

ZOOPOETICS AT THE CROSSROADS BETWEEN POSTMODERNISM AND POSTHUMAN. CASE STUDY: THE CAT AND CONTEMPORARY JAPANESE LITERATURE

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Abstract In a world overwhelmed by emerging technologies, in which the idea that humanity has lost its “authenticity” is increasingly more widespread, the literary narration that explores the territories beyond the “human” realm becomes an excellent laboratory for conducting observations on the posthuman concerns. Thus, in the final wave of the contemporary Japanese literature – covering the first two decades of the 21st century (2001-2021) –, seven novels have the word *neko* (‘cat’, ‘tomcat’) in their titles, written by Takashi Hiraide, Yōko Ogawa, Genki Kawamura, Makoto Shinkai, Naruki Nakagawa, Hiro Arikawa, Sōsuke Natsukawa. These Japanese novels have been translated into several dozens of languages, circling the globe and encountering, in their path, other books dedicated to the aforementioned feline. The present study aims to analyse these Japanese postmodern narrations from a zoopoetic-hermeneutic angle and to emphasise the cat-character’s role as the social marker of a “private space” shared by the human and his animal companion – which, naturally, is part of the “public space” of society –, connected to the present time of postmodern contemporaneity, as a means for “survival” in an alienated urban world. As part of an obvious intertextuality, the cat-character seems to dominate the gallery of non-human animal characters from the contemporary Japanese literature. Postmodernity, by its own means, adds to the study of the relation between the human animal and the non-human animal, which has previously been approached predominantly from an anthropological or a cultural-historical angle.

Keywords Contemporary Japanese literature, zoopoetic hermeneutics, Postmodernism, posthuman, non-human animal.

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Paleoanthropologists and archaeologists are convinced that, from the very beginning of their existence, humans have closely observed animals in an attempt to understand both the “predominant trait” of each animal and the “contradictory elements” that make humans human.¹ However, the human-animal interaction does not belong solely to science: religions, stories and literature also try, by their own means, to “recount” the relation between the human animal and the non-human animal, as well as the changes that occurred, over the years, in the way in which humans perceive animals. Thus, over the first two decades of the 21st century, the Japanese literary market stands out after the publication of seven novels that have the word *neko* (“cat”) in their titles: Takashi Hiraide (b. 1950), *Neko no kyaku* (*The Guest Cat*), in 2001; Yōko Ogawa (b. 1962), *Neko o daite, zō to oyogu* (*Swim With an Elephant, Embracing a Cat*), in 2009; Genki Kawamura (b. 1979), *Sekai kara neko ga kietanara* (*If Cats Disappeared from the World*), in 2012; Makoto Shinkai (b. 1973), Naruki Nakagawa (b.1974), *Kanojo to kanojo no neko* (*She and Her Cat*), in 2013; Hiro Arikawa (b. 1972), *Tabineko ripōto* (*The Travelling Cat Chronicles*), in 2015; Sōsuke Natsukawa (b. 1978), *Hon o mamorō to suru neko no hanashi* (*The Cat Who Saved Books*), in 2017, and Hiro Arikawa, *Mitorineko* (*The Goodbye Cat*), in 2021.

In Japanese mythology, the symbol for longevity and happiness is represented both by the turtle (*kame*) and by the crane (*tsuru*), according to the Taoist doctrine, in which the essence of the universe is given by two great principles: the celestial principle, symbolised by the crane, and the terrestrial principle, symbolised by the turtle.² The cat, or the small feline, is, in fact, not an endogenous animal. It reached the archipelago after a long journey through India, China, and Korea – brought over from Egypt to Asia by the armies of Alexander the Great (to protect the soldiers' provisions from rats). The cat is present in Japanese bestiaries with a heterogeneous symbolism, oscillating between a good and an evil connotation.³

Emperor Uda (867-931) was the very first to record the presence of the cat in Japan. On 11 March 889, in his *Imperial Diary* (*Kanpyō Gyōki*), from which only fragments have been preserved, he noted that he had received a luxurious (and unusual) gift, shipped from across the seas: his father, Emperor Kōkō,⁴ had given him a cat. He became very attached to the black cat and, in the chapter entitled *For the Love of a Cat*, the 59th Emperor of Japan – an intelligent philosopher and a reformist ruler, who abdicated to become a priest after ten years of reign, in 897 – pays a true homage to the small feline, which he believes endowed with ...spirit.

The first literary work of Japanese literature that depicts the cat as a quasi-character inspired by reality is *Makura no sōshi* (*The Pillow Book*, 1002?), by Sei Shōnagon (966?-1024?).

¹ See Eugenia Shanklin, “Sustenance and Symbol: Anthropological Studies of Domesticated Animals,” *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 14 (1985): 375.

² See Neli Delay, Dominique Ruspoli, *Bestiaire Japonais* (Garches: À Propos, 2021), 117.

³ See Jean Chevalier, Alain Gherrbrant, *Dictionnaire des symboles. Mythes, rêves, coutumes, gestes, formes, figures, couleurs, nombres*, Édition revue et augmentée (Paris: Robert Laffont et Jupiter, 1982), 214.

⁴ See Delay, Ruspoli, *Bestiaire Japonais*, 56.

