Provincial Life with Animals

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Abstract
The relationship of peasants and villagers with their animals in the premodern era is a missing chapter in the history of human-animal relations. Works on peasant culture ignore animals, and works on animals neglect their place in rural lives. This article, based on the depiction of premodern peasant and village life in hundreds of local-color novels and stories of the early nineteenth century, begins to fill in this gap in animal studies scholarship. It reveals that many of the defining boundaries between humans and animals introduced in the ideologies of modernity are fuzzy, fluid, or indeed nonexistent in premodernity, where animals are seen as subjects, companions, and, often, parts of the family.

Keywords
domestic animals, local-color literature, peasants, premodern era, provincial life

[Domestic beasts . . . were . . . frequently spoken to, for their owners, unlike Cartesian intellectuals, never thought them incapable of understanding.
—Keith Thomas, Man and the Natural World

A large, if largely overlooked, body of literature exists depicting peasant and village life in the European and American provinces of the early nineteenth century—“Pre-Railroad Times” (Stowe, 1968, Chapter 1). Hundreds of stories and novels were produced in this “local-color” tradition, to which my studies European Local-Color Literature (Donovan, 2010) and New England Local Color Literature (Donovan, 1988) provide an introduction.1 The movement flourished in the 1840s in Europe and later—until around 1900—in the United States. Its works give us a window into the realities of premodern peasant and village life—a world that has largely been lost through industrialization and mass transportation and communication systems.2

Because domestic animals were such an important part of that world, this literature shows us how rural people related to animals in the premodern, preindustrial era, providing us with alternative models of the human-animal relationship commonly seen today.3 For, while “we shall not ever return to a
pre-capitalist human nature, yet a reminder of its alternative needs, expectations and codes may renew our sense of our nature’s range of possibilities” (Thompson, 1991, p. 15). This article thus reprises the Foucauldian project of bringing to light “subjugated knowledges” (Foucault, 1980, p. 80; see also Donovan, 2010, pp. ix-xiii, and Donovan, 1993).

We find in this world, for example, that boundaries between the species that are commonly accepted now were then blurred, less restrictive, or in many cases simply nonexistent. Few distinctions were drawn, for example, among “pets,” farm animals, and even, in some instances, wild animals. One finds intense love for, and devotion to, work animals, such as horses, shepherd dogs, or oxen, who are considered companions. Animals are often seen as part of one’s family, as “folks,” recognized as subjects. And despite centuries of theology to the contrary, many of these uneducated villagers and peasants persist in thinking that animals have souls. Because of their recognition of animals as like beings, many characters express empathy for them and advocate humane treatment of them—a few even proposing vegetarianism and “rights” for “dumb animals” (Stowe, 1869, p. 24).

While the humane movement was in full swing by the early nineteenth century, and numerous treatises had been published advocating humane treatment of animals, it doesn’t appear that the characters in these works—most of whom were barely literate, if that—were consciously aware of “animal rights” theory or were modeling their behavior on it. Rather, it appears that “farmers and poor people” were following age-old tradition in making “very little distinction between themselves and their beasts,” as noted by one seventeenth-century commentator, Celia Fiennes (Thomas, 1983, p. 98). Many characters indeed register a manifest resistance to ideas imported from, and imposed upon them, by metropolitan authorities and intellectuals, who are resented and seen as having little understanding of rural life, operating instead in terms of rationalist schemes derived from Enlightenment theory and capitalist economics—exemplified, for example, by Adam Smith’s Wealth of Nations (1776)—which treat their particularized animate life-worlds in abstract and alien terms, as commodities. (See especially Smith’s [2003, pp. 298-309] recommended agricultural “improvements” involving consolidation, greater productivity, and enhanced profitability.) One can indeed postulate the existence of two distinct cultures operating according to separate ethics or “moral economies”: on the one hand, a peasant culture with its personalist ethic that accords animals equal ontological status; on the other, an elite intellectual culture under the influence of Enlightenment rationalism and capitalism that endorses a “speciesist” ethic where humans are ontologically superior and animals reduced to commodities or indeed (as in Cartesian theory) to feelingless
machines. The imposition of the ethic of Enlightenment rationalism and capitalism on that of peasant culture was, I have argued elsewhere, a form of ideological colonization that the local-color authors (and their characters) were resisting (Donovan, 2010).

Buchmaier, a Black Forest village mayor in a story by German author Berthold Auerbach, “Der Lauterbacher” (1843) (included in his collection *Dorfgeschichten*), for example, complains about animal welfare regulations being issued by metropolitan authorities, claiming such rules are unnecessary. These urban bureaucrats, he protests, don’t understand farm animals and farmers’ relationships with them. “I have seen that people cry more when an ox of theirs passes on than when one of their children dies” (Auerbach, 1884, 2:68; ich hab’ schon gesehen, dass die Leut’ mehr heulen, wenn ihnen ein Rind draufgeht, als wenn ihnen ein Kind stirbt).

