

COMPASSION AND ACCEPTANCE OF HUMAN ANIMALITY IN A SELECTION OF LIAM O'FLAHERTY'S STORIES

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Article history: Received 15 February 2022; Revised 10 May 2022; Accepted 18 May 2022; Available online 30 June 2022; Available print 30 June 2022.

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ABSTRACT. *Compassion and Acceptance of Human Animality in a Selection of Liam O'Flaherty's Stories.* Liam O'Flaherty's numerous stories dealing with animals are generally considered his best artistic efforts. Scholars have highlighted how he humbled anthropocentric pride and even effaced the narrator and the human point of view from them. My contention, however, is that these stories can also be interpreted as O'Flaherty's literary meditation on the absence of 'good discontinuities' between humans and animals, and on the importance of constructing the human/animal encounter on the acceptance of the existence of an interspecies communion. In his stories, humans do not necessarily possess something that animals lack, such as the capability of feeling compassion. Humans often fail to have compassion for other animals or human beings, for they deny that a communion obtains among all the living. These humans are capable of taking delight in another's suffering and so disrupt both their equilibrium with potentially negative consequences and the present 'ecological equilibrium', which has to be restored. Hence, O'Flaherty's short stories can be seen as earlier literary responses to contemporary works on human/animal ethics and genuine ethe of care (Derrida; Nussbaum; Wolfe), which will be discussed here together with selected empirical studies on the same subject (de Waal; Goetz, Keltner, and Simon-Thomas).

Keywords: *Liam O'Flaherty, animal stories, compassion, existential suffering, human-animal distinction*

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REZUMAT. *Compașiune și acceptare a animalității umane în unele povestiri de Liam O’Flaherty.* Numeroasele povestiri de Liam O’Flaherty care au ca subiect animalele sunt îndeobște considerate reușita sa artistică cea mai importantă. Exegeții au evidențiat modul în care el a redus la umilință mândria antropocentrică, ba chiar a șters naratorul și punctul de vedere uman din acestea. Teza mea este, însă, că povestirile în cauză pot fi interpretate și ca meditația literară a lui O’Flaherty despre absența „bunelor discontinuități” dintre oameni și animale, și despre importanța de a construi întâlnirea om-animal pe acceptarea existenței unei comuniuni inter-specii. În povestirile sale, oamenii nu posedă în mod necesar ceva ce animalelor le lipsește, cum ar fi capacitatea de a simți compasiune. Oamenii nu reușesc adesea să simtă compasiune față de animale sau de alte ființe umane, întrucât ei neagă faptul că o comuniune rezultă între toate cele vii. Acești oameni sunt în stare să se bucure de suferința altuia și distrug astfel atât echilibrul lor cu consecințe potențial negative, precum și „echilibrul ecologic” actual, care trebuie reconstruit. Așadar, povestirile lui O’Flaherty pot fi văzute ca prefigurări mai timpurii ale unor lucrări contemporane despre etica om/animal și etica generală a grijii (Derrida, Nussbaum, Wolfe), discutate aici laolaltă cu anumite studii empirice pe același subiect (de Waal, Goetz, Keltner și Simon-Thomas).

Cuvinte-cheie: *Liam O’Flaherty, povestiri cu animale, compasiune, suferință existențială, distincția om-animal*

Liam O’Flaherty in the context of Posthuman and Animal Studies

Irish Literary Studies are witnessing the development of a new area of inquiry surrounding the cultural and discursive significance of animality, as the past few years have brought about an unprecedented amount of scholarship on the depiction of the human/animal encounter and the recurrent presence of animals in the works of Irish writers (Estévez-Saá, Palacios-González, and Pereira-Ares 2020, 1). Featuring research relevant to Irish Animal and Posthuman Studies are, for instance, the pioneering *The Female and the Species. The Animal in Irish Women’s Writing* (2010) and the edited collection *Animals in Irish Literature and Culture* by Kathryn Kirkpatrick and Borbála Faragó (2015); the dedicated 2020 issue of *Estudios Irlandeses*, edited by Margarita Estévez-Saá, Manuela Palacios-González, and Noemí Pereira-Ares as well as scattered essays in Christine Cusick’s collection *Out of the Earth: Ecocritical Readings of Irish Texts* (2010). The list may also include the forthcoming *The Cambridge History of Irish Literature and the Environment*, edited by Malcolm Sen, and Bloomsbury’s *Flann O’Brien and the Nonhuman: Animals, Environments, Machines*, edited by Katherine Ebury, Paul Fagan, and John Greaney (O’Connor 2020, 367).

