allegory, as Andersen did so often in his animal stories. Unlike the minor characters Maya, the protagonist of this animal biography, is a profoundly anthropomorphic animal figure. The bee stands for a human outsider and vagrant who disposes of extraordinary perceptive and visionary powers and who, therefore, at the end proves as indispensable and most useful to society. In Bonsels' novel a freak of nature, i.e. a biological mutation, has caused Maya's unnatural character. When in the last chapters the novel turns into a political parable by describing the betrayal in the beehive and the war of aggression of the hornets Bonsels, for the sake of clarity, has attributed many human features to the animal characters by disfiguring their animality. In these chapters Bonsels discusses mainly political values such as patriotism and man's readiness to sacrifice himself for his country.

Up to the present authors mix naturalistic and allegorical manners of animal representation. Richard Adam's classic „Watership Down“, published in 1972 or „Wolfsaga“, a novel of the Austrian writer Käthe Recheis published in 1995, can be cited as just two examples for this proceeding. In the novel of Recheis both the dictatorial wolf Schogar Kann as well as his weak opponent the wolf Schiriki are to a large extent anthropomorphised animal characters. Schiriki resembles for instance biblical but also historical human characters, in the present case Jesus Christ and Mahatma Gandhi. Adam's and Reicheis' animal novels can be perceived at the same time as naturalistic animal fiction and as allegorical political novels. As political literature they critically deal with dictatorial and totalitarian systems of the 20th century.

The fact that the existence of anthropomorphised animal characters has to be explained logically – see the example of “Maya, the bee” – proves that humanised animal figures who differ a lot from their animality cannot not be regarded as a natural thing within modern animal fiction. The motif of a freak of nature as precondition and justification of the defamiliarised nature of the animal protagonist can also be found in Dietlof Reiche's „The Golden Hamster Saga“ (1998ff.) with its protagonist Freddy, the first volume of which was translated into English in 2003 and meanwhile also into Japanese, and Kate DiCamillos „The

Tale of Desperaux“ of 2003, only to name two examples. The clever rats of Robert C. O’Briens „Frisby and the Rats of Nimh“ (1971) escaped an animal laboratory where they experienced a mutation of their brains and the cats in „Felidae“, an animal novel of the German-Turkish author Akif Piriñci (in German in 1989, English translation in 1993) owe their intelligence to a brain mutation caused by animal experiments. Unlike these motivations Terry Pratchett attributes in his disc novel „The Amazing Maurice and his Educated Rodents“ (2001) the abnormal mental powers of the rats which formerly inhabited a rubbish tip to a magic spell. Both, O’Brien’s and Piriñci’s animal novels touch already on the ecological problem through their critical depiction of scientific animal experiments.

Felix Salten’s novel „Bambi. A Life in the Woods“, first published in 1923 and in 1928 in English with a preface of John Galsworthy, can serve as an example of a largely naturalistic animal character portrayal. This has been questioned by critics because Salten often used metaphors of the human world in order to describe animal species or single animal characters. So he calls Bambi a prince and the deer and stags the noble, they form the aristocracy of the forest. Salten’s depiction of wood life reveals that the latter is marked by a strong hierarchy with the stags and deer at the top and consequentially the minor species behave very respectful towards them. Despite this I cannot see, however, that Salten intended to use the depiction of the animal world in the woods as a means of satirising the Austrian society at that time. The minor importance of the theme of death by predation is here mainly due to the fact that Salten has put herbivorous animal species in the centre of the novel. „Bambi. A Life in the Woods“ can, therefore, not be taken as political novel in spite of the obscure human poacher who terrifies all animals in the woods.

Modern animal fiction deploys not only animal but also human characters. The confluence of the animal and the human sphere within modern animal novels can serve several purposes. On the one hand it may underscore the realistic character of the story. From the late 19th century onwards readers classify sheer animal settings presumably as unrealistic. If, however, the author mentions now and again human housing estates the reader gets the impression of a realistic depiction of the animal world. In Käthe Reicheis’ aforementioned novel “Wolfsaga” for instance the occasional mention of humans seems to have no other than this function and many domestic animals stories probably follow the same pattern by mentioning the human owners in passing.