A Scottish village preacher, Micah Balwhidder, in John Galt’s *Annals of the Parish* (1821), rejects the Enlightenment reliance on reason as a guide for the capitalist rural development schemes then proliferating in the Western world, which commodified animals and land. (One of the worst was the so-called Highland Clearances in Scotland at the end of the eighteenth century and into the early nineteenth, which introduced large-scale, industrialized sheep farming.) Balwhidder observes that the “birds and beasts” are “governed by a kindly instinct in attendance on their young,” which suggests “that love and charity, far more than reason or justice, formed the tie that holds the world . . . together” (Galt, 1967, p. 157), thus rejecting Enlightenment intellectualism in favor of what he sees humans as having in common with animals—their emotional capacity.

“Phil Purcel: The Pig Driver,” a story by Irish writer William Carleton that was included in his collection *Traits and Stories of the Irish Peasantry* (1843), concerns a clever scam Phil developed with his pet pig wherein he manages to sell the same pig over and over to twenty-four different, unwitting English buyers. The pig seems to understand the game and escapes from his new buyer each time to rejoin Phil for the next go-round.

The narrator observes, “Nothing could present a finer display of true friendship founded upon a sense of equality, mutual interest, and good-will, than the Irishman and his pig. . . . He and his family, and his pig. . . . all slept in the same bed” (Carleton, 1990, 1:410). Phil is especially attuned to his pigs, having had “from his infancy. . . an uncommon attachment [to them], and by a mind naturally shrewd and observing, made himself intimately acquainted with their habits and instincts” (1:413). (A lengthy footnote gives an “authentic account” of “a horse ‘Whisperer’” who had a similar way with horses [1:413 n.].)
With its serious and respectful treatment of the pig-human relationship, Carleton’s story must be seen as a repudiation of the by-then common English stereotype of the Irish as animals—indeed, pigs. By Carleton’s day “the British colonial imaginary,” obsessed with “the simianized monster of Fenian rebellion [focused on] the pig [as] a dominant representation of the Irish as animal” (O’Connor, 2010, p. 13).

Like many other local-color authors, Carleton is critical of Enlightenment improvement and capitalist development schemes and claims that people and animals were better off in the unregulated, “unimproved,” premodern era in which Phil lived:

In Phil’s time . . . pig-driving . . . had [not] . . . made such rapid advances as in modern times. It was then . . . unaccompanied by the improvements of poverty, sickness, and famine. Political economy had not then taught the people how to be poor upon the most scientific principles. Free trade had not shown the nation the most approved plan of reducing itself to the lowest possible state of distress. (1:408)

The pigs too were better off in the old days—leaner, longer-legged, able even to outrun a greyhound. But now only a “few specimens” of this hardy breed remain “except in the mountainous parts of the country, whither these lovers of liberty . . . have retired to avoid the encroachments of civilization, and exhibit their Irish antipathy” to being marketed in England (1:409).

Peasants’ relationships with work animals appears to have been especially intense. These animals were daily companions, helpers in difficult labor—for which their human owners were often deeply grateful—sometimes becoming the primary relationship in their lives.

James Hogg (1770-1835), a Scottish provincial writer—known as “The Ettick Shepherd”—wrote movingly about the shepherd’s relationship with his dog. In an autobiographical sketch, “Further Anecdotes of the Shepherd’s Dog” (1818), Hogg speaks of the collie’s “sagacity” (Hogg, 1818, p. 621). “Some” shepherd dogs, he says, “excel . . . in a kind of social intercourse. They understand all that is said to them, or of them, in the family; and often a good deal that is said of sheep, and of other dogs, their comrades” (p. 622). He gives several examples of these dogs’ amazing ability to find lost sheep, noting that they sometimes travel miles to do so.

Of his own dog, Sirrah, he writes, “My dog was always my companion. I conversed with him the whole day—I shared every meal with him, and my plaid in the time of a shower” (p. 623). Hogg remarks on Sirrah’s intelligence:

I can never forget with what anxiety and eagerness he learned his different evolutions . . . and when once I made him to understand a direction, he never forgot or
mistook it again. Well as I knew him, he very often astonished me; for, when hard pressed in accomplishing the task he was put to, he had the expedients of the moment that bespoke a great share of the reasoning faculty. (p. 623)

He gives examples of his dog’s intelligence but remarks, “an Edinburgh man” (i.e., an urban intellectual influenced by Scottish Enlightenment ideas) would not be able “thoroughly to understand” them (p. 624).

