Tolstoy’s Animals

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Abstract
In recent years, critics sensitive to animal issues have begun to theorize a new direction in literary criticism, an animal-centric or animal-standpoint criticism. Such a criticism seeks to examine works of literature from the point of view of how animals are treated therein, often looking to reconstruct the standpoint of the animals in question. This article examines a selection of short stories by Leo Tolstoy considering them exemplary from the point of view of animal-standpoint criticism.

Keywords
literary criticism, animal ethics, Tolstoy

Introduction
In recent years, critics sensitive to animal issues have begun to theorize a new direction in literary criticism, an animal-centric or animal-standpoint criticism. Such a criticism seeks to examine works of literature from the point of view of how animals are treated therein, often looking to reconstruct the standpoint of the animals in question. As an ethical and political criticism, animal-standpoint criticism not unlike, in this respect, feminist and Marxist criticism, questions ideologically driven representations of animal figures. Where feminist criticism lays bare inherent sexism and Marxist criticism lays bare inherent classism in texts, animal-centric criticism identifies speciesist representations and formulations. It critiques the figurative use of animals where such use is anthropocentric, eliding the subjective character and independent reality of the animal; in addition, it points up authorial blindness or silence when animals are treated merely as background objects rather than subjective presences.
Critiquing the aesthetic exploitation of animals—that is, using their realities metaphorically or allegorically or to comment metonymically on human situations—means critiquing a good deal of extant literature. To use animal figures thusly in literature is a time-honored practice. Indeed, it is hard to imagine how poets and fiction writers would proceed if deprived of the animal metaphor. Using animal death and agony to comment on the emotional state of the human protagonist continues to be a standard fictional device.

The Critics

*Animal-standpoint*

Several recent animal-standpoint critics have objected to this aesthetic exploitation of animal pain. In her groundbreaking work in the field, Scholtmeijer (1993) singles out Hemingway’s treatment of bulls in *The Sun Also Rises* as an egregious example of the practice.

The bulls are only animate objects in an artistic spectacle. Seen as art, the spectacle in the bullring does not merely override animal pain; it in fact causes that pain to disappear, since the whole event is just a geometric interplay of abstract forces. (p. 264)

In another pioneering work in the field, Norris (1985) proposes that in *Death in the Afternoon* Hemingway conceives the bullfight as an art form with the “artist as sadist,” the “matador literally creat[ing] ‘art’ out of torture and killing” (pp. 11, 12).

Simons (2002), another animal-standpoint critical pathbreaker, proposes that we need a new kind of literary study, one that includes “animal rights” as a “priority,” analyzing the “cultural text” for “the tracks of animals” (p. 5.) Such an approach, he advocates, will look for texts in which animals are not “displaced metaphors for the human” (p. 6). “The symbol is, perhaps, the most common form of representation of animals” (Simon, p. 115); however, Simon protests, “animals are not symbols” (p. 7).

Perkins (2003) likewise criticizes the use of animal as metaphor for human emotion. Shelley’s “To a Skylark” (1820), he notes, has little to do with an actual bird but rather “elevates the animal to bewail the human condition,” a “device” he finds “dubious.” “The animal is just a metaphor, with little character of its own” (p. 147).

The fictional animal-standpoint critic Elizabeth Costello in Coetzee’s (2003) recent work similarly critiques humans’ chronic tropological use of animals in
literature. “The life-cycle of the frog,” she notes, “may sound allegorical, but to the frogs themselves it is no allegory, it is the thing itself, the only thing” (p. 217). In a public lecture that lays out her animal-standpoint approach to literature, Costello rejects literature where “animals stand for human qualities; the lion for courage, the owl for wisdom, and so forth” (Coetzee, 2003, p. 95). In Rilke’s poem “The Panther,” for example, “the panther is there as a stand-in for something else” (Coetzee, p. 95). As an example of a poem where the poet does not use the animal figuratively but attempts to represent the animal’s being directly, Costello points to Hughes’s “The Jaguar.” In representing the jaguar, “Hughes,” she says, “is feeling his way towards a different kind of being-in-the-world…. [I]t is a matter… not of inhabiting another mind but of inhabiting another body” (Coetzee, pp. 94-96). Hughes, in other words, is paying serious attention to the jaguar qua jaguar and not as a metaphor for human speed, agility, or whatever.

