

Of Humans, Pigs, Fish, and Apes: The Literary Motif of Human-Animal Metamorphosis and its Multiple Functions in Contemporary Fiction¹

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[...] she would try
To stretch her arms, she had no arms to stretch.
Would she complain, a moo came from her throat,
A startling sound—her own voice frightened her.
[...]
Her tears rolled down; if only words would come,
She'd speak her name, tell all, implore their aid.
For words her hoof traced letters in the dust—
I, O—sad tidings of her body's change.²

THE STORY OF THE BEAUTIFUL IO, whom Jupiter transforms into a cow to hide his affair with her from his wife Juno and who, shedding bitter tears, manages to reveal her true identity to her father by tracing her name in the ground with her hoof, is just one of many instances of human-animal transformation in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. The *Metamorphoses*, beyond doubt part of the canon of Western literature, has inspired many authors throughout the centuries, and it still constitutes an interesting touchstone for a discussion of literary representations of human-animal transformation in texts written in the second half of the twentieth century. The frequent explicit intertextual references to Ovid in recent literary representations of metamorphoses is evidence of the lasting impact of the *Metamorphoses* on Western literature and culture.

The depiction of the metamorphosis in the story of Io shares a number of features with the stories about human-animal transformations that we will examine in more detail in this article. Firstly, the tension between radical physical changes on the one hand and the individual's mental and psychological state on the other hand constitutes a focal point of many stories about metamorphoses.³ The being that undergoes a process of transformation may either retain human feelings and thoughts beneath its animal appearance, as Io obviously does, or the metamorphosis may affect the mental level as well, bringing about novel or alien ways of perceiving the world. Secondly, the story of Io, like other stories of human-animal transformation in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, suggests that the animal the human being is turned into somehow

resembles the individual who has been transformed. Io, for example, apparently retains part of her beauty even as a cow.⁴ Thirdly, Io's attempt to communicate with her father and to let him know what has happened points to difficulties with the use of language, which are often addressed in twentieth-century fiction as one of the consequences of a metamorphosis. In the novels we discuss here, the individual's struggle to explain his or her transformation by means of language either takes place among the characters, that is, on the story level, or is situated on the level of narrative transmission, involving a homodiegetic narrator striving to explain his or her metamorphosis to a narratee.

Above and beyond these three issues associated with the motif of human-animal metamorphosis, a fourth important aspect of this motif is, of course, its potential to raise questions about the relationship between human beings and animals. Involving what is presumably the most intimate connection between human beings and animals imaginable, the depiction of a human-animal transformation is virtually bound to challenge culturally dominant assumptions about animals as the 'other' of humankind. This function is what makes the motif of human-animal metamorphosis particularly interesting from the point of view of current ecocritical approaches. Especially in recent fiction, the transformation of a human being into an animal is not necessarily seen in entirely negative terms, and this has interesting implications as far as the conceptualization of the relationship between human beings and animals, or even nature in general, is concerned. The relationship between human beings and animals has repeatedly been redefined by anthropology and biology. Charles Darwin's writings, for example, challenged the supremacy of man and induced a radical rethinking of the human-animal relationship. Since the 1970s, the ecological movement has contributed to a further fundamental reevaluation of the status of animals in relation to humankind and has in particular brought forth a vision of a fragile interdependence between human culture and non-human nature, in which the role of humans cannot be taken for granted but has to be negotiated. In book 15 of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, human-animal transformation is seen within a philosophical framework that, in crucial ways, anticipates current ecological thinking. In a passage that is often referred to as "The Doctrines of Pythagoras," a concept of reincarnation is sketched, which implies the notion that "[w]e too ourselves, who of this world are part, not only flesh and blood but pilgrim souls, can make our homes in creatures of the wild or of the farm. These creatures might have housed souls of our parents, brothers, other kin, or men at least, and we must keep them safe, respected, honoured" (Ovid 365). Although the connection

between the human and the animal realm that is suggested here is a spiritual one, resulting from the concept of the migration of souls, it still evokes the basic ecological axiom that “everything is connected to everything else.”⁵ Moreover, the exhortation that animals should be kept “safe, respected, honoured” anticipates an important aspect of ecological thinking.

That the motif of human-animal transformation has been part of the collective memory in many different cultures and that the motif has fascinated both authors and readers throughout the centuries can be explained by the fundamental anthropological questions that tend to be raised by a human-animal transformation as well as by the sense of wonder such a metamorphosis is likely to inspire. The motif of human-animal metamorphosis can be found in works by authors ranging from Geoffrey Chaucer, Marie de France, Dante, Shakespeare, Gerard Manley Hopkins and Franz Kafka to a number of contemporary writers, such as Michel Butor, Marie Darrieussecq, Michel Faber, and Richard Flanagan, whose uses of the motif we examine in this article. Additionally, human-animal transformation is a common feature of folktales, as the ubiquitous princes and princesses turned into frogs, swans or ravens in European fairytales or the tales about werewolves and similar shape-shifting creatures in various cultures demonstrate. One of the differences between the depiction of metamorphoses in folktales and in other literary texts consists in the general tendency of folktales to show “sudden transformation instead of slow change,”⁶ whereas other literary texts often devote considerable attention to the details of the transformation process itself.