The book mentions a beautiful cat, favoured by Emperor Ichijō (980-1011), who, in fact, granted the cat the “Fifth Rank” – a respected rank that provided the little feline with a special attendant and required careful supervision by the ladies-in-waiting at the imperial court.⁵ The cat is also present in *Genji Monogatari* (*The Tale of Genji*, 1008?), the novel written by lady-in-waiting Murasaki Shikibu (978?-1016?) several years after *Makura no sōshi*. There is a scene in which a kitten, chased by another, in an attempt exit the room, opens blinds and, thus, allows Kashiwagi – who, alongside other young men, was playing with a ball within Prince Genji’s residence, beneath the cherry blossom petals floating in the misty air of a spring sunset – to catch a glimpse of beautiful Onna-San-no-Miya, Genji’s new wife, and to fall madly in love with her.⁶ Thus, as early as the Heian period (794-1185), a literary imaginary of the cat seems to already emerge⁷ – one in which its “feline-ness” becomes associated with feminine grace, a connection that would, several hundred years later, be exploited to the fullest extent by the Japanese prints of Harunobu Suzuki (1725?-1770), Kitagawa Utamaro (1753?-1806), or Utagawa Hiroshige (1797-1858). In these works, the beautiful *geishas* are often accompanied by a cat either playing or being petted, sleeping, or grooming itself, as a subtle and indirect suggestion of the power of feminine seduction.⁸

In the 19th century, the cat is the theme of several dozens of *haiku* poems signed by Masaoka Shiki (1867-1902): 白猫の行衛わからず雪の朝 (*Unknown are the wandering paths of the white cat... Snowy morning*).⁹ It is also a standalone literary character, at the beginning of the following century, in the novel written by Natsume Sōseki (1867-1916) *Wagahai wa neko de aru* (*I Am a Cat*), which was published as a serial in the magazine *Hototogisu*, between 1905-1906, under Takahama Kyoshi’s supervision, who had, in fact, changed the title of the first story – from the initial *Cat Chronicle* to *I Am a Cat*.¹⁰ The nameless¹¹ cat’s lack of human prejudice is his great advantage. He refers to himself as *wagahai* (a somewhat pompous-

⁵ See Sei Shōnagon, *Însemnări de căpătâi* [*The Pillow Book*] trans. Stanca Cionca (Bucharest: RAO International Publishing Company, 2004), 45.

⁶ See Murasaki Shikibu, *Povestea lui Genji* [*The Tale of Genji*], trans. Angela Hondru (Iași: Polirom 2017), 699.

⁷ In the period in which ladies-in-waiting Sei Shōnagon and Murasaki Shikibu lived, only the Emperor, the Princes and Princesses could own a cat, which they walked in a leash with a red silk bow. It was not until an edict in 1602 that cats were freed from their leashes to become the pets of anyone who desired them.

⁸ See Delay, Ruspoli, *Bestiaire Japonais*, 58.

⁹ See <https://www.city.matsuyama.ehime.jp/shisetsu/bunka/sikihaku> (accessed in 12 December 2023). The original haiku, in Japanese, was translated into Romanian by the author of the present paper, as “Neștiute cărările rătăcitoare ale pisicii albe... Dimineață cu ninsoare,” which was then translated into English by the translator of the present paper.

¹⁰ See John Nathan, *Sōseki. Modern Japan’s Greatest Novelist* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 91.

¹¹ The novel begins by noting a certain detail regarding the cat’s lack of a name: “I am a cat. As yet I have no name,” in <https://toleratedindividuality.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/i-am-a-cat.pdf>. Original text: 『吾輩は猫である。名前はまだ無い。』 in Natsume Sōseki, *Nihon bungaku zenshō. Natsume Sōseki*, 1 (Tokyo: Kawade Shobō Shinsha, 1967), 7.

sounding archaic form of the first-person pronoun *I*) and he is the unusual storyteller-character of this novel, who manages to observe and describe the humans with utmost objectivity and detachment. In this reversed fable, in which an animal draws conclusions based on stories involving humans, Natsume Sōseki portrays contemporary Japan, in the early 20th century, in a rather early stage of the modernisation that had begun in 1868, after centuries of feudal stagnation, through a type of narrative known as *shishōsetsu* (*I-novel*) – a movement that debuts at this point in the history of Japanese literature. The novel *I Am a Cat* would, in fact, be immediately acknowledged as an essential marker of the modern Japanese literature.

The Japanese society experienced an era marked by paradoxes – one in which the new wave of individualism and selfishness, for instance, discrepantly juxtaposes the *sokuten kyoshi* principle (*to be in accord with heaven and reject the self*)¹² – a rather effervescent and confusing period during which it is quite unclear whether, for instance, a word denotes an almost forgotten artistic school or a type of cuisine from the still insufficiently known European gastronomy. The nameless narrator cat, from the position of a “new private subject”,¹³ portrays the turmoil and doubt, unease and angst with humour and bitter lucidity, with (self-)irony and cat-like wisdom, often tinged with pessimistic undertones. The feline narrator, a stray cat that took up residence at professor Kushami’s house (meaning *professor Sneeze*), is endowed with a level of intelligence that is highly unusual for its... species. He listens to the conversations that his neurotic master, an infatuated dilatant, a hypochondriac and a misogynist, has with the people who visit him: Meitei, the aesthetician wearing gold-rimmed glasses, a cynical boaster and a fake scholar; Kangetsu, the master’s former student who had held a lecture at the Physics Association about the “dynamics of hanging oneself” – he aspired to obtain a doctorate in physics by polishing a glass ball until achieving a perfect sphere, an ideal ultimately abandoned; Ochi Tofu, Kangetsu’s friend, a poet playwright dreaming of a “haiku theatre”, and Yagi Dokusen, a philosopher promoting Oriental passivity and spiritual discipline.

In the first part of the novel, the nameless cat tries to socialise with the other cats in the neighbourhood, such as Kuro, the giant uneducated and boastful tomcat belonging to the rickshaw puller, or with the beautiful and refined cat Mike, who addresses him as “sensei” (“professor”) – probably because the tomcat lived in a professor’s house – treated by her owner as her own child and respected by the servants as if she were racially superior to humans. In the second half of the narrative, the “humanized” cat with literary aspirations bears his critical fangs towards the human society. Thus, he focuses his “intelligence”, “intuition” and “reason” on the study and understanding of the human being, following in the footsteps of tomcat Murr, the anthropomorphised feline narrator from the novel *The Life and Opinions of the Tomcat Murr*¹⁴ (1820-1822). The Japanese cat had recently learned with extreme

¹² James A. Fujii, “Contesting the Meiji Subject: Sōseki’s *Neko* Reconsidered,” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 49, No.2 (Dec. 1989): 553. <https://about.jstor.org/terms> (accessed on 19 December 2023).

