Types of »Animalist« Focalization in Bulgarian Literature

Kalina Zahova

Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, Institute for Literature, 52 Shipchenski Prohod Blvd., Block 17, 1113 Sofia, Bulgaria https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7051-3029 kalinaz@abv.bg

Proceeding from the belief that in a world shaped by violent anthropodomination literature takes important part in the substitution of real nonhuman animals with their false cultural duplicates, the paper offers examples of Bulgarian literary works about nonhuman animals and tries to examine the different angles of focalization in them. In Bulgarian literary history there is a (disputed) tradition of differentiating a certain literary branch called "animalist fiction" or "animalist literature", distinguished predominantly on thematic basis (stories about nonhuman animals), and considered classical realistic literature for adults (or rather for all ages), not literature for children. Such works include a variety of focalization types: from extreme anthropocentrism, through pseudoanimalist focalization, up to claimed "objectivism". All these types show that escaping anthropocentrism and achieving real nonhuman animal representation seems impossible, so the inevitable anthropocentrism should at least try to be honest. Bulgarian classical realist "animalist" fiction testifies that "animalist" focalization can never be purely nonhuman, inasmuch as literary narrative always originates from the human imagination, gets expressed through a human language, and is experienced by human perception. Focalization always includes the human, but in the best cases it can resist violent anthropodomination by being empathic for the good of the nonhuman animals

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Of all the numerous viewpoints and perspectives towards narrative in present-day humanities I have chosen to focus on an angle that comes from Critical Animal Studies – an interdisciplinary field dedicated to the relations between human and nonhuman animals. By selecting this angle, I choose to involve a certain level of engagement that goes beyond the strictly literary world of fiction, beyond the closed concept of literature as predominantly artistic sphere, and into a consideration of

literary works as certain viewpoint responsibilities, certain positions, certain morality. In the words of David Herman, "there is another important task for narratology in the twenty-first century" (1), and I would gladly agree with him that,

At issue is a reassessment of the place of scholarship on narrative within a wider ecology of inquiry, a broader system of values and commitments; this reassessment takes stock of how stories and traditions for analyzing them relate to the norms, institutions, and practices that structure academic and other engagements with today's most pressing concerns, geopolitical, jurisprudential, environmental, health-related, and other. (Herman 1–2)

In a world shaped by anthropodomination contemporary literature and culture provide a vast range of mechanisms designed to prove and reassure the self-proclaimed supreme status of the human. Such is the function of the perspective, from which the literary works are narrated – yet another of the numerous cultural fallacies that continuously promote human as the measure of all things. Proceeding from the belief that literature takes important part in the substitution of real animals with their false cultural duplicates, I would like to offer a few examples of Bulgarian literary works about nonhuman animals and I will try to examine the different angles of focalization in them. By substitution I mean all types of cultural, marketing, consumerist, linguistic, etc. substitutions – basically all mechanisms that represent nonhuman animals as cultural duplicates of their real selves and consequently as inferior to humans in numerous respects.

I have chosen to extract my examples for this paper from Bulgarian literature for two main reasons. Firstly, I would not want to claim universal comprehensiveness with the typology I offer, neither to contribute to the evergrowing debate on the parameters of the term focalization, which I will use here only as an umbrella term in seek of its ethical potential as a literary device. Secondly, because in Bulgarian literary history there is a tradition (recently more often disputed than confirmed) of differentiating a certain literary branch called "animalist fiction" or "animalist literature". The basis for distinguishing this section is predominantly thematic – the so-called "animalist fiction" tells stories about nonhuman animals. On the one hand, some of the writers in this branch are depicters of domestic and other farm-related animals; among the most famous of them are Elin Pelin (1877-1949), Yordan Yovkov (1880-1937), Georgi Raychev (1882-1947). On the other hand, there are the depicters of hunting, passionate hunters in reality as well as in fiction, such as Elin Pelin, Emiliyan Stanev (1907–1979), Yordan Radichkov (1929–2004), Ivaylo Petrov (1923–2005), Doncho Tsonchev (1933–2010), Diko Fuchedzhiev (1928–2005), Anastas Stoyanov (1931–2004), etc. It is important to emphasize heavily that even though some of these Bulgarian writers have indeed written literary works for children, they are not predominantly writers for children, and the so-called "animalist fiction" in Bulgarian literature is neither age-oriented, nor subservient to the conventionality and the specific characteristics of literature for children. The works, in which I have discovered most of my examples of the main focalization types, are considered classical realistic fiction for adults, not literature for children.

