Animal Metaphor and the Unmaking of the Human: Darwin, Modernism, and Contemporary Environmental Ethics

By

Rasheed Tazudeen

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor in Philosophy

in

English

in the

Graduate Division

of the

University of California, Berkeley

Committee in Charge:
Professor Elizabeth Abel, Chair
Professor Anne-Lise Francois
Professor Charis Thompson

Spring 2015
Abstract

Animal Metaphor and the Unmaking of the Human: Darwin, Modernism, and Contemporary Environmental Ethics

by

Rasheed Tazudeen

Doctor of Philosophy in English
University of California, Berkeley
Professor Elizabeth Abel, Chair

My dissertation, *Animal Metaphor and the Unmaking of the Human: Darwin, Modernism, and Contemporary Environmental Ethics*, explores the linguistic innovations devised to reimagine the human/animal divide in the aftermath of the “Darwinian trauma.” My project scribes a wide arc from the publication of *The Origin of Species* (1859) to contemporary fiction and poetry, but I focus on the formal experiments of Modernism, with an emphasis on new uses of metaphor. I analyze a strain of literary works that trouble ideas of “form” in two different but intimately connected ways: a critique of *literary* form that rejects linear narratives, centralized human characters, and stable referential frameworks; and a critique of *bodily* form that undermines the ontological grounds of species difference. In these works, the animal metaphor becomes a key locus for bringing into relation human and animal bodies stripped of the logic undergirding the formal consistency of each. This literary interrogation of anthropocentric language, logic, and “form” begins, in my account, with Lewis Carroll’s *Alice* books and Flaubert’s *The Temptation of Saint Anthony*, but reaches its fullest expression in the Modernist period, in which Joyce, Kafka, and Woolf, among others, developed knowledge-disabling modes of language that further the critique of species difference.

Since the human has been made through language, the rationale for human transcendence can also be destabilized through language. After an introductory chapter in which I trace a philosophical tradition (starting with Spinoza) that rejects the Cartesian idealization of consciousness, I turn to *The Origin of Species*, in which Darwin transforms metaphor from an abstract comparison between discrete entities into a medium of interpermeative relation between species. I read Carroll’s *Alice* books (1865, 1872) as engagements with Darwinian theory that anticipate Modernist linguistic innovation through the use of figurative language, particularly the pun and portmanteau word, that enters into recombinatory play with the world it describes. Both the “Circe” episode of Joyce’s *Ulysses* (1922) and one of its major influences, Flaubert’s *The Temptation of Saint Anthony* (1874), develop Carroll’s troubling of bodily and literary form, as I discuss in my third chapter. Flaubert’s *The Temptation* conceives of the human, in Darwinian terms, as merely one possible developmental outcome amidst a near-infinite series of forms.
Conversely, in “Circe,” Joyce uses metaphor to dissolve Bloom’s capacity for self-possession into a sea of animal otherness.

Whereas Carroll, Flaubert, and Joyce celebrate the collapse of species difference, Kafka and Woolf view the dissolution into animal otherness as a prelude to the end of the human species. For Kafka, the metaphorical becoming-animal is not merely an escape from the social system, but also a confrontation with the condition of abjection proper to nonhuman life. In “The Burrow” and “Investigations of a Dog,” the subject of Chapter Three, Kafka theorizes a world in which the human self is completely irrelevant and meaningless vis-à-vis these stories’ nonhuman narrators, who are constantly subjected to the threat of death that arises not from human predation, but from an unknowable agency of the external world within which human agency is encompassed. Woolf’s *Between the Acts* (1941) situates this bodily precariousness amidst the outbreak of World War II. For Woolf, however, the potential end of the human species is not just a source of dread, but also an opening to the emergence of nonhuman lifeforms with new modes of apprehending the world. My final chapter surveys contemporary fiction and poetry to examine how literature now responds to literary Modernism’s preoccupation with species difference and language. I discuss the recent turn to the practical ethics of the human-animal relation among novelists such as Margaret Atwood and Benjamin Hale, and explore works of contemporary poetry, specifically Anne Waldman’s *Manatee/Humanity* (2009), Lydia Davis’s *The Cows* (2011), and Jody Gladding’s *Translations from Bark Beetle* (2014), that strive to integrate ethics with linguistic experimentation.
Introduction:
Towards a Posthumanist Critique of Representation, Language, and Metaphor

“Yet nowhere in a zoo can a stranger encounter the look of an animal. At the most, the animal’s gaze flickers and passes on. They look sideways. They look blindly beyond. They scan mechanically. They have been immunized to encounter, because nothing more can occupy a central place in their attention.”

“Nature is acquainted with no forms and no concepts, and likewise with no species, but only with an X that remains inaccessible and undefinable for us”

“Something in the world forces us to think. That something is an object not of recognition but of a fundamental encounter.
—Gilles Deleuze, Difference and Repetition (1968)

I. Entanglement and its Discontents

Carolus Linnaeus reached a stumbling point in his eighteenth century taxonomic system when he realized that there were no visible characteristics by which to separate the human being, as a species, from the higher primates. Instead of assigning a descriptive taxonomic designation for humanity then, Linnaeus provided the designation Homo nosce te ipsum, later shortened to Homo sapiens, meaning, “Humans, know thyself.” According to this logic, it is through an act of recognition, and neither the divine nor the scientific assurance of transcendent exceptionality or biological superiority, that the human is to raise itself above all creaturely life and make itself into the founding metaphysical category through which the significance of all other life is to be measured. The category of the human must hereafter be constructed in discourse, a discourse which the human makes in its own image and a discourse which privileges an active, perceiving human subject in relation to a fundamentally passive environment populated by mute animal others.

By the early-twentieth century, this discourse had been taken to its logical extent, as the marginalization of wild animals from human society became virtually complete and as all formerly “wild” spaces and animal habitats had been demarcated as such and marked off from the world of humans. Humans lost the capacity for encounter with newly de-worlded animals (“encounter” in the sense of contact with an other in which the stable contours of both self and other are called into question, as “experience,” “meeting with reciprocal sense” or “falling in with”1) now that human-animal interaction had been banished primarily to safe, non-threatening contexts: the industrialized and impersonalized slaughter of animals in abattoirs and stockyards, contact with imprisoned and classified animals in the zoo, the care and keeping of domesticated pet animals and laboring animals, and so on. The novelist and cultural theorist John Berger locates this

changed attitude in the gradual outmoding of peasant cultures by capitalist expansion in
the nineteenth-century, after which animals were no longer “with man at the centre of his
world.”² Peasants, according to Berger, “live intimately with, and depend upon animals. A
peasant becomes fond of his pig and is glad to salt away its pork. What is significant,
and is so difficult for the urban stranger to understand, is that the two statements in that
sentence are connected by an and not by a but.”³

But the devaluation of animal life, its reduction to the substance of exchange, is no
longer conceivable merely a result of the physical “separation” of human from animal
life, or the expulsion of animals from most human habitats. We have witnessed, in recent
years, an explosion of new technologies for producing, manipulating, and patenting
nonhuman life on a genetic level, or what has been termed “biocapitalism.”