¹³ Fujii, “Contesting the Meiji Subject,” 555.

¹⁴ The novel was written by E.T.A. Hoffmann, the German master of fantasy and horror literature.

astonishment about the existence of Murr, who had expressed his own opinions about humanity a hundred years earlier and was considerably successful. The end of the narration coincides with the end of the narrator cat's life (a death that is, in fact, far from honourable). Deeply saddened by the human society's might, who push him towards an absolute pessimism, but also driven by a typical cat-like curiosity, he licks the beer left by the professor-master's friends in the glasses on the table after the party. He then boldly exits the house, dazed by the alcohol he had consumed for the first time in his short life (of only 2 years). After greeting Lady Moon, he clumsily falls into the large courtyard barrel filled with rainwater, from which he can no longer save himself. He dies murmuring the name of Amida Buddha.

The novel *I Am a Cat* is rooted in the *gesaku* literature of amusement¹⁵ and is in absolute contrast with the sober utilitarian spirit of the late Meiji period. It cannot be labelled in a simplistic and simplifying manner, in the name of a local tradition of comical narration, merely as a modern (critically virulent) satire towards the contemporary society and of the Russian-Japanese war (during the second year of its development). The story can be read as a revelation and a discovery of the individual,¹⁶ due to both the deeply realistic portrayal of a character depicted as a parody of what can be regarded as the sophisticated hypocrisy of the Meiji period (1867-1912) and the "superficial" image of Japan, who won the Russian-Japanese war. However, it can also be read as an unmerciful psychological self-portrait of the author himself.¹⁷ In the end, in an apparently comical manner, the Japanese writer, who lends his voice to a feline narrator, aims to synthesize the contemporary Japanese sensitivity with the Western narrative perspective. This is overlaid with the period's *credo* to build the modern Japanese "state". Inevitably, he touches on the delicate issue of his own humanity, as well as that of humanity in general. This is a recurring issue in Japanese literature, from the first two decades of the 20th century. Not coincidentally, it is readdressed and reassessed though or with the help of the cat-characters as possible... reincarnations of the nameless cat under scrutiny here – who is, in fact, the most beloved cat in Japanese literature.

In Junichirō Tanizaki's novel, *Neko to Shōzō to futari no onna (A Cat, a Man, and Two Women, 1936, 1951)*, the beautiful, striped, European cat Lily is the character that binds the other characters together: Shōzō (the lazy, lying, jealous and unfaithful man who has a blind passion for Lily), Fukuko (the current wife) and Shinako (the ex-wife). Lily embodies the "humanity" of the love triangle while also representing the transience of the world – defined in Japanese by the concept of *mujōkan*. However, the novel *The Guest Cat*, published by Takashi Hiraide in 2001, brings to the forefront a novelist who, before the reader's very eyes, writes the story of the cat-character Mica, ten years after its death, by browsing through the notes he had made for several essays published in different literary journals at that time. Mica – a silent cat that can be seen, but never touched, its behaviour constantly reflecting the fact that the

¹⁵ See Fujii, "Contesting the Meiji Subject," 557.

¹⁶ See *ibid.*, 558.

¹⁷ See Nathan, *Sōseki*, 97.

cat is still a tamed wild animal¹⁸ – seems to have adopted the two spouses, and not the other way around, as one would normally expect of the human-animal relation. The very short time in which the cat is part of the couple's life will provide the novelist the opportunity to give the small feline a "voice", indirectly, through literary-philosophical meditations on the social relations and their humanity, as well as on the "river of time" or the meaning encompassed by the words "end" and "beginning". The events depicting the protagonist Mica take place between the autumn of 1988 and the spring of 1990, a period that coincides with the end of the Shōwa period (1926-1989), due to the death of Emperor Hirohito, and the beginning of the Heisei period (1989-2019), through the ascension of Emperor Akihito. Against the background of countless economic and housing problems the couple faces during this period, even the cat's death (which is, in fact, not entirely devoid of mystery) seems to be subject to the *uchi-soto* (inside-outside) relation, the ruling principle of the Japanese society. Generally, it is believed that the animal is the one being "observed" by the human, while the animal is never considered an "observer". However, the gaze of the guest cat embodies, for the two spouses, the possible "being-with"¹⁹ situation, in which "with" could be translated to "being near". The silent cat's gaze caught the eye of the novelist, who thus noted *the other* as the animal. The animal's mute alterity gave rise to a sense of responsibility within the novelist. Through its comings and goings, as well as through its mere presence, followed by its sudden disappearance, Mica the cat, embodying "the point of view of the absolute other",²⁰ opened the writer's path towards an entire array of issues related to the *human animal vs. non-human animal* relation, ultimately offering his anthropological-meditative gaze the abyssal limits of the human condition.