When Sirrah is too old for heavy work, Hogg has to sell him, but the dog refuses to work for anyone else, instead returning to watch his old companion every day from a distance. Hogg comes to regret his decision (though Sirrah ends up in a comfortable “foster” home, where he doesn’t have to work), considering that the dog’s loyal behavior had “a kind of heroism and sublimity” to it (p. 626). “The parting with old Sirrah, after all that he had done for me, had such an effect on my heart” (p. 626) that “I then made a vow to myself… never to sell another dog.”

Two of the stories collected in Hogg’s collection Winter Evening Tales (1820) deal centrally with men’s relationships with their “colleys.” Highlander Duncan Campbell (in a story of that title) (1811) is deeply bonded to his “colley,” Oscar, but has to leave the dog behind when he goes to Edinburgh for his education. Unhappy in the city, Duncan runs away from the school and heads back to the Highlands. He soon encounters a “drove of Highland cattle” with whom he identifies and sympathizes. “They were all in the hands of Englishmen;—poor exiles like himself;—going far away to be killed and eaten, and… never [to] see the Highlands again” (Hogg, 2002, p. 81). Among them he suddenly sees Oscar, “hungry and lame” (p. 81), having been beaten and abused by the drovers. Duncan rescues Oscar, and they travel about as vagabonds the next few years, finally settling down, with Oscar dying peacefully of old age at sixteen. “The sagacity which this animal possesses is almost incredible… [he had] undaunted spirit and generosity” (p. 87).

Another story, “The Shepherd’s Calendar” (1817), recounts in vividly realistic detail the heroic attempts by a shepherd and his “colley,” Sparkie, to save scores of sheep during a fierce winter storm (Hogg, 2002). Other local-color stories depict intense bonding between solitary human figures and their dogs, who form what has been called a “pack of two” (Knapp, 1998). Two stories in S. C. Hall’s Sketches of Irish Character (1829), for example, concern such characters: “Jack the Shrimp,” an eccentric shrimp gatherer, and his dog, Crab; and Grey Lambert, a hermit who lives with his dog, Bang, in an abandoned castle in “The Barrow Postman” (Hall, 1854).

As one might expect, horses are another work animal to whom owners become deeply attached. That relationship is strikingly portrayed in one of French writer George Sand’s peasant novels, Le Meunier d’Angibault [The Miller of Angibault] (1845). Here the bond is between miller Grand-Louis and
his horse, Sophie. Like Hogg he doubts urbanites’ capacity to understand the depth of peasants’ attachments to their animals.

We relate to animals as to people and we miss an old horse as an old friend. You wouldn’t understand that, you city people, but we peasants live with animals from whom we differ little. (1888, p. 253; On s’attache aux animaux comme aux gens, et on regrette un vieux cheval comme un vieux ami. Vous ne comprendriez pas ça, vous autres gens de la ville; mais nous, gens de paysans nous vivons avec les bêtes, dont nous ne différions guère)

Here again we sense a strong distinction being made between peasant culture, in which animals are valued as like beings, and urban educated elite culture, which misprizes these human-animal bonds.

When Sophie is missing for a period, and Grand-Louis fears she’s been stolen, he is distraught. But it’s not a matter of economic loss:

I scorn the paltry amount the old beast would bring…! Do you think I would care so much for 100 francs? Oh no! What I miss is her, and not her price…. She was so courageous, so intelligent, she knew me so well. (p. 255; Je me moque bien du peu d’argent que la vieille bête pouvait valoir… ! Croyez-vous que pour une centaine de francs j’aurais tant de souci? Oh! non pas: ce que je regrette, c’est elle, et non son prix…. Elle était si courageuse, si intelligente, elle me connaissait si bien)

Grand-Louis is here upholding a personalist, kin-based ethic as against a capitalist, exchange-value ethic. Sophie is valued for who she is as a living being, not for her monetary worth. (Happily, Sophie eventually turns up unharmed.)

In another of Sand’s peasant novels, *La Mare au diable* (*The Devil’s Lake*) (1846), the main character, Germain, a plowman, sings to his oxen, calling them by name, as they plow the fields. Such singing is an ancient custom, the narrator explains, designed to “uphold the courage of these animals, to pacify their discontent, and to alleviate the tedium of their lengthy toil” (Sand, 1931, pp. 31-32; entretenir le courage de ces animaux, d’apaiser leurs mécontentements et de charmer l’ennui de leur longe besogne).