In literary works, the psychological and emotional reaction of the transformed individual, as well as the way in which the metamorphosis is accounted for, provide useful clues as to the potential functions of the motif. Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, as *locus classicus*, presents a relatively uniform explanation of why human beings are transformed into animals, since the metamorphoses are always caused by the interference of supernatural beings. While supernatural powers of some kind are also usually responsible for the metamorphoses one encounters in fairytales, contemporary fiction often alludes to other reasons for a transformation. Literary texts, for example, point to new ways of conceptualizing the relationship between human beings and animals when they suggest that a metamorphosis might be a natural, evolutionary process. Sometimes literature provides an apparently more rational, ‘scientific’ explanation of the transformation by accounting for it as the outcome of an experiment or as the consequence of contact with toxic substances, as will be shown in our discussion of Darrieussecq's *Pig Tales* below. Traditionally the transformation of a human being into an animal as presented

in literary texts is first and foremost a punishment, which implies that crossing the boundary between humans and animals is conceptualized as an utter degradation for the human being. Deprived of various privileges because of his or her loss of 'humanity,' the one who is transformed is made aware of the rigid character of the demarcation line between animals and humans. In literary texts the experience of being turned into an animal is typically associated with a state of helplessness or with an outbreak of uncontrollable ferocity. In both cases the motif of human-animal metamorphosis is closely linked with human fears in the face of the 'other' and in particular with the threat of losing control over both one's emotions and one's body. In other words human-animal transformation may express the fear of encountering the 'other' lurking inside the human being behind a façade erected by civilization.⁷ Even in cases where the metamorphosis creates (mainly or partially) a comic effect, it can usually still be interpreted as an expression of fear, since laughing at what one is afraid of is a common strategy for keeping one's fears at bay.

In addition to undermining culturally prevalent assumptions about the human-animal relationship, the motif of human-animal metamorphosis can also fulfill a host of other functions, as the texts on which we focus in this article exemplify. The depiction of a metamorphosis may, for example, provide the context for a critique of gender roles, as Darrieussecq's *Pig Tales* demonstrates. Flanagan's *Gould's Book of Fish*, in contrast, shows that metamorphoses may also question contested self-definitions in what Russell West-Pavlov refers to as "the disputed terrain of Australian identities."⁸ The motif of human-animal metamorphosis thus turns out to be very flexible as far as its functions are concerned. In the following, we use the ecocritical and the cultural-ecological framework to examine the diverse functions that can be ascribed to four novels from the second half of the twentieth century that use the motif of human-animal metamorphosis.

Ecocritical approaches to the study of literary texts direct attention to themes and questions that have often been neglected by literary critics: concepts of nature, the representation of nature, and the interdependence between man and environment. Thus, ecocritical thinking, for example the assumption that "[h]uman accountability to the environment is part of the text's ethical orientation," provides a useful starting point for the discussion of the motif of human-animal transformation.⁹ To explore the potential functions of literary texts employing the motif of human-animal metamorphosis, it is also useful to rely upon the concept of literature as 'cultural ecology' developed by Hubert Zapf.¹⁰ In contrast to ecocriticism, Zapf's concept of literature as cultural ecology shifts the focus from a purely thematic to a structural-functional

approach. According to Zapf, literature can influence culture in a manner that can be compared to the workings of an ecosystem. The term 'ecology' in this context does not refer to the thematic focus of a literary text but merely to *analogies* between ecological processes and the function of literature as a sensor for what has been marginalized, neglected, and suppressed in society. By imaginatively balancing inequalities and distortions in the cultural system, literary texts may foster a creative renewal of perception and imagination. The literary motif of human-animal metamorphosis, for example, may challenge the rigid demarcations between human beings and animals which are prevalent in society; it may invite readers to reconsider and possibly even to redraw the human-animal boundary, but it may also critically examine other aspects of the cultural system.

Within the framework of his cultural-ecological approach to literature, Zapf discerns three central functions regulating the relationship between literature and cultural context. According to Zapf, literature may function as (1) *cultural-critical metadiscourse*, (2) *imaginative counterdiscourse* and (3) *reintegrative interdiscourse*. The function of literature as *cultural-critical metadiscourse* results from

[t]he representation and critical balancing of typical deficits, contradictions and deformations in prevailing political, economic, ideological and utilitarian systems of civilisatory power. These systems are depicted as often traumatising forms of human self-alienation, which, in their one-sided hierarchical opposition between culture and nature, mind and body, power and love, lead to death-in-life situations of paralysed vitality and psychological imprisonment. (Zapf 93)

A human being undergoing a process of metamorphosis may become the very site of conflict where culture and nature collide, since, as the story of Io illustrates, the transformation often forces the individual to cope with a painful tension between mind and body, culture and nature. If aspects of the prevailing cultural system are not just criticized in a literary work but the text actually "articulate[s] what otherwise remains unarticulated," Zapf assumes that the text has the function of an *imaginative counterdiscourse* (Zapf 93). This function can, for example, be fulfilled by texts in which a human-animal transformation is told from the perspective of the individual undergoing the metamorphosis. In such a case the human perspective may give way more or less radically to an 'animalized' point of view, and thus a perspective that is usually excluded from human perception is granted room in the work of fiction. Finally, literature may function as *reintegrative interdiscourse* by "reintegrating [...] the repressed into the whole system of cultural discourses," in this way potentially inducing a process of cultural renewal (Zapf 93). The

term 'reintegration' might at first seem to refer merely to a "superficial harmonisation of conflict," but, as Zapf emphasizes, the meeting of the repressed and the dominating culture may be fraught with immense tension and may even end in catastrophe (Zapf 93). In the depiction of human-animal metamorphoses the formulation of hybrid, transgressive identities allows a reading of the text as reintegrative interdiscourse. Yet such transgressive acts of self-definition often are shown to be accompanied by conflicts that are aggravated by their being located *within* the individual.