In 2009, a new cat-character emerges. It is even present in the title of Yōko Ogawa's novel, *Swim With an Elephant, Embracing a Cat* (*Neko o daite, zō to oyogu*). If, in the previous text under scrutiny, the protagonist of the story is the cat-character, in the novel that can be placed halfway between fantasy and realistic, authored by Yōko Ogawa, the protagonist is Little Alehin, while the cat named Pawn plays the role of the main character's ally, like an *alter ego* or another "self". In the chess adventure in which he dives passionately, the little boy, while holding his cat, would slowly learn the rules of the game as the rules of life which, *transcribed*,²¹ could be characterised as *elegance, grace, brilliance, cunning, grandeur, solemnity*. Just like the chess pawn, which can never retreat and which prudently continues its advance, Little Alehin unhesitatingly fulfils his mission of showing the world the fascinating universe of chess, aided by the genius cat Pawn, the fabulous elephant Indira and the girl with

¹⁸ See Robert Delort, *Animalele și istoria lor* [*Les animaux ont une histoire*, 1984], trans. Mioara Izverna and Florica Georgescu (Bucharest: Meridiane, 1993), 427.

¹⁹ Jacques Derrida, David Wills, "The Animal That Therefore I Am", *Critical Inquiry* 28, No. 2 (Winter, 2002): 379, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1344276> (accessed on 15 Dec. 2023).

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 380.

²¹ Yōko Ogawa, *Înotând cu elefantul, în brațe cu pisica* [*Swim With an Elephant, Embracing a Cat*], trans. Raluca Nicolae (Bucharest, Humanitas Fiction, 2020), 47.

ethereal contours, Mīra. Due to the fact that the boy sees an intellectual affinity in the cat, Little Alehin intuitively “accredited” Pawn²² with the ability to play chess. The animal imperceptibly approached the human condition, thus once more questioning the issue of the *humanity* of the human being as a “subject” and a “person”, in an “anthropological approach”²³ that redefines creativity and the artefact, when humanity “flows” *together with* the other, *into* the other or *through* the other.

Several years after Yōko Ogawa, in 2012, Genki Kawamura publishes the novel entitled *If Cats Disappeared from the World* (*Sekai kara neko ga kietanara*). The plot of the confessional-epistolary narration begins the moment in which a young, thirty year old mail carrier, who is “apathetic and charmless”, receives the diagnosis of an advanced-stage brain tumour surprisingly “calmly”. Together with death, the devil Aloha also unexpectedly enters his mundane life. The cat, sometimes believed to “have everything from the Devil,”²⁴ due to its possible association with a demon, can also gain a (partially) magical connotation. Thus, the tomcat Cabbage – the mail carrier’s “beloved” housemate of four years – in complete symbolic ambiguity, could be interpreted as the gaze and voice of the devil Aloha, who had appeared in order to *guide* the young man facing death towards “its own viewpoint.”²⁵ Moreover, the devil Aloha indirectly brings to mind not only the classical Faustian myth, but also what can today be deemed as a true “pact with the devil”, offered by the medical-pharmaceutical technology for life extension, conditioned by the use of drugs and medications: a longer life, but a reduced mental capacity; a liberation from depression, but a loss of creativity and spirit; therapies that erase the border between what a person can achieve alone and what they achieve due to the different chemical substances in the brain, triggered by the neuro-pharmaceutical products.²⁶ However, in the end, for the young man, it is not the cat’s aptitude for *logos* that seems to take precedence in his story, but rather the concern for an “ethical truth”.²⁷ the cat’s ability to feel pain and to suffer because it senses mortality, given the fact that both humans and animals share the finite nature of life identically.

Unique in its own style, the novel *She and Her Cat* (*Kanojo to kanojo no neko*) by Makoto Shinkai and Naruki Nakagawa, published in 2013, proposes a double character perspective on each detail of the event narrated in the storyline, constantly intertwining the human perspective with that of the cat-character. Moreover, given that four human female characters appear on the narrative stage, namely Miyu, Reina, Aoi and Shino, the cat-character is, in its turn, multi-faceted: Chobi, Mimi, Cookie and Negro. The young women and their cats

²² Dominique Lestel, *L’Animal singulier* (Paris: Seuil, 2004), 120.

²³ *Ibid.*, 125.

²⁴ H. Chauvet, cited in Delort, *Animalele și istoria lor*, 441.

²⁵ Derrida, Willis, “The Animal That Therefore I Am,” 382.

²⁶ Francis Fukuyama, *Viitorul nostru postuman. Consecințele revoluției biotehnologice* [*Our Posthuman Future: Consequences of the Biotechnology Revolution*, 2002], trans. Mara Rădulescu (Bucharest: Humanitas, 2004), 20.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 169.

live in Tokyo, in the same neighbourhood, and, over several seasons, they all sequentially meet and get to know one another. Naturally, their cats actually meet before their owners do. Their meetings and the experiences they share, recounted in two voices, create an urban tableau in which the resigned pain of human loneliness, manifested differently in the four young women, is ultimately dispelled by the adopted cats, as the fates of the human and feline characters intertwine in a very subtle weave. Learning the “price of freedom” together, through the experiences they share at the crossroads of their destinies, the cats and their owners explore the fragility of their feelings, the anguish of isolation and the impossibility of communication, in a desire to escape the fear of death and to prepare to enter (lovingly) into a new emotional-affective world. If, normally, the small, stray cat (belonging to no one) is a weak autonomous “subject” in the urban environment, in a hybrid human-animal community, it transforms into a strong heteronomous “subject”, sharing a common interest with the human – this seems to be the ultimate message of the novel *She and Her Cat*. Thus, despite all female characters having received individual names, the title of the book suggests the human “subject” merely through the personal pronoun in the third person singular, in nominative (she) and genitive (her), while the cat characters are subsumed into the collective “subject” *cat*. The title thus contains the subtle suggestion that *she* could be anyone and that the cat (be it a character or not) would always understand its mission of being *hers*.... Affection humanises the animal into a true “family metaphor”,²⁸ transforming it into the “visible soul of the house.”²⁹ Contrary to a widespread opinion – strongly linked to the model of the humans in their relation with their pets – the small feline can also “tame” the human, through a reciprocal “seduction”, as part of a similar process of “manipulating” both feelings and subjectivity.