On the other hand the placement of animal and human world side by side within an animal story allows to use the perceptions of animal characters or the animal point of view to defamiliarise aspects of human society. In „Watership Down” for example we get, as Simon Flynn points out, a rabbit’s eye view of humanity and its technologies. Common human objects are defamiliarised when described by rabbits who are trying to comprehend their purpose in their own terms. (Flynn 2004, 429) In Bonsels’ „Maya, the Bee“ the alienation of human matters helps to enhance the prestige of human race and to stress its importance and uniqueness. In the majority of cases, however, authors of modern animal novels use this alienation effect in order to criticize human behaviour and the negative impact of civilization. Unlike this general tendency Piriñci exploits in his cat mystery novels the animal perspective partly just for the sake of comical effects.

Whenever animal fiction authors tackle in their novels the relationship of the human to the animal or, more generally, between man and wildlife, they get involved in ecological matters. In these novels the human race mostly is seen as an evil force in the world. As examples of this view can be cited „Watership Down“ or „The Animals of Farthing Wood“ (1981) by Colin Dann or the Swiss picture book „Die Kanincheninsel“ (The rabbit Island) by Jörg Müller and Jörg Steiner from 1977. From its outset ecological animal fiction underscored the negative attributes of humans, namely their unscrupulousness and eagerness for power. Humans kill animals just for the sake of pleasure and power whereas predation and killing in the animal world serve as an indispensable means of survival and is only justified as such. Humans also carry out cruel animal experiments in laboratories to satisfy their curiosity and sadism. In doing so they infringe a fundamental principle of the biosphere that animal fiction (since Kipling) has always treated with respect. Compared to the ruthless and unscrupulous human character even ferocious predatory wild animals appear to be nearly innocent creatures. Some animal novels even culminate in a harsh condemnation of humans as such. So the final statement of one of the cats in Piriñci’s novel reads: “Man is not good. [...] Animals are kind men and man is a malicious animal.” (Piriñci 2000, 268).

Allegorical animal fiction which places animal and human world side by side deals with man in two different ways. On the one hand specific animal figures or animal species can bear a certain resemblance to specific human character types or communities and can thus be perceived as surrogates of humans. This indirect form of representing man works by the use of analogies. On the other hand, man is deployed as such and also stands for the human race

as such, he is for example shown as villager who lives at the edge of the jungle, as hunter, poacher or owner of domesticated animals. The question arises for what reason authors of animal fiction use simultaneously in one novel both ways of dealing with man, the indirect and the direct one. Maybe they wish to treat certain human features and cannot find any animal species that could work as surrogate. Perhaps authors refuse to anthropomorphise animals to represent such negative human characteristics as for instance ruthlessness or eagerness for power. Perhaps no reasonably naturalistic animal character depiction allows for that. However that may be, any modern animal novel that wants to treat themes such as for example human sadism or man's desire to kill for pleasure tends to deploy human characters. In this genre only human characters can be used to represent those features that distinguish the human race so radically from the nature of other living beings. This applies also to positive human characteristics as for instance spiritual love. Waldemar Bonsels holds the view that only man is capable of a form of love that presents at the same time a "unio mystica" with God. Maya the bee can, therefore, get a sight of this human feature only through the depiction of a "real" couple of human lovers.

In closing I would like to point out that modern animal fiction from its outset (that is to say since about one hundred years) is to a large extent political fiction. On the one hand it deals with totalitarian systems of the 20th centuries and on the other hand with ecological matters. The general tendency to classify this genre as completely belonging to reading material for younger children which was caused by the cartoon film versions of animal novels like "Bambi" and "Maya, the Bee", has ever been and remains completely unjustified. Not least Felix Salten's marvellous Bamby-novel can serve as an example for reading material of high literary quality that treats important themes and suits young adults and adults at the same time. I got the impression that modern animal fiction recently has regained its position as popular reading material for adults. Just as Pirinçci's aforementioned cat mystery novels Leonie Swann's sheep mystery novel „Glennkill. Ein Schafskrimi“, which recently came out, counts in Germany among the bestsellers for adults. I think it is high time to make modern animal fiction an integral part of modern literature not for children but for young adults.

