When Sophie Loved Animals

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This is an attempt to read the Countess de Ségur, a famous mid-nineteenth-century French woman writer of children’s literature known for her Christian outlook and moralistic views, alongside Derrida’s The Animal That Therefore I Am. Examining the Countess’ peculiar and conflicted zoophilia as it manifests itself in her most clearly autobiographical novels, this piece tries to show how the modern notion of autobiography is indeed both informed and inflected by an equally new notion of animality. The paradoxical links between “autobiography” and “animality” beget a rewriting of the history of Western literature from an animal vantage point, which this paper only begins to sketch. Drawing attention to the ambiguous textual and discursive treatment of animals in Ségur’s novels, I suggest that the mix of “love” for animals and violence directed at them exhibited in her novels is not only a faithful reproduction of infantile psychological tendencies aimed at satisfying a young audience but perhaps as much a reflection of a cultural crisis characterized by an unprecedented epistemological narrowing of the distance between animals and humans, and consequently by a violent reassertion of species borders. Finally, by showing the link between a certain female viewpoint (that of the little girl and of the grandmother) and what one might call an animal viewpoint in her novels, I argue that the turn to – and turn out of – animals in her novels not only undermines the Christian and moral message the Countess strives to deliver; it also provides an interesting locus for the analysis of the modes and stakes of the “animalization” of women that occurred in the European cultural discourse of the nineteenth century. It is as if the ontological difference between human and animal was being questioned and displaced only to find itself both recast and reaffirmed in the difference between the human sexes.

Prologue

I read the Countess of Ségur’s novels when I was a child. Indeed, hers are the first real books I ever read, the first my mother gave me. I, in turn, started reading her works with my own daughter. Very quickly I began to ask myself what was inherited, what was passed on to one’s daughter, to a daughter today, when one reads those narratives or rather some of these narratives among the twenty novels that make up the Countess of Ségur’s work. Are these works indeed “girls’ reading[s],” readings that take place or call to take place between mother and daughter, and if so, in what respect(s)?

While rereading Les Malheurs de Sophie (Sophie’s Misfortunes) and Les Mémoires d’un âne (A Donkey’s Memoirs), I was plunged into Jacques Derrida’s The Animal That Therefore I Am. Written on the occasion of a
conference held around Derrida’s own work on the theme of the “autobiographical animal,” *The Animal That Therefore I am* questions, among other things, the discourse of a “subject” defined as “anthropos,” and, conversely, the notion of “anthropos” as the only living being capable of becoming a subject, hence a potential autobiographical writer, since autobiography in its broader definition starts with an “I am” and consists in the (re)tracing and transcribing of an “I am.”

This double scene of reading prompted me to want to take a closer look at three of the Countess’ novels, two of which (*Les Petites Filles modèles* and *Les Malheurs de Sophie*) mark the beginning of her literary career, and the third one, *Les Mémoires d’un âne*, immediately follows what one could call Sophie’s Trilogy. No doubt my own autobiography, however virtual, is implicated in this choice. *Les Mémoires d’un âne* (*A Donkey’s Memoirs*) were my mother’s favorite “Segurian” novel, and *Les Malheurs de Sophie* (*Sophie’s Misfortunes*), remains for me the strongest experience of this early reading journey. But what, will you ask, justifies reading Derrida and this somewhat “Victorian” writer of children’s literature together? Indeed, each of these three novels raises, in a singular fashion, a question never addressed nor even posed by literary critics interested in “the autobiographical discourse,” namely, that of the relation between autobiography and something like “the animal.”

In various and different respects, these three novels are the most explicitly autobiographical writings of the Countess of Ségur. Not only does the heroine of the *Malheurs* [*Misfortunes*] bear their author’s first name (the Countess of Ségur was born Sophie Rostopchine); not only does the Countess “settle for good” into literature with Sophie’s adventures – before that (exactly one year before), she had only published a collection of fairy tales – but in the dedication to her granddaughter in which she sums up the moral scope of her narrative, she hints with a mixture of slyness and naivety at the closeness of her character with its “author”: “Grandmother has not always been good. There are many children who, like her, were naughty and who, like her, amended their ways. Here are the true adventures of a little girl your grand-mother knew very well as a child” (my translation).¹ What then is the connection between “Sophie’s” quasi-autobiography and the question of the animal? *Nous l’allons montrer tout à l’heure.*²

As for *A Donkey’s Memoirs*, is it by chance that the only novel in the first person in the work of the Countess happens to be an animal autobiography? The book also casts the “grandmother,” that is, the character who stands for the author’s persona in Ségur’s works and who usually does not step over the threshold of the preface, much like the “grandmother” who knew Sophie very well in her childhood. This “grandmother,” who sits enthroned at the top of the family pyramid and who owns the castle where all the children of the story gather, just as the Countess shelters the characters in