Extreme anthropocentric focalization

To some extent every type of focalization I will mention here is anthropocentric. Monika Fludernik considers the experientiality on the part of human as *conditio sine qua non* for every narrative: "In my model there can therefore be narratives without plot, but there cannot be any narratives without a human (anthropomorphic) experiencer of some sort at some narrative level" (Fludernik 9). Agreeing with that, I would also add that nonhuman animals could not be expressed in human linguistic or rational categories without certain appropriation. The belief that "animals should be perceived as different or other, and definitely not as equal or some kind of minimized humans" (Pavlič 121) is best expressed in Jure Detela's anti-appropriating quote from "Ionova pesem": "bitja izrekajo sebe, ne mene" (Detela 96), translated as either "beings express themselves, not me" (97) or "creatures articulate themselves, not me" (Pavlič 121).

All types of focalization involve certain human appropriation, but not every one of them openly admits that fact. And while in some cases the human presence might be masked or hidden, in the case of the extreme anthropocentric focalization it is completely open and plain. In this first type the anthropocentrism is carried to excess. The human is recognized as so supreme, exceptional, and central to the existence that the human experiences are imposed to all the other animals.

Elin Pelin, for instance, has written many stories with animal characters – from highly acclaimed descriptions of rural relations between human and nonhuman animals, through depictions of wild animals, up to stylized tales. His works provide a broad range of various levels of anthropomorphism and respect for the nonhuman animals. A proper example of extreme anthropocentric focalization is his short story "My

friends", which is told through the perspective of an observing human first-person character, who likes to lie under the forest trees and look at the birds. His anthropodominating focalization though leaves no place for real natural observations, instead of this it presents a rich spectrum of bird relations, intrigues, feelings, and even dialogues. "Melted in tenderness, he was begging forgiveness and calling his bright goldfinch lady with thousand beautiful diminutive names" (Elin Pelin, "Moite" 13)1 or "The robin, who knew everything and had a merciful heart, ran away to the forest to escape hearing the unfortunate fellow's crying" (16) – examples like these could be annoying for some recipients, funny for others, perhaps even credible for more passive readers. In Nikolay Haytov's short story "Turtle-doves" the male "ceases singing offended that 'the lady' would not come, thinking that she has fallen out of love with him, because his wings are smoked with the city fogs..." (Haytov 249). In Angel Karaliychev's short story "My first fishing" two kilograms of mountain barbels sacrifice and send themselves in a basket to the first-person character leaving also a note explaining their decision (Karaliychev 32–33). Thus, through a long line of humanlike "thoughts", "feelings", and "expressions" literature has strongly contributed to the substitution of the external and internal life of nonhuman animals with human absurdity.

Some literary works manage to escape the risk of sounding as absurd as that by creating an animal fictional world that resembles very much the characters in fairy-tales, folk tales, etc. and yet has its own "animalist realism". Such is the case of Yordan Radichkov's famous book *We, the Sparrows*, favorite of many generations of Bulgarian children, not only with the stories, but also with the author's illustrations. But unlike this book, let us not forget that the examples mentioned here are considered classical realistic fiction for adults (or rather for all ages), not literature for children.

Pseudoanimalist focalization

In the cases of this second type the authors try their best to resemble some sort of appropriate (in their opinion) for the animal character narration. Those attempts at presenting an internal animalist focalization might not be as absurd as the aforementioned, but they still have the same basis of anthropodomination and pretention to be able to understand and express the essence of nonhuman species through

 $^{^{\}scriptscriptstyle 1}$ Here and everywhere in the text the translations from the Bulgarian language are by the author.