Adams, Richard: *Watership Down*. London: Penguin 2001.

Adams, Richard: *Watership Down*. Unten am Fluss. Dt. v. Egon Strohm. Berlin: Ullstein 1975; Ullstein Taschenbuch 2001.

Alfred Edmund Brehm's Illustriertes Thierleben [Illustriertes Tierleben]. Vollst. Faks.-Ausg. nach d. 1. Aufl. 1863 - 1869 in 6 Bd. aus d. Stadtbibliothek Reutlingen. Kommentar von Werner Frank. Stuttgart: Stuttgarter Faksimile-Edition 1979.

Andersen, Hans Christian: Sämtliche Märchen in zwei Bänden. A. d. Dän. v. Thyra Dohrenburg. Hrsg. v. Erling Nielsen. München: Winkler 1959 u. ö.

Bonsels, Waldemar: Die Biene Maja und ihre Abenteuer. München: Langen-Müller 1984; Neuausgabe: Mit Zeichn. von Waltraut und Ottmar Frick. München: Deutsche Verlagsanstalt 2007.

Bonsels, Waldemar: The adventures of Maya the bee. Illustrated by John H. Jacoby. [Translated by Adele Szold Seltzer.] New York: Grosset & Dunlap [1964]; transl. By Elisabeth Waltson Taylor. Illustrated by L.R. Brightwell. Ondon: Hutchinson 1980.

Dann, Colin: The Animals of Farthing Wood. London: Heinemann 1979.

DiCamillo, Kate: The Tale of Despereaux. Cambridge/Mass.: Candlewick Press 2003.

DiCamillo, Kate: Despereaux. Von einem, der auszog das Fürchten zu verlernen. Dt. v. Sabine Ludwig. Hamburg: Dressler 2004.

Flynn, Simon: Animal Stories. In: International Companion Encyclopedia of Children's Literature. Ed. By Peter Hunt. Second Edition. Vol. 1, p. 418-435.

O'Brien, Robert C.: Frisby and the Rats of Nimh. New York: Atheneum 1971; London: Gollancz 1972.

O'Brien, Robert C.: Frau Frisby und die Ratten von Nimh. Dt. v. Stella Junker. Wien, München: Jungbrunnen 1975.

Pirinçci, Akif: Felidae. München: Goldmann 1989. Goldmann Taschenbuch 2000.

Pirinçci, Akif: Felidae. Transl. By Ralph Noble. London: Fourth Estate 1993.

Pratchett, Terry: The Amazing Maurice and his Educated Rodents. London: Doubleday 2001.

Pratchett, Terry: Maurice, der Kater. Ein Märchen von der Scheibenwelt. Dt. v. Andreas Brandhorst. München: Goldmann 2004, Goldmann Taschenbuch 2005.

Recheis, Käthe: Wolfssaga. Freiburg/Wien: Herder/Kerle 1995; dtv junior 1997.

Reiche, Dietlof: Freddy. Ein wildes Hamsterleben. Weinheim u. Basel: Beltz – Programm Anrich 1998.

Reiche, Dietlof: Freddy. book one in the golden hamster saga. Transl. from the German by John Brownjohn. London: Scholastic 2003

Salten, Felix: Bambi. Eine Lebensgeschichte aus dem Walde. Zürich: Albert Müller 1940; Fischer Bücherei 1956; Fischer Schatzinsel 2003.

Salten, Felix: Bambi. A Life in the Woods. Transl. By W. Chambers. Leicester: Knight Books 1971.

Salten, Felix: Bambis Kinder. Eine Familie im Walde. Zürich: Albert Müller 1940. Frankfurt a.M. und Berlin: Ullstein o.J. (Ullsteinbuch 2666)

Salten, Felix: Bambi's Children Illustrated by Erna Pinner. Translation by Barthold Fles, edited by R. Sugden Tilley. Second edition. Fourth printing. London: Commodore Press 1943.

Swann, Leonie: Glennkill. Ein Schafskrimi. München: Goldmann 2005; Goldmann Taschenbuch 2007.

Swann, Leonie: Three Bags Full. A Sheep Detective Story. London: Doubleday 2006.