These works attest to the growing academic interest in the field of Irish Animal Studies and betray the urgency, which is acutely felt among this scholarly community, to rethink Irish literature within a posthumanist framework and explore how the literary arts can raise our sensitivity towards the non-human world. Underpinning most of such research is the belief that the literary text, with its complexity and subtlety, is a fruitful space for us readers to increase our awareness about interspecies relationships and grasp some of the “elusive truths about animality”, including our own (Bartosch 2020, 9 and 12; cf. also Iovino 2010, 761). Literature has always been deeply engaged with environmental questions, exploring, among other things, the many facets of human and cultural attitudes towards animals. And, although literary works about animality may seem less scientifically reliable than zoological reports, the aesthetic encounter with ‘animal’ subjects can spur readers to question the ethical and scientific grounds of human exceptionalism, problematise the categorical human/animal distinction, and ponder spaces of interspecies conviviality (Kompatscher and Heuberger 2021, 268–69).

The invitation to consider the ethical and pedagogical value of imaginative literature informs the following pages, which investigate a number of animal stories by Liam O’Flaherty. Since O’Flaherty authored more than a hundred tales, a thorough selection was necessary and, to reduce the degree of arbitrariness in the selection, I opted for the stories that can engage with and challenge contemporary theoretical work in Animal Studies, focusing prevalently on the stories from the 1920s. I refer to: “The Cow’s Death” (1923), “Sport: A Kill”, “The Blackbird”, “The Wild Sow”, “The Hook”, “The Wren’s Nest”, “The Black Bullock” (all from 1924), “The Wild Goat’s Kid” and “The Wounded Cormorant” (both from 1925), “The Blackbird’s Mate” and “The Black Rabbit” (from 1929), and “The Hawk” (1949).² Usually only two- or three-page long, these stories are populated by the domestic and wild animals of the author’s native Aran and *seanchas* of the Galway region, to which is given prominence: O’Flaherty’s animals do not haunt the peripheries of narrative, nor are they metaphors, symbols, or representatives of humans (Sheeran 1976, 48; Kompatscher and Heuberger 2021, 252). Rather, O’Flaherty made the effort to represent their authentic existence and consciousness in stories that capture moments of interspecies encounters or feature no human being at all, focusing exclusively on animals (cf. Malamud 2000, 2).

This corpus of narratives, I believe, can be productively analysed from a posthumanist perspective, because it tackles the crucial questions mentioned above as well as other key issues like the presence of good discontinuities between species and animal suffering. By resorting to the tools of Posthuman and Animal Studies, we can gauge and make use of the potential of O’Flaherty’s

² There is no consensus on when O’Flaherty wrote “The Hawk”, which he also read on Radio Éireann and translated into Irish: 1949 is the year of its earliest known publication.

narratives to problematise deep-rooted assumptions about animals and our relation to them, the challenging of which is an integral part of the deconstruction of anthropocentrism (Xie 2019, 3). The use of the verb ‘to problematise’ is intentional here: as will be shown, O’Flaherty’s animal stories are neither blatantly moralistic tales nor pamphlets through which he made a cause of the prevention of cruelty to animals; what is more, in his entire oeuvre, scholars have pinpointed representations of bestialised men and of animals as “villains” that complicate attempts at classifying O’Flaherty’s works as posthumanist (cf. Phillips 2005, 43 and *infra*).

Incidentally, I contend that the short stories focusing on animal lives, often seen from the point of view of the animals themselves, may help us relativise and humble our anthropocentric *unlike* the novels and novellas (Hediger 2016, 12). As critics have often noted, in his longer narratives, O’Flaherty conjures for readers visions of subhuman creatures who are aliens in the civilised world or subject to degeneration and reverse evolution. For instance, Gypo Nolan of the bestselling *The Informer* (1925) teeters on the verge of insanity and inhabits a world that seemingly “hunts him like an animal, in which he is gradually tracked down for the kill” (Donnelly 1974, 73); the soldiers in the World War One novella *The Return of the Brute* (1929) are bestialised humans repeatedly compared to wild dogs. Commenting on such portrayals, Terry Phillips observes that, so doing, O’Flaherty created “a site of abjection which renders porous the boundaries between the human and the animal” (2005, 43). In my view, however, O’Flaherty does not really trouble the supposed human-animal divide in his lengthier works, because, there, animality is displaced and projected onto the marginalised Other to the point that the resulting hybrids do not appear to blur categorical difference but reaffirm it along with anthropocentricity: the bestialised man is ‘less than a human’ and slightly ‘more than an ape’ (cf. Ortiz-Robles 2016, 146–47).

In contrast, the selected short stories hold interest for Posthuman and Animal Studies scholars who deem literature a key instrument for the recognition that “we are all part of a porous, dynamic, and relational planetary system, every aspect of which is necessary and valuable” (O’Connor 2020, 346). Hence, by focusing on the briefer genre, I seek not only to contribute to the growing scholarship in the field, but also to further and, in part, re-orient the discussion of animality in O’Flaherty. The ‘re-orientation’ is carried out by situating the selected corpus into a framework of contemporary theorisations on human/animal ethics and genuine *ethé* of care put forward by Jacques Derrida, Martha Nussbaum, and Cary Wolfe. In their light, the stories can be read as O’Flaherty’s literary meditation on the absence of “good discontinuities”, in which “we humans have something morally valuable that animals don’t have” (Nussbaum 2012, 142), and on the importance of constructing the human/animal encounter on the acceptance of the existence of an interspecies communion.