human categories. I will illustrate this point with a couple of quotations from Georgi Raychev's famous short story "Karachakal" (Karachakal being the main character – a buffalo), in which, in Nelles's words, "the focus veers sharply away from the anthropomorphic interest toward imagining what an animal's focalization - both literally and psychologically - must be like" (Nelles 191). "Karachakal was feeling the warm sun penetrating his young body and reviving it" (Raychev 98) is a human attempt at imagining the buffalo experience in the warm sun. "He stopped aside and curiously reared his head – he had never seen such multitude. Why were they there? Where were they going to take them?" (98) is already an attempt at combining "the animal's mental perspective (focalization proper) with features of his physical perspective", as Nelles (192) puts it with reference to Jack London's White Fang. And while I strongly believe in the creative power of empathy, best synthesized in the phrase of J. M. Coetzee's Elizabeth Costello "[t] here are no bounds to the sympathetic imagination" (Coetzee 35), I call this type of focalization pseudoanimalist, because it is always inevitably human - in its origin (human imagination), in its medium of expression (human language), and in its addressee (human perception). And that is why in every attempt at presenting the consciousness of a nonhuman animal the human consciousness eventually shows up from its hiding place, thus confirming again and again its will to domination and superiority over the other species. From the same short story: "[T]he buffalo-cow stopped and shivered with a tender warm appeal. When? When had he heard this deep appeal? In times long gone in the past? Or in his dream?" (Raychev 101) - even with a certain fondness for mind reading could we really presume generational memory in the buffalo's consciousness or even memory for long standing sexual dreams? It is perfectly clear that the human narrator simulates nonhuman focalization, and it becomes even clearer when the perspective shifts away from the buffalo's eyes and mind and focuses on the animal from the outside: "From time to time he stopped, lifted up his head and listened alarmed. What was he listening to?" (100).

There are not many examples of homodiegetic (first-person) nonhuman animal narrators to be found in Bulgarian literature. Nonhuman animals appear in first person more often in poetry than in fiction, short stories like Zmey Goryanin's "Pages from a Dog's Diary", in which a dog not only tells, but even writes about himself, are rather rarities than frequent. Seems like all Bulgarian "animalist" writers are well aware that if "the narrating self's knowledge exceeds that of the experiencing self – here in its command of human language" (Nelles

189), that would immediately shove their narration to the realm of convention, whereas their main goal most often is to represent the animal characters in a realistic and truthful way.² For that reason the fiction writers mostly refrain from using homodiegetic nonhuman narration and prefer the pseudoanimalist focalization, through which the human appropriation of the nonhuman world happens much more seemingly natural and credible.

I will return to the potential positive uses of imagining nonhuman animals later in the text.

Claimed "objectivism"

Since nonhuman animal characters "open up to interpretation as humanlike as soon as thoughts, feelings, speech, or motivations are attributed to them", Suzanne Keen finds the avoidance of anthropomorphizing language "a demanding task" (Narrative 58). I would go even further and declare the task practically impossible, even though certain Bulgarian literary scholars would strongly disagree with that. There is one particular Bulgarian writer, who is most highly appreciated by Bulgarian literary studies as the past master at describing animals and nature without anthropomorphization – and that is Emiliyan Stanev. A lot of critics confidently attribute to his works something they define as "objective narration" (Yanev 7) or "ruthless realism," and Stanev himself calls it "cruel realism." There are many examples (best synthesized in Fadel 24–30) of critical perceptions of Stanev's works as antiliterary, beyond literary convention, documentary, scientific, natural. At first sight it would seem that Stanev's works might be the perfect example of "the dialectical interplay between anthropocentric and biocentric storytelling traditions" that Herman (7) seeks to map out and explore in his Narratology beyond the Human: Storytelling and Animal Life (2018). But there is something rather disturbing in Stanev's seemingly biocentric narrative. There is

² Bernaerts, Caracciolo, Herman & Vervaeck argue that nonhuman narration should be conceived "as the result of a double dialectic of empathy and defamiliarization": "Non-human narrators prompt readers to project human experience onto creatures and objects that are not conventionally expected to have that kind of mental perspective (in other words, readers 'empathize' and 'naturalize'); at the same time, readers have to acknowledge the otherness of non-human narrators, who may question (defamiliarize) some of readers' assumptions and expectations about human life and consciousness" (69). Seems like it is precisely this defamiliarizing otherness that the classical Bulgarian realistic writers are systematically trying to avoid.

something rather disturbing behind the "objectivism" of his short stories and short novels: it is not based so much on a writer's achievement as on anthropodomination in its most distorted form – killing for pleasure. Behind the "objective" writing lie numerous hours of hunting observations and numerous animal victims – Stanev the "objective" writer is actually Stanev the hunter. This claimed "objectivism" is in fact in the highest degree pure subjectivism. The perspective might resemble zero or external focalization, and yet it is the perspective of a narrator who has mastered nature, who dominates nature as her fancier, ruler, as a God. This position is allegedly supposed to avoid anthropocentrism in order to present itself as omniscient, as God, as master of everything.