Several years later, in the novel *The Travelling Cat Chronicles (Tabineko ripōto)*, from 2015, Hiro Arikawa proposes a new narrative formula for depicting the cat-character in relation with the human protagonist: a human-animal dialogue transcribed into a travel chronicle by tomcat Nana, who openly confesses his resemblance, in terms of his literary aspirations, to his famous “compatriot”, the nameless cat. The chronicle of the journey across the ocean of life should have belonged to Nana, as a survivor, following the death of his master, struck down in the prime of his life by a ruthless disease. He was the one left alive to tell their story, in a highly passionate interpretation. Despite the fact that, intrinsically, no animal is an actual *person*,³⁰ in a hybrid human-animal community, like the one proposed by the novel *The Travelling Cat Chronicles*, the animal seems to have become a *person* through the reciprocal trust “contract”. The chronicle of the travelling cat undoubtedly compels the reader to rethink and re-conceptualise the notion of “person” as a “humanised animality”³¹ that emerged from the relation between a human person and a non-human person, as is one’s pet.

²⁸ Lestel, *L’Animal singulier*, 131.

²⁹ Cocteau, in Delort *Animalele și istoria lor*, 442.

³⁰ See Lestel, 135.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 115.

Hachi's story and Nana's story were continued by Hiro Arikawa several years later, in the collection of stories entitled *The Goodbye Cat (Mitorineko)*, published in 2021. To the two stories, *Events from Hachi's Life. A Short Sequel to The Travelling Cat Chronicles* and *Another Journey. Short Sequel to The Travelling Cat Chronicles*, the author adds five others: *Cat Island; Tom, The Rascal; Schrödinger's Cat; Beyond Appearances* and *The Goodbye Cat*. Each short story focuses on a cat-character who understands human speech and can converse with those around it. *Can cats feel time?* – this is one of the questions with which the reader could be left at the end of reading each story. Undoubtedly, contemporaneity seems to have changed the traditional means of treating the pet. From a “zoontological”³² perspective, the life of an animal that becomes a pet in the urban environment today seems to claim an understanding that intersects the biological, zoological and anthropological fields. A social-cultural phenomenon thus emerges, namely one in which the cats, for instance, are considered friends and, sometimes, even members of the family. From an initially economic human-animal bond, it has now evolved into a relationship of emotional investment between the human animal and the non-human animal.

The cat-character from the novel *The Cat Who Saved Books (Hon o mamorō to suru neko no hanashi)*, published by Sōsuke Natsukawa in 2017, could be a possible *nekomata* avatar (an immortal cat with magical abilities) who was fully aware of the “the power of books”. A mysterious talking tomcat Tiger, characterized by his “will”, “perseverance” and “stubbornness”, who appeared out of nowhere on the “endless” corridor between the bookshelves, invites Rintarō – who had inherited the Natsuki second-hand bookstore after the recent death of his grandfather – to embark on a fantastic adventure in the “The Labyrinth of books”. He required his help in saving the books from certain dire situations that could lead to their disappearance from the world. Following the magical-fantasy journeys in which he allows himself to be guided by Tiger, the high school student matured spiritually and came to understand the fact that the expression “to pass away” (*daijōjō* 大往生, lit.: “the great departure”), which he had heard when his grandfather died, combines the terms “to depart” (往) and “to live” (生), precisely in order to eliminate the semantic antonymy and logical contrast between “death” and “life”, since duality is annihilated by the non-separation of the components. For Rintarō, the initial shock of an apparent linguistic absurdity was erased by the “miracles” witnessed over the final days, through the teachings of his “beloved” books that reflect people's souls and that were now explored in a new dimension. The novel *The Cat Who Saved Books* can, therefore, be read as “a symbolic adventure of the identity”³³ that characterises humanity. The rebel tomcat Tiger is highly cultured, from a literary viewpoint, and he is capable of profound analytical thinking. As an *individual* and a *person*, he demonstrates not only knowledge but also a wise dignity – quintessentially human concepts – precisely to reveal to Rintarō the *humanity* of man and to compel him to reflect upon it. Given

³² Cary Wolfe, “Introduction,” in Cary Wolfe (ed.), *Zoontologies. The question of the animal* (Minneapolis/London: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), ix-xxiii.

³³ See Lestel, 130.

its very essence, the cat represents a force of nature, wild and untameable,³⁴ which could explain why it has become the most popular animal-character in contemporary Japanese literature: the attraction it exerts on humans by its somewhat mystical nature and the degree of wildness kept unaltered can undoubtedly confer it the status of a unique literary character. Similar to the other cat-characters in literature, the striped tomcat from a children's storybook can ensure and maintain high school student Rintarō's "inner gaze" upon "the other". The human-animal meetings in the novel thus gain a pedagogical, ethical and philosophical connotation.

Contextualised within the perimeter of the period, the publication of the contemporary Japanese novels that feature the cat-character in their very titles no longer seems accidental. As part of an obvious international "trend" of novels dedicated to the small feline: Erin W. Hunter, *Warrior Cats* (2001), Sonya Hartnett, *Forest: Journey from the Wild* (2001), S.F. Said, *Varjak Paw* (2003),³⁵ in 2008, the American literary market launches the book *Dewey: The Small-Town Library Cat Who Touched the World*, by Vicki Myron, which quickly became a worldwide best-seller. In the chapter *Dewey goes to Japan*, the author mentions that, in 2003, the Japanese public broadcast channel NHK expressed their desire to film the American tomcat adopted by the public library from Spencer, Iowa, in a documentary about cats. The channel representative had discovered that particular cat's story in an article published in the Japanese magazine *Nekobiyori*. After the documentary about twenty-six felines (most of which were Japanese) was broadcast in Japan, Vicki Myron recounts that she received many letters from Japan at the library she managed, together with a request for postcards depicting Dewey's image (the tomcat who "worked" at the library). Moreover, she mentions that, during that particular summer, Japan ranked second in the top countries of origin for the virtual audience, after the USA: the Spencer Public Library had received a record number of over 150,000 visitors over the course of three years.³⁶

