

Animal: narrator but never main character

Reading *Anima* by Wajdi Mouawad

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Then he proceeded to furnish each of them with its proper food, some with pasture of the earth, others with fruits of trees, and others again with roots; and to a certain number for food he gave other creatures to devour: to some he attached a paucity in breeding, and to others, which were being consumed by these, a plenteous brood, and so procured survival of their kind. Now Epimetheus, being not so wise as he might be, heedlessly squandered his stock of properties on the brutes; he still had left unequipped the race of men, and was at a loss what to do with it.
(Plato, *Protagoras*, 321b-c)

In Plato's *Protagoras* the guilty was the titan Epimetheus, the careless brother of one of the most important heroes of Greek mythology who helped the human race: Prometheus. The assignment was simple: to furnish each form of life on the earth, in a time when "there were gods, but no mortal creatures" (*Protagoras*, 320c), its proper faculty. Epimetheus persuaded his brother to let him take care of it. After spending a long time assigning features to all animals except one, Prometheus verified his brother's distributions. There was a big problem: all animals were equipped but Epimetheus had forgotten the human race: the men were naked, without any chances to survive in a world full of highly specialized beasts and predators; «man was naked, unshod, unbedded, unarmed» (321c). After that terrible mistake made by his brother, Prometheus, guardian of mankind, decided to steal fire and technical abilities from the Gods and to equip the human race with them. Prometheus paid a high price for his action, but from that mythological time men and women could "emerge from earth to light" (321c) and conquer the planet; from another prospective, we can read the same human will to emerge in the words said by God in the book of *Genesis*: "God blessed them and said to them, 'Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground'". (Gen. 1:28).

In his books, the Italian philosopher Roberto Marchesini argues that from the forgetfulness of Epimetheus and the whole myth narrated in Plato's *Protagoras* was born the "sense of lack" that humans feel observing other animals, which are, as the myth said, highly specialized, complete and perfect. The animal world is a kaleidoscopic of shapes, faculties and specializations; on the other side, men and women are naked and unfitted. For this reason they have only one way to walk along: using technical tools and their imaginative minds to cross the hiatus that separated the human world from the natural and animal ones in order to dominate the other forms of life thanks to Prometheus' gifts (Marchesini 2014). From this starting point, emerged the myth of the unrooted man, the man that can do anything he wants because he is unspecialized and unshaped, which means that he is free to mould and transform the world even without touching it or mixing with it. This anthropocentric view has been revisited, especially during the Nineteenth Century,

and today posthuman studies are trying to relocate mankind, focusing on the relations between man and alterity and filling the gap that divided us from the rest of the world for a very long time.

Wajdi Mouawad is a Lebanese-Canadian writer, actor and director. *Anima* is his second novel, published in Canada in 2012. The plot moves from Canada to the United States and, finally, to Lebanon, where the secret of the main character, Wahhch Debch, is hidden. *Anima* is a bloodstained book, where brutal assassins are powerful and everywhere, both in the past and in the present. In the first chapter we find out that narrators of the story are not humans, but animals; the title of the each chapter indicates which animal will narrate that part (some of them are recurrent narrators): *Passer domesticus*, *Columba livia*, *Boa constrictor*, *Rattus norvegicus*, *Pan troglodytes*, *Felis sylvestris catus* and so on. Mouawad chooses a long series of beasts to tell us a story of another kind of beast: man. “Dice spesso che preferisce gli animali agli umani. Dice anche che gli umani sono più bestie delle bestie, e le bestie più umane degli umani” (Mouawad 2015, 128) (“He often says he prefers animals to humans. He also says that humans are beasts more than beasts themselves, and beasts are more human than humans themselves”). The focus of the story are the terrible actions that men sometimes do to other men, especially during wars, like the Sabra and Shatila massacre – the killing of thousands of civilians, mostly Palestinians and Lebanese Shiites, during the Lebanese Civil War in 1982 – an historical event which plays an important part in the book’s plot.

If *Anima* is a story about the bestiality of men, why Mouawad chooses animals as narrators? And which is the effect of that choice on the reader? The author produces a double and opposite effect with this narrative solution. First of all, assigning the role of observers and narrators to animals, Mouawad represents animals like organisms that are often unable to survive or live in the absence of men; animals are not the owners of their destinies, which are decided and shaped by men and men only. Secondly, in this book animals are good observers, therefore the readers can see humans with different eyes. With this change of the point of view, animals donate a new perspective on mankind: this is a fundamental movement that we have to make if we want to know us better. Like Marchesini said, the non-human alterities represent the best interface – open, a-balanced and in evolution – that men have to understand themselves (Marchesini 2009). On the other hand, there is a problem in *Anima*: the role played by animals. They are narrators, but they aren’t main characters or co-protagonists of the story. Using animals to tell a story about men in which animals rarely act is a choice that underlines, again, the hiatus that divides us from them: they become the voice over in story about mankind, they are an element of the scene that men transform and in which they live, kill and act. Animals are regrouped, despite their kaleidoscopic set of shapes and peculiarities, in a single category. Men are on the other side of the crevasse. From this point of view, beasts are prisoners in their monad-worlds, trapped in their instincts, caged in their behaviors. Men instead emerge from this static landscape, moving free in a world bleeding for their actions.

There is an important aspect which is just mentioned in the book by Wajdi Mouawad: the deep interaction between animals (humans included), here described in some episodes involving men and dogs. The author puts in relation this dialogue to ancient cultures, like the indigenous peoples of North America, suggesting that we should look to our past to find new ways to approach non-human alterities. *Anima* is a book that suggests a comparison and a metaphor: men and beasts,

men are beasts. We are animals for sure, but we have to find new ways of telling stories about us and them. The ages of George Orwell and moral fables is far away in the past, they merely used animals like metaphors or caricatures of human acts and conditions in a narrative form that didn't look at the future. Authors should avoid the use of animals to tell stories about men, they should add some distance between their new way of seeing things and the old methods, like the ending lines of *Animal Farm*: "The creatures outside looked from pig to man, and from man to pig, and from pig to men again; but already it was impossible to say which was which" (George Orwell 1945, 118). Animals are our main alterities, we have to tell stories of interactions, of changes, of connections; and we have to let them occupy some space that we have reserved for us during a very long time: first of all the role of main characters or co-protagonists of the stories we tell about the world.

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