Oxen, we learn, often form strong bonds with one another, especially with “their comrade under the yoke” (p. 27; son camarade d’attelage). When one dies, the other will refuse to work or eat and will die of grief:

The poor gaunt weakened animal [can be found] deep in his stall… panting with fear and disdain over his food, his eyes always turned toward the door, scratching his foot at the empty place by his side, sniffing the yoke and chains his companions wore, and calling him endlessly with deplorable bellows. (p. 27; au fond de l’étable un pauvre
animal maigre, exténué... soufflant avec effroi et dédain sur la nourriture qu’on lui présente, les yeux toujours tournés vers la porte, en grattant du pied la place vide à ses côtés, flairant les jougs et les chaînes que son compagnon a portés, et l’appelant sans cesse avec de déplorables mugissements)

Such an animal, lamentably, has to be sent to market. Otherwise, he will starve himself to death.

A similar bonding is seen in the novel between two horses, a mare and her mother, one named “la jeune Grise” [the young Grey]; the other, “la vieille Grise” [the old Grey]. As with the oxen, Germain is very sensitive to the animals’ moods; indeed, the young la Grise becomes a central player in the novel. When Germain leaves on an excursion with her, she whinnies a good-bye to her mother, who tries to follow her daughter, then “whinnies in reply and remains pensive, uneasy, her nose to the wind, her mouth full of grass that she no longer [thought] to eat” (pp. 69-70; elle hennit à son tour, et resta pensive, inquiète, le nez au vent, la bouche pleine d’herbes qu’elle ne songeait plus à manger). The animals themselves are thus seen as having emotional relationships with one another, which the human characters respect and include as a significant factor in their own decision-making.

A German regionalist, Adalbert Stifter (1805-68), who wrote about Bohemia—then a part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire—describes the intense relationship that develops between a rural doctor and his horse. In *Die Mappe meines Urgrossvaters* [My Great-Grandfather’s Papers] (1841) the doctor exclaims at one point: “O, these good, these true, these willing animals-in the end they are the only ones on earth who love me so truly from the ground up” (Stifter, 1959, p. 646; Ach diese guten, diese treuen, diese willigen Tiersie sind am Ende doch das einzige auf dieser Erde, was mich so recht vom Grunde aus liebt). The doctor develops an acute sensitivity to the languages of other nonhumans, as well. “The voice of the cricket... throbs in my heart—likewise... the neglected animal beats in my heart, as if he were speaking to me in clear human words” (1:469; die Stimme der Grille... klopfte... an mein Herz-gleichsam... klopfte das misachtete Tier an mein Herz, als sagte er mir deutliche menschliche Worte).

American local-colorist Sarah Orne Jewett spoke similarly of the “languages” of nonhumans and urged that humans should learn their tongues:

Who is going to be the linguist who learns the first word of an old crow’s warning to his mate...? [H]ow long we shall have to go to school when people are expected to talk to the trees, and birds, and beasts in their own language!... It is not necessary to tame [creatures] before they can be familiar and responsive, we can meet them on their own ground. (1881, pp. 4-5)
Characters converse with animal companions in other local-color works. Manuel, the protagonist of Max Buchon’s regional French novel *Le Matachin* (1854), for example, converses nonverbally with his ox, Dsaillet, with whom he relates as to a close friend. When Manuel begins courting a young woman, Dsaillet chastises him: “Giving him a sly look, he seemed to say . . ., ‘Take us as an example, my dear. Resign yourself to the life you are assigned’ ” (Buchon, 1858, p. 84; Dsaillet le regardait . . . d’un air narquois qui semblait lui dire: . . . ‘Prends example sur nous, mon cher. Resigne-toi à la vie qui t’est faite’).

At Manuel’s wedding celebration, which Dsaillet attends, “he opens his eyes completely surprised at seeing so many people. Manuel, who notices, imagines that he is confused at having so poorly prophesied in his famous advice” (p. 157; Dsaillet ouvre ses yeux tout surpris en voyant tant de monde. Manuel qui s’en aperçoit s’imagine qu’il est tout confus d’avoir si mal prophétisé dans son fameux discours).

Finally, Manuel reluctantly has to sell Dsaillet in order to buy back a cow, La Bouquette, to whom his mother is deeply attached. (The cow was also in attendance at the wedding, another indication of the fluid boundary in this premodern culture between human and animal space [for example, the Irish sleeping with their pigs, dogs in church, etc.].) Dsaillet ends up being butchered, and Fifine, Manuel’s new wife, realizes she may have inadvertently put his meat in a soup she has prepared. She warns Manuel, saying it would be heartless to eat his old companion. He proceeds to eat the soup but immediately throws it up. Fifine laughs: “Ha! Ha! Poor Dsaillet . . . thus are you avenged” (p. 171; Pauvre Dsaillet . . . te voilà vengé). The novel includes a lengthy disquisition on what admirable beings oxen are and how people should treat them more humanely (pp. 87-90).