Noting the pervasive use of the animal metaphor, Adams (1991) argues that real or literal animals are thereby obscured by their signifier, which renders the animal “an absent referent.” In much literature, she points out, animals have in fact “become absent referents, whose fate is transmuted into a metaphor for someone else’s existence or fate… whose original meaning… is absorbed into a human-centered hierarchy” (p. 42).

Animal-standpoint critics may also question the absences or blind spots, the lapses and lacunae, in texts where animals appear. As an example, Perkins (2003) notes that despite the fact that many novels of the past, as well as memoirs and travel books, include travel by horse-drawn coach, they “almost never” mention the horses’ “suffering,” which remains “invisible to most passengers or, perhaps, the novelist considered them irrelevant to the theme of the novel” (p. 105). An animal-standpoint critic might raise the question of why this suffering is ignored or repressed by the author, the likely answer being that speciesist assumptions condone such blindness.

Animal-standpoint critics also take note of past critical blindness to animals’ existence and suffering in literary texts. Perkins (2003), for example, provides a long list of Wordsworth scholars who have managed to write about Wordsworth’s poem “Hart-Leap Well” (1800) without acknowledging and responding to the suffering of the deer who is the focus of the poem. “Commentaries on this poem… show that if [it] seeks to instill compassion for animals, it was written in vain” (p. 80). Had the poem been about an abject human, Perkins speculates, “interpreters [had been less likely to] reduce or ignore the creaturely desperation it describes” (p. 81).
Other Critics to the Contrary

Contrary to these earlier critics who ignored or minimized the animal’s suffering, critic Mortensen (2000) notes of the poem that “for Wordsworth the hart’s suffering is a subject of ethical interest in itself, not merely a figure for other, more noteworthy forms of human suffering” (p. 303). Indeed, Mortensen insists that Wordsworth intended for the poem to point up “man’s shockingly cruel treatment of animals,” thus “inaugurat[ing] a new kind of Romantic nature poetry, which brings animals into the foreground and takes their suffering seriously” (p. 296).

Similarly, Fudge (2000) criticizes the anthropocentric bias in much ecocriticism. She singles out (p. 109) Bate’s (1991) for its “avoidance of and silence about the place of non-human animals.” One could make this criticism of most ecocriticism today. As Fudge (p. 109) notes, a broadly construed ecological approach in fact risks degenerating into what animal rights theorist Regan (1983;) calls “environmental fascism” (p. 362); that is, it focuses on abstract generalities such as species and ecosystems, ignoring the individual creature and discounting that creature’s suffering. Instead, Fudge proposes that in human-animal relationships it is not “general and abstract” conceptions that matter; on the contrary, “the truly meaningful animal is often a very individualized being” (p. 110).

Prosaics and Poetics

That prose fiction—the novel especially, but also the short story—is the literary mode best suited for realizing the particular story of an individual creature is an important aspect of Bakhtin’s (1973) literary theory. Arguing that prose fiction requires an ethically rooted “prosaics,” as opposed to an aesthetically oriented “poetics,” Bakhtin sees the novel as a special form of ethical knowledge, precisely because it brings to life the particular and complex story of an individual in the face of abstract systems—such as ideologies—that would elide the individual’s realities. As an example, Bakhtin cites the character Devushkin in Dostoievsky’s novel, Poor Folk (1846). Devushkin, a poor man, resents being characterized, stereotyped, and objectified as a “poor person.” Dostoievsky’s hero “revolts against literature in which the ‘little man’ is externalized and finalized without being consulted.” Devushkin is “personally deeply insulted… and outraged” by the characterization of poverty in Nikolay Gogol’s Overcoat (1842), because it made him feel “he had been defined totally once and for all” (p. 47). In other words, Devushkin felt that his subjective uniqueness had been erased, that he had been reified as an object by the abstract characterization “poor person.” An
animal-standpoint critic would extend this concern—that subjective uniqueness not be erased—to animals.

