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The Eminent Victorian and the Philosopher

Canine Perspectives in Virginia Woolf's *Flush: A Biography* and Italo Svevo's *Argo e il suo padrone*

Abstract

*This study investigates the representation of two literary dogs: Flush, the cocker spaniel protagonist of Virginia Woolf's *Flush. A Biography*, and Argo, the protagonist and narrator of Italo Svevo's novella *Argo e il suo padrone*. With the rise of the phenomenon of language skepticism around 1900, the topos of narrating dogs became of particular interest and both these works can be placed in the fashion of dog novels, but while Svevo, although with reversed roles, draws from the literary fashion of the philosopher dog, in which "canine narrators eloquently master the human language" (Driscoll and Hoffmann 2018), Woolf plays with the very British, and Victorian, tradition of 'illustrious biographies' and writes the biography of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's cocker spaniel. By means of a zooanthropological reading of the two works, the article enquires whether the two writers try to resist anthropomorphic constructedness in the narration of their nonhuman characters and what kind of narrative device they enact to underline similarities and differences between humans and dogs. It will also try to understand if the underlying presumption of the two writers is that language is only 'linguistic' language, or if diverse and alternative, but equally valid, forms of communication and reciprocal understanding exist.*

Keywords: Virginia Woolf, Italo Svevo, Dogs, *Flush*, Animal Studies, Zoopoetics

*"Even the most sensuous of poets
cannot find words for the sensations a dog feels"*
(Virginia Woolf, *Flush. A Biography*)

It is generally acknowledged that Jacques Derrida was the first to use the term 'zoozoetics,' with reference to Franz Kafka's work, in his essay *L'animal que donc je suis*, described by Cary Wolfe as "arguably the single most important event in the brief history of animal studies"

(2009, 570). In his essay, the French philosopher famously recounts the experience of being caught naked in the gaze of his cat, declaring that “nothing will have ever done more to make me think through this absolute alterity of the neighbour than these moments when I see myself seen naked under the gaze of a cat” (Derrida 2002, 380). Derrida’s is an interesting perspective from which to consider modernist works and zoopoetics, and to acknowledge how much they have in common. Animal studies indeed share with modernism “the impulse to question Enlightenment ideas about knowledge, subjectivity, and language” (Hovanec 2018, 25). Modernist authors also sought to find a way to represent the true, inner self, the one that is not visible from the outside, with a gaze similar to the one of Derrida’s cat intruding into the philosopher’s intimacy and forcing him to think about who he is, how he uses language, and what role it plays in the definition of a “human animal” (Derrida 2002, 380).

Despite the centrality of biology and natural history in the Victorian age, surprisingly few studies have discussed the relationship between literature and zoology in the early 20th-century in England, even fewer in Italy. Among these, Caroline Hovanec’s work is particularly interesting. In *Animal Subjects: Literature, Zoology, and British Modernism* she reads modernist writers as zoologists and vice versa, suggesting that “both groups worked to find a balance between matter and language, a way to attend to both the animals they observed and the many possibilities for representing them” (Hovanec 2018, 6). Sharing Hovanec’s approach, which considers how modernist writers found animals’ differences from humans aesthetically compelling, I will analyse works by Virginia Woolf and Italo Svevo, who wrote about dogs not only as animal lovers—they both had dogs throughout their lives—but as thinkers fascinated by animals.

Even though I began by mentioning the gaze of a cat, my investigation focusses in fact on two literary dogs: Flush, the cocker spaniel protagonist of the eponymous novel by Virginia Woolf, and Argo, the protagonist and narrator of Italo Svevo’s novella *Argo e il suo padrone*, which I read from a zooanthropological perspective. As zooanthropology investigates the relationship between humans and other animals, where nonhuman animals are agents and co-protagonists in a dialogic and hybrid exchange (Tonutti 2021, 412), it offers a particularly interesting perspective to understand how the two modernist writers dealt with anthropomorphic constructedness in the linguistic representation of their canine protagonists. Both works, published in 1933 and 1934 respectively, came out after a period in which dog autobiographies thrived in Europe. The genre found its origins in the New Animal Psychology based on Pavlov’s behaviourism, but also had a direct connection with modernism. As Joela Jacobs explains:

The topos of the narrating dog became of particular interest around 1900 with the rise of the phenomenon of language skepticism. Modernist writers were acutely aware of the inability of language to represent anyone's perceived reality accurately, and they struggled with the arbitrariness of signs and their referents. (Jacobs 2018, 81)

1. A master, a poet, and two dogs

Despite being very different, *Flush: A Biography* and *Argo e il suo padrone* share some elements. First of all, they offer a multidisciplinary perspective, as both can be considered works of literature, ethology, and animal psychology at once. While only few studies exist on *Argo e il suo padrone*,¹ *Flush* has been the object of several studies. Among these, the most relevant for this analysis are the aforementioned study by Hovanec and the one by Craig Smith (2002), who read *Flush* through the lens of ethology and animal psychology. The studies by Jeanne Dubino (2011) and Derek Ryan (2020; 2013), who explored ideas of human-canine coevolution and multispecies entanglements in the novel, also offer interesting insights.² The novel is, in fact, both a biography of a poet told from a different perspective and “a book about species difference, about the mutual strangeness of nonhuman and human” (Hovanec 2018, 242).