To adequately show this, the article is structured into two parts and each one focuses on how, in his short narratives, O'Flaherty engaged with some leading questions of our age that have to do with human-animal relations (Calarco 2008, 113). The first question, which was initially posed by Jeremy Bentham and then reiterated by Derrida and Wolfe, can be summed up as: "The question is not, Can they *reason*? Nor Can they *talk*? but, Can they *suffer*?" (Wolfe 2003a, 33). The analysis of the selected stories will show that O'Flaherty lays emphasis on the entrapped, tragic fate of all species (Cahalan 1991, 54). His tales do not rest on human exceptionalism but refuse to normalise any neat human-animal distinction, because suffering, vulnerability, and finitude are presented by the author as marks of existence for *both* humans *and* animals. Shared existential suffering in particular is a recurrent theme in his animal stories, which point to the fact that humans and animals undergo similar experiences: we are no less mortal or vulnerable than animals (Perkins 2000, 10; Adams 2016).

Then, after dwelling on the fate humans share with animals, the focus will shift to a second, interrelated, question: the question of violence and compassion towards animals. In my view, the deep-rooted idea of human exceptionalism is further challenged in O'Flaherty by the fact that his human characters do not possess something that animals lack. The capability of compassion is often thought of as a key marker of humanity's difference from other species, meaning that only humans can feel compassion and deeply share another's emotions. Yet, in O'Flaherty, humans often fail to have compassion for other animals or human beings, for they deny that a communion obtains among all the living. These humans are capable of taking delight in another's suffering, disrupting both their equilibrium with potentially tragic consequences and the present 'ecological equilibrium', which has to be restored.

O'Flaherty's narrative and thematic choices thus enable one to put his short stories in dialogue with the ideas of Nussbaum, Wolfe, and the other contemporary thinkers for whom compassion is the potential cornerstone of any radical interspecies ethics and politics – the basis on which we should forge an ethical bond with nonhuman animals (Arnould-Bloomfield 2015, 1467; Xie 2019, 5).

Vulnerability, suffering, and the interconnectedness of human and nonhuman lives

O'Flaherty was a prolific but uneven writer, whose critical standing has suffered because of the extreme differences within his work (Heaney 1995, 45). With few exceptions, the existing scholarship presents him as a talented craftsman of short stories who tried his hand at the longer form with mixed results. Critics have often thought his fifteen novels to be flawed and I deem it indicative that,

with the only exception of *The Informer*, all of them were out of print by the mid-1970s (Donnelly 1974, 71). In contrast, O'Flaherty's stories from the 1920s dealing with animals and Irish peasant life are still anthologised and have been crucial in establishing his reputation as an exquisite craftsman of the briefer genre (Cahalan 1991, 53). Earlier and later commentators have been consistent particularly in their agreement that O'Flaherty's best works are the tales evincing an obsession with animality, a deep interest both in non-human animals and the animality of humans (O'Connor 1970, 1). Seán O'Faolain saw in O'Flaherty's animal stories "the distillation of pure genius" who "has his ear to the earth" (1937, 174), and, according to Benedict Kiely, "it is understanding of the earth, of animals worthy and human beings not always so worthy of the earth, that makes O'Flaherty's work important" (qtd. in Murray 1968, 154). David H. Greene contended that O'Flaherty "developed a genre" which he "made all his own – the short story with an animal character" (1956, 328), and, for fellow-writer Frank O'Connor, O'Flaherty's "best stories deal with animals, and the nearer his characters approach to animals the happier he is in dealing with them" (qtd. in O'Connor 1970, 18).

Considered together, these comments point to the qualities in O'Flaherty's writing, which was grounded in his connection with nature and his profound knowledge of animal life and the inner workings of animal characters. For O'Flaherty, animal life was not merely a literary subject but held a fascination in its own right (Cahalan 1991, 54). During the 1920s, O'Flaherty retreated to the Aran Islands on a few occasions in an attempt to regain his spiritual health and inspiration. For the writer, solace and beauty could always be found in primitive Nature and its contemplation, to the point that he sought "communion with the cliffs, the birds, the wild animals, and the sea of [his] native land" (qtd. in Cahalan 1991, 58). To Edward Garnett, his literary reader for the publisher Jonathan Cape, O'Flaherty wrote in 1927: "I went down to the Aran Islands for a few days and I was gloriously alive for those days, alone by the sea fishing rockfish" (1996 [1927], 187). Another letter to Garnett, dated April 1923, instead attests to the author's careful attention to animals: "I sat for two hours in a field yesterday watching young heifers. It's peculiar the way they lie down. Invariably they raise snouts in the air and blow out their breath. I think it's to clear their nostrils. [...] I never noticed this before" (qtd. in Cahalan 1991, 54). Similarly, in the non-fictional *Joseph Conrad. An Appreciation*, O'Flaherty says that his closeness to nature and animals made him a different writer from the author of *Lord Jim* and other novelists: "I have seen the leaping salmon fly before the salmon whale, and I have seen the sated buck horn his mate [...]" (qtd. in Sheeran 1976, 36).