In short, an aestheticized animal or person—that is, one turned into a trope of one kind or other—is objectified, no longer a subject. For there to be an ethical response, empathy is required on the part of the author and sympathy on the part of the reader. Neither response is possible unless there remains a subject to whom the reader can relate. Animal ethics in literary criticism therefore must look to literature in which animals are treated as subjects.

Tolstoy

Not surprisingly, perhaps, it is in the work of that “greatest of all novelists” (Woolf, 1966, p. 244), Leo Tolstoy, that we find model examples of sensitive, perceptive, and empathetic treatment of animals. Late in life, Tolstoy (1903/2001b) published an exemplary moral fable that recommends empathy as a mode that promotes moral growth—ethical sensitivity to others, including animals: “Esarhaddon, King of Assyria” (1903/2001b). The fable concerns Esarhaddon, a king who is made to enter the consciousness of an enemy he had defeated and animals he had hunted. As he prepares to carry out the execution of his enemy, an old sage tells him he should not carry out his plan. When asked why not, the old man says, “[Y]ou are Lailie [the enemy]” (p. 742). Puzzled, Esarhaddon asks the sage to explain. The sage puts the king’s head under water during which time he finds himself inside the consciousness of Lailie, as well as that of a hunted animal.

He was astonished that he was an animal, and astonished, also, at not having known this before. He was grazing in a valley, tearing the tender grass with his teeth, and brushing away flies with his long tail. Around him was frolicking a long-legged, dark-grey ass-colt, striped down his back. Kicking up his hind legs, the colt galloped full speed to Esarhaddon, and poking him under the stomach with his smooth little muzzle, searched for the teat and, finding it, quieted down, swallowing regularly. Esarhaddon understood that he was a she-ass, the colt’s mother, and this neither surprised nor grieved him but rather gave him pleasure. But suddenly, something flew near with a whistling sound, hit him in the side, and with its sharp point entered his skin and flesh. Feeling a burning pain, Esarhaddon… tore the udder from the colt’s teeth, and laying back its ears galloped to the herd…. The colt kept up with him… when another arrow in full flight struck the colt’s neck. It pierced the skin and quivered in its flesh. The colt sobbed piteously and fell upon its knees. Esarhaddon could not abandon it, and remained standing over it. The colt rose, tottered on its long, thin legs, and again fell. A fearful two-legged being—a man—ran up and cut its throat. (pp. 745,746)
When the sage releases Esarhaddon from the water, he points up the moral. “‘Do you now understand,’ continued the old man, ‘that Lailie is you,... [and] the animals which you slew and at your feasts, were also you.... Life is one in them all, and yours is but a portion of this same common life’” (p. 746).

Even in his early work, that done before his celebrated conversion to pacifist Christianity—which included vegetarianism—in the early 1880s, Tolstoy depicts animals sensitively and with an empathetic eye to their feelings and sufferings. “Strider: The Story of a Horse” (“Khostomer,” begun in 1861 but not published until 1886) is told almost entirely from the animals' point of view.

The horses were not at all frightened or offended at the horseman’s sarcastic tone: they pretended that it was all the same to them and moved leisurely away from the gate; only one old brown mare, with a thick mane, laid back an ear and quickly turned her back on him.... Of all the horses in the enclosure (there were about a hundred of them) a piebald gelding, standing by himself in a corner... and licking an oak post with half-closed eyes, displayed least impatience. (Tolstoy, 2001a, p. 585)

The story centers upon this animal, an aged, battered horse who, Tolstoy stipulates, remains “majestic” despite his ugliness (p. 589). A lengthy minute description of the animal—an example of Tolstoy’s (1886/2001a) characteristic attention to detail (one of the reasons for his claim to fame as a novelist)—illustrates an author giving an animal serious moral attention.

