

# Posthuman Narratives, Italian Style

**Emiliano Guaraldo**

*PhD Candidate, University of North Carolina*

guaraldo@live.unc.edu

Amberson, Deborah, and Elena Past. 2014. *Thinking Italian Animals: Human and Posthuman in Modern Italian Literature and Film*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan. 263 pp. \$ 90.00 ISBN 978-1-137-45475-1

Among other things, the 2014 American Association of Italian Studies conference in Zurich will be remembered for its meaningful conclusion. After her exceptional keynote address speech (*Posthumanist Paradoxes*), the Italianist scholars in the audience applauded Rosi Braidotti in a long, heartfelt, and regenerating standing ovation. This event marked an important step in a more general trend within the Italian Studies scholarship. It is a well-established fact that in recent years there has been a proliferation of conference sessions, scholarly articles, and academic production aimed at the re-reading of Italian literary and cinematic traditions in the light of posthuman, ecocritical, and new-materialist studies. In Zurich, Braidotti acknowledged this trend and complimented the Italianist academics for their contributions. By enthusiastically adopting the post-human “navigational tools”, the world of Italian literary studies seems to be finally taking the environmental turn towards a deeper understanding of post-humanism and towards an open, and inclusive attitude regarding non-human subjectivities.

Later in 2014, *Thinking Italian Animals: Human and Posthuman in Modern Italian Literature and Film* was published as part of the Italian and Italian American Studies series by Palgrave MacMillan. This book stands as proof of the found interest in posthumanism by the North American Italian studies academia. Scholars of Italian departments from the United States wrote most of the contributions that compose the book, making *Thinking Italian Animals* exemplary of the renovation and hybridization of Italian studies in the North American departments. Roberto Marchesini and Serenella Iovino, who are currently the most prominent scholars for post-humanism and ecocriticism in Italy, also contributed with two remarkable essays, respectively *The Heterospecific as Ontopoietic Epiphany* and *Hybriditalles: Posthumanizing Calvino*. The participation of scholars of

global importance for the environmental humanities such as Iovino and Marchesini adds up to the excellent collection of essays that Amberson and Past put together in their ambitious project.

The volume is structured in three parts: “Ontologies and Thresholds”, “Biopolitics and Historical Crisis”, and “Ecologies and Hybridizations”. Each part includes a handful of essays that focus specifically on the works of one or more author, being those literary texts or film. The diversity of the essays that compose *Thinking Italian Animals* is profound and, as a result, it offers a panoramic view on how scholars operating from literary departments are currently approaching themes such as animal ethics, the animal question, and the human/nonhuman animal divide, starting from literary analysis.

The essays of *Thinking Italian Animals* share several points of contact. Many possible “reading paths” can connect the fourteen contributions that constitute the volume. Most of the works analyzed in *Thinking Italian Animals* are from the 20<sup>th</sup> or 21<sup>st</sup> century, with the exception of Del Principe’s enticing essay *The Monstruous Meal: Flesh Consumption and Resistance in the European Gothic*. Exposing the relationship between works such as Collodi’s *Pinocchio*, Tarchetti’s *Fosca*, Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, and Stoker’s *Dracula*, Del Principe indicates the monstrous “transhuman body as a key site for articulation of the construction of species and national identity” in 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe (179). According to Del Principe, gothic monsters’ bodies function as resisting objects against speciesist desires of meat consumption and as a tool to destabilize the fixed boundary between human and nonhuman animals. Meat consumption and cannibalism are also at the center of Valentina Fulginiti’s excellent essay *The Postapocalyptic Cookbook*, which focuses on the dystopian/cyberpunk novels *Free Karma Food* (2006) by Italian authorial collective Wu Ming and Laura Pugno’s critically acclaimed *Sirene* (2007). Literature and cinema have widely adopted post-apocalyptic, sci-fi, and dystopian themes to not only titillate the audiences’ imaginations, but also as narrative devices to destabilize the anthropocentric gaze of capitalist mass culture. In this sense, Daniele Fioretti claims that Paolo Volponi’s dystopian allegory of *Il Pianeta Irritabile* (1978) “foresaw the main point of the contemporary debate on animality: the idea that human beings are not something separate from animals” (154). This is an idea that the readers of *Thinking Italian Animals* will find in many of the essays that comprise the volume, as in several of the authors’ works examined seems to emerge some sort of embryonic anti-speciesist self-consciousness. Of course, this self-conscious thought by authors such as Tozzi, Montale, Pavese, Luzi, Landolfi does not necessarily imply an advanced understanding of the nonhuman other, but rather a “posthuman

foreshadow", to use Fioretti's term, an acknowledgment on the ontological limitations of a human centered awareness of life.