Both works are then parodies of a genre: *Flush* of Victorian biographies and *Argo e il suo padrone* of 18th-century apologues. Indeed, Woolf's *Flush* plays with the genre of Victorian biographies by overturning the description of eminent and exemplary figures and narrating the life of a dog which reveals all human fragilities and corruptions. This is of course a joke that Woolf made both with reference to her father, the director of the Dictionary of National Biographies, and her friend Lytton Strachey, whose *Eminent Victorians* revolutionized the very idea of biographies. The dog Flush is described as an ‘eminent Victorian’ to tell, through his canine perspective, the life of the poetess Elizabeth Barrett Browning. Yet, as Jeanne Dubino noted: “so often is *Flush* read as a biography of Elizabeth Barrett Browning [...] that it is easy to forget, as the narrator proclaims in the first sentence, that Flush is ‘the subject of this memoir’” (2011, 143). Flush is then “a dog memoir, about a dog's life, with a dog's point of view” (Dubino 2011, 143).

Like *Flush*, *Argo e il suo padrone* is an experiment in different genres, first and foremost of the ironic apologue, which was in fashion in the eighteenth century and was used, in Italy, by Giacomo Leopardi in his *Operette morali*. In this genre, animals are zoomorphic, and their role is to reveal the thoughts of the author. *Argo*, however, overturns the confidence and optimism

¹ See mainly Ziolkowski (2014), Ferraris (2006) and Panazza (2007).

² The work by Eberly (1996) is also worth mentioning, for its attention to the domestication of Flush.

of the 18th-century ratio, which was typical of apologues, to talk about uncertainty, the fallacy of reason, the lack of clear and final explanations. In addition to this, *Argo e il suo padrone* plays with the genre of *noir* or detective stories, since, while walking in the woods, Argo discovers the corpse of a man whose death appears to be linked to his master.³

The third element they share is the switch from human to nonhuman perspective and the multisensoriality that characterizes this shift. This makes them two zoopoetic texts, because their poetic thinking proceeds via the animal. As Quentin Bell famously commented, *Flush* is “not so much a book by a dog lover as a book by someone who would love to be a dog” (1972, 410). My analysis mainly focusses on this third aspect in order to understand whether Woolf and Svevo share the underlying presumption that language is only ‘linguistic’ language, that “l’humain ne pouvait parler que de l’humain, ne s’adresser qu’aux humains” (Simon 2016, 74), or whether body language and scent-based cognition are presented as diverse and alternative, but equally valid, forms of communication and reciprocal understanding. In other words, do the two writers try to resist anthropomorphic constructedness in the narration of their nonhuman characters? And what kind of narrative device do they, or do they not, employ to underline similarities and differences between their human and nonhuman characters?

A main difference is the narrative device they adopt: Woolf uses an omniscient narrator to express *Flush*’s feelings and thoughts, while Svevo’s novella is narrated in the first person by Argo, although ‘translated’ from canine to human language by his master. Since neither dog has linguistic abilities, one might assume they are not subjected to the ‘anthropomorphized’ animal language exposed by zoopoetics (Jacobs 2018, 101). However, anthropomorphism can take other and more subtle forms. Moving beyond traditional anthropomorphic views, Jutta Ittner proposes a paradigm shift based on an idea of anthropomorphism “that views the animal as a separate and unknowable entity” (2006, 183). This perspective illuminates more complex aspects of the human/animal dynamics. As Ittner explains:

by thinking of an animal, we construct it within our own consciousness and therefore what is reflected back to us is our own existence, irrespective of the point of view we choose to adopt. The new anthropomorphic approach acknowledges this impasse and integrates it into its inquiry on animal alterity. (Ittner 2006, 183)

³ I use the word ‘master’ throughout the article to translate the Italian ‘padrone,’ which is how Argo always refers to the human he lives with, being aware of the fact that the world denotes human exceptionalism.