Human-animal transformation as ecocriticism and criticism of gender roles in Marie Darrieussecq's *Pig Tales*

In Marie Darrieussecq's novel *Pig Tales* (*Truismes*, 1996), which depicts the gradual transformation of a woman into a sow, one can quite clearly discern an ecocritical orientation, since the relationship between human beings and animals as well as that between humans and nature in general is re-examined in a number of ways. One of the possible explanations offered for the transformation of the protagonist, namely nuclear fallout "or maybe a cocktail of toxic effects," suggests a reading of the novel as cultural-critical metadiscourse, since it points to the human destruction of nature and the nefarious consequences for the humans themselves.¹¹ Yet this 'scientific' account rivals with an explanation of the transformation as a 'natural' process that is regulated to a certain extent by the protagonist's emotional states, since the protagonist oscillates between her human and her animal shape depending on how she is feeling. For example, situations of extreme anguish seem to bring about a transformation, either from human to animal form or the other way around. Thus Darrieussecq's novel does not stick to the traditional binary opposition between nature and civilization; instead it toys with various competing explanations of the unlikely events depicted in this novel. The motif of human-animal metamorphosis is also employed to criticize gender roles. Darrieussecq's story draws upon social structures and gendered relationships to account for the unlikely event of a woman turning into a sow, and in this way functions as cultural-critical metadiscourse of a culture that turns a woman into a pig because it treats her like one. In the dystopian French society depicted in *Pig Tales*, gender roles are more rigidly defined than ever; the only jobs open to women are those of "personal assistant" and "traveling companion" (91), that is, prostitute. Moreover, "there aren't many animals left" (50) in this bleak futuristic France, which suggests that the exploitation of nature may have led to an extinction of animal species. References to events the readers do not know anything about ("the Epidemic," "that series of famines,"

"the Los Angeles disaster," and "the Great Trials" (114, 131), create a temporal distance between the narrator and the readers' reality. Yet there are enough similarities between the dystopian society and today's reality to encourage the readers "to judge their own society by the extent to which it embodies dystopian features."¹²

The narrator in *Pig Tales*, who describes her own metamorphosis into a pig in retrospect, provides the reader with details about the various physical changes she experiences as well as about her thoughts and emotions during the whole transformation process. The detailed description of the physical changes the protagonist undergoes makes the metamorphosis appear grotesque, even monstrous. The features that mark the radical departure of the protagonist from being human in terms of her appearance include her hair "sticking up like bristles, falling out in handfuls" (41), her temporary inability to stand or walk upright, the development of additional breasts or rather teats, hooves with three fingers, and a corkscrew tail. While the body of the protagonist is gradually becoming monstrous, the depiction of the protagonist's thoughts, emotions, fears, and hopes still makes it possible for the reader to feel sympathy for the main character or even to identify with her to a certain extent. The complex relationship between the external 'animalization' of the protagonist and her thoughts and emotions that remain recognizably 'human' makes it possible to read the novel as reintegrative interdiscourse, which combines the human and the animal domain in novel ways. A reading of the motif of human-animal metamorphosis as establishing a reintegrative interdiscourse is also supported by the protagonist's continuing oscillation between being a sow and a woman, suggesting that the human-animal boundary might not be as rigid and impene-trable as is generally assumed.

The protagonist's transformation into a pig implies critical comments on the dominant gender roles and thus motivates a reading of the novel as cultural-critical metadiscourse of prevalent images of women. One of the first symptoms of the metamorphosis is the protagonist's increased appetite and significant weight gain. The assumption that gaining weight constitutes a step towards turning into a pig can, in and of itself, be read as a highly ironic comment on social expectations with respect to what women are supposed to look like, as well as on many women's preoccupation with their weight. At first, the extra weight makes the protagonist more attractive for men, and she shares this initial positive assessment of her additional weight, observing that she "looked [...] incredibly gorgeous, like a fashion model, but more voluptuous" (5). While this positive assessment of a more voluptuous female body may at first sight suggest a liberation from the dictates of weight control, it turns out

to be part of a criticism of the bestiality of men's desires. The fact that the male customers of the 'boutique'/brothel where the protagonist works actually enjoy her transformation into a pig is indicative of what they expect from sexual relationships with women. The customers react to her physical changes by falling "into barnyard ways" (19), by turning "bestial" (25), yet without going through any physical transformation that would account for their behaviour: "Some of the clients began to bray, others grunted like pigs, and little by little, most of them wound up on all fours" (19). As Lucile Desblache observes, the protagonist "becomes the mirror of her environment and thus becomes a sow because the men who are around her are pigs" (Desblache 390). In other words *Pig Tales* toys with the idea that there is a certain resemblance between the individual who is transformed and the animal he or she is turned into. That the notion of a resemblance between the human being and the animal is used as a satirical take on gender roles is emphasized by the fact that the protagonist's lover Yvan is a werewolf, a creature that is surely the epitome of masculine gender stereotypes such as aggressiveness and strength.

In addition to highlighting and criticizing gender roles, some details of the protagonist's physical and mental transformation allude quite clearly to the exploitation and abuse of animals by human beings and thus are indicative of an ecocritical stance. For example, the protagonist begins to suffer from painful allergic reactions to make-up, recalling the abuse of animals by the beauty industry to test make-up products. Describing the pain that she experienced when she put make-up on her face, the narrator becomes the voice of the voiceless; she articulates the pain of the animals in the laboratories who cannot utter their complaints themselves. The protagonist's changing food preferences, her aversion to eating meat and in particular pork ("I couldn't eat ham sandwiches anymore, they made me sick" (13), another symptom of the metamorphosis, can be read as an implicit criticism of the meat industry.¹³ This critical stance is already introduced in the motto preceding the novel, which describes how a boar is butchered. The criticism of the meat industry is further stressed by the main character's being haunted by "bizarre dreams about blood, about sausages" (20).¹⁴ The readers, thus, are confronted with butchering from the point of view of a potential victim, a strategy that establishes a cultural-critical metadiscourse.