Biocapitalism, as described by theorist Ashley Dawson, refers to a new regime of
technological control over nonhuman life, in which the genetic material of nonhuman
beings is absorbed into the circulation of capital.⁴ At the forefront of these new
technologies is Synthetic Biology (or SynBio), which is, according to Dawson,

a powerful new form of genetic engineering through which biologists are capable
of turning living organisms into man-made factories through the manipulation of
their genomes. Organisms created using SynBio are increasingly looked at as
private property, since they have supposedly been created through human
ingenuity. The result is a potentially sweeping privatization of existing life forms,
as well as the creation of all sorts of new creatures who will be the hapless property
of global agribusiness and pharmaceutical companies.⁵

With the rise of these new technologies, scientists, “[r]ather than swapping existing genes
from one species to another, . . . can now write entirely new genetic code on a computer,
print it out using a 3D laser printer, and insert it into living organisms – or even create
brand new forms of life.”⁶

These new forms of genetic engineering and artificial production multiply the
modalities of human-animal relations: far from continuing our modern isolation from
animals, biocapitalism ensures our entanglement with animal life. For example,
xenotransplantation, or the transplantation of living cells, tissues, or organs from animal
to human bodies, produces new configurations of species that destabilize the boundary
between the human and the nonhuman, and produce new modes of intimacy and co-
dependency with nonhuman animals such as pigs, chimpanzees, and baboons.

However, the telos towards which these new modes of intimacy and co-
dependency with animals ultimately tend is still appropriation and violence. Dawson

³ ibid, p. 7. See also Berger’s Pig Earth (New York: Vintage, 1992), the first volume of his Into Their Labours
trilogy detailing the lives of French peasants at the onset of capitalist modernity.
⁴ For an in-depth account of the rise of biocapitalism from the 1970s to the present, see Melinda Cooper,
For an analysis of the development of biotech initiatives in genomics and pharmaceutical development, and
the growth of “technoscientific capitalism” as the incorporation of biotechnology into the marketplace, see
Kausik Sunder Rajan, Biocapital: The Constitution of Postgenomic Life (Durham, NC: Duke University Press,
2006).
⁵ Ashley Dawson, “Regulate SynBio Now!” http://ashleydawson.info/2014/10/22/regulate-synthetic-
biology-now/
⁶ Dawson, “Biocapitalism and Culture,” lecture at UC Berkeley, 2 December 2014. A more formal version
of this argument is forthcoming in Dawson’s Capitalism and Extinction (2015).
contends that the focus on “entanglement” in contemporary Animal Studies discourse, or the need for humans to realize their co-dependency on nonhuman animals, misses the larger point; namely, that recognizing and participating in co-dependent relations with animals, living alongside animals and sharing habitats with them, and removing the barries between human and animal being, does not prevent the continued marginalization, consumption, slaughter, and reduction to exchange value of animal life. Entanglements, in other words, are not antithetical to violence, and our being-with animals, our sharing of the earth with them, should not, in itself, be the end-point of our ethical commitment to challenging the existing order of things.

The idea of entanglement can, however, be the beginning of an ethics. For if human life and animal life are becoming increasingly more intimately bound up with one another physically, at the level of xenotransplantation and genetic manipulation, the human-animal separation is still very much alive in the imagination, in the anthropocentric attitudes we carry and in the anthropocentric structure of language that reproduces the human-animal relation in hierarchical terms and that enables and regularizes violence as the natural result of co-inhabitation with animal others. In this sense, biocapitalism is merely the logical outgrowth, or perhaps the manifested full extension, of an anthropocentric world-view in which all that exists, exists for human understanding and can be molded to fit the particular constraints of that understanding. In my analysis, the primary “constraint” of anthropocentric modes of knowledge will be the concept and the conceptually based modes of understanding that inform human access to and engagement with the world.

So, while not disputing Dawson’s larger point, and without downplaying the importance of registering the current epistemic shift of late capitalism towards a biocapitalist regime of power that takes “life itself” as the raw material of exchange, I want this study to produce a more precise sense of what “entanglement” actually means, or what it could mean, if we were to keep the possibilities of entanglement open and not limit our understanding of it to the mere co-inhabitation of physical space, the sharing of cellular and genetic material, or some other form of relation that ultimately ends in the appropriation of animal life and the extraction of surplus value out of animal bodies. If we are to imagine an open-ended form of entanglement, one that keeps alive the possibility of a genuinely transformative shift in how we conceive of the human being in the world, I want to suggest, we have to turn our attention to the language and structures of thought through which anthropocentrism reproduces itself. For all language can do to produce a sense of animal life as an object of exchange, a bearer of surplus value to be extracted from it, it is also possible, as I will argue throughout this study, to locate the seeds of resistance to anthropocentric attitudes through language, and ultimately, to use language as a means of imagining a non-appropriative entanglement with animal life.

This was one of the primary aims of Charles Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species* (1859), and it was a concern that fed into the work of several authors writing in his wake, from the mid-nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth, primarily Lewis Carroll, Gustave Flaubert, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, and Franz Kafka. The formal experimentation, and particularly the redefinition of traditional modes of metaphor among these authors, Darwin included, sought to remake the language by which we know the living world, and further, to create a mode of language that would resist the appropriation of animal bodies into networks of stable meaning, and, finally, to challenge the presumed universality of human consciousness and conceptual understanding as a means of knowledge-
production. As such, they provide an understanding of language that resists the drive to take ownership over nonhuman bodies by inserting them into networks of meaning and knowability, and thus provide a ground for thinking of a non-appropriative, but still open-ended and indeterminate, form of human-animal entanglement. The endeavor among these authors to forge a mode of literary language that would not take the human as its index, as the universal measure and mediator of all things; that would perform the dissolution of human agency, will, subjectivity, and conceptual identity into a field of otherness; and that would attend to the various nonhuman agencies that have shaped the world as much as so-called human subjectivity, is thus inseparable from we would now call a posthumanist ethics.

The literary texts I am analyzing—Lewis Carroll’s Alice books (1865, 1871), Flaubert’s The Temptation of Saint Anthony (1873), the “Circe” episode of Joyce’s Ulysses (1922), Kafka’s “The Burrow” (1924, pub. 1931) and “Investigations of a Dog (1922, pub. 1931), and Woolf’s Between the Acts (1941)—all concern themselves, in various direct and indirect ways, with Darwin’s analysis of the instability of language as a mode of expressing nonhuman life in The Origin of Species. In these works, linguistic experimentation is inseparable from a critique of the grounds for species difference and from an interrogation of the centrality of human over nonhuman agencies. What emerges is a version of international Modernism, stretching roughly from 1859 to 1941, that groups The Origin of Species and the Alice books alongside more properly Modernist works that collectively participate in the (ongoing) project of decentering human subjectivity and de-anthropomorphizing the language by which we encounter the nonhuman world.