2. Transdisciplinary strategies: from Darwin to Russell

To better examine the two works, it is also important to consider how Darwin's evolutionary theory and Freud's "three great pictures of the universe"⁴ had radically decentred the human from the second half of the 19th century, and how this affected zoology and studies on animals in general. In particular, "Darwin explored the presence in nonhuman animals of ostensibly human characteristics such as the ability to learn, the sense of curiosity, and the power of reason" (Hovanec 2018, 15). Between the last decade of the 19th and the first decades of the 20th century, many bioscientific and behavioural studies on animal and dog language appeared. In *The Animal Mind: A Text-Book of Comparative Psychology*, published in 1926, Margaret Washburn cites hundreds of studies published in biology journals between 1900 and 1926, and tries to answer questions about animals' cognitive abilities, learning processes, sensory perceptions and conscious experiences, proving it was a rapidly developing field. The most famous study concerning a 'talking' dog certainly took place in Germany: the Airedale terrier Rolf was claimed to be able to perform arithmetic and communicate with humans on an 'intellectual' level, and the story inspired *Argo e il suo padrone*. Woolf too apparently places her novel in the fashion of dog novels, but while Svevo, although with reversed roles, draws from the literary fashion of the philosopher dog, in which "canine narrators eloquently master the human language" (Jacobs 2018, 77), Woolf plays with the very British, and Victorian, tradition of 'illustrious biographies.' Through *Flush*, she writes the biography of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's cocker spaniel, using Lytton Strachey's innovations in this genre and considering the novel a joke, at first, to let her brain "cool" after *The Waves* (*Letters* 161-162), but eventually dedicating more than two years to the novel.

Woolf ironically recalls the British literary tradition from the incipit of the novel, which mimics Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*: "[i]t is universally admitted that the family from which the subject of this memoir claims descent is one of the greatest antiquity" (2017, 7). After this literary opening, the narrator sets up a historical (although ironic) tone for the novel by means of a very imaginary philological explanation of the origins of the spaniel breed, clearly parodying typical Victorian biographies.⁵ *Argo*, on the contrary, opens on a very different note, with the master's preface explaining to the readers what they are going to read and why, before leaving

⁴ In *Totem and Taboo*, Freud outlines three systems of thought: the animistic, where "humans ascribe omnipotence to themselves," the religious, where it is "transferred to the gods," and the scientific, in which "men have acknowledged their smallness" (Freud 1960, 88). This aspect is explored by Derek Ryan in *Animal Theory* (2015, 23-36).

⁵ Dubino (2011) deeply analyses the first twelve pages of the novel in her "Evolution, History, and *Flush*; Or, The Origin of Spaniels."

the floor to Argo. By means of this ‘human’ introduction, the reader thus discovers that what she or he is going to read is Argo’s autobiography, which Argo dictated to his master in canine language and that his master translated from canine to Italian, adding only some observations in parenthesis.

Argo e il suo padrone, a minor and less known work, requires a brief introduction. Svevo wrote it around 1925,⁶ and a first version, titled *Dalle memorie di un cane*, was published in the *Almanacco letterario Mondadori* in 1927. A more advanced version was published in the journal *Dante* in 1934, curiously a year after the publication of *Flush* and in the same year in which *Flush* was published by Mondadori as Woolf’s second novel translated into Italian.⁷ While Argo’s unnamed master is spending with the dog long and boring days in forced isolation on the mountains to recover from a nervous breakdown, he reads in the news of a talking dog in Germany who could also give advice. Though never mentioned, reference to the famous Airedale terrier Rolf is obvious. The master convinces himself that his dog too is perfectly capable of learning human language, and that “Argo sapeva parlare e taceva solo per ostinazione” (2019, 152).⁸ He thus starts teaching Argo his language but, instead of Argo learning Italian, it is the master who ends up learning canine language:

Il mio primo intendimento era stato di insegnare ad Argo l’italiano. Argo non seppe mai dire una sola parola italiana. Ma che importa? Si trattava d’intendersi e perciò non c’erano che due possibili vie: Argo doveva apprendere la lingua mia oppure io la sua! Come prevedibile, dalle lezioni che ci davamo a vicenda, apprese di più l’essere evoluto.⁹ (2019, 154)

This quotation offers an insight into one of the preliminary questions of this analysis. Even though *Argo e il suo padrone* is narrated by the dog in the first person, it would be wrong to assume that such narrative choice subverts Heidegger’s characterization of nonhuman animals as *weltarm* (poor in world) in contrast with *weltbildend* (world-forming) humans (1995, 176-177). Svevo would then seem to presume that language is only ‘linguistic’ language. On the contrary, I believe that, by using modernist methods of narration, Svevo experiments with what David Herman calls, in relation to Woolf’s *Flush*, an “ecological approach foregrounding the

⁶ Mario Lavagetto, the editor of Svevo’s work for the canonizing series Meridiani by Mondadori, noted in the chronology section of the first volume of Svevo’s *Tutte le opere*: “[a] partire dal ’25 Svevo scrive *Argo e il suo padrone*” (2004, cxxiii).

⁷ The first being *Orlando* in 1933. Both novels were translated by Alessandra Scalero.

⁸ “Argo could speak, and he didn’t only out of stubbornness.” All translations are mine.

⁹ “My first goal was to teach Argo Italian. Argo could never speak a word of Italian. But what did it matter? It was a matter of reciprocal understanding and there were only two possible ways: Argo should learn my language, or I should learn his. Predictably, from the lessons we gave each other, it was the more evolved being who learnt the most.”

plurality and diversity of ways of world-making across as well as within species” (2013, 560). In line with zoopoetic principles, by having Argo’s thoughts translated from canine to human language by his master, Svevo resists a linguistic anthropomorphization of the dog, who is yet “actively involved in the production of the very materiality of the text” (Driscoll and Hoffmann 2018, 17), making him not only the object but also the agent of representation.

