Dystopian (Non)Fiction? Shteyngart, McCarthy and the Fall of the Animal Kingdom

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Wild nonhuman animals are rapidly disappearing from the earth, while animals bred for human consumption are increasingly brought inside and confined to warehouses in a move towards more 'efficient' farming techniques. We are thus moving into a time marked by an absence of animals: a post-animal era. Gary Shteyngart’s Super Sad True Love Story (2010) and Cormac McCarthy’s The Road (2006) stand out amongst a wave of dystopian and apocalyptic fiction, very different novels yet both depicting a near-future in which humans live their lives almost entirely without the presence of other animals. The novels’ protagonists suffer deep psychological trauma from trying to survive in the post-animal world that they have inherited. Shteyngart’s characters self-obsess and find shiny things to distract themselves with, but compulsively refer to each other by the names of other animals. McCarthy’s man and his son, walking through a post-apocalyptic wasteland, both fixate on signs of life and lifelike processes. Although animals are almost entirely absent from both novels, each features a single, pivotal encounter with another creature.

The suffering of each novel’s characters reminds us of what is at stake if we continue down the path that we are on, one of mass extinctions for wild animals and mass incarcerations for domesticated animals. We, too, are animals, and the fall of the animal kingdom would be the fall of all of us.

Key Words: anthrozoology, ecocriticism, zoocriticism, dystopian literature, extinction

Introduction

In the last two centuries animals have gradually disappeared. Today we live without them (Berger 1980, p.11).

It seems like almost every day now that we hear news of another species threatened with extinction. For every story about cheetah numbers plummeting (New York Times 2016), giraffes being faced with a ‘silent extinction’ (Telegraph 2016) or more than half of all Mediterranean shark species being at risk (Scientific American 2016), there are countless other species – birds, reptiles, amphibians, insects – who do not make the news as they slide silently from the ‘critically endangered’ list to the ‘probably extinct’ one. According to the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) we are now losing species at up to 1000 times the ‘normal’ rate (Faunalytics 2016, New Scientist 2016). At the time of writing, a check on the IUCN Red List website revealed 11,316 species listed as ‘vulnerable’, 7,781 species as ‘endangered’ and 5,210 as ‘critically endangered’ (IUCN Red List 2016). As if this wasn’t dire enough, the IUCN point out that the extinction risk has been evaluated for less than 5% of the world’s described species, meaning that the number of threatened species in the world could be far greater than anyone has imagined (IUCN Red List 2016). In 2014 The World Wildlife Fund’s Living Planet Report found that the earth had lost half its wildlife population in the preceding 40 years (WWF 2016).
The population numbers of nonhuman animals bred for human consumption, meanwhile, have exploded. Yet they have been taken out of the fields and pastures where they used to graze, peck or wallow, and been placed inside warehouses, where they can be more ‘efficiently’ farmed. Few of us who eat or drink the products made from animals have seen first-hand how farm animals are raised or slaughtered (see Lovenheim 2002, Safran Foer 2009) and the whereabouts of the these now industrial-scale farming operations are typically unknown to us.

During the Anthropocene era human actions have caused an extraordinary decline in wild animal life, while domesticated animals are hidden away so that we can protect ourselves from the knowledge of what we do to them. The few ‘privileged’ species that have been bred over generations to fit into our lives as ‘companion’ animals are often treated as little humans, their animality denied them through training, confinement and surgery. It appears that we are entering a post-animal era. While articles and videos depicting the reality of the collapse of the biosphere are hard to get through, we turn with horrified fascination to ‘fiction’, to dystopian-themed films, television series and novels (Atwood 2003 and 2009; Ballard 1962; Crace 2008; Matheson 1954; McCarthy 2006; Shteyngart 2010; Stewart 1949; Tolstaya 2003) to watch, one step removed, the consequences of our actions upon the environment and its other inhabitants as they unfold in front of us.