The big bony head, with deep hollows over the eyes and a black hanging lip that had been torn at some time, hung low and heavily on his neck, which was so lean that it looked as though it were carved of wood. The pendant lip revealed a blackish, bitten tongue and yellow stumps of worn teeth. The ears, one of which was slit, hung low on either side, and only occasionally moved largely to drive away the pestering flies.... The veins of his neck had grown knotty, and twitched and shuddered at every touch of a fly. The expression of his face was one of stern patience, thoughtfulness, and suffering.... Yet in spite of the hideous old age of this horse one involuntarily paused to reflect when one saw him.... Like a living ruin he stood alone in the midst of the dewy meadow, while not far from him could be heard the tramping, snorting and youthful neighing of the scattered herd. (pp. 589, 590).

Strider tells his life story—one of being traded from master to master, sometimes abused and sometimes treated well—in the first person to the assembled horses in the stables over a period of five nights. Tolstoy (2001a) then switches the scene to the wealthy owner’s house where humans discuss the relative merits of their equine property from a purely economic point of view. In thus ironically juxtaposing the subjective point of view of the animals with the
objective/commodifying view of the human masters. Tolstoy appears to be borrowing a page from Stowe’s technique in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852)—a novel Tolstoy greatly admired—where scenes in the slave cabins that depict slave lives sympathetically from their point of view are juxtaposed against those in the big house. There, the masters discuss slave-trading from a purely mercenary perspective, seeing the slaves as but feelingless commodities. Whether Tolstoy intended a slave/animal analogy is not clear, but it is apparent that, like Stowe, he deplores the commodification of living, feeling creatures as but objects for sale.2

In the drawing-room discussion, a former owner of Strider (Strider’s favorite former master), now old and defeated, talks with pride about his favorite horse, the young Strider. Ironically, earlier in the day this owner, Serpukhovskóy, had seen Strider in the paddock but hadn’t recognized him, whereas Strider knew his former owner and neighed fondly.

The next day, Strider develops an ailment and it is decided to do away with him. This is done by taking him out in the fields and cutting his throat until he bleeds to death—a process Tolstoy (2001a) describes in detail from the horse’s point of view. Strider’s body is left to feed the wild animals, and therefore is at least put to some use, Tolstoy implies, unlike the body of his former master who is buried in full dress uniform in a leaden casket, which the author characterizes as a vain and presumptuous human ritual. The story’s main point is that immersed in a smug and false sense of superiority humans fail to appreciate the dignity and nobility of animals.

The description of Strider’s death may derive from an actual visit Tolstoy paid to a slaughterhouse at about this time. As he was finishing this story (and perhaps a motivation for doing so) in the mid to late 1880s, Tolstoy read Williams’ (1883/2003, 1892/2003), treatise on vegetarianism, to which Tolstoy wrote a preface for the Russian edition. In this preface, published in English as “The First Step,” Tolstoy describes his observations in the slaughterhouse, delineating in novelesque detail the deaths of several individual animals—possibly the most vivid and horrifying descriptions of animal slaughter ever written.

[A] large sleek ox was brought in…. Two men were dragging him…. [After being hit “above his neck” with a “pole-axe” it was] as if his four legs had been suddenly mown from under him, the ox fell heavily on his belly to the floor…. and began to move his legs and his back convulsively…. [After his throat is cut]…. from out of the gaping wound the black-red blood came spurting…. Then another butcher…. broke the leg and cut if off. And the belly and the remaining three legs continued to quiver convulsively. (p. 37)
Tolstoy (2001a) similarly describes Strider’s death. Unaware of what is happening, the horse

...began to drowse to the sharpening of the knife. Only his swollen, aching, outstretched leg kept jerking. Suddenly he felt himself being taken by the lower jaw and his head lifted. He opened his eyes. There were two dogs in front of him... The gelding looked at them and began to rub his jaw against the arm that was holding him. (p. 623)

Trustingly, Strider considers the slaughterers are about to help him. Then he

...felt that something had been done to his throat. It hurt, and he shuddered and gave a kick with one leg... Then he felt something liquid streaming down his neck and chest. He heaved a profound sigh... He closed his eyes and began to droop his head. Then his legs quivered and his whole body swayed... The knacker waited till the convulsions had ceased. (pp. 623, 624)

As the reader has come to know Strider as a subject, his death necessarily evokes feelings of sadness, compassion, and sympathy, as well as anger at human indifference to the fate of this remarkable and admirable animal. Yet, as elsewhere in his treatment of animals, Tolstoy’s rigorous realism saves the passage from sentimentalist bathos.