Differently from Argo, Flush does not act as narrator in the novel, and his language is not anthropomorphized in order to make it intelligible; yet, to give a sense of continuity between human and nonhuman ways of perceiving the world, Woolf too uses modernist methods of narration. According to David Herman, she enacts the coordinate system established by the *Bildungsroman* form in *Flush*, so that it results in a “metabiographical text; [...] a narrative that in presenting its protagonist’s biography explores the consequences for life writing of what Woolf reveals to be an inextricable entanglement not just of male, female, upper-, and lower-class life histories, but also of human and nonhuman ways of encountering the world” (Herman 2013, 547). As a matter of fact, *Flush* was conceived to critique Victorian patriarchal constraints and values organizing life in London and England, and both the dog and Elizabeth Barrett emancipate themselves from a culture where “even dogs are strictly divided into different classes” (Woolf 2017, 32).

3. A switch of perspective

After the shake-up in human beliefs caused by Darwin’s theories, another crisis of scientific knowledge and values came with the advent of psychology. Once scientists were “understood as humans with human senses and human psyches” (Hovanec 2018, 197) science could no longer be considered as absolute and objective. Modernist writers faced this crisis by proposing the idea that multiplying perspectives was the best path to knowledge and studying animal perspectives was one of the ways to work on this multiplicity. As Hovanec explains: “[a]nimal perspectives offer modernists new forms of knowledge, but they also retain a certain amount of mystery, or cosmic strangeness, that reminds us there are some things we cannot know” (2018, 199). This is because animal psychology is aligned with modernist concerns such as “the belief in a plurality of perspectives, the exploration of consciousness, and the need to denaturalize our own point of view and see the world through different eyes” (Hovanec 2018, 201).

This plurality of perspectives is also suggested by Timothy Morton, who claims that humans should not look at animals from a distance, but “jump down into the mud” (2007, 204-205) with them. Even though Cary Wolfe argued that “taking animal studies seriously has nothing to do, strictly speaking, with whether or not you like animals” (2009, 567), the plurality of perspectives

mentioned by Morton is more easily applied when one lives with animals, since they help humans to literally ‘jump down’ on four legs to appreciate the world from their perspective. This was precisely the case for Woolf and Svevo, dog owners for most of their lives,¹⁰ who enact this plurality of perspectives by opening their narration with a two-legged human perspective and then switch to a four-legged, canine one. This switch of perspective puts the two texts in the category of discourse that Derrida calls of “poets and prophets,” those “men and women who admit taking upon themselves the address of an animal that addresses them,” as opposed to those who have never seen themselves being seen by the animal (2002, 383).

Beside the love for their own pets, the influence of psychology, and animal psychology studies deserves attention. Both writers had read Charles Darwin and knew his evolutionary theories well.¹¹ The connections of both with the father of psychoanalysis Sigmund Freud are also known.¹² Yet, it is the philosopher Bertrand Russell who is a particularly interesting figure for Woolf. In the second decade of the twentieth century, Russell developed a philosophy founded on sensations and perspectives and in *The Analysis of Mind* (1992b) he extended concepts borrowed from animal psychology to the human animal. In so doing, he reconceptualized the physical world through the language of the senses, claiming that sense-data are the ways through which we acknowledge the existence and substance of the world and that “the bridge between sense-data and matter is either inference or logical construction” (Russell 1992b, 84-85). He argues this through the example of a table that *is* in fact a series of related sense-data, and not a single, consistent object. Woolf was influenced by such theories.¹³ In *To the Lighthouse*, when the painter Lily Briscoe thinks of Mr. Ramsay’s work, she references exactly the example of the table:

Whenever she ‘thought of his work’ she always saw clearly before her a large kitchen table. It was Andrew’s doing. She asked him what his father’s books were about. ‘Subject and object and the nature of reality,’ Andrew had said. And when she said Heavens, she had no notion

¹⁰ Svevo proudly appears in many pictures with his dog and his dog’s puppies while Woolf had several dogs, the most famous one probably being the spaniel Pinka, a present from Vita Sackville West (Bell 1972, 409).

¹¹ On Woolf and Darwin see Dubino (2011), on Svevo and Darwin see, in particular, Miceli Jeffries (2014).

¹² Woolf met Sigmund Freud in Germany in 1935 and then again in London in 1939 (Woolf 1985, 202), and The Hogarth Press printed *On Dreams*, a series of conferences Freud held in 1901. Svevo translated this same work with his nephew in 1918 as *La scienza dei sogni*. Svevo also had a more personal knowledge of Freud’s theories and practice because his brother-in-law Bruno Veneziani had been a patient of Freud in Vienna.