II. Animal Studies and the Problem of Otherness

The discipline of Animal Studies has become increasingly focused on critiquing not existing representations of animals in works of literature, art, film, and other cultural media (i.e., analyzing the symbolism of certain animals, the narrative functions they perform, or what they reveal about human characters), but on critiquing the very logic of representation and conceptual identity upon which which language and the foundations of the human are based. This leads to a rethinking of the human and its place in the world generally. In his 2010 book What is Posthumanism? Cary Wolfe writes,

[T]he full force of animal studies—what makes it not just another flavor of “fill in the blank” studies on the model of media studies, film studies, women’s studies, ethnic studies, and so on—is that it fundamentally unsettles and reconfigures the question of the knowing subject and the disciplinary paradigms and procedures that take for granted its form and reproduce it.7

The “post” in the “posthuman” suggests neither a coming-after the human nor an extension (or sublimation) of human capabilities through technological prostheses, but a mode of thought that does not reduce thinking to the function of categorizing, harmonizing, and making sense of the non-identicality and disharmony in which we live. In Wolfe’s account, the humanities as a field of inquiry is predicated upon a normative

---

7 Wolfe, WIP, 120. While I take Wolfe’s point, his dismissal of “fill in the blank studies” such as “media studies, ethnic studies, and women’s studies” as rooted in the “study” of women or ethnicity or media assumes that these other disciplines are somehow not invested in the same critiques of existing modes of representation, and further, seems to foreclose the possibility of intersectional scholarship and dialogue among these fields and Animal Studies.
notion of personhood to which its disciplinary structures adhere. However, to rethink this normative understanding does not entail getting rid of the category of the human entirely, but “attend[ing] to . . . ‘the human’ with greater specificity, greater attention to its embodiment, embeddedness, and materiality, and how these in turn shape and are shaped by consciousness, mind, and so on.” The “posthuman” in Wolfe’s analysis (which follows in the footsteps of Lyotard’s conception of the “postmodern”) comes both “after” the human chronologically and “before” the human in the sense that it challenges the foundations of the model of human subjectivity by revealing its “material, embodied, and evolutionary condition of possibility.”

In Slavoj Zizek’s reconfiguration of subjectivity (in the 1991 book *For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor*), what we consider the “subject” of a text is only conceivable in its moments of symbolic rupture, moments when it disturbs or pierces through a purely rational order of designation—the subject is no longer the freely willing and self-determining, self-possessed agent or author, but merely “the gap that prevents language from becoming a neutral tool of designation of some objective state of things.”

This rethinking of the subject skirts the edges of the human and nonhuman, enveloping and submerging them both beneath the transcendent film of a purely rational and conceptual language to which neither has access and in which neither can appear except in the form of disturbance, of the marks they leave on the film’s surface in attempting to break through it. This power of disturbance is not simply the power of negation or of negative self-definition, because negation still operates upon the model of a subject/object duality that does not apply here. Rather, it rewrites agency as a collective capacity, a positivity, that is not the action of subjects upon objects, but the product of an “immanent field,” to borrow a term from Gilles Deleuze, in which agency is distributed across a variety of actors stripped of any conceptual, transcendent, or metaphysical identity and in which actions occur without reference to individuals.

Experimental literary language in particular has the capacity to make legible this formation of the subject without a conceptual identity and to envision a world not structured around an active human subject in the midst of acted-upon, non-agential animal or nonhuman objects. Part of the import of experimental literature from the mid-nineteenth to mid-twentieth century is to reveal subjectivity as a contingent and precarious form that does not protect against the dissolution of the self in the midst of encounters with animal otherness, encounters that take place not in a world shaped exclusively by human agency, will, and desire, but within an immanent field in which the aleatory encounters of bodies obey no fixed laws governing their patterns of action, reception, and reaction, or what Benedict de Spinoza calls the laws of “composition and decomposition”: the Queen’s croquet grounds in *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, the Thebadian mountain-top in *The Temptation*, Nighttown in *Ulysses*, the creature’s

---

8 ibid., p. 120.
9 ibid., p. 121.
underground lair in “The Burrow,” and Miss La Trobe’s stage pageant in *Between the Acts*.

To be clear, the purpose of this study is not to make anthropocentric language the new “enemy,” in place of capitalist modernity, of a properly posthumanist ethics, but to explore the ways in which anthropocentrism is both structurally embedded in language itself and provides a ground for the continued social abjection of animals under the regimes of multinational capitalism and biocapitalism alike, and how language might serve as a terrain upon which the categories of the human and the nonhuman are contested and continually unmade and remade, and ultimately, may open up a space to imagine what new, indeterminate, non-appropriative relations between humans and animals might look like. I do not necessarily define my approach in opposition to more sociohistorically based studies of this problem, such as Nicole Shukin’s *Animal Capital: Rendering Life in Biopolitical Times* (2009), Noellie Vialles’s *Animal to Edible* (1994), and Harriet Ritvo’s *The Animal Estate: The English and Other Creatures in the Victorian Age* (1987), but do want to distance myself from the Marxist thematic embodied to varying degrees by these and other works that presuppose the economic sphere as the primary (if not the exclusive) terrain upon which anthropocentrism is to be dismantled.

In the particular line of argument adopted by Shukin, Vialles, Ritvo, Berger, and others, modernity is premised upon the increasing separation of human from animal life, and the increasing subjugation of animal bodies to the workings of capitalism. In *Animal to Edible*, an anthropological study of slaughterhouses in France, Noellie Vialles discusses the ways in which modernity was in large part dependent upon the removal of places of slaughter from the urban centers. In France, legislation against animal cruelty brought on by the public outcry over the conditions of animals in the early nineteenth-century, a concern that was more about removing the offensive spectacle of slaughtering (and its attendant noxious odors) from public view than providing for the well-being of animals, led to a separation of “butchery from slaughtering.” The butcher shop, where meat was cut, packaged, and sold to the public, had to be separated from the abattoir, where the killing of animals took place. Writes Vialles,

> The dissociation between butchery and slaughtering, which today is complete, could only be accomplished by banishing the abattoir to a site outside the city walls. . . . Indeed, while it certainly had to do with a town-planning policy concerned about public hygiene, exiling the abattoir was also, through that very policy, an expression of the profound shift in sensibilities with regard to such realities as death (human or animal), suffering, violence, waste and disease, ‘miasmas,’ and finally animals themselves, which were increasingly coming to be seen as ‘lesser brethren.’

In both the French abattoirs and the American stockyards that followed in their

---

12 All citations of Spinoza’s *Ethics* are from Edwin Curley’s 1994 translation, hereafter cited as *E* with an accompanying Definition (D), or a Proposition (P) accompanied by a Demonstration (Dem) or Scholium (S), where appropriate, from the text. See Benedict de Spinoza, *Ethics*, trans. Edwin Curley (London: Penguin, 1996).