Another example for this type is Radi Tsarev – the author of famous wildlife books who is acknowledged as "active conservationist" (Tsarev, *Mecha 5*) and at the same time as hunter and fisherman, and was even called "hunter environmentalist". But as informative and "objective" as his popular science books may seem to be, let us take a look at this ethological description of male bears cracking wood pieces just for fun: "The big beast listens to their ringing with special rapture. The wild forest harp echoes through the mountain for a long time" (Tsarev, *Mechkite* 85). So much for being objective.

The scientific objectivism of Tsarev's narrative becomes cracked by subjective humanlike speculations. The imaginary biocentrism of Stanev's narrative proves to be the pure distorted anthropocentrism of the hunter with the shotgun. And no matter how objective and natureoriented their focalization may seem, the true ethical focalizer in such cases will always be the stalking human hunter, taking pleasure in killing other beings for no reason.

Honest anthropocentrism

To sum up the shortage of real nonhuman animals representation that those three types of focalization are connected with. The extreme anthropocentric focalization sounds ridiculous and way beyond any similarity with real nature and real nonhuman animals. Coming out of the anthropocentric position also turns out to be abortive. The attempts at presenting an internal animalist focalization eventually result in pseudoanimalist focalization — imposing of human categories on nonhuman species. The attempts at presenting "objective" observations of nature eventually result in claimed "objectivism" that is pure human subjectivism and pure anthropodomination.

So if escaping anthropocentrism and achieving real nohuman animal representation seems impossible, then what position would be the justest and the most appropriate? I suggest that this would be the honest anthropocentrism, namely: not trying to pretend to be a nonhuman animal; not trying to pretend to be able to understand the other species and speak on their behalf; not trying to dominate the world as a human or as a God, who has achieved objectivism and stands above everybody and everything; but rather to be honest, open, just. Escaping the human focalization seems inevitable, because after all the persons writing and reading literary works are humans. So if it is inevitable, let the focalization be human, but let it be frank, honest, and kept close to the subjective modus.

By honest and just position I do not mean necessarily position over-flowing with compassion and tolerance towards the world around us. Naturally, I crave to see literature and the whole world overflowing with compassion and tolerance, but that is not always the case. By honest and just position I mean taking responsibility for the human, all too human focalization in one's literary works. The moral pole might as well be opposite of compassion and tolerance, and still be better than the three types presented above.

There are quite a few open "confessions" to be found in the writings of the hunting Bulgarian writers. According to Emiliyan Stanev the motto of the good hunter is "A little game killed, a lot of pleasure" (317) – the pleasure of killing other creatures. Hunting writers often praise eating, or rather guzzling as their favourite thing about hunting: "That's the best thing about hunting! To feed one's face, to have one's load, and to lie on one's back!" wrote Anastas Stoyanov (65). "The best thing about hunting is the evening drinking", wrote Boyan Biolchev (5). "The big hunter is untiring in the legs. Inexorable in the shooting. Insatiable at the table", wrote Doncho Tsonchev (36). Furthermore, Ivaylo Petrov confessed how he was once shooting rabbits "with doubled greed to exterminate them till the very last one" (Obarkani 74). "Hunting greed", he wrote, "is not so easily satiated" (47). Elsewhere Ivaylo Petrov also confessed that "Hunting is vanity. Man kills the beautiful animals to flatter his stupid feeling that he is a good marksman" (Madriyat 96). The main character in Stoyanov's "The Drake" confesses his spite after shooting two times at a drake and missing it: "Anyone of you who is a hunter knows that such things are never forgotten. And I will not calm down, until I knock the stuffing out of this drake" (114). Aggression, gluttony, greed, vanity, spite – not exactly the best human qualities, and yet so much better when they are openly expressed rather than hidden behind false focalization.

Ethical focalization

The honest human focalization might be in a way unpleasant (like those hunter confessions), but it might as well be communicating certain values from the opposite type.