¹³ The most thorough analysis of this aspect is by Banfield 2000.

what that meant. ‘Think of a kitchen table then,’ he told her, ‘when you’re not there.’ (2005, 26)

In *Flush* too Woolf introduces a similar reflection to describe the relationship between Elizabeth Barrett and her dog, although in more ironical terms:

She would make him stand with her in front of the looking-glass and ask him why he barked and trembled. Was not the little brown dog opposite himself? But what is ‘oneself’? Is it the thing people see? Or is it the thing one is? So Flush pondered that question too, and, unable to solve the problem of reality, pressed closer to Miss Barrett and kissed her ‘expressively.’ *That* was real at any rate. (2017, 26)

Russell’s influence on Woolf, thoroughly analysed by Ann Banfield (2000) in her *The Phantom Table*, was twofold: not only did Russell influence Woolf with his theories, but he himself was influenced, in return, by Woolf’s research on human psychology and her experimentation with prose. Russell applied “animal psychology to humans in order to create a vision of the human that is more in accord with modernist versions of subjectivity” (Hovanec 2018, 215), of which Woolf was of course a perfect example.

Another influential scholar for modernist writers was Conwy Lloyd Morgan (1852-1936), who studied under Charles Darwin’s protégé George Romanes. Morgan was a prominent figure in early animal psychology and animal behaviour studies,¹⁴ and his experimental approach to animal psychology, known as Morgan’s Canon, played a major role in behaviourism. In *Animal Life and Intelligence*, he assumed that all animals, humans included, mentally construct their ideas of objects based on sense-stimuli, or on memories of earlier sense-stimuli, and nonhuman animals, having different sensory abilities, instincts, and cognitive capacities, are likely to have different constructs than humans and each other. Morgan refers to plural worlds saying that “it is not merely that the same world is differently mirrored in different minds, but that they are two different worlds” (1891, 336). The question we should ask, then, is not “—How does the world mirror itself in the mind of the dog? but rather—How far does the symbolic world of the dog resemble the symbolic world of man?” (Morgan 1891, 336). In Morgan’s view, it would be wrong to assume that humans have objective knowledge of the world, of which a dog’s world is just a subset, and he proposed instead that both humans and dogs make up their own worlds that are differently mediated by the subject’s biology. Russell too preferred the word ‘worlds’ to describe the things around us, as it emphasized the fact that there is no single or objective

¹⁴ His *Animal Life and Intelligence* (1891) and *Introduction to Comparative Psychology* (1896) are foundational texts for the field.

perspective. But as Cary Wolfe argues, “when it comes to the decentering of the human, the issue isn’t just *what* you’re thinking, it’s *how* you’re thinking it” (2020, 132). What kind of narrative device do the two authors enact, then, to represent these two worlds?

4. Thinking smells, smelling thoughts

In *Animal Theory*, Derek Ryan claims that “in imagining animal experience the human cannot help but judge the animal based on human qualities” (2015, 37). The question Ryan poses is thus: “is there a way to think about the figurative and literal, imagination and reality not in opposition to one another, but in alliance?” (2015, 38-39). It is indeed around the concept of alliance that the narration of *Flush* revolves. From their first encounter, Flush and Miss Barrett look at each other and think “Here am I,” but also “But how different!”. They are presented as “closely united and “immensely divided.” Elizabeth and Flush are different, but in alliance and not in opposition; put in Haraway’s terms, they are “companion species,” and as such they are “the fruit of becoming with” (2008, 17). ‘Becoming-with’ is not an imitation nor a transformation but, as suggested by Kate Wright (2014), an ‘ecology,’ in the sense of a plurality of patterns of relations between organisms and their environment. In the description Woolf makes of the two characters, though, Flush, more than Miss Barrett, is the one who becomes-with, and “lying with his head pillowed on a Greek lexicon, [he] came to dislike barking and biting” (2017, 34). Through this perspective, Flush’s desire that his furry paws might “fine themselves to ten separate fingers,” or that “his own rough roar would issue like hers in the little simple sounds that had such mysterious meaning” (2017, 31), or even his wish that one day he would be able to write on paper like Miss Barrett, should be read not as an anthropomorphic narration of the dog, but as an example of how “we become-with life as it is manifested through the body of another” (Wright 2014, 280).

Svevo’s narrative device in *Argo e il suo padrone* are even more interesting for what concerns the issue of *how* we think raised by Cary Wolfe. First of all, in the novel there are several elements that recall post-behaviourist cognitivist canophilia, a discipline which would be inaugurated many years later.¹⁵ This demonstrates Svevo’s attempt to observe the dog’s behaviour and understand—and respect—his biology by trying to look at the world from a multiple perspective, such as when Argo explains the difference between humans and dogs by describing how and why dogs smell each other, providing explanations that are incredibly

¹⁵ Cognitive canophilia stemmed from Konrad Lorenz’s studies and, among the first to have a cognitive approach was Eberhard Trumler (1971), whose *Mit dem Hund auf du* was published in Germany in 1971, prefaced by Lorenz himself.