13 Notable pieces of legislation were the “ban on animal fights” in Paris in 1833, the formation of the SPA in 1846 (corresponding to the formation of the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA) in Britain in 1824), and the passage of the Grammont Law “penalizing ill-treatment of domestic animals in 1850. See Vialles, pp. 15-32.

14 Vialles, p. 19.
footsteps, slaughtering became “invisible—the more so, in fact, as technical improvements made it possible to conjure away more and more of the age-old signs of the business.”15 The abattoir would be, as Vialles has it, a “place that is no place,”16 where the act of slaughtering and the slaughtered animal would leave no material trace as the animal body became sublimated into exchange value. “Progress” would be measured by how well the material contingents of the slaughtering process could be “conjured away.” In Animal Capital, a study of the subsumption of animal life into the operations of capitalism (and one that I will return to later in this Introduction), Nicole Shukin writes concerning the repression of the offensive smells associated with slaughtering:

As slaughter and rendering were turned into mass operations in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, suppressing the “olfactory obtrusiveness” haunting rendering’s traffic in “perishable substances” became something of an industry obsession and the sensory index of its progress.17

In these accounts, the obsession with the impersonality of slaughter, the erasure of its sensory traces, the invisibility of its signs, and the anonymity of the agents involved, is a distinctively modern phenomenon. Shukin’s criticism is directed towards the often insidious ways in which capitalism shrouds the material basis of animal slaughter, its traffic in animal bodies, in the symbolic traffic of animal “signs,” or visual representations of animals (as employed in the discourse of advertising) that make animals into immaterial entities, figures that uncritically represent concepts such as innocence or, more simply, the “natural.” In Shukin’s analysis, a true critique of capitalist biopower’s “zoontological production of species difference” must implicate both senses of animal life, the material and immaterial, in one another.18

This important insight, however, leads her to dismiss outright the social role that “immaterial” representations or images of animals play in challenging dominant conceptions of reality.19 Literature is not among Shukin’s topics of discussion, and aside from her readings of images in contemporary advertisements, she does very little actual analysis of representations (both visual and discursive) themselves. The very act of abstraction is condemned as being complicit with what conceals the materiality of the animal slaughter and what enables capitalism’s so-called traffic in animal signs. In the “Automobility” chapter, for example, Shukin attempts to uncover what she calls “the material unconscious of film” in the gelatin of slaughtered cows (or “live stock”) used to produce the physical “film stock” upon which cinematic and photographic portrayals of animals (and everything else) depend.20 While she produces a fascinating genealogy of the material origins of film, her analysis leaves aside the question of the aesthetic content of films (early and contemporary alike) that depict animals in some way and how this content might exist in a productive tension with its material origin in animal byproduct. Instead, she chooses to condemn the medium entirely as one with “a pathological relationship to animal life,” which operates by the “mimetic capture” of its objects of

---

15 ibid., p. 20.
16 ibid., p. 15.
17 Shukin, p. 63.
18 p. 11
19 A similar critique could be levelled at Vialles, but would perhaps be unjust, as hers is a sociological study that is invested more in large-scale attitudes and conceptions of the slaughterhouse and the changing role of animals in society and does not engage directly with the question of modes of representation.
20 Shukin, p. 108.
representation, and in the case of wildlife photography, “substitut[es] . . . the camera for the gun.”\textsuperscript{21} In the broadest terms, \textit{Animal Capital} operates under a binary logic that sets the material and the rhetorical infinitely apart and leaves little room for distinction between different levels or orders of abstraction in aesthetic production.

In \textit{The Animal Estate}, Harriet Ritvo locates the fundamental historical split between human and nonhuman life a century earlier, in the formation of early nineteenth-century English laws that “viewed animals simply as the property of human owners, only trivially different from less mobile goods,” now that nature, with which animal life was innately associated, had become less of a threat to human dominance and advances in “stockbreeding, veterinary science, and weapons technology made . . . animals easier to manage.”\textsuperscript{22} Animals, in the Victorian Era, could stand for colonial populations, criminals, or “the lesser ranks of a domestic commonwealth” in their need to be dominated and properly governed, and the domesticity of an animal was the “express[ion]” of its “clearest acceptance of the hierarchy of nature.”\textsuperscript{23} This was an order that animals were powerless to resist, and the discursive or rhetorical signs of animals that proliferated in the Victorian Era were subject to the last instance of a capitalist order that ensured their subordination to human will and desire.\textsuperscript{24}

What I take issue with in this line of argument, then, is not the understanding of nineteenth- and twentieth-century modernity in terms of the increasing need for human physical and conceptual separation from nonhuman life, which is undoubtedly a key historical point to make (and one that informs the present study), but its reading of the abjection of nonhuman life as a symptom of capitalist development for which there are no solutions aside from economic ones, such as “crossing the signals” by which global capitalism disseminates itself in order to slow its progress, in Shukin’s analysis. The new biocapitalist regime, as Ashley Dawson reminds us, has already ensured our inextricable entanglement with nonhuman life at the level of bodily organs and genetic material, but this entanglement has not slowed the continued exploitation of animal life and its continued production as bearers of exchange value for human beings. What I want to emphasize, over and against these accounts, is the latent possibility of the aesthetic to redefine the contours of the human and nonhuman, and human-nonhuman modes of entanglement, and to unmake a world hitherto defined in the image of the human being.

Not every work, and certainly not every literary work self-consciously “about”

\textsuperscript{21} ibid., p. 108.
\textsuperscript{22} Ritvo, pp. 2-3.
\textsuperscript{23} ibid., 17.
\textsuperscript{24} Ritvo writes:

As material animals were at the complete disposal of human beings, so rhetorical animals offered unusual opportunities for manipulation; their positions in the physical world and in the universe of discourse were mutually reinforcing. . . . Although [animals] might be strong in the muscular sense, they were also manifestly powerless, as were bulls in rural fields, lions in menageries, and even the dangerous game stalked by hunters on the African plains or in the Indian hills. And in the rhetorical sphere they were less potent still. If the power of discourse lies in its inevitable restructuring and re-creation of reality, the ability of human beings to offer counterinterpretations places inevitable limits on the exercise of that power. Animals, however, never talk back. (5)