The repeated opportunities to observe animals first hand prepared O'Flaherty to write about them. When O'Flaherty turned to the animal world to

populate his stories, he tried to approach animals on their own terms by making the effort to represent their consciousness and look at life from their perspective (cf. Malamud 2000, 3). To do so, he would efface the point of view of humans from the narrative or place it side by side with a multiplicity of alternative visions. "Sport: The Kill" is exemplary in this regard, as it is first told from the perspective of a rabbit that is hunted down and trapped in a tunnel by a boy and his dog. The boy pushes a willow rod in an attempt to drag his prey out, but only manages to wound it.³ So, "blinded by the pain", the rabbit crawls straight into the fangs of the dog at the other end of the tunnel (1924, 152). In these moments of violence, the point of view shifts rapidly from the rabbit to the dog and, finally, to the boy who then takes the rabbit and bashes its head on a rock. The action is very clearly pictured through details about the panting, snorting, and growling of the animals. Readers are helped to understand the rabbit's instinctual reactions, they are made to feel the fear of the prey as it "see[s] enemies on both sides" or "the strong smell of the dog's breath [is] stifling" it (151). The story as a whole gains intense poignancy through this sensing of the rabbit's plight.

As one may garner from the brief synopsis of "Sport: The Kill", many of O'Flaherty's stories focus on the fundamental concerns of the lives of animals, such as the search for food, mating, and their struggles to avoid the threat of danger or death from humans or other animals (Magee 1964, 159). Equally central, in narrative terms, is the depiction of animal pain and suffering. For example, "The Wild Goat's Kid" is the story of a young goat who bravely fights a scavenging dog to protect her kid; "The Hawk" concerns a father bird's desperate attempt at protecting his eggs and mate from a hunter: at the end, the human intruder smashes him onto some rocks and the hawk drops, dead and without a sound, into the "dark water" below (1999 [1949] 345); in "The Blackbird's Mate", a hen blackbird freezes to death because she refuses to leave her eggs in the nest, which, nonetheless soon become "icy cold" (1999 [1924], 314); "The Cow's Death" is a vivid account of a mother cow searching for her dead calf and dying herself; in "The Wounded Cormorant", a story that involves no human characters, the titular bird is brutally killed by its flock.

Often climaxing in the death or wounding of the animal characters, these stories stand out as a profound comment on the tragic transience of life on earth: animals are first and foremost temporal and vulnerable living creatures. Not unlike humans. O'Flaherty shows that animals are made vulnerable by necessities, constraints, and the pressures of the environment, but also that they share this status of precariousness and vulnerability with us. Human beings are not exempt from cruel fates and pain, especially within an environment

³ At times, O'Flaherty uses the pronouns and adjectives he/she/his/her to refer to animals; at other times, he opts for it/its: the occurrences in the article reflect those in the original texts. Moreover, whenever possible, the quoted texts are taken from the earliest instance of the story being examined.

subject to the whims of sea and weather like that of the Aran Islands. Despite leaving Dublin for the Aran during his nervous breakdowns,⁴ O'Flaherty never denied that life was hard on the islands at the turn of the twentieth century: when he was born, in 1896, many of the 3,000 islanders lived in houses with no electricity or running water and faced a constant struggle to find enough food (Kelly 1988, 5). The first-hand knowledge of the elemental harshness of his native place made O'Flaherty no more inclined to romanticise the life of people than that of animals (Phillips 2005, 43).

This is apparent, for instance, in "The Landing" (1924) and "The Oar" (1928), two complementary stories that are characterised by similar plot patterns and a "cinematic" style (Sheeran 1976, 133): a storm erupts suddenly, the sea swells, and some fishermen struggle to race to shore. The divergence lies in the conclusion: while, in "The Landing", the fishermen make it out to the rocks, in "The Oar", a "mighty wave" swamps a curragh and three men die. The stories end abruptly with brief sentences, respectively "They had landed safely" (1999 [1924], 49) and "We saw an oar by the Serpent's Reef. Raised up to Heaven with a hand grasping it. It followed us and no hand was grasping it" (1928, 55), which direct the reader's attention to the primal moments and situations in the life of any living being – death, survival, sudden accidents that alter irrevocably human or animal relationships (cf. O'Connor 1970, 288). Both tales are graphic descriptions of the fishermen's lives as they struggle with the unforgiving elements of nature to survive and, by focusing on such themes, the author implies that humans too are "subject to the requirements of the surrounding environment, the vicissitudes of time, and the vulnerabilities of the body" (Herman 2016, 3). In the novel *Insurrection*, one of the characters says, "I'm in revolt against the idea that man is the centre of the universe" (qtd. in O'Connor 1970, 58), and, emblematically, the towering waves in "The Landing" and "The Oar" point to a rejection of the patterns of human domination over nature and, instead, to bonds of continuity between them (Braidotti and Dolphijn 2017).