adherent to the ones that the ethologist Eberhard Trumler would give in his *Mit dem Hund auf du* in 1971.¹⁶ Moreover, Argo's narration—or, at least, his master's translation of it—presents examples of metacognition, an ability which was considered as a solely human capacity in the 1930s and only came to be recognized in dogs in 2018. Examples of Argo's awareness of his own thought processes abound. He says things like: “[e]bbi qualche esitazione”¹⁷ (2019, 160) or “mi parve di sentire il fischio del padrone. Ma il suo odore non c'era e potevo essermi sbagliato” (2019, 160),¹⁸ up to more general statements like “[s]olo Argo soffre. In tutto il mondo ch'è bello e lucente non c'è altra sofferenza” (2019, 166);¹⁹ but also “Argo ha anche altri odori che il resto del mondo non sa e non sente”²⁰ (2019, 169) and “[t]alvolta Argo è lieto e vuol bene a tutti. Taglia l'aria con la coda perché in lui manca ogni sospetto e sa che non c'è nessuno che voglia pigliarlo per quella parte inerme” (2019, 181).²¹ Argo's metacognitive considerations sometimes even make of him a philosopher, like when he claims that “pensare alla catena quando si è liberi sarebbe come diminuire la grande gioia della libertà” (2019, 186).²² Flush, on the contrary, is not transformed into a thinker or a philosopher, and remains a creature of “instinct with health and energy” (2017, 23), whose thoughts and feelings Elizabeth Barrett often misinterprets. Woolf stresses this difference in particular in the passage in which, while Flush looks at himself in the looking-glass, pleased by his own breed and the “privileges of rank” (2017, 27), Miss Barrett observes him and is quite mistaken: “[h]e was a philosopher, she thought, meditating the difference between appearance and reality. On the contrary, he was an aristocrat considering his points” (2017, 28).

Both Argo and Flush, however, mostly live in what Woolf calls “the world of smell” and have an “olfactory philosophy, science, and religion” (2017, 67). Argo opens his autobiography stating that there exist three smells in this world, only to then list five different smells—as if to stress that, contrary to the Airdale Terrier Rolf, Argo knows no arithmetic. Everything is smell for Argo. Even his excrements are described in terms of smell, and this leads him to explain why his master does not want him to ‘leave stench’ inside the den—meaning the house: “[n]ella tana gli olezzi non erano necessari perché nello spazio ristretto è ben facile dirigersi e trovare senza

¹⁶ See in particular chapter VII of *Argo e il suo padrone* and chapter VI of Trumler.

¹⁷ “I had some slight hesitation.” All translations are mine.

¹⁸ “I thought I heard my master's whistle. But I could not smell him and so I could be wrong.”

¹⁹ “Only Argo suffers. In the entire world that is shiny and beautiful there is no other suffering.”

²⁰ “Argo also has other smells which the rest of the world ignores and cannot smell.”

²¹ “Sometimes Argo is happy and loves everyone. He cuts the air with his tail because there is no suspicion in him, and he knows that no one will take him by that defenseless part.”

²² “thinking about the chain when you're free would amount to decreasing the great joy of freedom.”

il loro soccorso” (2019, 180).²³ To explain the relevance and importance of smells, Argo even comes to a philosophical statement that his master calls “futurist:” “Odori tre uguale vita” (2019, 155).²⁴

The representation of Flush’s consciousness is less enigmatic and more “grounded in the mundane, embodied everyday life of dogs” and often “consonant with, perhaps even informed by, comparative psychology” (Hovanec 2018, 238). As mentioned before, Hovanec suggests that Woolf’s conception of animal experience closely aligns with the ideas of animal psychology (2018, 236) and she argues that one of the techniques Woolf uses to represent Flush’s experience is “delayed decoding,” a term invented by Ian Watt to describe Conrad’s impressionist techniques. This is a device in which the narrator relates an event not through facts and description but through sense-impressions, without explaining the event’s meaning (Watt 1981, 175-176). This is precisely what happens in *Flush*, where the narrator only reports the dog’s sense-impressions—merely smells—and it is up to the reader to decode the events and their meanings. An example is when Elizabeth Barrett goes shopping with Flush, and the reader deciphers what is actually going on only through the dog’s perspective of the experience, which is confused, multiple, overwhelming:

[Flush] entered mysterious arcades filmed with clouds and webs of tinted gauze. A million airs from China, from Arabia, wafted their frail incense into the remotest fibers of his senses. Swiftly over the counters flashed yards of gleaming silk; more darkly, more slowly rolled the ponderous bombazine. Scissors snipped, coins sparkled. Paper was folded; strings tied. What with nodding plumes, waving streamers, tossing horses, yellow liveries, passing faces, leaping, dancing up, down, Flush, satiated with the multiplicity of his sensations, slept, drowsed, dreamt and knew no more until he was lifted out of the carriage and the door of Wimple Street shut on him again. (2017, 15-17)

Delayed decoding occurs to Argo too, when he witnesses a crime, possibly connected to his master. The reader realizes what happened through the description of Argo’s senses, which led him to misunderstand the facts:

Non lontano dalla nostra casa c’è un grande e profondo burrone ed io amo riposare là accanto. Un giorno vidi che un uomo, dall’altra parte ch’è la più erta, venne giù, giù, sempre più presto. Non camminava sulle gambe. S’arrestò ad uno sterpo. Non gridò perché altrimenti avrei gridato con lui; ma restò là esitante. Poi strappò lo sterpo che aveva tenuto afferrato e disparve in fondo. Sentii chiaramente lo stormire di sterpi e foglie al suo passaggio. Volli seguirlo per vedere che cosa facesse in quel luogo che a me sembra mio. Fui richiamato e non

²³ “In the den, smells were not necessary because in a closed space it is easy to find one’s way, even without them.”