My analysis attempts to complicate this disavowal of the power of discursive expression. The issue is not that animals do not “talk back,” a problematic claim in itself that relies on a rather narrow definition of communication, but that literature, through the rhetorical production of nonhuman life, offers a way of staging mutually transformative human-animal encounters that call into question the conceptual validity of species difference.
animals, actualizes this potential. Most late nineteenth- and twentieth-century writing about animals conforms loosely to three dominant models. In the first model, writing molds animals in the image of human subjects, but subjects that exist primarily as metaphors that illustrate truths about humanity, as in the “Br’er Rabbit” tales popularized by Joel Chandler Harris in the *Uncle Remus* stories of 1881, and to a lesser extent, the animal stories of Beatrix Potter. In the second model, writing subject animals to the conventions of Realist representation, as in nature writing such as Aldo Leopold’s *A Sand County Almanac* (1949) and Ernst Thompson Seton’s *Animals* (1926), as well as in works that exposed the disgusting conditions of animal slaughter and the food industry such as Emile Zola’s *The Belly of Paris* (*Le Ventre de Paris*, 1873), and perhaps more prominently, Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle* (1906). And in the third model, writing holds the animal up as a sublime object (a signifier for some impossible concept such as pure energy or unrestrainable desire) that exists beyond the scope of representation, at an entire remove from the world of humans and logocentric representation and thus deprived of the capacity to intervene into and disturb the make-up of this world, as in D.H. Lawrence’s novels *St. Mawr* (1924) and *The Plumed Serpent* (1926). In the vast majority of literature about animals, then, nonhuman otherness is dispelled in three primary ways: 1) absorbing it into the contours of human subjectivity by making animals into anthropomorphic characters, or speaking and reasoning beings, that function primarily as metaphors about humanity, 2) expiating it as mute, consumable substance that is inseparable from its environment and only threatens the contours of human subjectivity in its capacity to spread disease, and 3) idealizing or sublimating it as an unattainable loss for the world of humans that does not practically affect the operations of this world.

The first mode in which animal otherness is dispelled is perhaps the most familiar to us, simply because it has permeated so much of our cultural media, from the Fables of Aesop to Jean de la Fontaine’s seventeenth-century *Fables Choisies* (written between 1668 and 1694 for the education of young princes and nobles in France), through the “Br’er Rabbit” tales and contemporary animated cartoons and films. In most cases, such narratives anthropomorphize animals into “characters” endowed with reasoning and speaking capacities. Often, an animal is chosen because it illustrates a particular trait about humanity, a thematic inherited from the fable tradition: a fox is cunning, a lion is courageous, an owl is wise, etc., and each performs its metaphor within a fable to illustrate truths about humanity. In the Preface to the fable collection written for the Prince of Dauphin in 1668, Jean de la Fontaine tells us that fables extend our knowledge of the modes of behavior of animals and thus of ourselves, since we epitomize both the good and the bad in creatures of restricted understanding. Prometheus, when creating man, took the predominant characteristic of every animal, and from contradictory elements formed mankind, instituting what is known as our little universe. So the fables are a panorama in which we see ourselves.25 The fable as a genre and other animal narratives informed by the fable tradition presuppose that all animals are translatable into immaterial concepts, morals that instruct readers about human nature, their otherness absorbed into a world of human meaning, reason, and logic.

According to La Fontaine, “[a] fable consists in two parts, which might be termed body and soul: the story being the body, and the moral the soul.”26 Animals are put to

---

26 Ibid, 8.
work in the *Fables* as vehicles through which some abstract moral might be extracted and applied to man (a process which La Fontaine participates in with an immense degree of self-reflection and self-ironization, as in fables like “*Les Compagnons d’Ulysse*” and “*À Iris: Madame de la Sablière*”). What is innovative about La Fontaine’s *Fables* is that they, self-consciously, represent this movement from physical body to abstraction (or moral value, or “soul”) as part of the process by which the foundation of anthropocentrism is constructed. As such, they stand collectively as an attempt to create a discourse around animality, albeit one indexed by the (imagined) correspondence of animal traits to human characteristics.

Take “The Cock and the Pearl,” which reads:

> One day a cock uncovered  
> A pearl, which he brought  
> To a famous jeweler.  
> “It’s fine,” he said,  
> “But the smallest bit of grain  
> Would suit me better.”

> An idiot inherited  
> A valuable manuscript, and took it  
> To a nearby bookseller.  
> “This is marvelous,” he said,  
> “But the smallest gold coin  
> Would suit me better.”

The cock moves from being a literal animal, the subject of a narrative, to being abstracted into the moral of a tale (something like “different people value things differently”) that will produce knowledge and social education for a young future sovereign (the eight-year-old Duke of Burgundy, in this case). The cock is implicitly compared to the “ignorant” who trades what is invaluable for a minor sum: stupidity (or *bêtise*) being one of man’s many traits with a metaphorical origin in animals (in this case, the cock). The body of the cock disappears and becomes sublimated into the idealist (and anthropocentric) universality of metaphor: “stupid as a cock,” or in the lesson form: “don’t be as stupid as a cock.” The *Fables* thus provide the grounds for a discourse of animality in no small part because they

---

27 My translation. The original reads:

> Un jour un coq détourna  
> Une perle, qu’il donna  
> Au beau premier lapidaire.  
> « Je la crois fine, dit-il;  
> Mais le moindre grain de mil  
> Serait bien mieux mon affaire. »

> Un ignorant hérita  
> D’un manuscrit, qu’il porta  
> Chez son voisin libraire.  
> « Je crois, dit-il, qu’il est bon;  
> Mais le moindre ducaton  
> Serait bien mieux mon affaire. »
represent, in however straightforward and apparently teleological a manner, the movement from materiality to figurality which makes the living animal into a conceptual entity as a contingent, discursive process (one indexed by the power of the human as “sovereign” over the animal world, the being for whom all animals are constitutive, fragmentary units) and not part of the natural order of things. Instead of presenting an animal metaphor or animal trope as having some ontological existence, we bear witness to the process by which the animal soul is sundered from an animal body to make a concept, a function of anthropocentric discourse.

Nature writing, which I have grouped under the second mode, often represents animals as inextricable elements of a particular environment. In *A Sand County Almanac*, for example, famed conservationist Aldo Leopold writes concerning the prothonotary warbler he spots in the woods, “He nests in an old woodpecker hole, or other small cavity, in a dead snag overhanging water. The flash of his gold-and-blue plumage amid the dank decay of the June woods is in itself proof that dead trees are transmuted into live animals, and vice-versa.”28 The warbler is inseparable from its environment, unthinkable outside of its relationship to it, in which its life and the tree’s death feed into one another in a continuous cycle. Not yet subject to the dynamic of abjection, in which the formation of discrete entities or subjects/egos out of the pre-objectal world or maternal body is shot through with the non-symbolizable and traumatic persistence of what Julia Kristeva calls the “abominable limits from which, in order to be, the ego has broken away,” the warbler is one with the pre-objectal world of its arboreal environment, not yet symbolizable and not yet capable of an agency outside of its capacity to represent and reflect back its origin, its environment.29