Tolstoy (1892) describes another animal, this one a bull “of real beauty with white spots and white feet” who fights against the butchers but is finally subdued:

The noble animal, which but a moment before was full of exuberant life, fell down in a heap, convulsively moving its feet... Five minutes later the black head had become red and skinless, and the eyes that had shone with such brilliancy and color were glassy and fixed (p. 38).

Contrast Tolstoy’s treatment of the bull’s death to the aestheticization of animal torment seen in the bullfighting scenes noted above.

In Trovat (1967), Tolstoy’s personal sensitivity to, and respect for, animals is described by his fellow novelist Turgenev, who noted the trait on a late-nineteenth-century visit to Tolstoy’s estate Yasnaya Polyana. Trovat cites Turgenev’s report that he,

...was amazed at Tolstoy’s... profound understanding of animals. There was more than a familiarity between them—something like an organic intimacy. He stood by a bony, mangy old nag, stroking its back and whispering gently into its ear, while the
J. Donovan / Society and Animals 17 (2009) 38-52

horse listened with evident interest. Then he translated the animal’s feelings to those around him. “I could have listened forever,” Turgenev later said, “He had got inside the very soul of the poor beast and taken me with him. I could not refrain from remarking, ‘I say, Leo Nikolayevich, beyond any doubt, you must have been a horse once yourself.’” (p. 388)

Although a thorough examination of all the examples of animal presence in Tolstoy’s works is beyond the scope of this article,³ suffice it to note that throughout his work even minor references to animals include acknowledgment that what is involved is a living, feeling creature. In the early story, “Snow Storm” (1856), for example, which does not centrally concern animals but rather depicts an arduous trek several men make through a winter blizzard, animals are nevertheless treated not as background furniture, nor to point up human traits or issues but rather as separate, active, living creatures worthy of attention in their own right.

The large piebald horse, stretching its neck and straining its back, went evenly along the completely snow-hidden road, monotonously shaking its shaggy head under the whitened harness-blow, and pricking one snow-covered ear when we overtook it. (Tolstoy, 2001a, p. 235)

The shaft-horse, a good, big, shaggy animal, stumbled more than once, though immediately, as if frightened, it jerked forward again and tossed its shaggy head almost as high as the bell hanging from the bow above it. The right off-horse . . . noticeably let its traces slacken and required the whip, but from habit as a good and even mettlesome horse seemed vexed at its own weakness, and angrily lowered and tossed its head at the reins. (Tolstoy, p. 250)

At the end of this arduous journey “the off-horse . . . kept running in the same way, only the sunken, heaving belly and drooping ears showing how exhausted she was” (Tolstoy, 2001a, p. 257). Finally, after being lost for some time, the travelers come upon a fresh trail of “a three-horsed sledge, and here and there pink spots of blood, probably from a horse that had overreached itself” (Tolstoy, p. 257) When they reach town and safe haven, “near the inn stood a tróyka of grey horses, their coats curly from sweat, their legs outstretched and their heads drooping wearily” Tolstoy (p. 257).

During the course of the journey, the narrator has a dream about a drowning incident that happened in his youth. Even in this dream, which centers upon the death of a peasant, a rescuer’s dog is given pronounced attention. Seeing his master enter the water,

Tresórka, perplexed by the quickness of his master’s movements, has stopped near the crowd and with a smack of his lips eats a few blades of grass near the bank, then looks
at his master intently and with a joyful yelp suddenly plunges with him into the water. (Tolstoy, p. 245)

While the master swims toward the drowned man, “Tresórka, having swallowed some water, returns hurriedly, shakes himself near the throng, and rubs his back on the grass” (Tolstoy, 2001a, p. 246).