The gender-related functional potential of *Pig Tales* also interacts with ecocritical functions. In the course of her transformation, the protagonist feels a growing affinity with nature. Her physical metamorphosis makes her better adapted to surviving in nature, rendering her more and more independent of human society and its amenities. Her nails and teeth grow harder and allow

her to survive on the food she finds outdoors, enabling her, for example, to peel and crack chestnuts with her nails and teeth. In addition, her skin grows thicker, keeping her warm without clothes. Even in the very first stages of her metamorphosis, the protagonist already feels an overpowering longing “for green things, for nature” (14). This longing is not restricted to the affective level, but involves a physical, sensual component, which manifests itself in an “intense desire to go stick my nose into everything, roll around on the grass, sniff it, nibble it” (14). The ‘return to nature’ thus goes hand in hand with a desire to liberate the body, to discover its sensuousness, which has been denied to human beings in general and women in particular by cultural norms.¹⁵ The growing affinity with nature also makes itself felt in physical proximity with animals: “Birds landed on me and pecked at my cheeks, the corners of my mouth, behind my ears, where scraps of food remained” (65). An even stronger impression of the protagonist’s being part of nature is created by the description of her sharing the dreams of various animals around her: “I heard sparrows in the treetops, ruffling their feathers as they went early to bed [...] and I felt their dreams glide across my skin with the last rays of the sunset. [...] In my dreams were the dreams of the birds, and the dream the dog had left for me” (76-77). Images such as the shared dreams conjure up a vision of a state of harmony with nature, establishing an imaginative counter-discourse to the traditional separation between the human sphere and that of animals. Still, from the point of view of today’s gender studies, the association between woman and nature that is evoked in passages like these is far from unproblematic, since it cements the cultural marginalization of woman by virtually excluding her from the domain of culture and seems to propagate an essentialist notion of an instinctive affinity between women and nature.

Ecocritical concerns also inform the depiction of the protagonist’s changing food preferences. At first sight, the description of her food choices seems to contribute primarily to the impression that the protagonist is gradually turning into a grotesque, monstrous creature. Gauged against human standards, her eating habits degenerate from what can be considered a ‘healthy,’ ‘natural’ craving for fruit and vegetables via an at best unusual desire to eat flowers and raw, unpeeled potatoes to an animalistic inclination to eat earthworms and mice: “I often chew up one of nature’s little creatures without the slightest twinge of either pride or disgust. We all need to get our dose of protein. Mice are the easiest—ask any cat—or else earthworms, but they don’t pack as much energy” (48). By pointing out the parallel between what she eats and what cats (that is, cherished pets) feed on, the narrator makes the reader wonder whether the protagonist’s eating habits are really all that monstrous.

Moreover, her recurring nausea and nightmares caused by the very idea of eating pork suggest that ordinary human food preferences might be at least equally disgusting, depending on the perspective one adopts. Still, when the protagonist finally does not even stop short at eating dead human bodies, she definitely violates a fundamental food taboo. The descriptions of the protagonist ravenously devouring her food likewise can be seen as indicative of her gradual transformation into an animal. Yet these descriptions may also be read as an expression of unrestricted pleasure in eating, almost a kind of *jouissance*, which is usually suppressed by table manners that have been internalized in the process of socialization: “You should have seen me eat those apples. I never had enough time to munch them properly, really chew them—my mouth would be bursting with juice, my teeth crunching up the flesh—and the taste!” (14).

The way of life chosen by the protagonist at the end of *Pig Tales* can be interpreted as an imaginative counterdiscourse presenting an alternative existence that is completely at odds with human standards and norms, as the main character chooses to live in the woods among wild pigs. Both her change from human to animal and the parallel move from human society to nature invert and subvert the norms to which readers are accustomed. It remains doubtful, however, whether she fully belongs among her animal companions: “they often sniff me suspiciously, sensing that human thoughts are still going on in there” (143). Transgressing the human-animal boundary is therefore not necessarily identical with achieving a state of harmony. Instead, the protagonist remains caught in the tensions caused by her in-between state. Since the protagonist’s transition from human being to animal is never really completed, given the fact that she regularly returns to her human shape, the depiction of the metamorphosis can also be read as reintegrative interdiscourse. Even at the end of the novel, when the protagonist is a pig most of the time, she still regularly reverts to her human form.

The loss of control over language as a side-effect of the transformation, which can be found in many metamorphosis narratives, also evokes a cultural-critical metadiscourse, but in addition this aspect of the transformation creates comic effects. The metamorphosis into a sow weakens the protagonist’s capacity to use language. She occasionally struggles to find the right word: “Until I filled out a *job application form* (words are coming back to me)” (2); and, at least temporarily, she is even completely unable to utter human language: “I opened my mouth but managed to produce only a sort of grunt” (79). The (partial) loss of a control over language appears to go hand in hand with the loss of other cognitive capacities, since the narrator reports, for

example, that “[e]ven the act of remembering is quite difficult” (2) for her. Likewise, both anatomical and circumstantial problems make it difficult for the narrator to write down her story: “Simply holding a pen gives me terrible cramps. [...] I write very, very slowly. I won’t tell you about the problems I had getting this notebook or about the mud, which dirties everything and dilutes ink that’s barely dry” (1). The problems with using spoken and written language emphasize the increasing alienation of the protagonist/narrator from human society. When the protagonist’s body parts are referred to by herself using the butcher’s terminology—“bacon” (46), “chops” (65)—the criticism of the meat industry is picked up by alluding to the possible future fate of the protagonist, that is, ending up as bacon and chops on people’s plates. Yet at the same time this categorization of her body parts creates comic effects. The multiple functions of the use of language in connection with the protagonist’s metamorphosis stress once more that the motif of human-animal transformation can contribute to a wide range of functions the literary text can fulfill.