The Japanese magazine *Asahi shinbun* (which has been published continuously since 1879) is one of the oldest and most prestigious publications in Japan and, in fact, in all of Asia. In 1907, it hired Natsume Sōseki – who had recently resigned from his position as a professor at the Imperial University of Tokyo.³⁷ Between April and September 2014, the *Asahi shinbun* celebrated the centennial of the first Sōseki publication. To mark the event, the magazine republished a serialised version of the novel *Kokoro (Kokoro)*, the author's most famous book, in the original format from 1914. The readers' excitement, reflected in the sale of seven million copies, led Asahi Shinbun to subsequently reedit the writer's other novels, including the

³⁴ See Delort, 446.

³⁵ See Maria Nicolajeva, "Devils, Demons, Familiars, Friends: Toward a Semiotics of Literary Cats," *Marvels & Tales* 23, No. 2 (2009): 263.

³⁶ See Vicki Myron, Bret Witter, *Dewey. Pisiul din biblioteca unui mic oraş cucereşte lumea [Dewey: The Small-Town Library Cat Who Touched the World, 2008]*, trans. Ines Hristea (Bucharest: Humanitas Fiction, 2012), 218.

³⁷ See Fujii, "Contesting the Meiji Subject," 563.

masterpiece *Wagahai wa neko de aru (I Am a Cat)*, from 1905. The novelist's death was commemorated by unveiling an android of Natsume Sōseki, on 9 December 2016, which was then exhibited at different Japanese universities.³⁸ Could the publication of novels, between 2001 and 2021, that feature the word *neko* ('cat', 'tomcat') in their titles be merely a cultural gesture of reverence across time, by the contemporary generation, towards master Sōseki, or rather merely an alignment with an international trend?!

Japanese postmodernism is characterised by the tendency and ability to "juxtapose"³⁹ – somewhat confusingly – polar opposites, thus enabling the immediate proximity of past and present, the juxtaposition of "high" culture and mass culture, the interconnection of public and private spaces, the amalgamation of Western and Eastern aesthetic-philosophical and socio-political perspectives, and the contamination of life and death. This is done within a program deliberately designed to avoid any term that might suggest either concentration or hegemony, or a "normative centre",⁴⁰ or a control code. In the absence of this control code, contemporary fiction could confer upon a non-human animal the role of the protagonist of the narrative. The cat-character, for instance, thus becomes the hero of a novel that aims to obliterate the demarcation lines between the human animal and the non-human animal. Through different narrative scenarios that contain elements of magic, labyrinths, theatrical features, complexity, ambiguity and symbolism, the postmodern Japanese literature often equated knowledge with a matter of style. In this case, style is understood as "a sensibility of time."⁴¹

As books of their own periods, undoubtedly inspired by the authors' own pets, as well as by the pets of literature – namely Sei Shōnagon's courtier-cat, Murasaki Shikibu's seduction-cat, Natsume Sōseki's novelist-cat or Junichirō Tanizaki's conjugal pawn-cat –, the cat-characters in the Japanese literature of the first two decades of the 20th century enrich the imaginary of the small feline, showcasing several of its many contemporary facets: the guest-cat (Takashi Hiraide), the master-cat (Yōko Ogawa), the thinker-cat (Genki Kawamura), the psychologist-cat (Makoto Shinkai, Naruki Nakagawa), the traveller-cat (Hiro Arikawa), the saviour-cat (Sōsuke Natsukawa). They configure a Japanese "zoopoetics"⁴² that aims to cover the abyssal rupture that had, for centuries, been thought to lie between humans and animals. Like in the case of Alice in Wonderland, accompanied by a pet cat in real life and a protector cat-companion in an unfamiliar and bizarre land, the Japanese writers transformed the pet from real life into a hybrid cat-character: a *humanised* non-human animal. Given the fact that it has always been believed that the small feline has magical powers and can summon alternative

³⁸ See Nathan, *Sōseki*, x.

³⁹ See Alan Wolfe, "Suicide and the Japanese postmodern: A Postnarrative Paradigm?", in Masao Miyoshi and H.D. Harootunian (eds.), *Postmodernism and Japan* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1989), xii.

⁴⁰ See Miyoshi, Harootunian, *Postmodernism and Japan*, vii.

⁴¹ See Marilyn Ivy, "Critical Texts, Mass Artifacts: The Consumption of Knowledge in Postmodern Japan," in *ibid.*, 28.

⁴² Derrida, Wills, "The Animal That Therefore I Am," 374.

universes, or can even cross the borders between worlds, the cat-characters from the Japanese novels play the role of spiritual guides for the human characters and for the readers, from the desire to reveal to them the beauty within the banality of everyday life. In the Japanese novels, the cat-character is depicted as a (semi)anthropomorphised creature, never without its enigmatic essence, sometimes detached from the human being, but always a challenger of society's totalitarian rules, as part of a subtly ideological intention, devoid of any evil-negative connotation. It receives a metaphoric, symbolic and/or allegorical rendition of love, friendship, loyalty, life and death.