If considered together, O'Flaherty's short stories have the power to 'spur' readers to meditate upon the embodied finitude and vulnerability, to other creatures or to time and environment, which we share with animals. The recognition of a shared status enables one to anchor O'Flaherty's narrative, on the one hand, to Anat Pick's theorisations on existential vulnerability, on the other, to what figures as diverse as Adams, Derrida, Nussbaum, and Wolfe have posited as the starting point for our ethical response to non-human animals, namely "our shared embodiment, mortality, and finitude" (Wolfe 2008, 9).

⁴ O'Flaherty's 'moodiness' may have been a consequence of his traumatic experience on the front lines of the Great War: in September 1917, he was caught in a bombardment of artillery fire and severely injured. The author came home from France shell-shocked and, as remarked in the autobiographical *Shame the Devil*, he "was regarded as a pariah and a fool and a renegade" (O'Flaherty 1934, 21; Marchbanks 2006, 93).

Taking her cue from Simone Weil's "The vulnerability of precious things is beautiful because vulnerability is a mark of existence", Pick argues that there is nothing specifically "animal" about the susceptibility of mind and body to earthly forces and necessities: vulnerability is a mark of existence that transcends species difference (2011, 1–7). At the same time, O'Flaherty's short stories can be seen to fit with recent concepts of interspecies interconnectedness, which Adams sums up in the sentences "All of us are fated to die. We share this fate with animals"; for this reason, she argues, we should try to awaken our culture to care about animals, a group with which we share deep affinities (2016, 5).

Thus grounded in the poignant reminder of shared vulnerability and mortality, the interspecies affinity between humans and animals is also emphasised, in O'Flaherty's short stories, by the attribution to animals of capacities such as character, intelligence, and emotion. As noted by John Hildebidle, "the animals act out of the same instincts and emotions as do O'Flaherty's people", including the 'negative' jealousy, the dislike of the outsider, and hatred (1989, 19); indeed, given that O'Flaherty based his descriptions on sensitive and minute observation of animal behaviour, his writing, often violent, does not look at the natural world in a sentimental fashion. For example, "The Blackbird" revolves around the pride and vanity of its protagonist, which is so "full of vanity", so proud of and absorbed in "his delicious warbling", that he barely escapes the claws of a cat (O'Flaherty 1924, 563–64). Instead, in "The Black Rabbit", O'Flaherty conjures up a world pervaded by fear and envy, in which the 'different' animal is dreaded and killed: the rabbit of the title is described as huge and "undoubtedly a sport of nature, a sudden upward curve in the direction and divine intellect"; particularly because of his beauty and intelligence, he became the "hated enemy of [his] housekeeper" who instigates some half-wild, conniving cats to kill him: the cats, who fear and despise the 'difference' of the rabbit, carry out their task (1971 [1929], 194–201).

One consideration arises from reading these two stories. We should not view the blackbird, the rabbit, and the cats as predominantly allegorical, whose main function is to be serving as a mirror for the examination of people. It has been argued that, in "The Blackbird" and "The Black Rabbit", O'Flaherty makes use of anthropomorphism, as he transposes human emotions onto animals: significantly, A. A. Kelly labels the former story "a fable", sort of cautionary tale meant to warn people of the dangers of excessive vanity (1976, 14). I do not fully share Kelly's view. In the wake of Frans de Waal's theorisations in *Primates and Philosophers*, I deem such presence of anthropomorphic elements a judicious form of anthropomorphism, which may uncover a whole world of resemblances between species, an essential interconnectedness (de Waal 2006, 65). Moreover, as I will try to demonstrate by reporting some private writings by O'Flaherty, I believe that the author genuinely recognised in all living beings the capabilities of feeling emotions and developing complex interrelations. Hence, by showing

that, O’Flaherty points to a fundamental continuity between humans and other animals: fear, hatred, jealousy, and so on are facts of nature, not – to paraphrase Anat Pick – something specifically human or animal.

Suffering, here intended as psychological pain, is another marker of continuity. O’Flaherty depicts a harsh, naturalistic world which can also be defined as “Darwinian” in that only the fittest survive, and both animals and humans can give in to brutality and violence in keeping with the extremes of nature they have to face (cf. Kelly 1988, 5). “The Wounded Cormorant” provides a case in point. O’Flaherty was fascinated with cormorants: following a visit to Inis Mór, he claimed that “the people are sadly inferior to the island itself. But the sea birds are almost worthy of it. The great cormorants thrilled me” (1996, 188). Nonetheless, he was not inclined to offer an edulcorated portrayal of them. In the short story, a cormorant gets injured when a rock drops from a cliff ledge and cuts its leg: it survives for a short time until its “comrades” take action. The relevant passage reads:

But they had no mercy. They fell upon it fiercely, tearing at its body with their beaks, plucking out its black feathers and rooting it about with their feet. It struggled madly to creep in farther on the ledge, trying to get into a dark crevice in the cliff to hide, but they dragged it back again and pushed it towards the brink of the ledge. One bird prodded its right eye with its beak. Another gripped the broken leg firmly in its beak and tore at it. (1925, 318)

Here, O’Flaherty shows how his brutal world implies that the elimination of the weakest must take its course to guarantee the survival of the others: both the wounded cormorant and its mates knew that for the former, unable to keep up with “the flock, death was certain. Sea-gulls would devour it” (318). The laws of nature regulate life on the Aran Islands and the barren efforts of survival of their inhabitants, as O’Flaherty had so closely observed. Incidentally, that the story is not narrated from a noticeably personalised perspective makes “The Wounded Cormorant” look like an objective study of nature with all its tenderness and viciousness – a depiction that seems to comply with Morton’s assertion that “ecological art must include ugliness and disgust” (Morton 2018, 87; cf. Bateson 2021, 55).