One of the most intense relationships depicted in this local-color literature is between a peasant, Érembert, and his goat, Scripant, in Ferdinand Fabre’s novel *Le Chevrier* [*The Goatherd*] (1867). Érembert considers Scripant his “best friend” (Fabre, 1913, p. 257; meilleur ami). “I kissed my goat. . . . Heavens! Had I any other friend on earth” (p. 57; j’embrassai mon bouc. . . . Hélas! Avais-je d’autre ami sur la terre). “Touched” by his response, “I scratched [my hands] against the grain of his hair, [which is] how goats like to be caressed” (p. 57; Emu, j’allongeai les mains . . . et je les grattai à travers poils, comme chèvres aiment être caressées).

Érembert sings Scripant’s praises. He was the most handsome, the strongest, the most valiant of nature’s creatures that had ever been known in the Hautes Cévennes [mountains]. Scripant had intelligence and knowledge to more than match the schoolmaster. (p. 70; le plus beau, le plus fort, le plus vaillant aux entreprises de nature qu’on eût jamais connu aux Cévennes-Hautes. Scripant avait de l’esprit et de la connaissance à en revendre au maître de l’école)
Based on Scripant, Érembert concludes that “animals love better, regret more, take greater offense than we do, because, when they love, it’s forever” (p. 111; bêtes aiment mieux, regrettent mieux, s’estomaquent mieux que nous tous, car, aimant, c’est pour toujours). Indeed, he considers that humans may in fact be fallen animals, reversing the myth of the fall. “It often occurred to me that before being hard, querulous, wicked men, we were perhaps gentle, affectionate, peaceful animals” (p. 16; Il m’est souvent fois venu l’idée qu’avant d’être hommes durs, querelleurs, méchants, avions-nous été peut-être animaux doux, affectueux, paisibles).

For many of these characters, animals are simply part of the family; human space—the home—and animal space are not held as ontologically distinct. Érembert’s mother, for example, who also loves animals, has chickens, hens, rabbits, turkeys, and a pig running through her house (p. 149), all sharing the same home territory. Aunt Carleton, the town herbalist in Mary Leadbeater’s Annals of Ballitore (ca. 1824), a nonfictional account of an Irish village, has several animals living in her house, including a clever pig who can open door latches and pet hens who lay eggs on a cushion under her chair (Leadbeater, 1998, 1:70).

Jenny Wrayn, in American local-colorist Mary E. Wilkins [Freeman]’s story “Christmas Jenny” (1891), has turned her house into a kind of unofficial veterinary rehab hospital:

> It had a curious sylvan air; there were heaps of evergreens here and there, and some small green trees leaned in one corner. All around the room . . . were little rough cages and hutches, from which twittering and chirping sounded. They contained forlorn little birds and rabbits and field mice. (p. 170)

A neighbor explains that Jenny

> picks [the animals] up in the woods when they’re starvin’ and freezin’ an’ half dead, an’ she brings ’em in here an’ takes care of ’em an’ feeds ’em till they gets well, an’ then she lets ’em go again…. You see that rabbit there? Well, he’s been in a trap. Somebody wanted to kill the poor little creature. You see that robin? Somebody fired a gun at him an’ broke his wing. (p. 172)

A similar character operating as a local veterinarian out of her house may be found in Annie Trumbull Slosson’s story “Anna Malann” (Slosson, 1898).

Another New England local-colorist, Rose Terry Cooke (1827-92), depicts two memorable women characters whose primary relationships are with their animals in “Miss Lucinda” (1861) and “Dely’s Cow” (1865), both collected in Somebody’s Neighbors (1881). Lucinda keeps a cat and three kittens, “an old blind crow, a yellow dog,” a rooster, and three hens in her house with her.
(Cooke, 1986, p. 155). “In her life her pets were the great item: Her cat had its own chair in the parlor and kitchen; her dog, a rug and a basket . . . ; her old crow, its special nest of flannel and cotton, where it feebly croaked as soon as Miss Lucinda began to spread the little table for her meals” (p. 156). Lucinda “cared more for her garden” and her animals “than for all the humanity of Dalton [her town] put together” (p. 157).

She eventually adopts a pet pig to whom “she took an astonishing fancy. Very few people know how intelligent an animal a pig is” (p. 161). He “wig-gled his curly tail as expressively as a dog’s and ‘all but speakin’ . . . . He was always glad to see Miss Lucinda, and established a firm friendship with her dog” (p. 162). Lucinda lavishes care on her animals (which the author/narrator disapproves of); she believes that “animals have feelings that are easily wounded, and are capable of ‘like passions’ with [humans], only incapable of expression” (p. 162). Indeed, she “believed creatures had souls” (p. 163), thus elevating animals to equal ontological status.