Gary Shteyngart’s satirical Super Sad True Love Story (2010) and Cormac McCarthy’s The Road (2006) both depict our post-animal world seemingly just a moment or two ahead in our collective history. In Super Sad True Love Story humanity (or at least, the human population of the USA) is on the cusp of a financial Armageddon, threatening to throw the whole of civilization into chaos. America is illiterate, broke, and in debt up to its eyeballs to an increasingly impatient China. In Shteyngart’s America, New Yorkers are still spending on credit, splashing out on the latest fashions, on digital neck pendants that track their ‘fuckability’ and their credit rating, on the latest youth-enhancing technologies, and on all things kitsch and superficial. It’s a garish, chaotic, Technicolor landscape, in which everything is disposable. It’s also worlds apart from the bleak, post apocalyptic setting of The Road, where the end has come amidst a wasteland of melted roads, drifting ash cloud and life-threatening cold and hunger. As different as they are, both novels are set in a time that can be described, much like the time we are moving into, as ‘after animals’. Humans live their lives without animals and rarely, if ever, come into contact with them. The post-industrial world of Super Sad True Love Story is more familiar to us (perhaps uncomfortably so, particularly when in a parallel universe the president of the United States once tweeted that ‘The concept of global warming was created by and for the Chinese in order to make U.S. manufacturing non-competitive” (Washington Post 2016), a city in which living animals have been marginalized to the point of extraction, almost insidiously removed from the lives of humans. In The Road, all other-than-human animals are dead. Yet in both novels it is the very absence of animals that gives them such importance, the negative space that they once inhabited filled by characters who almost compulsively make constant references to animals that are never seen. Both stories also feature a single, pivotal encounter with another animal.
**Super Sad True Love Story**

Lenny Abramov is the anti-hero of *Super Sad True Love Story*; a balding, late 30’s Jewish New Yorker, who falls in love with the much younger Korean-American Eunice Park. Lenny represents the old world, a time when people still read books and newspapers, while Eunice epitomizes all things modern; young, beautiful, plugged in, and sheathed in skin-tight see-through jeans. In Lenny and Eunice’s world, animals are encountered in almost every form except their real selves. They are found in the alligator skin handbag that Eunice admires in a shop window, the pile of chicken bones in the street, the ‘Cluk’ food brand, with flavouring inspired by ‘real chicken’, and the little girls with their faces painted like kittens. Cartoon animals are featured everywhere, from clothing brands to political propaganda. At the beginning of the novel Lenny attempts to return to the US from Italy, where he has been on sabbatical. He goes to the US embassy, where he is grilled not by an official, but by a digitized otter.

A pixelated version of the plucky otter shuffled onto my apparat screen, carrying on his back the letters ARA, which dissolved into the legend: American Restoration Authority.

The otter stood up on his hind legs, and made a show of dusting himself off. “Hi there, pa’dner!” he said, his electronic voice dripping with carnivalesque. “My name is Jeffrey Otter and I bet we’re going to be friends!” Feelings of loss and aloneness overwhelmed me. “Hi,” I said. “Hi, Jeffrey”. (Shteyngart 2011, p.6)

When Lenny is subsequently flagged for investigation by the ARA, he responds, ‘But I did worry. How could I not? Flagged by some fucking otter! Jesus Christ’ (2011, p.11). The digitalized Jeffrey Otter reappears throughout the novel, by turns ridiculous, menacing and poignant.

In a stencilled, bleeding-edge style that had been cool at the turn of the century, I saw – no, it couldn’t be! – an arty reproduction of Jeffrey Otter, my inquisitor at the US embassy in Rome, in his stupid red-white-and-blue bandana. A smudge of what could have been a cold sore on his hairy lip.

“Oh,” I said, and actually backed away.

“Kokiri?” Eunice asked. “What’s up, nerd-face?”