While not developed in this story, the exuberant liveliness of the dog in the face of death foreshadows a theme Tolstoy (2001a, pp. 565-581) was to pick up in what is perhaps his greatest story, “Three Deaths” (1859); the conclusion of which describes the exuberant thriving of vegetation, signifying the eternal resurrection of life, in the face of the deaths the story depicts.

A more mature and more fully developed version of “Snow Storm” is Tolstoy’s (2001b, pp. 541- 595) acknowledged masterpiece, Master and Man” (1895). Here too the ostensible issue is survival of travelers in a terrible winter storm. As in “Strider,” however, a larger theme is developed in the implicit contrast drawn between the natural world, including animals, and the vain falsities of the human world—in particular, one governed by capitalist entrepreneurialism. As in other stories, full attention is paid to the horse who struggles for survival along with his peasant driver, Nikíta, and his owner, the capitalist Vasíli Andréevich.

Picking his way out of the dung-strewn stable, Mukhórty frisked, and making play with his hind leg pretended that he meant to kick Nikíta. . . . After a drink of the cold water the horse sighed, moving his strong wet lips, from the hairs of which transparent drops fell into the trough; then standing still as if in thought, he suddenly gave a loud snort (Tolstoy, 2001b p. 546).

Of another horse they pass on their way:

Their shaggy, big-bellied horse, all covered with snow breathed heavily under the low shaft-bow and, evidently using the last of its strength, vainly endeavoured to escape from the switch, hobbling with its short legs through the deep snow…. Its muzzle, young-looking, with the nether lip drawn up like that of a fish, nostrils distended and ears pressed back from fear, kept up for a few seconds…. [Nikíta thinks:] “They’ve tired that little horse to death. What pagans!” (Tolstoy, 2001b, pp. 558-59)

Having become completely lost in the raging storm, Vasili and Nikíta decide to give Mukhórty the reins, hoping he can lead them to safety. “‘The one thing he can’t do is talk’ Nikíta kept saying. ‘[J]ust see what he’s doing with his ears! He doesn’t need any telegraph. He can scent a mile off’” (Tolstoy, 2001b, p. 560). The horse does succeed in bringing them to a village and Mukhórty
is briefly stabled, a scene Tolstoy describes with detailed attention to the other animals present.

The hens and the cock had already settled to roost . . . and clucked peevishly, clinging to the beam with their claws. The disturbed sheep shied and rushed aside trampling the frozen manure with their hoofs. The dog yelped desperately with fright and anger and then burst out barking like a puppy at the stranger. Nikíta talked to them all, excused himself to the fowls and assured them that he would not disturb them again, rebuked the sheep for being frightened without knowing why, and kept soothing the dog, while he tied up the horse . . . (Tolstoy, 2001b, p. 562)

After a few hours of rest, the master—despite warnings and the misgivings of both horse and driver—insists on setting out again. He is determined to continue on through the storm because he hopes to make a killing in a business deal—“the purchase of the Goryáchkin grove” (Tolstoy, 2001b, p. 576) and time is of the utmost. He will make a profit of 10,000 rubles, thereby furthering his dream of becoming a millionaire.

Once again they lose their way and must spend the night without shelter in the raging storm. The master and the horse freeze to death; only the peasant Nikíta manages to survive.

Mukhórt, buried up to his belly in snow . . . stood all white, his dead head pressed against his frozen throat; icicles hung down from his nostrils, his eyes were covered with hoar-frost as though filled with tears, and he had grown so thin in that one night that he was nothing but skin and bone” (Tolstoy, 2001b, p. 594).

In his treatise on literary theory, Tolstoy (1896, 1960) gives as an example of the kind of art he favors, a hunting scene by the Russian painter Vasnetsov, which was drawn to accompany Turgenev (2001). “in which it is told how, in his son’s presence, a father killed a quail and felt pity for it.” Tolstoy, p. 136). Another example Tolstoy draws from a play he read about that had been created by a primitive tribe, the Voguls. In it two characters represent a reindeer-doe and her fawn, another represents a hunter, and a fourth, a bird who “warns the reindeer of their danger.” The deer and fawn escape momentarily; however, in the end,