Though vastly different in terms of genre, motivation, and mode of social engagement from *A Sand County Almanac*, we can take Sinclair’s *The Jungle* as another example of a work that represents animals in terms of the substance or material upon which the “de-humanizing” slaughtering industry works. Despite its moments of narratorial grief over the treatment of animals in the stockyard, the novel can be said to confirm anthropocentric attitudes more than to confront them, as many of its social prescriptions urge the need for a greater separation between humans and animals because of the impurity, disgust, and fear of contagious disease involved in inter-species contact. Animal otherness is identified with disease, and with what must be expelled from social circulation. *The Jungle* thus participates in the modern project, as defined by Vialles and others, of removing animals from the world of humans and finding a way for populations to consume animals safely and inconsequentially. Sinclair’s emphasis on the “purity” of meat also informs his treatment of racial and gender issues, as in the following scene depicting the conflicts arising from the hiring of “big buck Negroes” as scab workers in the meat-packing plants:

*The ancestors of these black people had been savages in Africa, and since then they had been chattel slaves, or had been held down by a community ruled by the traditions of slavery. Now for the first time they were free—free to gratify every passion, free to wreck themselves. . . . [W]hiskey and women were brought in by the carload and sold to them, and hell was let loose in the yards. . . . [The*
[packinghouse employers] lodged men and women on the same floor; and with the night there began a saturnalia of debauchery—scenes such as never before had been witnessed in America. And as the women were the dregs from the brothels of Chicago, and the men were for the most part ignorant country Negroes, the nameless diseases of vice were soon rife, and this where food was being handled which was sent out to every corner of the civilized world.30

“Civilization” itself depends upon the enactment and aggressive policing of the boundary between the healthy and diseased,31 and the abjected other can be the animal as much as the “ignorant country Negroes” or the “dregs” of brothels. While a recuperative reading might claim that Sinclair is destabilizing and de-ontologizing the human-animal boundary by showing that the mobile distinction between the diseased and the healthy is more socially significant than the fixed distinction of species, another reading—one that takes Sinclair’s deployment of racial and gender tropes at its word—is that Sinclair is simply qualifying anthropos by expiating from it racial others and promiscuous women along with the abject substance of slaughter.

Zola’s *The Belly of Paris* (*Le Ventre de Paris*, 1873), while less preoccupied with the viscerality of animal slaughter than *The Jungle*, similarly represents animals in terms of pure material, but a material that can become transmuted into an art object in the new “realist” style. In the novel, the painter Claude Lantier32 “inveigh[s] against romanticism” and the obligation to preserve the classical objects of representation, “the rags and tatters of the Middle Ages,” instead finding in the food markets of *Les Halles* an entirely new subject of representation, a way to make art directly out of living life. As Lantier remarks: “Look at the corner of the footpath over there! Isn’t that a ready-made painting, far more human and alive than all their terrible sickly efforts put together?”33

The slaughtered and hanging carcasses of animals in particular provide him with the precursor of a revolutionary artistic style, precisely through their collective status as mute, abject substance inseparable from the atmosphere of the food markets in which they hang:

> [H]e stood in ecstasy before the lungs and lights that hung from the auction hooks. He often explained to Cadine and Marjolin that there was no sight more beautiful than this. The lights were a tender rose-pink, deepening gradually and turning at the lower edges to a bright crimson. Claude compared them to watered satin, finding no other term to describe the silken softness of the flowing lengths of flesh which fell in folds like the caught-up skirts of a dancer. . . . And when a ray of sunlight fell across the offal and gave it a golden hue, an expression of rapture came into his eyes, and he felt happier than if he had been privileged to see Greek goddesses filing past in their splendid nudity, or the châtelaines of romance in their brocaded robes.34

Animals here are the raw material out of which art is formed, and while Zola does not himself present Claude’s sentiments without a touch of irony, the novel nonetheless only

---

31 Michel Foucault’s *The Birth of the Clinic* (New York: Vintage, 1994) is grounded upon a version of this argument.
32 Claude Lantier is in many ways a fictional version of Paul Cezanne, Zola’s close friend before their split in 1886 after the publication of Zola’s *The Masterpiece*, which Cezanne believed was a criticism of him.
34 ibid., 164-65.
conceives of the nonhuman in terms of its transferability, as mute substance, into anthropic representational conventions. The nonhuman is not what disturbs, but what exists without voice and expressive capacity and what is integrable into a mode of representation that aspires to become identical with everyday life itself, or the Baudelerian “memory of the present.”

D.H. Lawrence’s 1925 novella *St. Mawr* can serve as an instance of the third mode, which sublimates animal otherness and makes it unreachable by and non-functional within the realm of human subjectivity. This is similar to the dynamic of the first mode, in which the animal becomes an immaterial sign or concept, but the difference that here the animal functions as a concept that transcends the representational frame, not one that is absorbed into a world of human meaning (though we might, of course, argue that it is available to human reason precisely as a signifier of this beyond, of sublimity itself). In his essays on novelistic form, Lawrence derides the excessive “self-consciousness” of the narrator in Modernist fiction and views it as a symptom of decadence.

In *St. Mawr* and other of his mid-career novels, Lawrence re-imagines the function of the narrator as that of a vanishing mediator, or what the film theorist Andre Gaudreault would call the “monstrator,” who presents a spectacle while effacing his own presence and subjectivity, giving the viewer the effect of a direct access to the world presented to him. The novel, then, would not be a narration of events from an invested perspective, but a “tremulation on the ether,” a pure expression of energy beyond representation that would “make the whole man alive tremble.” In *St. Mawr*, Lawrence attempts to find a space outside or prior to discourse and discursive representation through the use of a metaphor (*St. Mawr*, the horse) that presents rather than represents, that stands only for its own vital energy, as a self-generating conduit for pure expression and pure intensity beyond the capture of narrative mechanisms and forms of signification generally. In *St. Mawr*, Lawrence creates a figure which operates by pure affect, a signifier identical with its own signification, exuding a dynamism that cannot be contained by signification.

Upon seeing *St. Mawr* for the first time, the novel’s protagonist, Lou, is infected by the raw power emanating from its body:

She looked at the glowing bay horse, that stood there with his ears back, his face averted, but attending as if he were some lightning conductor. He was a stallion. When she realised this, she became more afraid of him.

*St. Mawr* is a figure that literally creates tremulations in Lou’s body, a figure that can only be symbolized in terms of self-generating elemental power (as a “lightning conductor”). *St. Mawr*’s indifference to being perceived (“his face averted”) places him outside the structure of intersubjective recognition required for discursive

---

36 “The people in serious novels are so absorbedly concerned with themselves and what they feel and don’t feel, and how they react to every mortal button; and their audience as frenziedly absorbed in the application of the author’s discoveries to their own reactions: ‘That’s me! That’s exactly it! I’m just finding myself in this book!’ Why, this is more than death-bed, it is almost post-mortem behavior.” “Surgery for the Novel—or a Bomb,” *Selected Essays* (London: Penguin, 1972), p. 115.
communication. The horse is placed outside of discourse, standing as it does for what overwhelms socio-symbolic exchange, and what inspires terror, fear, and other affective responses, such as Lou’s weeping when she returns home that evening. The description of her first physical contact with the horse equates St. Mawr with the phallus itself, an impossible, sublime, “slippery” signifier of irrepressible bodily and sexual energy which none of the characters can possess or hold onto:

She laid her hand on his side, and gently stroked him. Then she stroked his shoulder, and then the hard, tense arch of his neck. And she was startled to feel the vivid heat of his life come through to her through the lacquer of red-gold gloss.