I made a breathing sound. “Panic attack?” she asked. I put my hand up to indicate a ‘time-out’. My eyes ran up and down the graffito as if I were trying to scrub it into a different dimension. The otter stared back at me: curved, oddly sexual, pregnant with life, the fur smoothed into little charcoal mounds clearly warm and soft to the touch. (2011, p.151)

In *Picturing the Beast* (2001) Steve Baker observes that, ‘Popular Culture…sees only itself in the eyes of its animal’ (p.xxi). ‘It is clear that Western society continues to draw heavily on symbolic ideas involving animals, and that the immediate subject of those ideas is frequently not the animal itself, but rather a human subject drawing on animal imagery to make a statement about human identity’ (p.xxxv). As Lenny walks through the city he is scanned by ‘credit poles’ that measure his credit rating as he passes by. Each pole has a flag on top of it. In Chinatown
the flags have the words, ‘America Celebrates Its Spenders!’ emblazoned on them ‘with a cartoon of a miserly ant running toward a mountain of Christmas presents’ (2011, p.52), and in the Latino sections the legend is, ‘Save it for a Rainy Day, Huevon’, ‘with a frowning grasshopper in a zoot suit showing us his empty pockets’ (p.52). These images have an existing, if tenuous, cultural context, drawn from Aesop’s fable of the grasshopper and the ant. Yet what specifically is Jeffrey Otter supposed to represent? And why an otter? His character comes close to the term ‘wilful meaninglessness’, that Baker uses when describing an Anchor butter advert featuring singing cows (2001, p.2), and the attitude that Baker describes later on as ‘this Walt-Disney consciousness’ (2000, p.28). Jeffrey is intended to be accepted simply as a cute cartoon character, empty of historical meaning or context, without future meaning or relevance, his shape and otter identity a seemingly arbitrary choice and not reflective of any immediately obvious ‘otter’ characteristics.

Lenny watches with incredulity as the American president begs a visiting Chinese banker to make China a nation of consumers and ‘not otters’ (2011, p.153).

The otter came for me in a dream. Not the cartoon otter that interrogated me in Rome, nor the graffito otter I saw on Grand Street, but a true-to-life otter, a high-definition mammal, whiskers, fur, the dampness of the river. He pressed his wet plush nose into my cheek, into my ear, kissing me with it, blessing my face with his hot familiar and familial salmon breath, his muddy little paws destroying the clean white dress shirt I had put on for Eunice. (2011, p.247)

The dream otter seems to have transformed from digitalized image to living animal, until he begins talking conversationally to Lenny in the voice of his dead friend Noah, and ‘the Noah-otter smiled as if he knew exactly what kind of man I was and wiped his whiskers with a human paw’ (2011, p.245).

The novel is peppered with theriomorphisms, as characters refer to each other constantly, and almost compulsively, in animal terms. ‘Dear Rhesus Monkey’ (p.48), ‘It worries me too Grizzly Bear’ (p.63), ‘My sweet Emperor Penguin’ (p.106), ‘Hi, precious Pony’ (p.139), ‘Dear Precious Panda’ (p.144), ‘I’ll thresh you later Panda-gator’ (p.174), ‘wearing my cutest platypus grin’ (p.204), ‘Don’t be dramatic chipmunk’ (p.254), ‘he has the strength of his sweet tuna arms’ (p.296). Yet at the same time as animals are rendered interchangeably cute and lovable through arbitrary endearments, their triviality and inferiority are never in question. Lenny refers to a girl he would be, ‘terminally attracted to if I could stand to spend my life within three metres of her nondeodorized animal scent’ (p.56), and his father refers to protestors as ‘Obeyziani’ (‘Monkeys’) (p.133).

In a single authentic encounter with the animal, Lenny and Eunice visit the Bronx Zoo.

He was twenty-five, Sammy, at the middle of his life-span, much like I was. A lonely elephant, the only one the zoo had at the moment, removed from his compatriots, and from the possibility of love. He slowly flicked back one massive ear, like a Galician shopkeeper of a century ago spreading his arms as if to say, “Yes, this is all there is”. And then it occurred to me, lucky me, lucky Lenny having his trunk kissed by Eunice Park: The elephant knows. The elephant knows there is nothing after this life, and very little in it. The elephant is aware of his eventual extinction and he is hurt by it, reduced by it, made to feel his solitary
nature, he who will eventually trample through bush and scrub to lie down and die where his mother once trembled at her haunches to give him life. Mother, aloneness, entrapment, extinction. The elephant is essentially an Ashkenazi animal, but a wholly rational one – it too wants to live forever.