This story is unusual among local-color works in that the author takes a critical view of the character’s relationship with her animals, considering it silly and juvenile. Thus, Lucinda is eventually made to conform to “adult norms,” of subordinating animals to human use, including having the pig sold for butchering.

A more sympathetic account by Cooke is “Dely’s Cow,” which similarly depicts a woman who loves her three cats, dog, horse, and a lame robin. “For all these dumb things she had a really intense affection” (Cooke, 1986, p. 183). Dely develops an especial attachment to her cow, Biddy, who “was really Dely’s friend” (p. 189), and she is distressed at Biddy’s “cries of appeal and grief” (p. 189) when her heifer is sold to the butcher. As with the other rural folk we have considered, Dely saw her cow

as a real sentient being, capable of love and sympathy. Many a time did the lonely little woman lay her head on Biddy’s neck, and talk to her about George [her husband, who is off at the Civil War] with sobs and silences interspersed; and many a piece of dry bread steeped in warm water, or golden carrot, or mess of stewed turnips and bran, flavored the dry hay that was the staple of the cow’s diet. (p. 189)

Further examples where animals are accorded kin status include The Wild Irish Girl (1806) by Lady Morgan (Sydney Owenson) in which a starving Irish peasant says that seeing the suffering of his equally starving cow is as hard to bear as that of his family. “One can better suffer themselves a thousand times over than see one’s poor dumb baste want: it is, next . . . to feeling one’s child in want. God help him who has witnessed both!” (Morgan, 1986, p. 13).
Some characters adopt as domestic pets animals we would consider wild. Terence O’Gee O’Leary, an eccentric rustic philosopher in another of Lady Morgan’s novels, *Florence Macarthy* (1818), has a pet eagle (Morgan, 1979, 1:299). A similar character named Patience in George Sand’s *Mauprat* (1837) has a pet owl (Sand, 1930, p. 48).

Perhaps because of their close association with animals, many characters exhibit strong empathy with them and react viscerally against any cruelty they encounter. The title character in *The Life of Mansie Wauch* by D. M. Moir (1828), a Scottish regional novel, is appalled at the cruel treatment of an exhausted mare, who is driven to her death in a horse race. “I turned round my back, not able to stand it” (Moir, 1828, p. 88).

Natzi, an illiterate German peasant boy in an Auerbach novella, is intensely sensitive to the farm animals he tends, lamenting that they exist only to be slaughtered. “That is why the sow cries and screams so when she is slaughtered,” he says (Auerbach, 1884, 1:126; Dessenthalben auch so eine Sau am ärgsten schreit und heult, wenn man’s metzget). He has a shepherd dog who is “smarter than ten doctors” (1:125; gescheiter war als zehn Doktor) and could read his “innermost thoughts” (1:125; verborgsten Gedanken). He teaches his friend Ivo to love these animals and “encouraged him in this care for the defenseless enslaved creatures” (1:137; Zu dieser Sorgfalt für die wehrlos Angejochten hielt ihn Natzi… an).

King Corny, a rustic authority in Maria Edgeworth’s Irish novel *Ormond* (1817), similarly advocates humane treatment of farm animals, rejecting the use of a cruel farming practice: “That is against humanity to brute *bastes*, which…I practice” (Edgeworth, 2000, p. 51).8

Guillaume Inot, an abandoned wild child in Léon Cladel’s *Le Bouscassié [The Woodcutter]!* (1867), set in Languedoc, France, grows up in even closer proximity to animals than most. “Nursed by a dog” (Cladel, 1869, p. 10; une chienne allaitait), he early learns to model his behavior on the animals around him:

Paddling in the pond with the ducks and geese, crawling under the pensive oxen before the manger, hanging around the dog who nursed him, sometimes walking on all fours like his wetnurse, and sometimes on two in the manner of poultry, he conducted himself in imitation of his companions whom he had taken for models. (p. 12; Barbotant dans la mare avec les canards et les oies, rampant sous les boeufs pensifs devant la crèche, fréquentant la chienne qui l’avait allaité, tantôt marchant à quatre pas comme sa mère la nourrice, et tantôt sur deux avec des allures de volaille, il se dirigeait à l’instar de ses compagnons qu’il avait pris pour modèles)
He understands animal language and empathizes with animals’ emotions, protesting when other humans ignore their cries:

Initiated from his earliest years into their commerce and speaking their language, he undoubtedly understood amazingly what the animals said…. “Deaf as you are,” he said one day to some diggers who asked him why he was sad and groaning, “don’t you hear over there… that ewe who is crying and calling back her lamb whom they have taken or killed?” (p. 26; Initié, dès son plus bas âge, à leur commerce et parlant à leur langage, il comprenait sans doute à merveille ce que disaient les animaux…. “Sours que vous êtes,” dit-il un jour à des terrassiers qui lui demandaient pourquoi il était chagrin et gémisait, “n’entendez-vous pas là-bas… cette brebis qui bêle et réclame son agneau qu’on lui a pris ou tué?”)