The author returns to the themes of overpowering and violence in “The Hawk”, the analysis of which also helps to foreground the centrality of predation, of prey-predator relationships, in many depictions of human-animal encounter in O’Flaherty’s narrative. In the autobiographical *Shame the Devil*, one learns that predation is the groundling principle of existence for the author, who, in an oft-quoted passage, is seen shouting to an American woman: “Learn, you foolish

woman, that life is an interminable process of one form of life preying on another, from the cow that destroys life in the blade of grass to the lion that leaps upon a stag in the African forest" (1934, 55).

The idea of relentless violence and suffering engendered by the "interminable process" of predation is craftily conveyed in "The Hawk", in which human beings and animals compete with the other species in satisfying the same wants, and humans succeed because they are the fittest (cf. Magee 1964, 160). The story is divided into three parts. First, the male hawk scares peaceful birds out of the territory and kills a lark to feed his mate, thus fulfilling "the purpose for which nature had endowed him" (O'Flaherty 1999 [1949], 343). But, then, the hawk loses his life in a futile attempt to protect his nest from a man who captures the mate and takes the eggs: the hawk is "helpless in the presence of the one enemy that he feared by instinct" (344). "The Hawk" is another objective study of nature with all its laws and viciousness, which suggests that birds and humans partake in the same naturalistic universe and can be both predators and prey: the 'villain' is the man, but man is seen preying on the hawk's nest immediately after the hawk had killed the lark; the man emerges as merely another animal, only more dangerous (Kelly 1976, 11; Cahalan 1991, 60).

Again, what is striking in this story is the full range of emotions attributed to the hawk, from a sense of triumph to "ecstasy" to "fear" and "agony" (O'Flaherty 1999 [1949], 344). The hawk also demonstrates that he can suffer, as we see his emotional response to the pain of his mate: "it was neither pride in his power nor the intoxication of the lust to kill that stiffened his wings and the muscles of his breast. He was drawn to battle by the wild, sad tenderness aroused in him by his mate's screech" (345). And suffering is very broadly construed here, because it is not physical pain but, specifically, psychological pain (cf. Wolfe 2003a, 33). This may remind the reader of the cock bird losing his companion in "The Blackbird's Mate", who is said to utter a "queer cry" and "piteous shriek" upon realising what happened in his nest (O'Flaherty 1999 [1929], 314). The blackbird's behaviour, as presented in the story, seems to show that animals have some sort of awareness of death, and hurt because of it.

Albeit without any animal rights agenda, O'Flaherty thus tackles the central question first raised by Jeremy Bentham in response to Descartes, and recently addressed by Derrida and Wolfe: "the question with animals is not can they talk, or can they reason, but can they *suffer*" (Wolfe 2003b, 24). An answer in the positive appears to emerge from the stories analysed here. O'Flaherty was certainly aware that animals feel the raw, unpretentious emotions that have to do with the struggle for survival: he wrote, "swift thought and the swift flight of ravenous birds, and the squeal of terror of hunted animals are to me reality" (qtd. in Sheeran 1976, 36). Moreover, thanks to first-hand observation of nature,

he may have concluded that animals can feel psychological pain: they *do* suffer. Reflecting on a *real* goat he saw on the Aran, he observed:

a wonderful character but a hopeless milker. I shot her kids and in revenge she is deliberately withholding her milk, so that very probably she will go dry in a fortnight unless she changes her mind and decides to behave herself. I think she is a most unhappy animal for she wails at times for no reason in the world. (O'Flaherty 1996, 150)

Hence, readers of O'Flaherty are confronted with the troubling idea that the distinction between animals and humans is not adamant: animals not only have emotions but can also suffer, and this concerns us very directly, for we are fellow embodied beings vulnerably exposed to suffering. O'Flaherty's insinuation that *we both* suffer simultaneously "challenges the ontological understanding of the human as a superior species" (Chiew 2014, 61) and raises pressing questions about our relationship with non-human alterity: should we care about animals? Why should we care about them when we do not always care about fellow humans?

The short stories I am about to examine can act as a stimulus for us to reconsider our relationship with the animal Other and our capacity to witness the suffering of animals with no compassionate response – to be emotionally frozen in front of it. Many of O'Flaherty's 1920s stories are accounts of indifference and cruelty to animals that are grounded, I contend, in "the a priori rejection of shared characteristics between humans and animals", that is to say, the "wilful blindness to the human-like characteristics of animals or the animal-like characteristics of ourselves" (de Waal 2006, 65).