Posthumanism often resonates also in other theoretical traditions, for example in feminist theory and the analysis of biopolitical structures of power. In *Cesare Pavese, Posthumanism, and the Maternal Symbolic*, Elizabeth Leake places Pavese's literary production under the theoretical scrutiny of feminist theory and post-humanism more specifically at the intersection of both. In particular, Leake is interested in Pavese's dedicated attention to the woman's body and the biological nature of maternity, the relationship between violence and sexuality, and the mythos of male parthenogenesis.

In *Montale's Animals: Rhetorical Props or Metaphysical Kin* Gregory Pell individuates animal depictions in Montale's poetry that seem deeper and more complex than "trivial anthropomorphism", thanks to the poet's self-aware engagement with the animal otherness (57). The author's engagement is essential also in the case of Luzi's work, as pointed out by Matteo Gilebbi in one of the most memorable essays of the entire book, *Animal Metaphors, Biopolitics, and the Animal Question* in which Gilebbi states, "the presence of animal figures in poetry does not always serve the animal question in an ontological sense". (95) More specifically, it is the appearance of animal metaphors that undermine anthropocentrism (the so-called "theriomorphisms") that can make possible a dialogue between poetry and animal ontology. Such a dialogue is also the fundamental structure of Gilebbi's text, in which Luzi and Agamben interact with surprising complementarity.

The analysis of literary texts and authors takes up most of the pages of *Thinking Italian Animals*, as Elena Past's (Re)Membering Kinship: *Living with Goats in the Wind Blows Round and Le Quattro Volte* and Alexandra Hill's *Creatureliness and Posthumanism in Liliana Cavani's The Night Porter and Pier Paolo Pasolini's Salò* are the only two essays dealing with film. In particular Past's contribution considers two extremely interesting recent films that deal with innovative strategies with the relationship between human and nonhuman life and landscapes they inhabit, demonstrating contemporary Italian independent cinema's attentive gaze on nonhuman subjects.

The posthuman foreshadowing that gradually materializes reading the examples of Italian literature presented in the book answers also other questions, this time on the nature itself of a volume like *Thinking Italian Animals*. How is relevant for a de-localized critical debate on animality and the animal question a work apparently nested within the national borders of Italy? In an increasingly interconnected academia, where boundaries between disciplines seem to collapse exposing the complex networked nature of contemporary humanities, this seems a relevant concern. Intuitively, we could think that the ideas of Italian national entity

and language that on a superficial level are serving as *trait d'union* of the volume are anthropocentric and far from an anti-speciesist understanding of the humanities. But even keeping in mind these concerns, the distinctive “posthuman feel” that transpires from these re-readings of Italian literary texts is real and undeniable. The sense of anticipatory cognizance towards the animal other’s ontological existence becomes the real link between the works analyzed in *Thinking Italian Animals*, rather than their national origin. Furthermore, as pointed out by Roberto Esposito and cited by Amberson and Past in the introduction, we are reminded that there is a uniqueness if Italian thought, as “Italian philosophy has been thinking the human and, more specifically, the living or embodied human with marked intensity for many centuries” (3). In this sense, the Italian framework that defines the scope of the book takes a deeper meaning:

Italian philosophy differs from other Western currents of thought in that it moves beyond the horizon of language to traverse the disciplinary and lexical boundaries of the strictly philosophical, positioning itself across the spheres of politics, history, and life. A propensity for “contamination” with the “non-philosophical” allows Italian thought to incorporate, as it were, the living or embodied human within its conceptual scaffolding. (3)

*Thinking Italian Animals*’ collection of essays represents a clear leap forward from previous works on the animal presence in Italian literary and film culture. On one hand, the contributors share a common theoretical and methodological framework composed by the pivotal works of authors such as Agamben, Derrida, Foucault, Haraway, Braidotti, Lyotard, and seem to be deeply invested in the wider epistemological project of the environmental humanities. On the other hand, the contributors and the editors of the volume explicitly point out that they are not simply interested on the mere passive presence of animals in Italian texts and film, but rather in the ways in which Italian literature seems to be a fertile soil for the seeds of posthumanist and anti-speciesist thoughts.

The ultimate objective of an ambitious project such as *Thinking Italian Animals* is obvious. Amberson and Past’s unearthing of the hidden creative ways in which Italian literature and film have embraced the nonhuman subjectivities and the posthuman horizon will eventually initiate a debate on topics that cannot be ignored anymore. Finally, this volume has the merit of consolidating Italian literary academia on the map of current environmental humanities, potentially initiating transnational, interdisciplinary, and comparative efforts within the humanities departments of Italy. Quoting Amberson and Past, *Thinking Italian Animals* earns itself a place on a larger anti-speciesist project as it “invites further efforts to hybridize, and de-anthropocenter the creaturely world around us” (13).