There are several other instances where Guillaume shows compassion for and/or saves animals from harm. In a lengthy scene he cares for a dying mule and insists on giving the animal a decent burial when the owner wants to dismember the body to sell the skin (pp. 27-34). Later, at some risk to himself, he intervenes in a cruel sport where rats are being set on fire (pp. 133-35). And while consulting a fortune-teller/witch about how to avoid the military draft, he refuses to permit as part of the procedure a ritual decapitation of a bird (p. 256).

Characters in other works show similar compassion. The title character in *La Petite Fadette* [Little Fadette] (1850) by George Sand, for example, expresses empathy for a caterpillar:

Me, I am not like those who say: Look, there’s a caterpillar, an ugly creature; oh, how ugly! We must kill it! Me, I don’t crush God’s poor creature and if the caterpillar falls in the water I extend her a leaf so she can save herself. (Sand, 1973, p. 127; Moi, je ne suis pas comme ceux qui disent: Voilà une chenille, une vilaine bête; ah! qu’elle est laide! il faut la tuer! Moi, je n’écrase pas la pauvre créature du bon Dieu, et si la chenille tombe dans l’eau, je lui tends une feuille pour qu’elle se sauve)

Mara, a character in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s New England local-color novel *The Pearl of Orr’s Island* (1862), protects some eagle’s eggs from destruction, showing empathy for the mother eagle (Stowe, 1896). In Galt’s Scottish *Annals of the Parish*, the local schoolmistress, Sabrina Hookie, saves a duck by performing a Caesarian operation on her when she eats too many uncooked beans (Galt, 1967).

Some characters articulate a coherent “animal rights” theory, in some cases advocating vegetarianism. Again, this doesn’t seem to have derived from any theory they read in books but rather from a direct emotional response to animals’ suffering.
Grandmother Badger, a central character in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Old-town Folks* (1869), for example, laments the practice of separating a cow from her calf a day before the latter is to be slaughtered, exclaiming that “calf-killing [is] an abominable cruelty, and the parting of calf and cow for a day beforehand an aggravation” (Stowe, 1894, p. 169):

I say it's a shame . . . and I always shall. Hear that cow low! She feels as bad as I should…. If I had things my way, folks should n't eat creatures at all…. I know an old cow's feelings, and I would n't torment her to save myself a little trouble. (Stowe, 1894, p. 170)

Sam Lawson, another character in the same novel, goes so far as to claim that fish have rights, noting how they suffer when caught on a hook:

He was a soft-hearted old body, and the wrigglings and contortions of [the fish] used to disturb his repose so… he [would] kill the fish by breaking their necks when he took them from the hook…. “I can’t bear to see no kind o’ critter in torment. These ’ere pouts ain’t to blame for bein’ fish, and ye ought to put ’em out of their misery. Fish has their rights as well as any on us.” (Stowe, 1894, p. 29)

Patience, the eccentric hermit in George Sand’s novel *Mauprat*, has a similarly empathetic response to animal suffering and, as a result, becomes a follower of the “Pythagorean doctrine” (vegetarianism): “Inclined toward Pythagorean ideas, he was horrified by bloodshed. The death of a doe brought him to tears” (Sand, 1930, p. 146; Enclin aux idées pythagoriciennes, il avait horreur du sang répandu. La morte d’une biche lui arrachait des larmes). After becoming a vegetarian, “he felt… a secret joy… in no longer having occasion to see death delivered… to innocent animals” (p. 42; il éprouvait… une secrète joie… de n’avoir plus occasion de voir donner la mort… à des animaux innocents).