The contemporary human-animal relation has surpassed the limits of anthropocentric subjectivity,⁴³ and the issue of the difference between human and animal is addressed today through literature's attempt – as an expansion of the scientific and ethnologic research endeavours – to understand whether the animal is a *subject*, an *individual*, or a *person*.⁴⁴ After the animal was long regarded as a kind of “blind zoological automaton”, the debate about the human-animal relationship has now also moved into zoopoetics, at the interface between natural, cultural, and biographical history. This shift aims to highlight not the animal as a plural, generalised species, but the animal in the singular, thus individualized – the only one that can, in fact, attain the status of *animal-individual* or *animal-person*. This status emerges from multiple interactions with humans within hybrid human-animal and non-human animal communities, where they share common interests, affection, and meaning. The *human animal-non-human animal* binomial is complex, multidirectional, dynamic, and the creation of a cohabitation space, modified by both, so as to welcome each of their specificities,⁴⁵ seems fairly difficult. Domestication created the pet within the urban environment of a given culture and, in the life space built for both the human animal and the non-human animal, the latter becomes an *individual* through the privileged connections between the two, in the course of a common history that takes place within the same physical space.⁴⁶ Given that the cat cannot normally “answer” the human using words – which differs from a mere reaction –, in order for the perception to belong mostly to the non-human animal, the Japanese writers imagined talking cat-characters. They are thus creative and intelligent, and they were given names, not merely in order to individualise them, but to endow them with... human powers. This intimacy – where a relationship between the human animal, the non-human animal, and the reader is established through a *story* – ultimately metamorphoses into a social space where numerous emotional states are exchanged through a triadic complicity that shares the same (literary) meaning. Naturally, literature has “seen” the animal before as well, but only now it wonders whether the animal, in its turn, *watches* the human. The question that ultimately arises is whether or not the human became... *humane* precisely by interacting with the animal. The history of human evolution is fundamentally a history of hybrid communities and of their

⁴³ Ibid., 400.

⁴⁴ Lestel, *L'Animal singulier*, 15-97.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 17.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 21.

sensible transformations – as ethnologists and ethologists, as well as all of the aforementioned Japanese novels seem to generally note.

Through the efforts made by several generations in the field of animal ethology, which tended to erode the border once believed to have separated humans from the rest of the animal world,⁴⁷ *the issue of the animal* in a social, technological and cultural context seems to have become a central concern for contemporaneity – widely theorised, over the past several decades, by Julia Kristeva, Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, Jacques Lacan etc. In a new theoretical paradigm in which the social sciences borrow cybernetics knowledge, as well as elements from the systems theory or the chaos theory, humans lost their anthropologic “importance”. Therefore, the discussion today revolves around human life within a culture that is somewhat “posthuman”, if not “posthumanist”.⁴⁸ This stance implies that the “animal issue” must also be discussed more as an “external” theory to the human being – rather than an “internal” one⁴⁹ – from a completely different angle compared to the one once promoted by Montaigne⁵⁰ (1533-1592), for instance. The large amount of recent studies in the fields of cognitive ethology and field ecology have repositioned anthropocentrism, now doubting the characteristics that have once been considered to be prevalent in depicting *human nature*: the possession of language as an instrument, the usage of tools, the cultural behaviour heritage etc., by which the humans seem to have forever separated from animals.

The anthropocentric perspective had offered humans the “order” and “structure”⁵¹ they needed in order to understand the world, while also showing them the “limits” of their understanding. However, by undermining the meaning of the conceptual term “mankind” or “human”, the postmodern pluralism is employed to redirect the humans’ focus towards the “multiplicity of the subject”⁵² and towards redefining the *human quality* in light of their own “animality” and the differences among the species, in all their varied aspects. Montaigne discussed “the animals’ understanding or thought” – the animal behaviour could help humans understand or discern, by inference at least, that the non-human animal is endowed with intelligence, thus dissolving the boundary between species. Descartes (1596-1650) interpreted the animal behaviour and what could be regarded as animal “language” as an “expression of passion”.⁵³ The human animal has thus always tried to understand what the concept of “human” truly means. Does the possibility for a human to assert, with words, “I am”, or “I

⁴⁷ See Fukuyama, *Viitorul nostru postuman*, 170.

⁴⁸ Wolfe, “Introduction,” ix.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, xi.

⁵⁰ According to Montaigne, the only border that probably exists between humans and animals is given by human’s limits (and limitations). In this sense, see Hassan Melehy, “Silencing the Animals: Montaigne, Descartes, and Hyperbole of reason,” *symplokē* 13, No. 1/2 (2005): 279.

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/40550630> (accessed on 13 Dec. 2023).

⁵¹ See Rob Boddice, “Introduction. The End of Anthropocentrism,” in Rob Boddice (ed.), *Anthropocentrism. Humans, Animals, Environments* (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2011), 1.

⁵² Wolfe, “Introduction,” xiii.

⁵³ See Melehy, “Silencing the Animals,” 264.

exist”, signify “being human”? Or, in fact, do the human being and the animal, by stepping out of taxonomy into a universal system of knowledge, actually become “designations” through which partial knowledge of one by the other is acknowledged?

The 19th century coincided with the juxtaposition of the concepts of “civilisation” and “civility”, through the outright refusal to accept “animality” within the realm of “humanity”. However, the humanity crisis of the 21st century – with a full critical awareness of the contemporary use of anthropocentrism against the backdrop of the nature-culture relationship – shows that the response to anthropocentrism is to write about animals. What is required is a reassessment of what had previously been believed to be the domain to which humans are exclusively entitled, through new experiences that problematize any living being’s sensitivity or capacity to feel. This is because humans now also consider themselves human animals, as part of the history of evolution and of the behavioural and psychological repertoire of humanity itself, and they redefine themselves through what is “non-human”.⁵⁴ Moreover, redirecting human attitudes towards *being with* – rather than *against* – animals would lead to the acknowledgement of the “distinction”, rather than its rejection. This would facilitate the creation of a *common vocabulary* for how humans should communicate with pets in a relationship of mutual “domestication”. This attitude is also present in the Japanese postmodern literature, which tries to surpass the possible tension between humans and animals, between the human self and the other, by proposing certain reassessments of the *human animal – non-human animal* relation.