. . . the arrow strikes the young deer. Unable to run, the little one presses against its mother. The mother licks its wound. The hunter draws another arrow. The audience, as the eyewitness describes them, are paralyzed with suspense; deep groans and even
weeping is heard among them. And, from the mere description, I felt that this was a true work of art. (Tolstoy, 1896/1960, p. 138)

The gist of Tolstoy’s theory is that literature and art should communicate powerful feelings honestly and sincerely, feelings that bring people together, creating a sense of community among all life-forms. The Vogul play exemplifies, . . . that sense of infection with another’s feeling, compelling us to joy in another’s gladness, to sorrow at another’s grief, and to mingle souls with one another—which is the very essence of art. (Tolstoy, 1960, p. 138).

In this treatise, Tolstoy rails against “counterfeit art” or “art for art’s sake,” as well as the similarly specious “science for science’s sake,” which he sees as corrupting modern science (Tolstoy, 1960, p. 182). Too often, he argues, science and modern engineering have not been “for the benefit of the workmen, but to enrich capitalists who produce articles of luxury or weapons of man-destroying war” (Tolstoy, p. 184). Instead, he argues, science should have moral purposes: “how to use the land, how to cultivate it oneself without oppressing other people, . . . how to treat animals” (Tolstoy, p. 185). “[T]he business of real science” should be “to demonstrate the irrationality, unprofitableness, and immorality of war and executions . . . [and] the absurdity, harmfulness, and immorality of . . . eating animals” (Tolstoy, p. 186). “Art,” similarly, “should cause violence to be set aside . . . evok[ing instead] reverence for the dignity of every [person] and for the life of every animal” (Tolstoy, p. 190).

Great writers, the British writer Murdoch (1960) contends, are those who are able to break through ideological and mythic preconceptions to the individual in the individual’s unique particularity. Of Tolstoy, Murdoch noted that like Shakespeare he exhibited what Keats termed “negative capability,” a capacity to render the reality of his material without imposing upon it self-serving personal or ideological design (p. 173). In the case of animals, (though Murdoch does not treat this issue), Tolstoy is able to render them as they are without imposing upon them anthropocentric and speciesist perspectives. That recognition—of the otherness and independence of (in this case) animals—fosters a growth in ethical awareness on the part of the reader.

The more the separateness and differentness of [other creatures] is realized, and the fact seen that another . . . has needs and wishes . . . , the harder it becomes to treat [that creature] as a thing. (Murdoch, 1971, p. 66)
Conclusion

Animal-standpoint criticism looks for literature in which animals are taken seriously (as seen in Tolstoy’s treatment), not ignored or silenced, but with their realities empathetically imagined and in which speciesist ideology—that holds animals are but objects for human use—is broken through, discarded, in favor of a view that respects their subjectivity, their souls.4

Notes


3. In this article, I concentrate on Tolstoy’s short fiction, and because of space constraints omit reference to Anna Karenina (1876) and War and Peace (1869). The former includes the celebrated depictions of Levin’s dog and Vronsky’s horse, whose back is broken by her overzealous rider. The latter example is a rare instance in Tolstoy’s work that one might wish to interpret symbolically, for the treatment of the horse prefigures in certain respects Vronsky’s treatment of Anna (Tindall, 1955, p. 77). However, as Brumm (1967) argues, a symbolic interpretation is not necessary, nor is it clear that Tolstoy intended it. Unlike Henry James’s golden bowl, which “exists in the novel solely for the sake of its symbolic character…. Tolstoy’s symbol is a possible interpretation of a subordinate event which the reader can also take at its face value” (pp. 360,361); that is, the tragedy of the death of a mare.

War and Peace does include episodes in which characters are not particularly sensitive to animal cruelty, including a bear-baiting scene and a hunting scene. But it is not clear whether the insensitivity is the author’s or the characters’. Another celebrated episode Tolstoy treats in a story “The Bear-Hunt” (1872; 2001a, pp. 743-753) concerns an event that actually happened to him in 1858, when he was nearly killed by a bear whom he later shot in self-defense. Some 20 years late, he gave up hunting as part of his conversion to humane treatment of animals and vegetarianism.


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