The perfect example of how human focalization is the most just and credible one is Elin Pelin's famous short story "The Old Ox". The narrator remembers his childhood and focalizing his memories through his child self tells the story of Belcho, their beloved hard-working domestic ox, who gets old and sick and eventually dies. Apart from very few pseudoanimalistic diversions (like "Belcho came back offended" in Razkazi 264), Elin Pelin keeps the focalization entirely through the main first-person character's experience and pain. Thus, what the focalization communicates to the reader is compassion, adherence, affection. So when the narrative perspective is already a certain moral position, as it is in "The Old Ox," we could speak of ethical focalization. The moral positions of the characters could differ from one another, and the focalization chosen could privilege a certain view. Such is the case in Krum Grigorov's short story "The Fox Cub" – after being forcibly kept in domestic environment for some time, the fox cub manages to escape killing three hens on its way. The reactions in the family are different: the grandfather hunter explains the escape circumstances, the grandmother is angry and sour, and the narrator (again focalized through his child self) is sorry and sad for the fox cub. An even better example is Ivaylo Petrov's short story "My Friend from K. Village", in which the character bacho Stoyan skins a fox alive and then rips its stomach to take it out along with the heart ("Moyat" 27-28). The narration is not focalized through this character, but rather through a first-person hunter, who gets so shaken by this episode that he never goes back to that place and to that former friend of his. The focalization privileges the focalizer's point of view, and this point of view leads the recipient too, to some extent blocking his/her own thinking. While being led by the focalized character's point of view, do we not agree with his disgust and disappointment from the disembowelling of the living animal, do we not accept this incident as brutality? And at the same time do we not forget that the focalizer is also a hunter who kills living creatures for pleasure and that hunting is also brutality? From here, it is not hard to go further into viewing focalization as opinion-expressing, opinionmaking, perhaps possibly even opinion-imposing.

In this text I will not go in the direction of clarifying various types of narratees, narrative audiences, narrator reliability, exchange of voices,

possible reader reactions, and possible worlds. My focus remains predominantly ethical, advocating against the violent anthropodomination in today's world and asserting natural balance and respect for nonhuman animals.

Let us go back now to Detela's "beings express themselves, not me" (97) and to the perception of the nonhuman animals as other. Since all nonhuman species are radically different from the human and unique, they should not be appropriated in human categories and languages, and thus reduced to humanlike duplicates of their real selves. On the other hand, I promised to return to certain potential positive uses of imagining nonhuman animals, and I believe the positive outcome could be achieved following the path of empathy.

Empathic focalization

Empathic focalization could be extended further from the classical "relation between focalizer and focalized object", understood as "constant speculation about the thoughts and feelings of the focalized object" (Herman and Vervaeck 77), it could be extended from the perception of the focalizer to a certain perception that the literary work is able to communicate to the reader.

Even though the nonhuman animal could not be understood and expressed without human appropriation, it could be perceived as "an embodied soul" with the "heavily affective sensation" of "fullness, embodieness, the sensation of being" (Coetzee 33). By imagining ourselves as someone else, Coetzee's Elizabeth Costello claims, we can "share at times the being of another" (34), we can actively feel the horror, the fear, the pain – be it in the holocaust death camps, or in the present-day places of slaughter and death of nonhuman animals.

Here I would like to draw an ethical distinction between the positive and the negative use of the ability to imagine oneself as another being. The fine ethical line between the two lies in the matter whose benefit is the imagination working for. If the hunters (and, in consequence, their readers) get to know the hunted animals, get to think themselves into their preys, get to somehow guess the behavior and even the feelings of their targets, then the imagination is used for their own benefit – for aggression, for hurting the animals, for killing, for pleasure, for domination. If, on the other hand, the imagination is used for the benefit of the imagined creature, then this would already be positive empathy that makes moral sense. Guided by the empathic focalization the reader

could indeed focus on the empathy, and it would hardly be an overstatement to claim that literature has a very high ethical potential to communicate empathy.

Naturally, from our inevitably human perspective we could never really know what exactly is for the benefit of the nonhuman creature and what not. There are numerous examples of well-meaning people actually harming animals (be it human or nonhuman) by something they considered benevolent. Even animal activists and conservationists sometimes allow mistakes to slip in, because understanding the other individuals, species, and the dynamics between species within the elaborate ecosystems appears to be a task way above the possibilities of *homo sapiens*. So by positive empathy and by being empathic for the good of nonhuman animals I would not imply being able to judge as god and trying to engineer the ecosystem, I would simply mean cultivating nonviolence and respect towards other creatures and somehow trying to diminish the violence on the part of humans towards other creatures.