The term “posthumanism” found its way into the contemporary critical discourse together with the human and social sciences from the mid-1990s, that readdressed the concept of “human” defined by Michel Foucault (1926-1984) in *Les mots et les choses - une archéologie des sciences humaines* (*The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*), from the 1960s. In fact, a research direction began in the 1940s, when cybernetics and the invention of the theory systems converges towards a new theoretical model for the biological, mechanical and communication processes, which removed the *human* and the *Homo sapiens* from any privileged position in relation with information or knowledge/perception.⁵⁵ This perspective led to the statement that, on the one hand, posthumanism precedes humanism, and, on the other hand, it follows it. Posthumanism *before* humanism admits that, in fact, the human being, from the dawn of its existence, could be encompassed not only in a biological world, but also in a technological one. This necessitates the recognition of “prosthetic coevolutions”⁵⁶ of the human animal both with the technicality of tools and with external archival mechanisms, such as language and culture. Posthumanism *after* humanism designates a historical moment that consciously promotes the decentring of the idea of the “human”, acknowledging the undeniable dependence of humans on a technical,

⁵⁴ See Cary Wolfe, *What is posthumanism?* (Minneapolis/London: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), xxv.

⁵⁵ See *ibid.*, xii.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, xv.

medical, informational, and economic network. This requires a new paradigm of thinking and interpretation. Thus, in this hyper-computerised postmodern universe, continuously invaded by the unprecedented development of technology and biotechnology – which have become full-fledged industries –, the relation between the human being and its own extinction will radically change. Humans will understand death not as a natural or inevitable fact of life, but as a form of “harm” that can be “prevented” by a pill.⁵⁷ In a schizoid century, varying between the sentimental movement for animal liberation and the socio-biological interpretation,⁵⁸ the definition – in comparative-contrastive terms with the “non-human” – of what *human nature* means, specifically the *human animal* or that *self without ego*, is also influenced. Until now, human nature was thought to be the sum of the behaviours and characteristics that are typical to the human species, originating from genetic factors, rather than the environment⁵⁹ and habit led to humanity being characterized by interiority. However, in contemporaneity, the barrier of anthropocentrism is surpassed and, thus, the light is shed on both the *cultural human animal* and the *cultural non-human animal*. The reason is probably that, similar to humans, the animals have more than one nature. Moreover, they have the ability to pass down learned behaviours, from one generation to the next, through non-genetic means,⁶⁰ which is no longer an exclusively human accomplishment. The current research dedicated to the *human-animal and non-human animal* relationship leans sometimes towards a functional, internal point of view – promoted by cultural ecology – and sometimes towards the external connections point of view – supported by social anthropology.⁶¹ However, contemporary Japanese literary narrative seems to have successfully combined these two attitudes in the transition from nature to culture through various incarnations of the cat-character in a postmodern perspective.

In a world that is overwhelmed by emerging technologies, the idea that humans have lost their “authenticity” – that modern humans are “inauthentic”⁶² – is increasingly prevalent. Thus, narratives that explore beyond the human realm serve as an excellent laboratory for observing posthuman concerns. Reimagined within a postmodern posthuman framework, promoting an exit from an *ethos* centred on abolishing human exceptionalism, anthropocentrism, and the rational justification of species supremacy, literary art can guide the reader's sensitivity towards the non-human animal world. The purpose is developing a posthuman sensibility that reconfigures the identity of the human animal. The literary text, with its complexity and subtleties, reveals the importance of creating a meeting space between humans and animals, based on the acceptance of a communion among the species. In this space, the distinction between the human animal and the non-human animal becomes

⁵⁷ See Fukuyama, *Viitorul nostru postuman*, 91.

⁵⁸ See Shanklin, “Sustenance and Symbol,” 376.

⁵⁹ Fukuyama, 154.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 170.

⁶¹ See Shanklin, “Sustenance and Symbol,” 375.

⁶² See Lestel, *L'Animal singulier*, 132.

uncertain, given that suffering, vulnerability and finitude characterise both humans and animals and, additionally, the experience of life and death is, in both cases, identical. The zoopoetic-type Japanese narrative texts naturally push for a reconsideration of the anthropocentric view on subjectivity, individuality or the inner being, through a double voice: a direct intentionality of the talking cat-character, doubled by the author's suggestive intention. Exiting the sphere of the purely natural, the cat-character entered the cultural sphere through activities reserved for humans, like *storytelling*. Moreover, given that cat-characters share a considerable number of characteristics with humans, we could acknowledge a human-animal *common humanity*. However, ultimately, as the scholarly literature also shows,⁶³ it is merely a "common animality": undoubtedly, humans would be more capable of self-love by loving cats and they could regain their own humanity with the help of their pets.

In an obvious intertextuality, passing from fantasy to reality, from utility to luxury, from emotional exploitation to delicate intimacy, the cat-character in the Japanese postmodern stories retains its reserve of alluring and perplexing enigma within the context of attempting to connect nature (animal) and culture (human) through a mutual rational-sentimental involvement. By creating an actual feline "myth", the cat-character, having no family ties or social status, somewhat shatters the expectations of trust and security that the reader usually seeks in the narrator-character of a story. This establishes a kind of equality among the characters, allowing all voices in the narrative to interact freely. The narrative scenes – monologic, dialogic, or event-based – in the aforementioned Japanese zoopoetic novels depict the "private space" of the human and their pet. This space is part of the "public space" of (post-human) Japanese society, connected to the present time of postmodern contemporaneity: a contemporary private space and a critical present time that propose a means for survival in an alienating world and in the altered form of urban communication. The cat-character thus seems to reclaim its status as a cultural *totem*.

Translated from Romanian by Anca Chiorean

⁶³ See Fukuyama, 171.