The world depicted in these local-color works is preindustrial and largely precapitalist. This doesn’t mean that animals are not sent to market and slaughtered or sold for other reasons—though, as we have seen, numerous characters are wrenched by the process. As a farmer notes upon selling a horse in Karl Immerman’s *Münchhausen* (1838), “It always saddens one when one sells a creature one has raised, but what can one do?” (Immermann, 1972, 3:141; Es tut einem immer leid, wenn man eine Kreatur, die man aufzog, losschlägt, aber wer kann wider?). The horse looks back wistfully (3:141; als wolte sie klagen) and a young boy observes that a cow companion too is mournful at the departure (3:141; Das Vieh grümt sich). The farmer replies, “[W]hy shouldn’t she?… we’re all mourning” (3:141; Warum sollte es nicht?… grämen wir uns doch auch).
The personal relationship with the animals meant that they had subject status—they were persons in the eyes of their owners—something no longer possible with the current system of industrialized agriculture, where animals are but mass objects, commodities for sale, slaughter, and consumption. Nor does this personal knowledge of animals guarantee that they were never treated cruelly in preindustrial eras and regions. Undoubtedly, instances of cruelty occurred then as now; however, in this local-color literature, cruelty is generally deplored and humane treatment seems to have been the norm—a humane treatment rooted in intimate knowledge of animals as fellow beings who experience similar emotions, who suffer similarly, and who therefore deserve to be treated with respect and compassion.

These characters therefore point to an animal ethic that is not based on rights or utilitarian theory—Enlightenment offshoots—but rather on personal, emotional, dialogical knowledge rooted in interspecies communication. It is, in short, an ethic of care, such as I and others have advocated (see especially Donovan & Adams, 2007, and Donovan, 2006), which proposes that ethical treatment of animals be based on information received from the animals themselves, who are seen as subjects capable of communicative expression. “Don’t you hear over there… that ewe who is crying?”

Notes

1. This tradition is to be distinguished from both the sentimentalist and the naturalist traditions. The former was a didactic genre designed to elicit readers’ emotional reactions to animals’ suffering (as, for example, in Anna Sewell’s Black Beauty); the latter generally depicted rural life negatively, with peasants analogized to animals in scornful terms. This was particularly the case in the French tradition (in Balzac and Zola, for example).

2. By “premodern” I mean to designate those times and places that remained largely unaffected by Enlightenment theory and by capitalist commodification and development, which quantified and objectified the land and animals as property, inert objects lacking personalist, subjective character. The premodern identification of space and time was less by quantitative measurement than by the processes of nature and personal emotional connection (see Scott, 1998). Generally, the premodern era in Western provincial locales was before the late nineteenth/early twentieth centuries when institutionalized agriculture and mass production (“factory farms”) took hold. In its resistance to the impositions of modernity, peasant culture may be viewed as a distinct class culture, transcending national distinctions.

3. The relationship between peasants and animals has been largely ignored or overlooked in scholarship on the history of human-animal relations. Works on peasants ignore their relationship with animals and works on animals ignore peasant culture. This is probably due to the fact that most extant historical records concern elite classes and their writings; scholarship reflects this bias. This study therefore helps to fill in this gap in human-animal studies. All translations in the text are mine.

While the authors of these local-color works were in many cases themselves educated (unlike the characters) and not of the peasant class, they were all nevertheless natives of the regional
locales they wrote about and were themselves intimately knowledgeable about rural peasant and village culture; their work may therefore be viewed as sociologically realistic documentation. As one critic remarked of one of my subjects, Irish writer William Carleton: his “authority in using materials from peasant life and from oral tradition has made him a source for historians and folklorists” (MacKillop, 1977, p. 100). That in general the local-color authors were attempting to portray rural life sympathetically and positively does not diminish the sociological value of their work.

4. Indeed, much humane movement literature reflects an elitist hostility toward the lower classes, seeing them—erroneously, it appears, from the evidence of these local-color works—as more prone to animal cruelty than the upper classes (see Kete, 2007).

5. While this article suggests that such intimate connection between peasants and animals laid the basis for a caring ethic, it was not seen positively by elite authorities of the day. One of them noted that “in the uncultured portion of civilized communities, the distinction between them and animals is not adequately, if at all, recognized… to the animal [is attributed] a vastly more complex set of thoughts and feelings and a much greater range of knowledge and power, than it actually possesses” (Midgley, 1994, pp. 188-189).

6. “Moral economy” was a term used by E. P. Thompson (1991, pp. 259-351) to distinguish the economic worldview of the lower classes from that reflective of a capitalist market economy, to which the moral economy was often drawn in resistance. Thompson, however, does not consider the place of animals within this economy. See also Scott, 1985.

7. I developed a detailed critique of this story in “Breaking the Sentence: Local-Color Literature and Subjugated Knowledges” (Donovan, 1993, pp. 226-43).

8. Claire Connolly has suggested that King Corny may have been modeled in part on Dick Martin (1754-1834), an animal defense advocate and author of Philosophical and Practical Treatise on Horses and the Moral Duty of Man towards the Brute Creation (1796) (Edgeworth, 2000, p. 302, n. 8).

9. See Raber, 2007, pp. 73-99, for an overview of the capitalist transformation of animal agriculture.

References


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