“A colony of fish masquerading as men”: metamorphosis as ecocriticism and criticism of colonization in Richard Flanagan’s *Gould’s Book of Fish*

Gould’s Book of Fish by Australian writer Richard Flanagan is a revisionist historical novel juxtaposing two time levels (the present and the beginning of the nineteenth century) and featuring two narrators, a frame narrator (situated on the time level of the present) and an embedded narrator (situated on the time level of the past). As the subtitle “A novel in twelve fish” already suggests, fish constitute the main structural device of this text. Each of the twelve parts of the novel bears the name of a species of fish: “The Pot-bellied Seahorse,” “The Kelpy,” “The Porcupine Fish,” and so forth. In addition, pictures of these different species of fish precede each of the parts. The embedded story, which is set in 1828, when “a convict called William Buelow Gould [...] in the supposed interest of science was [...] ordered by the surgeon of the penal colony of Sarah Island to paint all fish caught there,” provides an account of the early stages of colonization in Australia from the point of view of a convict.¹⁶ Thus it presents an account of the past from a perspective that has been marginalized in traditional historiography. While painting various species of fish for his *Book of Fish*, the convict William ‘Billy’ Gould begins to feel a growing sympathy with the fish, a development that culminates in his transformation into a fish at the end of the novel.¹⁷

The motif of human-animal transformation plays a crucial structural role in Flanagan’s novel, since it establishes a link between the two time levels that

are juxtaposed and even blurs the distinction between them.¹⁸ The notion of the metamorphosis is first introduced on the time level of the present, in the first part of the novel (“The Pot-bellied Seahorse”), where it is a book that appears to undergo some kind of transformation. This metamorphosis, however, also strangely affects the protagonist. What connects this incident at the beginning of the novel with the human-animal transformation near its end is the fact that the transformation of the book is associated with biochemical reactions that are characteristic of a certain species of fish, the bastard trumpeter:

As with the skin of a bastard trumpeter caught at night, the book’s cover was now a mass of pulsing purple spots. [...] As with the night fisherman who handles the bastard trumpeter, the speckled phosphorescence spread from the book onto my hands until they too were covered in purple freckles [...]. As I held my luminous hands up in front of my face and then slowly turned them around in wonder—hands so familiar yet so alien—it was as if I had already begun a disturbing metamorphosis. (Flanagan 13)

Finally, the book dissolves into “a large, brackish puddle” (25), apparently completing its transformation and disappearing at the same time. The metamorphosis of the book causes the narrator to write the book that has just been lost—“Gould’s Book of Fish”—and thus to retell Billy Gould’s story, which culminates in his metamorphosis into a fish. Moreover, at the end of the first part of the novel the narrator describes a strange encounter with a seadragon in an aquarium, a sort of osmosis that serves as a transition to the retelling of the ‘original’ “Gould’s Book of Fish”: “I was falling, tumbling, passing through glass and through water into that seadragon’s eye while that seadragon was passing into me, and then I was looking out at that bedraggled man staring in at me, that man who would, I now had the vanity of hoping, finally tell my story” (38). The distinction between the two time levels dissolves when Billy, who has been transformed into a fish in 1828, turns up on the time level of the present.

The novel does not provide a clear answer to the question of why (or even how) Billy Gould’s transformation into a fish takes place. Instead, the text suggests several alternative explanations. For example, in the first part of the novel the narrator alludes to some magical power that might be associated with the book he has discovered. Magic is even more explicitly linked to human-animal transformations in another passage, which refers to the alleged capacity of the Aborigenes’ ancestors to fly like birds and swim like fish: “to levitate then fly from Van Diemen’s Land’s chains & cockchafers by eating fish eyes & smearing a bird’s blood over my arms & leaping off a certain magic mountain, then diving into the sea & swimming as one with the fish

until one was a fish" (81-82). Flanagan's novel also includes references to classical tradition, since, at one point, Billy Gould is "ordered to depict the great sea god Proteus who can [...] miraculously assume the form of any aquatic creature" (54), and there is even a reference to Ovid. The sudden transformation caused by supernatural interference that one encounters in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, however, is explicitly rejected as a possible explanation in the narrator's account of his own metamorphosis: "There was for me no magick [sic] transformation, when hair fell out & skin slowly coarsened & divided into small scaling" (391).

Among the rivalling explanations for Billy Gould's metamorphosis there are also some that invite an ecocritical reading. When the embedded narrator compares his own imminent transformation to the metamorphosis of the freshwater crayfish, he evokes a notion of a metamorphosis as a natural, biological process, one which must occur at a particular point in the life cycle. The narrator also ponders whether his transformation has been caused simply by his prolonged proximity to the fish he has to paint: "I simply had spent too long in their company, staring at them, committing the near criminal folly of thinking there was something individually human about them, when the truth is that there is something irretrievably fishy about us all" (392). As an animal species, fish certainly are radically 'other' to human beings, arguably more so than most other species.¹⁹ Yet, in the process of painting the different species of fish, Billy Gould feels a growing sympathy and empathy with regard to fish. This affinity is partially fuelled by what can be regarded as ecocritical thinking, since the dead fish that is lying before him while he is painting makes Billy wonder about the implications of a potential extinction of the species:

And when I finished the painting & looked at that poor leatherjacket which now lay dead on the table I began to wonder whether, as each fish died, the world was reduced in the amount of love that you might know for such a creature. Whether there was that much less wonder & beauty left to go around as each fish was hauled up in the net. And if we kept on taking & plundering & killing, if the world kept on becoming ever more impoverished of love & wonder & beauty in consequence, what, in the end, would be left? (200)

The embedded narrator ponders the responsibility human beings have for protecting the fragile ecosystem and the widespread lack of awareness regarding this responsibility. Moreover, the fact that fish are associated with "wonder & beauty" draws the readers' attention to the splendour and complexity of all living creatures. The transgression of the human-animal boundary in Billy Gould's metamorphosis is also the basis of an imaginative counterdiscourse, since it allows the narrator to emphasize that fish have thoughts

and feelings, without, however, making an attempt to reconstruct these thoughts and emotions, since “our thoughts are our own & utterly incommunicable” (397). The narrator uses his insight into the mind of the fish to correct the culturally prevalent image of fish as unfeeling, thus rectifying a view which presumably makes it more acceptable to kill and eat fish than other animal species. The ecological idea that all living beings are connected with each other is rounded off by picking up the idea of a migration of souls, which can already be found in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* in the context of human-animal transformation. Billy Gould has the impression that the dying fish he is painting seek to transfer their spirit to him: “It was as if their spirit was seeking another watery medium, & at a certain point when death was imminent this spirit to ensure its own survival would leap across the deadly medium of air” (215).