Compassion as the cornerstone of the human/animal encounter

In the 1920s, one of Liam O'Flaherty's best achievements was the story "The Cow's Death", which he first published in the *New Statesman* in June 1923. Later included in the collection *Spring Sowing* and much appreciated by the author himself, "The Cow's Death" tells of a mother cow giving birth to a stillborn calf. We see the cow, in pain, reaching for the calf in a sequence of actions that highlights her strong maternal instinct: "She stooped over the calf and moaned, again smelling it. Then she licked the still body with her coarse tongue lovingly" (O'Flaherty 1923, 364). But soon after, oblivious to this display of affection, the peasants who were watching over the cow take the body of the calf and throw it over a cliff: the dead calf ends up on some rocks at the sea edges. The second part of the story thus focuses on the increasing distress afflicting the cow: O'Flaherty does not treat her suffering as incommunicable, as the cow's anguish is described through references to her frantic movements and 'intelligible'

animal language – the narrator tells us how she tilts her head, moans and lows, stumbles, and circles around the same point wildly. This until, driven by the desire to find her young one, the cow breaks through all barriers and discovers the body: so, “the cow, uttering a loud bellow, jump[s] headlong down” to her death, just as a “great towering wave” sweeps the calf’s body from the rocks (364).

Without anthropomorphising the cow, the story elicits sympathy from the reader, for the emotion and maternal instinct that drive the cow to her death are familiar to humans too (O’Connor 1970, 306–07). And to emphasise the communion that exists – or should exist – between species, the narrator introduces the unnamed characters of the cow’s peasant owner and his wife, who show compassion and understanding for the bereaved animal mother. I intend compassion not as a blind urge in contrast to reason, but, in the wake of Martha Nussbaum’s theorisations, as the emotion that arises in witnessing another’s suffering and that motivates a subsequent desire to help (Nussbaum 2012; cf. Goetz, Keltner, and Simon-Thomas 2010, 351). The portrayal of the peasant owners and the account of their actions provide a ‘narrative’ case in point for such a definition, because the peasant woman manifests sorrow and tries to attend to the cow supportively after the delivery. The third-person, objective narrator recounts that “the woman offered her a hot drink of oatmeal” and that “the woman rubbed the cow’s matted forehead, and there was a tear in her eye; for she too was a mother” (O’Flaherty 1923, 364).

This appears to be a compassionate response evoked by what Nussbaum calls a “judgment of similar possibilities” and deems of “considerable importance in preventing or undoing anthropodenial” (Nussbaum 2012, 147). Put it simply, people or animals feel compassion because they view the plight of the suffering other as a real possibility for themselves, as is arguably the case with the peasant woman. In my reading, the woman’s reaction is devoid of any connotations of condescension and is not activated by a position of superiority – her compassion for the cow stems from a sense of similarity and communion, specifically from her recognition that, for the mother, the life of the calf possesses more than merely material value: animal life is recognised to have some intrinsic worth. This recognition is further narratively foregrounded in the gestures of the peasant, who buries the bag “under a mound of stones” and makes the sign of the cross on the cow’s side “with a handful of the brown earth”: man and cow are placed symbolically at one (O’Flaherty 1923, 364).

But this unity of humans and animals is often destroyed by the former’s insensitivity or cruelty as other stories show (Kelly 1976, 3). O’Flaherty provides his readers with many examples of failure in compassion, which may be ascribed, at least partly, to what de Waal has called “anthropodenial,” the implicit denial on the part of humans that we are animals (de Waal 2006, 59–67; Nussbaum 2012, 140). In “Sport: The Kill”, for instance, we have a case of animal suffering that

evokes no compassionate response from its human witness (and perpetrator). This is a tale in which “animals play the roles of both heroes and villains, and the latter role they share with man” (Kelly 1976, 10), because the dog joins in hunting down the rabbit, but the dog is not an agent of senseless violence as much as the boy. The young hunter is shown to give in to the unreasonable pleasures of killing – he “cursed”, “grunted”, “growled” – and has no feelings for his dog or the rabbit: at the end of the story, he “kick[s] the dog fiercely on the ribs” and “bash[es]” the rabbit’s head on a rock (O’Flaherty 1924, 150–52).

Employing his usual objective style, the author gives no explicit ethical judgement on the situation, but seeing the chase from the perspective of the hunted animal and how the hunt atrociously ends forces us to interrogate killing as a form of wanton cruelty as well as our relations to animals and our supposed ‘moral’ superiority. Discussions of the relationship between humans and animals often focus on two things: continuities between humans and animals and the so-called good discontinuities, including the contention that full moral agency and the capability to feel compassion pertain exclusively to humans (Nussbaum 2012, 142–44). No fully-fledged theorisation on whether animals can deeply share another’s emotions transpires from O’Flaherty’s short fiction, nevertheless, his grimmest naturalistic stories linking animals and people compel us to entertain the idea that there is not, necessarily, a good discontinuity between humans and animals for what concerns compassion.