So slippery with vivid, hot life! Nonhuman otherness is sublimated into phallic power, or into that which is structurally removed from the frame of representation (and what grounds the possibility of representation itself). In the second mode of dispelling nonhuman otherness, animal life is abjected into pure substance, too far beneath the scope of representation to pose any kind of disruptive threat to the sovereignty of the human subject. In the third mode, exemplified by Lawrence, animal life is elevated above representation and associated with the sublime phallic signifier which representation fails to access. The end result is similar to that of the second mode, however: the “animal” becomes idealized into a pure abstract signifier that is nothing in itself and that holds no structural or functional position vis-à-vis the human subject. Animality is identified with an empty point, or what negates, in its impossibility and in its transcendent removal from the sphere of humanity and from the textual world, the voice of the narrator and the subjectivity of its characters.

How then, to return to John Berger’s question, do we look at animals in the literary text, and where is the space for our encounter with nonhuman otherness? The force of cross-species encounter cannot be adequately expressed through work that still upholds an anthropocentric representational frame, a frame that either represents nonhuman otherness in terms of the concept of anthropos, expiates otherness into the depths beneath conceptual representation, or elevates it above the scope of representation. This task requires a different approach, which I am arguing can be found in Modernist and Victorian experimental literature. The works I am analyzing in this study engage directly with and disrupt the conventions of representation not by transcending the material world they represent and serving as the locus through which the artist can remake this world according to her or his own will and desire, but by using language as a medium to provide imaginative encounters between modes of human and animal being and to open up new imaginary modes of non-appropriative co-existence. Rather than merely banishing animals to the realm of the figural or the sub-conceptual, Victorian and Modernist experimental fiction’s complex modes of interrogating the position of the human (subject/author) towards the animal (object/representation) make animals more disturbingly present than they are in conventional representations, because they trouble the anthropocentric foundations of civilization that have enabled their complete instrumentalization. In so doing, these texts carve out a space for the animal to appear as animal as an other, allowed to distort the representational framework in which it is confined rather than to become absorbed within it, expiated from it, or elevated beyond it.

In this respect, Margot Norris’s masterful account of the animal in modern

---

40 St. Mawr, p. 30.
literature, art, and philosophy, *Beasts of the Modern Imagination: Darwin, Nietzsche, Kafka, Ernst, and Lawrence* (1985), is a significant move towards theorizing the changing dynamics in the representation of animals and the presence of animality in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century literature and culture. Norris conceives of an opposition between two traditions in literature and art: the anthropocentric tradition, which values mediation, representation, mimesis, reason, and the ego; and the biocentric tradition, which values the body, energy, vitality, and physical power, and spurns mediation and representation as disempowered substitutes for this vital energy. The biocentric tradition wants an art without “representation, form, or ideal,” an art that reveals (and revels in) the creative process itself, as “the discharge of energy and power,” as in Nietzsche’s *Ecce Homo* (written 1888, first published 1908) and D.H. Lawrence’s *St. Mawr.* Yet Norris’s powerful critique of anthropocentrism often falls prey to the limitations of its binary method, in which she conceives of the biocentric tradition as a mere “negation” of mediation, representation, mimesis, and the other structuring principles of the anthropocentric tradition. Her conception of biocentrism thus produces a version of animality that replicates the problems of the social construction of the human-animal divide: the animal is aligned with the physical, with the qualities of instinct, vitality, and sensation, the human with reason, logic, and mediation, and the encounter between the two is a Hegelian struggle for dominance and self-justification in which one must triumph over the other by negating it. Either the author masters the animal by successfully “taming it” and confining it within representation, or the animal triumphs by negating the authority of the author, “ruptur[ing] representation,” and “rebuff[ing] interpretation.”

Literary engagements with animality, however, do not always map onto this model of mastery vs. its negation: the author is not necessarily in search for ways in which either to domesticate animal energy and vitality or to become dominated and negated by it, but also employs writing to call into question the logic of species division and to provide modes of encounter with animals that are mutually transformative. The animal becomes something other than either an anthropomorphic projection, a purely physical/material body, or an impossible and transcendent, “pure” signifier within the artwork, and the human characters change nature, and even species, in the course of the encounter. The representational framework is not simply negated and destroyed through the force of animalistic vitality that cannot be represented, but perpetually denatured and distorted as the founding divisions between animal and human become more and more malleable, fluid, and indistinct.

In the works of Darwin, Carroll, Flaubert, Joyce, Kafka, and Woolf that will be studied here, we see a persistent attempt to call into question not only the stability of literary form and the viability of representational and conceptual logic, but also the supposedly ontological nature of bodily forms and the category of species generally. Operating in a post-Darwinian sociocultural and literary world in which the

---

41 Nietzsche writes, in *The Will To Power*:

Art reminds us of states of animal vigor; it is on the one hand an excess and overflow of blooming physicality in the world of images and desires; on the other, an excitation of the animal function through the images and desires of intensified life;—an enhancement of the feeling of life, a stimulant to it. (422).

And further on: “Art exercises the power of suggestion over the muscles and senses, which in the artistic temperament are originally active” (427).

42 Norris, p. 3
transcendence of the human over all other forms of life (one of the founding assumptions of Western metaphysics) was no longer guaranteed, these authors subjected the consistency of the human form, and the conceptual or “metaphysical” language by which it structures itself and performs its exceptionality, to contagion and disarticulation in a sea of not-quite-material, not-quite-inmaterial animal otherness.

In these works, the animal metaphor, and figurative language more generally, as I will discuss in the next section, becomes a key locus through which the self-consistency of the human/nonhuman divide is disrupted, and in which the encounter between human and animal occurs as an encounter between bodies stripped of the conceptual grounding (the logic of species) that formerly preserved the formal consistency of each. The narratorial voice here is not the impersonal voice of the Lawrentian narrator/“monstrator” that effaces itself in order to provide an ostensibly untainted window (or “hole in the wall,” in Lawrence’s terms) into living life, but a voice that is markedly not in control of the actions, characters, expressions, and events it narrates and must continually shift its contours as distinctions between subject and object, human and animal, literality and figurality, reality and fantasy, event and representation collapse into one another.43 The narrative voice, to paraphrase Joyce, is the voice of the author become or becoming animal. Experimental language in general, and types of animal metaphor in particular, provides a way for the author to express nonhuman otherness or bring it into textual being, while ceding control over the full meaning of his or her expression to the submerged and untraceable histories embedded in and emanating from the nonhuman world and the language we use to describe it. Experimental language, in other words, can press against the limits of human consciousness as a supposedly universal mode of apprehension.