“Let’s go”, I said to Eunice. “I don’t want kokiri to see you kissing my nose like that. It’ll only make him sadder” (Shteyngart 2011, p.117-118).

Berger writes about the spectator’s imperviousness to the zoo animal’s ability to look back at us (1980), but Lenny’s own status as marginalized animal enables him to recognize the plight of Sammy the elephant. Lacking any tangible means of communication, and across what Berger refers to as an ‘abyss of non-comprehension’ (1980, p.4), Lenny ascribes a complex level of self-awareness to Sammy, based on his own feelings about where he belongs in this dysfunctional society. This perhaps makes a truism of Baker’s assertion that we see only ourselves in the eyes of the animal, as Lenny literally observes his own reflection in the brown eyes of the elephant, yet he uses this perceived insight to try to relieve some of the elephant’s suffering by not flaunting his own fragile, newfound happiness. The scene is clearly drawn to reinforce the reader’s understanding of Lenny’s own existential loneliness; he is able to identify more with a captive elephant in a zoo than with any of the people in his life. Yet, Shteyngart’s picture of an animal yearning, or supposedly yearning, for something else, the way that his main character yearns, brings home the notion of a shared crisis, a collective wrong turn that led to a world in which all sacredness has been leached away, leaving only the banal. In Loving Nature (2002), Kay Milton cites Bill McKibben and Neil Evernden’s similar perspectives on how humans value nature.

For Everden, ‘wildness’ is nature’s most important feature, because it cannot be encompassed by human horizons: ‘Wildness […] is the one thing that can never be ours. It is self-willed, independent, and indifferent to our dictates and judgements’ (Evernden 1992:120). McKibben also saw the perceived separateness or independence of nature from human agency as its most important feature. In modern western culture, nature is ‘the separate and wild province, the world apart from man to which he adapted, under whose rules he was born and died’ (McKibben 1990:43-4). McKibben argued that we need to believe in wild, separate nature, to know that there are ‘pristine places […] substantially unaltered by man’ (ibid.:51, emphasis in original) (Milton 2002, p.97).

Lenny’s interpretation of Sammy’s look as telling him that ‘yes, this is all there is’, harks back to McKibben’s point that we as humans need to believe that there is more in nature that is autonomous and separate from us. Having harnessed nature, personified in the form of Sammy, and placed it ‘behind bars’, we are left with a hollowness, a kind of hopelessness born from having captured, culled and catalogued everything that was ever mysterious and Other.

The Road
In The Viable Human (2001) ecotheologian Thomas Berry describes the seed of the damage that humans are doing to the planet as a ‘deep cultural pathology’ (2001, p.176) that developed in Western society and is now spreading across the planet.
In this universal disturbance of the biosphere by human agents, the human being now finds that the harm done to the natural world is returning to threaten the human species itself.

The question of the viability of the human species is intimately connected with the viability of the earth. These questions ultimately arise because at the present time the human community has such an exaggerated, even pathological, fixation on its own comfort and convenience that it is willing to exhaust any and all of the earth’s resources to satisfy its own cravings (Berry 2001, p.176).

On the other side of Armageddon a man and his young son head south across a burnt out wasteland, where nothing grows anymore, and the sound of dead trees falling punctuates every night. It’s unclear what exactly happened, but in the time before, the man recalled waking in the night to fires burning outside the window of his house, and we can be reasonably confident that the crisis had an anthropogenic source. Now his son has inherited a deadly wasteland. The Road (2006) feeds into what ecocritic Lawrence Buell describes as ‘toxic discourse.’

Toxic discourse […] calls for rethinking certain standard expectations normally brought to the work of critical reading. It unsettles assumptions about the boundaries of nature writing and environmental representation generally […] Within literary and rhetorical studies, the impetus to engage environmental issues has mainly come from the so-called ecocritical movement, which to date has been energized by two chief ethico-political commitments: protection of the endangered natural world and recuperation of a sense of how human beings have been and might be imagined as (re)connected with it, notwithstanding the threat of the death of nature from industrialism and/or postmodernity. (Buell 1998, p.640)