Often, in the short stories from the 1920s, humans are shown as insensitive and cruel for no apparent reason or gain. In “The Hook”, for instance, a hook is cruelly planted by two “small boys” in a piece of liver, with which they lure a seagull: the boys are not described in detail, for the story is told from the point of view of the bird, which only ‘hears’ them “curs[ing]” when it manages to escape free (1924, 871–73). Similarly, in “The Wren’s Nest”, two boys drag a nest from a tree, kick it and tear its pieces to shreds, and scatter the eggs all around: all of that just to prove their fearlessness. The focus on the two friends does not ‘obscure’ the human-animal relationship, but rather places it in a larger network of relationships that predicate themselves upon forms of prevarication and violence: the boys often quarrel and fight to establish who is the bravest and strongest, and the destruction they cause restores their amity. They are oblivious to the suffering of the birds, which are “screaming in an agonised state”: soon after destroying the wren’s nest, they devote their attention to “a rabbit’s nest with three young ones in it” (1924, 11–12). Readers may find “The Wren’s Nest” particularly disturbing, especially since O’Flaherty deliberately uses children as the perpetrators of violence.

“The Hook” and “The Wren’s Nest” were written around the same time as “The Wild Sow” and “The Black Bullock”, which both deal with cruelty to animals and their death at the hands of irrational people. These two tales

implicitly criticise human exploitation of other species and our self-perceived superiority to animals. Bullocks and sows are prized agrarian resources in the rural communities depicted by O'Flaherty, but, in these stories, their life and wellbeing appear to possess little material value, let alone an intrinsic value. In "The Wild Sow", Old Neddy starves his pig until she breaks into his bedroom/food storage and a "big potato stuck in her throat" chokes her to death (1924, 65–66). "The Black Bullock" describes a bullock that eats too much and so is rejected by its owner and tortured by villagers and other animals alike, which makes it "hungrier, more thirsty and miserable": eventually the bullock falls, breaks its spine, and is slaughtered (1999 [1924], 145–48). Again, readers are left wondering about human insensitivity to animal pain, on which the narrator lingers: the bullock roams near the village hungry and thirsty, but the villagers throw stones at him; the sow "whine[s] with the hunger", but Neddy's only reaction is shouting at her "From now on, [...] you'll have to fend for yourself, and may the devil choke you" (1924, 66).

Equally disconcerting may be the realisation that these animals were purchased to make a profit and, yet, are neglected by their human purchasers who, ultimately, pay the consequences of their actions. Old Neddy, who continuously repeated "I have money while I have that pig", finds himself with no potatoes, flour, or dried rockfish. The bullock is slaughtered before it is fit for sale. These are consequences of the economic kind but, to an extent, O'Flaherty seems to suggest that acts of brutality upset the existing ecological equilibrium made of human-animal interrelations: both stories end on an ominous note of death – respectively, "he found her lying on her side, stone dead" (66) and "so he had to slaughter him" (148) – which points to an untimely rupture in the rhythmic cycle of rural, seasonal life. It also presses into the reader's mind the idea that a new equilibrium, in a community dependent on animals for livelihood and vulnerable to the overwhelming forces of nature, has to be established.

These tales of wanton cruelty to animals also counter the strong positive link between humans and animals portrayed, for instance, in "The Cow's Death". Amy Scher argues that, in the tales of animal subjugation, O'Flaherty longs for "an integrated world" and wishes to "impart [...]" to his peasant characters "a sense of the responsibility inherent in living creatures to sustain a relationship with the environment which focuses on harmony as an essential element" (1994, 113–14). I believe that O'Flaherty does not 'impart' or 'preach', as Scher's article title would suggest, but he makes clear that the very same peasant whom he holds in high regard for "respond[ing] to the seasons like a bird or beast" (1929, 116) could give in to brute instincts. Therefore, he confronts his readers with a range of possible human-animal relations and, given the bitterness that transpires from tales such as "The Wren's Nest", it is safe to suggest that O'Flaherty leans towards a way to connect with the nonhuman animal that is based on the acknowledgement of shared characteristics.

This article has shown that the Aran-born author tackled questions that are nowadays central for Posthuman and Animal Studies scholars, as he subtly indicated that vulnerability underpins existence itself, regardless of species difference; that we are all equal in defencelessness in the face of immanent nature, its towering waves and sea depths such as those described in “The Oar” and “The Cow’s Death”; that animals too have emotions and suffer; and that denying that animals suffer is of little gain to humans.

Hence, O’Flaherty’s fictional handling of human-animal relations can be put in dialogue with Derrida’s and Wolfe’s theorisations on compassion, because compassion appears to be linked, in all these authors, to the acknowledgement of our vulnerability. If we read O’Flaherty’s stories against such theoretical background, we may grasp the importance of constructing the human/animal encounter on the acceptance of the existence of an interspecies communion, with compassion – literally ‘suffering together’ – as the key means to live with animals and engage ethically with their difference.

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