The human-animal transformation in *Gould’s Book of Fish* can also be read as cultural-critical metadiscourse, as criticism of a particular aspect of the colonial system, namely the way prisoners were treated. The description of a method of punishment that was devised specifically for the convicts on Sarah Island suggests a reading of the motif of human-animal metamorphosis as a comment on the inhumane treatment of the prisoners. Since the prison cells have been “built at the base of sandstone cliffs below the high water mark,” the prisoners nearly drown in “those infamous fish cells” when the flood comes in (43). A transformation into a fish almost seems to be the logical outcome of having been the inmate of a ‘fish cell.’ That the metamorphosis and the references to fish in general can be interpreted as cultural-critical metadiscourse concerning the treatment of the convicts in the penal colony is also intimated by the observation that sometimes a “bloated convict drowned trying to escape” (135) is found among the fish in the nets of the local fishermen. While the dystopian society depicted in *Pig Tales* turns women into pigs, the colonial past evoked in *Gould’s Book of Fish* seems to turn convicts into fish, reducing them to a subhuman status.

The metamorphosis is also associated with a more general criticism of colonization. The process in which Billy feels the fish slowly taking possession of him is described as an act of colonizing. The narrator, for example, says about his changing relation to fish that “they [the fish] were beginning to enter me & I didn’t even know that they were colonising me as surely as Lieutenant Bowen had colonised Van Diemen’s Land all those years ago” (214). His struggle to resist the invasion/colonization is conceptualized as an attempt “to fight back as the blackfellas had” (214), and his attempts to resist the invasion turn out to be just as useless as those of the indigenous Australians. The fish,

in this invasion, play the role of the white settlers, a parallel that is also evident when Billy refers to the fish as “cruel new settlers of my soul” (215). This additional facet of the cultural-critical metadiscourse associated with the motif of human-animal metamorphosis draws the readers’ attention to the highly problematic identity formation in a context where the individual is a victim (convict) and at the same time an invader (settler).

The use of the motif of human-animal transformation not only criticizes certain aspects of the colonial situation; it is also an instrument for expressing criticism of human nature in general. In the process of painting the various species of fish, Billy Gould begins to recognize striking similarities between the fish and the human beings around him. When he sketches “a crude caricature of the Surgeon naked” (136), he ends up drawing the Surgeon as a porcupine fish. Ultimately, Billy Gould even begins to perceive his whole environment as fish: “I realised the awful truth about Sarah Island: that this was not a colony of men at all, but a colony of fish masquerading as men. [...] I recognised not Jorgen Jorgensen but saw a sawtooth shark, thrusting & cutting me into pieces with his long mouth” (250). Thus, his own gradual metamorphosis seems to be accompanied by radical changes in how he perceives his environment. When men are compared to fish in such a manner, their negative characteristics are stressed. Such reflections hark back to the fable and the bestiary, but also to Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, which suggests that there is a certain resemblance between the original human being and the animal into which he or she is transformed.

Metamorphosis and the cultural archive: Michel Butor’s *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Ape*

In comparison with the two novels discussed so far, the motif of human-animal metamorphosis plays only a relatively marginal role in Michel Butor’s *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Ape*. The main references to human-animal transformation are relegated to a dream sequence containing many fantastic elements, which is typographically set apart from the rest of the text by means of italics. During the protagonist’s stay at Castle H. he has a series of dreams that expose him to fantastic and horrifying situations. When the protagonist dreams about being transformed into an ape (chapter eight, “The Metamorphosis”), this metamorphosis is explained as an event that is brought about by a supernatural being, a vampire, who transforms the protagonist into an ape in order to punish him for having been sexually involved with the vampire’s daughter. The unrealistic atmosphere of the dream is enhanced by the introduction of the idea of an interplanetary flight: “he [the vampire] swept me off

to the planet Mercury.”²⁰ The fact that the human-animal transformation is located within the dream sequence and is associated with elements of horror as well as with the experience of being punished by a supernatural being is in line with the traditional use of the motif as an expression of the human fear of losing control over one’s body and of being involuntarily ‘animalized.’ The implications of the motif of human-animal metamorphosis are thus reminiscent of those one encounters already in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*.

While the motif of human-animal transformation is most often used to ask questions about the relationship between human beings and nature, Butor’s novel focuses rather on the *cultural* dimension of the motif itself, on its being embedded in a vast cultural archive. This questioning is achieved by calling upon various literary and cultural contexts in which metamorphoses appear. As Helene Harth has shown, the protagonist’s experiences in the dream sequence closely imitate one of the stories in *The 1001 Nights*.²¹ The intertextual reference to this Oriental tale is also marked by assigning *The 1001 Nights* a particularly prominent status in the library of Castle H., where it is the only book that is not on the shelves but is lying on a table. Moreover, the Orientalist scholar Enno Littmann, who translated *The 1001 Nights* into German (Harth 218), is mentioned several times. In addition to the Oriental tradition, Egyptian myths (for example the reference to the Egyptian god of writing, who “was often portrayed as an ape” [29]) as well as medieval alchemy are evoked, situating the metamorphosis in a transcultural context and tracing it through various centuries. Finally, Græco-Roman mythology is drawn upon, which embeds the idea of human-animal transformation within yet another cultural context and includes direct references to Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* and its pictorial adaptations. The cultural framing clearly dominates the depiction of the metamorphosis in Butor’s novel, inviting an allegorical reading of the transformation and virtually forestalling an anthropological or ecocritical interpretation.