The world that the man and his son traverse has no society, no class system, no race divide. The human survivors are separated into cannibals and potential victims of cannibals. With the demise of almost every other species, the world is no longer metaphorically animal-free, it is a time literally after animals, and deeply disturbing and threatening for being so. The biggest danger, aside from being cannibalized, is of starvation. Both threats stem from the absence of other species, an acute reminder of how reliant humans have been on the lives of other animals, despite having been largely flippant about this dependence. Yet, in spite of the immediate threat of starvation, the man dreams not of meat, or butchery, or any other edible incarnation of the ‘absent referent’ as Carol Adams puts it (1990), but of the referent itself, the living animal. He dreams about walking in flowering woods, with birds flying around himself and his son. He remembers watching a falcon diving down the side of a mountain to pick a crane from amongst a group of them, and watching trout swaying and flashing in the current of a river.

Once in those early years he’d wakened in a barren wood and listened to flocks of migratory birds overhead in the bitter dark. Their half muted crankings miles above where they circled the earth as senselessly as insects trouping the rim of a bowl. He wished them godspeed till they were gone. He never heard them again (McCarthy 2009, p.54-55).
Instead, the man and boy’s travels are littered with the relics of deceased species. A boar hide nailed to a barn door. A pile of cat bones in a living room. A plastic deer in a yard. The lingering odour of cows in a barn. A man with a tattoo of a bird on his neck, ‘done by someone with an illformed notion of their appearance’ (p.65). The man often sees other animals in the boy and his habits, yet the comparisons he makes are not like the flippant comments of the characters in Super Sad True Love Story. In the mornings he trudges out into the snow drifts, leaving the boy to sleep under a tree ‘like some hibernating animal’ (p.103), knowing that in times of danger he had trained the boy to lie in the woods ‘like a fawn’ (p.124). Later he watches the boy licking the lid of a tin of prunes with great care, ‘like a cat licking its reflection in a glass’ (p.205). The theriomorphisms that the man perceives in the boy are poignant; there are no more hibernating animals, no more fawns, no more cats left to lick their reflections in a mirror.

The boy, born after the events that changed the landscape so drastically, is unfamiliar with the lives of other animals, but endlessly curious. He shows a rudimentary understanding of animal characteristics by painting fangs on the mask he wears over his mouth to protect from air pollution. When his father describes the distance they still have to cover as ‘two hundred miles…as the crow flies’ (p.166), he has to enquire about the meaning, never having seen a crow fly.

It means going in a straight line…We’re not going as the crow flies.
Because crows don’t follow roads?
Yes.
They can go wherever they want.
Yes.
Do you think there might be crows somewhere?
I don’t know.
But what do you think?
I think it’s unlikely.
Could they fly to Mars or someplace?
No. They couldn’t.
Because it’s too far?
Yes.
Even if they wanted to.
Even if they wanted to.
What if they tried and they just got halfway or something and then they were too tired. Would they fall back down?
Well. They couldn’t really get halfway because they’d be in space so they wouldn’t be able to fly and besides it would be too cold and they’d freeze to death.

Oh.

(McCarthy 2009, p.166-167)

The boy’s fascination with other species, despite having almost no direct experience of them, might arguably be rooted in the same foundation as the way in which the characters in Super Sad True Love Story compulsively talk about themselves as other animals, what E.O. Wilson famously termed ‘biophilia’ (1984); the inbuilt affinity that humans have for other species, an ‘innate tendency to focus on life and lifelike processes’ (1984, p.1). In Biophilia, Wilson states that we are ‘human in good part because of the particular way we affiliate with other organisms. They are the matrix in which the human mind originated and is permanently rooted, and they offer the challenge and freedom innately sought’ (1984, p.139). Perhaps in The Road the man sees the shapes and habits of animals in his son, in part because there are no more animals to look at. The sum of ‘life and lifelike processes’ is now encapsulated within the boy, making him all the more precious for it.

Wilson warns against the route that humanity is taking in hurtling towards the machine and away from the natural, of going beyond the point of no return, and giving too much away in our quest for control, ‘perhaps Hobbes’s definition is correct, and this will be the hell we earned for realizing the truth too late’ (1984, p.13).