By describing nature "objectively" or by luring the reader into the hunters' world (deliberately presented as manly, confident, friendly, uniting, cozy, tasty, innate, value-oriented, environmental, etc.), the hunting Bulgarian writers advertise killing for pleasure not only as normal, but even as quite enticing. Many of their "animalist" works communicate murder by normalizing it, at times simply through the lack of empathic focalization. Less often, quite rarely in fact, nonhunter characters find themselves in hunting situations and communicate aversion and disgust. Such is the case of Boyan Bolgar's character in "Hunting from Saturday till Monday", who joins hunter friends for a few days and ends up disgusted and sick at heart: "But I saw the blood agglutinated on the coats of the six rabbits that were killed today. And that spoiled my appetite" (203). Such is also the case of Svetlozar Igov's main character in *The Deer*, who after watching a group of hunters dismember a deer and a hind and burn a wild boar alive undergoes the transformation from being indifferent towards hunting to being shaken, disgusted, actively feeling revulsion, nausea, and having nightmares (217-221). But sometimes even the hunters can communicate empathy, as it is with Ivaylo Petrov's aforementioned short story "My Friend from K. Village". Empathy here is triggered by the first-person hunter focalizer, who is watching his friend rip the stomach of the skinned still alive fox and show her heart beating its last beats ("Moyat" 28). The shaken character leaves that place and that friend forever, but not his hunting hobby. The shaken reader in his/her turn could either distinguish between "bad" hunters (like the brutal friend) and "good"

hunters (like the shaken by the brutality narrator), or could simply extend his/her empathy towards all hunted animals in general.

Bulgarian classical realist "animalist" fiction testifies that "animalist" focalization can never be purely nonhuman, inasmuch as literary narrative always originates from the human imagination, gets expressed through a human language, and is experienced by human perception. Focalization always includes the human, but in the best cases it can resist violent anthropodomination by being empathic for the good of the nonhuman animals. The ethical power of empathy has been analyzed from various angles by authors like Marta Nussbaum, Suzanne Keen, et al. This power should neither be underestimated, nor overestimated, although I personally tend to rather believe in its high potential than not. As Patrick Colm Hogan has put it: "The most we can reasonably expect from the cultivation of empathy through literature is that it will foster a greater inclination to choose the humane options and refrain from the inhumane options" (246). Or, in the case of the treatment of nonhuman animals – to choose the less anthropodominating options and refrain from the violent options.

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Tipi »animalistične« fokalizacije v bolgarski literaturi

Ključne besede: bolgarska književnost / odnos do živali / nečloveške živali / fokalizacija / anthropodominacija / empatija

Izhajajoč iz prepričanja, da ima v svetu, ki mu nasilno gospoduje človek, literatura pomembno vlogo pri nadomeščanju resničnih živali z njihovimi lažnimi kulturnimi dvojniki, obravnavam v članku primere bolgarskih literarnih del o nečloveških živalih in skušam preučiti različne kote fokalizacije v njih. V bolgarski literarni zgodovini obstaja (sporna) tradicija razlikovanja posebne literarne smeri, imenovane »animalistična fikcija« ali »animalistična literatura«, ki temelji pretežno na skupni tematiki (zgodbe o nečloveških živalih) in velja za klasično realistično literaturo za odrasle (ali, bolje rečeno, za vse starosti), ne pa za otroško literaturo. Takšna dela vključujejo različne tipe fokalizacije, od skrajnega antropocentrizma prek psevdoanimalistične fokalizacije pa vse do dozdevnega »objektivizma«. Vsi ti tipi kažejo, da se zdi nemogoče izogniti antropocentrizmu in doseči resnično nečloveško reprezentacijo živali, zato bi moral neizogibni antropocentrizem vsaj poskusiti biti iskren. Bolgarska klasična realistična »animalistična« fikcija priča o tem, da »animalistična« fokalizacija nikoli ne more biti čisto nečloveška, saj literarna pripoved vedno izvira iz človeške domišljije, izražena je s človeškim jezikom in doživeta s človeškim zaznavanjem. Fokalizacija vedno vključuje človeka, v najboljših primerih pa se lahko upre nasilni antropodominaciji, če je do nečloveških živali empatična.

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