It is in particular the protagonist’s attempt to cope with the loss of the ability to speak that provides the basis for the potential function of Butor’s text as cultural-critical metadiscourse. Other physical aspects of his metamorphosis, such as the change of his skin texture and bone structure, appear to be of minor importance for the protagonist in comparison to the loss of the ability to speak. He regards his situation as “a terrible predicament since [he] was unable to speak” (77), but, like Io, he manages to overcome this predicament at least partially by writing, which shows that he is still able to think and to use language, albeit only in writing. As an ape, the protagonist is not only capable of writing, but apparently even of doing so very skillfully, as he

achieves “an imitation of the writing of Basil Valentine, Jacob Böhme, Father Athanasius Kircher, Jean-Paul Richter, Hegel, Marx, and Enno Littmann” (79). That the ape is able to imitate a group of Western writers and thinkers can be read as a highly ironic comment on the lack of original writing (and thinking) in the second half of the twentieth century. The modern writer apparently can only ‘ape’ what others have done before, without hoping to achieve anything new or original. Butor’s text thus seems to use the motif of human-animal metamorphosis to express the postmodern topos of the ‘exhaustion’ of literature.

Seeing oneself as the other: metamorphosis in Michel Faber’s *Under the Skin*

That the motif of metamorphosis can fulfill a wide range of functions is also apparent in Michel Faber’s crime/science-fiction novel *Under the Skin*.²² This novel presents an unusual example of metamorphosis, but it can be seen as variation on other transformation narratives, giving rise to yet different interpretations and functionalizations of the motif. So far, we have looked at instances where the metamorphosis was caused either by supernatural powers or by factors not further specified. Metamorphoses thus apparently tend to be represented as processes beyond the individual’s control. In *Under the Skin*, however, the protagonist Isserley, who belongs to an alien species, voluntarily undergoes an extremely painful operation to alter her physical appearance completely. The purpose of the surgery is to make Isserley look human. The metamorphosis is therefore the result of a conscious decision rather than an instance of human helplessness in the face of supernatural powers or unspecified environmental forces.

It is by departing in several respects from the usual pattern of human-animal transformation that Faber’s novel raises interesting questions about the dividing line between human and animal. Isserley belongs to an alien species that, to human eyes, looks like animals, as is repeatedly indicated in the text, but whose knowledge and technology are far superior to that of humans. Thus, the idea that being turned into an animal implies a degradation and loss of rationality, which is a common feature of literary representations of human-animal metamorphoses, is questioned ironically. At first the readers are led to believe that the protagonist is an ordinary woman. For a considerable portion of the story, there are no clues that would give away that Isserley is an alien, and thus the recipients simply fall back on the default value for characters in fiction and assume that she is a human character. A cognitive-narratological analysis can explore how this primacy effect is gradually undermined in the

reading process. This draws the readers' attention to their anthropocentric assumptions about literary characters, and it produces an ironic twist on the readers' expectations as far as metamorphoses are concerned. Since the readers are first of all fooled into believing that they are reading about the actions, but also the thoughts, emotions, and perceptions of a human woman, the assumption that there is a clear dividing line between human and non-human species is called into question. The depiction of alien perception, thus, does *not* generate an imaginative counterdiscourse, but appears to be quite ordinary, at least at first.

When the readers finally learn about Isserley's true identity and that she has undergone a painful operation in order to look human, the alien aspects of Isserley's perspective also begin to occupy more space in the tale. The readers' assumptions about the desirability of being human are challenged by the information that the operation had a very prosaic purpose: Isserley dislikes looking human, but needs this disguise in order to kidnap male hitchhikers because human meat is regarded as a culinary speciality by her species. Considering the pain she suffers due to the 'unnatural' human anatomy, she is in fact 'de-humanized' by her operation and viewed as a machine or weapon. The impact of losing one's humanity, which often haunts the individuals experiencing a metamorphosis in literary texts, is thus ridiculed. Isserley has lost part of her dignity by becoming a 'vodsel' (the name attributed to humans by her alien species) in this 'reverse' metamorphosis. In Isserley's view of the world, human beings have the status of cattle, and the way the men caught by Isserley are treated by the aliens can be read as a cultural-critical metadiscourse of the way human beings treat animals in the meat industry. The novel's ecocritical stance, thus, is mainly expressed by interpolating an alien perspective, by inviting the readers to see human beings, themselves, from an alien point of view. In a scene where Isserley inspects the humans that are being kept for fattening, the captives are naked, and their tongues have been cut out; yet the remnants of their being human are expressed when one of them writes the word 'mercy' with a "handful of long straws [...] in the dirt" (171). This scene emphasizes the utter degradation that the captives have been submitted to and might make the readers wonder whether their treatment of animals is not also 'inhuman.' Even though Isserley can understand and read human language, she is not willing to let this cry for mercy enter her consciousness. The scene in which writing is used in an attempt to establish communication not only recalls the story of Io, but also aspects of intensive livestock farming, that humans may be caught between the wish to communicate with their companion species and the wish to ignore this possibility in order

to avoid moral and ethical problems. The variation on the motif of human-animal metamorphosis in Faber's *Under the Skin* once more shows how flexible this motif is in terms of the stories and the functions it can be associated with. *Under the Skin* also illustrates that the ideas and constellations one finds in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* can often still be identified in contemporary fiction. This recurrence points to the fundamental and timeless nature of the questions that are raised by the motif of human-animal metamorphosis, which, apparently, still fascinate readers in the twentieth and twenty-first century.

As our analyses of four selected novels have exemplified, the motif of human-animal transformation can fulfill a range of different functions in contemporary fiction. Since the motif involves what is presumably the most intimate relationship between human beings and animals imaginable, it is hardly surprising that it has turned out to be very productive in the light of recent ecocritical and cultural-ecological thinking. By questioning the rigidity of the boundary between humans and animals, the novels we discussed invite the reader to reconsider traditional cultural divisions critically. It is the prerogative of literature to confront the reader with a fictional universe that inverts the human-animal relationships to which we are accustomed. This inversion can be achieved by the motif of human-animal metamorphosis, but also by other fictional scenarios, such as the dystopian world projected in Will Self's novel *Great Apes* (1997), in which human beings are kept in zoos by apes, or the 'microcosm' of a lifeboat, where the boy Pi Patel and a Bengal tiger struggle to survive in Yann Martel's *Life of Pi* (2001).