As in Shteyngart’s novel, there is a single encounter between the main characters and another animal, which leads them to reflect on their shared predicaments. Walking through a deserted town, the man and boy hear a noise in the distance. The man explains to his son that it is a dog barking, at which the boy’s immediate concern is not to cause any harm to the dog. His father reassures him that they will not, yet later the barking ceases and soon they see lights in the distance and smell woodsmoke on the air. It reminds the man of a time when the boy’s mother was still alive, and they were followed by a dog for two days, ‘a trellis of a dog with hide stretched over it’ (p.91), and the boy had begged his father not to hurt it. The boy, surrounded by fossils, bones, death, places a higher value on life and the living than humanity had been able to when they were surrounded by it. He is drawn to life, fascinated and excited by it, and living in dread that his father will replace that living being with more death. The fact that the dog could feed them, perhaps saving them from starvation in the process, is secondary to the sacredness that the boy ascribes to the life of the animal. The value that the boy places on true, biotic life forms is perhaps the source of a nightmare that he has about a toy penguin that could waddle and flap its flippers when it was wound up. In his dream the boy is in the house of his childhood when the penguin comes waddling around the corner, even though nobody has wound it up and the winder isn’t turning. This poor imitation of life can perhaps be viewed as an echo of years before, when humans were so fascinated by the machines that they created, that they forgot the miracle of organic life. The boy is deeply disturbed by the pretence of life in his dream. The book ends with a visceral remembrance of what life used to be like.
Once there were brook trout in the streams in the mountains. You could see them standing in the amber current where the white edges of their fins wimpled softly in the flow. They smelled of moss in your hand. Polished and muscular and torsional. On their backs were vermiculate patterns that were maps of the world in its becoming. Maps and mazes. Of a thing which could not be put back. Not be made right again. In the deep glens where they lived all things were older than man and hummed of mystery (McCarthy 2009, p.306-307).

Conclusion
In *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (1993) Val Plumwood describes a phenomenon that she terms ‘backgrounding’; the treatment of women and nature as a ‘background’ to the dominant ‘foreground’ focus on male-centric contemporary human society. The backgrounding of nature helps to perpetuate the myth of human exceptionalism, the anthropocentric notion that somehow we as humans are apart from our environment, and not reliant on the biosphere, or on other animals, for our survival.

The natural world and the biosphere have been treated as a dump, as forming the unconsidered, instrumentalised and unimportant background to ‘civilised’ human life; they are merely the setting or stage on which what is really important, the drama of human life and culture, is played out […] Systematic devaluation and denial are perceptually ingrained in backgrounding, involving systematic not noticing, not seeing” (Plumwood 1993, p.69).

The backgrounding of nature and animals, a taken-for-granted feature of life in the contemporary west, has also been in place in the vast majority of our literature, in which it has sometimes been deliberately used as a device, as human dramas have played out against an actual background of sweeping landscapes or amongst exotic or domesticated animals. In *Super Sad True Love Story* and *The Road*, however, the ever-reliable animal kingdom has all but disappeared, with animals’ absence ironically pushing them to the foreground, as the novels’ protagonists struggle with their loss. In fact, both books are teeming with animal life, with animals making their absence felt. The characters in both novels are lost, set adrift in a world without animals. There is a sense in both novels that the people in them will not be able to survive much longer in the worlds they have inherited.

After much destruction, mastery will fail, because the master denies dependency on the sustaining other; he misunderstands the conditions of his own existence and lacks sensitivity to limits and to the ultimate points of earthian resistance. The master’s denial of dependency and his self-deception with respect to the conditions of his own life carry grave dangers, which include, of course, self-destruction. Since he is set on a course of devouring the other who sustains him, the story must end either with the death of the other on whom he relies, and therefore his own death, or with the abandonment of mastery, his failure and transformation (Plumwood 1993, p.195).

Our art and literature are dependent on animal presence for colour and meaning, just as we are in life. Fiction can make us face what we already know to be true but do not want to acknowledge. We are animals, reliant on other animals for our physical and psychological
survival. We are a part of the whole, not apart from it. The fall of the animal kingdom would be the fall of all of us.

Bibliography