²⁴ “Smells three equal life.”

ci pensai più.²⁵ (2019, 172)

The following day he could feel that the man “putiva come una folla di animali uccisi. Certo giaceva nel proprio sangue”²⁶ and, after a few days, “l’olezzo gridava e mi raggiungeva persino alla catena divenuta perciò ancora più incresciosa del solito”.²⁷ Argo then decided to escape and go back to the ravine:

Il giorno dopo [...] ritornai al burrone. C’era qualcosa di nuovo! L’odore era oramai sparso per il sentiero per cui ero sceso il giorno innanzi; lo scopersi già sulla strada maestra su cui c’era persino una goccia di sangue ch’egli non aveva potuto portare seco. Ed io risalii sulla traccia di quell’odore ed ero tanto immerso nel mio lavoro che non sentii il fischio del padrone. Sulla strada non sapevo se l’odore girava a destra o a sinistra e rimasi perplesso. Ma lassù mi trovai improvvisamente dinanzi al padrone. Non mi picchiò! Anzi socchiuse gli occhi ed aperse la bocca. Ed io dalla gioia dimenticai l’uomo e il berretto e balzai abbaiano intorno al padrone che m’accarezzò. Così appresi che certe bestie anche dopo morte possono tuttavia fuggire.²⁸ (2019, 173)

In this switch of perspectives from human to dog, an element worth noting is the use of synaesthesia to describe smells, which for Argo are “alive and shining” for living things—like the ‘shouting stench’ in this passage, or “black and boring” for objects (2017, 157). For Flush too, smells have a crucial role, and during his first walk on a London street they become “more complex, corrupt, violently contrasted and compounded than any he had smelt in the fields near Reading” (2017, 26). Smells allow Flush to understand reality better than humans, as happens when Mr. Barrett enters his daughter’s room and cannot guess that Robert Browning has just spent the afternoon there, while Flush is “aghast at his obtuseness”, asking himself: “[d]on’t you know? [...] who’s been sitting in that chair? Can’t you smell him?” (2017, 39). Even though there

²⁵ “Not far from our house, there is a big and deep ravine and I love to rest nearby it. One day, I saw a man on the opposite side, the stiffest, coming down, down, faster and faster. He was not walking on his legs. He stopped by a brushwood. He did not cry, or I would have cried with him; but he stood there hesitatingly. Then he tore the brushwood and disappeared on the bottom. I clearly heard the leaves and brushwood rustling as he passed by. I wanted to follow him, to see what he was doing, in a place I considered mine. But I was called and no longer thought about it.”

²⁶ “smelled like a crowd of killed animals. He surely laid in his own blood.”

²⁷ “The stench was shouting and reached me to the chain which got even more unpleasant than usual.”

²⁸ “The next day [...] I went back to the ravine. There was something new! The stench was scattered all around the path; and I could smell it from the main road where I could even spot a drop of blood he could not carry with him. And I went up following the stench and grew so engrossed that I couldn’t hear my master’s call. On the road I found myself in front of my master, who did not beat me. I was so happy that I forgot the man and the hat [...] And I learned that some beasts can still escape after they’re dead.”

is no precise use of synaesthesia in Woolf's novel, smells still have synaesthetic traits for Flush: "[l]ove was chiefly smell; form and colour were smell; music and architecture, law, politics and science were smell. To him religion itself was smell" (2017, 76).

While synaesthesia is a narrative device which merges multiple worlds and sense-data, it is also a device that stresses differences between human and nonhuman perception of the world(s). The two authors enact quite different strategies. In Argo's case, what immediately links human and nonhuman animals is anguish, or neurosis as they "communiquent entre eux d'abord et surtout par l'inquiétude qu'ils renforcent dans un mouvement interminable d'influence réciproque"²⁹ (Ferraris 2006, 169). Argo is in fact convinced to have been born to suffer, and to suffer more than anyone else: "solo Argo soffre [...] Ed Argo ha anche altri dolori che il resto del mondo non sa e non sente. Argo è fatto per soffrire"³⁰ (2019, 166) but this could also be read in relation to the greatest difference between the two dogs here scrutinized: their relationship with their 'master' and 'mistress.' While Argo is often beaten by his master and spends his days chained outside the house, Flush is loved and treated like a child—so much so that when a baby is born from Elizabeth and Robert Browning, Flush becomes very jealous. Yet both dogs are prisoners in their own ways, since Flush is kept captive in Elizabeth's room, exactly like her:

the autumn winds began to blow; and Miss Barrett settled down to a life of complete seclusion in her bedroom. Flush's life was also changed. His outdoor education was supplemented by that of the bedroom, and this, to a dog of Flush's temperament, was the most drastic that could have been invented. His only airings, and these were brief and perfunctory, were taken in the company of Wilson, Miss Barrett's maid. For the rest of the day he kept his station on the sofa at Miss Barrett's feet. All his natural instincts were thwarted and contradicted. (2017, 28)