Besides raising questions concerning the relationship between human beings and animals, the motif of human-animal metamorphosis may also fulfill a number of other functions, as our discussion of the four texts has illustrated. Occasionally, in fact, the potential ecocritical function associated with the motif of human-animal transformation is even supplanted by other social or cultural functions, as Butor's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Ape* shows most clearly. This phenomenon indicates that the motif is enormously flexible from a functional point of view. The motif of human-animal metamorphosis, due to its long literary tradition, has accumulated manifold cultural implications. Drawing upon this motif certainly evokes issues concerning the human-animal relationship, but also a literary and cultural tradition reaching back to Antiquity. Thus, ultimately, the motif, just like the beings undergoing a transformation, almost appears to be 'caught' in between nature and culture as far as its implications and functions go.

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Notes

1. We are very grateful to Sara B. Young for her enormously helpful comments.
2. Ovid, *Metamorphoses* (Oxford: Oxford U P, 1998), 20.
3. Cf. Peter Kuon, "Metamorphosen: Ein Forschungsprogramm für die Geisteswissenschaften," in *Metamorphosen*, Sabine Coelsch-Foisner and Michaela Schwarzbauer, eds. (Heidelberg: Winter, 2005), 1-8, 4.
4. The representation of animals in literature is, in general, often used to depict human characteristics. This is particularly apparent in fables and in the medieval bestiaries, where "beasts represent a facet of humankind—generally a despicable one—, which needs to be eradicated or controlled." Lucile Desblache, "Beauties and Beasts: Contrasting Visions of Animal Representation in Women's Contemporary Fiction," *Comparative Critical Studies*, 2:3 (2005), 381.
5. Barry Commoner, *The Closing Circle: Nature, Man, and Technology* (New York: Knopf, 1971), 29.
6. Max Lüthi, *The Fairytale as Art Form and Portrait of Man*, Jon Erickson, trans. (1975; Bloomington: Indiana U P, 1987), 70.
7. After all, in Western culture as well as literature, animals "are traditionally represented as the antithesis of rational beings: creatures ruled by their instincts, admired for their sensuality and beauty or feared for their strength, victimised because they are unable to think logically or speak" (Desblache 383).
8. Russell West-Pavlov, "Who's Australia, Or, Whose Australia?" in *Who's Australia?—Whose Australia? Contemporary Politics, Society and Culture in Australia*, Russell West-Pavlov, ed. (Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2005), 5.
9. Lawrence Buell, *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1995), 8.
10. The most extensive discussion of the cultural-ecological approach to the functions of literature can be found in Zapf's study *Literatur als kulturelle Ökologie: Zur kulturellen Funktion imaginativer Texte an Beispielen des amerikanischen Romans* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 2002). A shorter, English version ("Literature as Cultural Ecology: Notes Towards a Functional Theory of Imaginative Texts with Examples from American Literature") was published in *REAL: The Yearbook of Research in English and American Literature*, 17, Herbert Grabes, ed. (2001):85-100.
11. Marie Darrieussecq, *Pig Tales: A Novel of Lust and Transformation* (New York: The New Press, 1997), 109.
12. Chris Ferns, *Narrating Utopia* (Liverpool: Liverpool U P, 1999), 109.
13. "The only thing I still couldn't stomach was ham, which also meant pâté, sausages, and salami—all those handy luncheon meats. Even chicken sandwiches didn't taste as good as they once had" (Darrieussecq 45).
14. "As soon as I nodded off on my stool, images of blood and butchery flooded my mind" (Darrieussecq 46).
15. Cf. Raynal Udris, "Alterité animale, pouvoir et identité dans la littérature européenne du 20ème siècle à nos jours," manuscript, who refers to *Pig Tales* as "écriture du corps retrouvé, en harmonie avec le corps naturel" (9).
16. Richard Flanagan, *Gould's Book of Fish: A Novel in Twelve Fish* (London: Atlantic Books, 2003 [2001]), 14.
17. Flanagan's novel can also be read as an example of unreliable narration. In fact, the afterword of the novel, which reveals that the narrator has deceived the readers about his identity, makes it necessary to read at least the embedded narrator as unreliable. There are also various clues as to the narrator's unreliability in the text, and the depiction of the metamorphosis can surely also be seen as one of these. However, since the readers only learn in retrospect (recency effect) that the narrator is untrustworthy, it still makes sense to consider the metamorphosis as an event that is possible within the fictional universe that is constructed in the novel. We thus argue for a willing suspension of disbelief such as that demanded by *Pig Tales*.

18. Presenting history from the perspective of a convict, using fish as a structural device and blurring the time levels, Flanagan's novel *Gould's Book of Fish* seems to correspond largely to the prototype of the revisionist historical novel as characterized by Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* (London: Routledge: 1987): "The postmodernist historical novel is revisionist in two senses. First, it revises the *content* of the historical record, reinterpreting the historical record, often demystifying or debunking the orthodox version of the past. Secondly, it revises, indeed transforms, the conventions and norms of historical fiction itself" (90).
19. Given the fact that fish certainly tend to be perceived as being radically different from human beings, what Raynalle Udris says about the transformation of Kafka's protagonist Gregor Samsa can largely be applied to the metamorphosis depicted in *Gould's Book of Fish*: "La métamorphose de Gregor Samsa en insecte, forme animale la plus éloignée de l'humain, ramène le personnage au stade de la bestialité la plus pure, objet d'horreur à lui-même et aux autres" (Udris 5).
20. Michel Butor, *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Ape: A Caprice* (Normal, IL: Dalkey Archive P, 1995), French original, *Portrait de l'artiste en jeune singe* (1967), 76.
21. Helene Harth, "Der Künstler als Alchemist: Zu Michel Butors *Portrait de l'artiste en jeune singe*," *Germanisch-Romanische Monatsschrift*, 21 (1971), 218-19.
22. Michel Faber, *Under the Skin* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2001 [2000]).