To analyse how their different kinds of constraints influence their relationships with their humans, the parameters suggested by Roberto Marchesini to value the partnership dog-human may be of help. Marchesini values the level of integration of dogs in society by means of two parameters:

- il 'ruolo,' ovvero il tipo di integrazione sociale, i compiti assegnati ma anche il grado di importanza attribuito, le risorse investite e gli oneri sopportati;

²⁹ "communicate between them first and foremost through the anxiety that they both reinforce in a never-ending movement of reciprocal influences."

³⁰ "only Argo suffers [...]. And Argo suffers from pains that the rest of the world does not know or feel. Argo is made for suffering."

- lo ‘statuto,’ ovvero il tipo di considerazione e le attenzioni tributate, la rilevanza morale delle azioni condotte verso di lui, i diritti assegnatigli, i limiti alla condotta che l’uomo si pone nei confronti del cane.³¹ (2007, 1)

In rural societies, the performative dimension was strongly present and so was a high level of ‘role’ and a high acknowledgement of species-specific characterization, yet with instrumental purposes and a low level of ‘statute.’ On the contrary, in urban societies there is a strong affiliate dimension and consequently a low level of ‘role’ and a poor acknowledgment of species-specific characterization with a tendency towards anthropomorphism, although with a high level of ‘statute’ (Marchesini 2007). Argo and Flush are indeed representatives of dogs in rural and urban contexts respectively, and the more they try to become similar and closer to their humans, the more they lose their agency and subjectivity. Argo is a hunting dog, and he is faithful to his master, but he also experiences typical human feelings like jealousy, rage, and anger. While Argo’s narration is made to ‘elevate’ him to the level of humans, Flush, on the contrary, ‘becomes-with’ Elizabeth Barrett: it is by laying on her knees and hearing men’s voices that his flesh becomes “veined with human passions; he knew all grade of jealousy, anger and despair” (2017, 77). To recall Morgan’s and Russell’s notion of different worlds, Flush enacts his plurality of worlds in the different interactions he has with other dogs, made purely by desire and instinct and free of possessiveness, jealousy, and anxiety, and in his relationship with Elizabeth Barrett Browning, marked by fidelity and jealousy. As Hovanec notices: “in the world of dogs, Flush is a carefree little primitive; in the world of humans, he absorbs human cares” (2018, 241).

4. Conclusions

One of the preliminary questions of this analysis was whether the two writers attempt to resist anthropomorphic constructedness in the narration of their nonhuman characters, and what narrative device they adopt to underline similarities and differences between human and nonhuman characters. Even though Svevo’s novella is narrated in the first person by Argo, both he and Flush have no linguistic abilities, yet they both have that ‘anthropomorphized’ animal language that usually questions zoopoetics’ own presuppositions (Jacobs 2018, 101). Anthropomorphism is often considered a literary device flattening diversity in favour of a

³¹ “• the ‘role,’ that is the kind of social interaction, the tasks assigned but also the level of importance attributed to them, the resources invested, and the burdens endured; • the ‘statute,’ that is the kind of consideration and the attentions expressed, the moral relevance of actions towards him, his rights, the limits to the conduct that the man applies to himself with regard to the dog.”

human-only perspective, but it can as well be a way to make animals more understandable to humans, in order for readers to realize that they demand an “ethically equivalent response and sense of responsibility from humans” (Faris 2007, 116). I believe this is the case with Svevo and Woolf, who in fact use anthropomorphic narrative device such as ‘delayed decoding’ or metacognition to represent the animal world as a perception capable of shaking their culture’s assumptions and the place of humans in a world inhabited by many more species than just themselves.

Is, then, the assumption that language is only ‘linguistic’ language upheld by the two writers or do they rather believe that body language and scent-based cognition are equally valid forms of communication and reciprocal understanding? This analysis has shown how Woolf, adopting the voice of the biographer, is in a position to represent the normally inaccessible consciousness of the dog, to offer insight into aspects of Flush’s subjective life that even his closest companions could not understand. Yet as a human being, “Woolf’s biographer-narrator confronts the limitations of human senses and human language in understanding and describing the full extent of Flush’s experience” (Hovanec 2018, 242). Svevo, on the contrary, explicitly places language learning at the basis of the relationship between human and dog, yet seeks to imagine the dog’s mind, although he only does it by means of typically human psychological devices such as metacognition. Albeit in different ways, both writers could be then considered as ‘zoological modernists’ in that they depict the otherness of animals to “recognize the limitations of human perception and representation,” and to “renew their commitment to perceiving and representing animals” (Hovanec 2018, 24).

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