III. Expressing the Nonhuman: Nonconceptual Thought and Language

To insist on a split between language and consciousness is to run counter to much of the current discourse emerging from the field of Speculative Realism (along with its counterpart, Object-Oriented Ontology), which presumes that language, being a human construction, can never genuinely get us “outside” of human-centered thought, or to the world as it is “in itself” as opposed to the world “for us,” or the world according to our relation to it, as Quentin Meillassoux, one of the founders of the Speculative Realism movement in philosophy, argues.44 The presupposition that nothing exists that cannot be thought by our own, human consciousness, and cannot be conceptualized by our own relation to it, is what Meillassoux terms “correlationism,” and this is the position against which Speculative Realism defines itself, since Speculative Realism wants to find a way to theorize the existence of objects and phenomena in the universe that lie beyond the limits of human thought.45 I take no issue with the basis or the aims of Speculative Realist philosophy as a whole, but only with the coupling of consciousness and language, and the idea that language is or can be nothing more than a mere reflection of the workings of human consciousness, that Meillassoux insists on in his argument. According to Meillassoux, “Consciousness and its language certainly transcend themselves towards the

43 Lawrence, “Surgery for the Novel—or a Bomb,” p. 119.
45 Ibid., p. 5.
world, but there is a world only insofar as consciousness transcends itself towards it. Consequently, this space of exteriority is merely the space of what faces us, of what exists only as a correlate of our own existence.\(^{46}\)

In other words, whatever “outside world,” or “radical exterior” we can think is formed by “consciousness and its language,” which then holds itself up as the only means of access to this radical exterior world. The “external” then becomes representable solely through the concepts that consciousness uses in order to domesticate this world to the understanding. This is the correlationist position that Meillassoux critiques. But in so doing, Meillassoux risks producing a homogenized version of the entities that we are “correlated” with, in the sense that “consciousness and its language” are able somehow to encapsulate correlated entities within the understanding, in favor of speculating about the realities that are non-correlative because we can imagine no way to relate ourselves to them.\(^{47}\) But we do not have to leave the contours of our world and of our historical place in time in order to locate the limitations of human consciousness, and language is precisely what can help us to press upon these limits.\(^{48}\) In the first place, we are “correlated” to millions of life forms, each with different modes of worldly apprehension that are radically different from human consciousness, yet our correlation to them does not make them fully available to our knowledge, or somehow not radically other from ourselves and from our modes of thinking. This is the primary revelation of Jakob von Uexküll’s theory of the “Umwelt” (or “environment,” or “environment-world”), which holds that there is no single “world” in common to all life forms, since the “world” is constituted by what each organism finds to be “significant” within its own environment, which varies radically according to species.\(^{49}\)

And this is where language can emerge as a critique of the limitations of human consciousness. It is not to say that language can somehow reach “outside” or “transcend” human consciousness in some way, since we are always-already embedded in consciousness as a mode of understanding, for better or worse. However, language, especially experimental literary language, can foreground the anthropocentric limitations of human consciousness, or the tendency of consciousness to reflect back to us a world made in the image of the concepts we have used to understand it, and can challenge the

\(^{46}\) ibid., p. 7.

\(^{47}\) For Meillassoux, these non-correlative realities are primarily 1) the “ancestral” realities that are “anterior to the emergence of the human species” or even to “every recognized form of life on earth,” and 2) the “arche-fossils” that are “not just materials indicating the traces of past life . . . but materials indicating the existence of an ancestral reality . . . that is anterior to terrestrial life” (10).

\(^{48}\) For example, N. Katherine Hayles discusses, in *How We Became Posthuman* (1999), how consciousness itself is a material product that is not solely a human possession and does not “guarantee the existence of the self,” but is distributed amongst a variety of human, nonhuman, and cybernetic bodies. Hayles writes: “The construction of the posthuman is . . . deeply involed with boundary questions, particularly when the redrawing of boundaries changes the locus of self-hood. Shift the seat of identity from brain to cell, or from neocortex to brainstem, and the nature of the subject radically changes. . . . Conscious mind can be hijacked, cut off by mutinous cells, absorbed into an artificial consciousness, or back-propagated through flawed memory. . . . Whether consciousness is seen as a precious evolutionary achievement . . . or as an isolation room whose limits we are ready to outgrow, we can no longer simply assume that consciousness guarantees the existence of the self. In this sense, the posthuman subject is also a postconscious subject. (279-80)


\(^{49}\) Uexküll, p. 53.
status of human consciousness as a universal means of apprehension by revealing that our consciousness-based perception of the world is a contingent one, and merely one among millions of other potential modes of understanding dispersed throughout the nonhuman world. Language, in other words, while still being inevitably tied to human consciousness, can nonetheless destabilize the knowledge-producing functions of consciousness, can work to separate itself from the world-ordering function of consciousness, and thus to produce new understandings of life, particularly of animal life and our entanglements with it, that resist the ordering of the world into conceptual reality.

It is perhaps worth pausing here to articulate the definitions of “concept” (and “conceptual reality,” and “conceptual identity”) that I will be drawing on, and in the process, tracing the usage of the term across a particular strain of oppositional philosophy, from Spinoza to Nietzsche to Deleuze. It may make sense to begin with Friedrich Nietzsche’s analysis of the “concept” in his (initially unpublished) 1873 essay, “On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense” [Über Wahrheit und Lüge im außermoralischen Sinne], since of the three, Nietzsche is perhaps most invested in the “concept” as an anthropic construction. “On Truth and Lie” was also, like the works of Carroll, Flaubert, Joyce, Kafka, and Woolf I will be analyzing, written in the aftermath of The Origin of Species and its critique of language as an inadequate means of expressing nonhuman life. In this essay, Nietzsche levels a critique against the tendency, amidst speakers of Western languages, to flatten out the differences between various individual things and experiences by grouping them together under the form of the “concept” [Begriffe], which erases the differences between things by sublimating them into the sameness of the concept. In a key passage, Nietzsche writes:

Let us still give special consideration to the formation of concepts. Every word immediately becomes a concept, inasmuch as it is not intended to serve as a reminder of the unique and wholly individualized original experience to which it owes its birth, but must at the same time fit innumerable, more or less similar cases—which means, strictly speaking, never equal—in other words, a lot of unequal cases. Every concept originates through our equating what is unequal. No leaf ever wholly equals another, and the concept “leaf” is formed through an arbitrary abstraction from these individual differences, through forgetting the distinctions; and now it gives rise to the idea that in nature there might be something besides the leaves which would be “leaf”—some kind of original form after which all leaves have been woven, marked, copied, colored, curled, and painted, but by unskilled hands, so that no copy turned out to be a correct, reliable, and faithful image of the original form. . . . We obtain the concept, as we do the form, by overlooking what is individual and actual; whereas nature is acquainted with no forms and no concepts, and likewise with no species, but only with an X which remains inaccessible and undefinable for us. For even our


51 Now defined primarily as “concept,” “term,” or “definition,” Begriffe originally meant “to grasp,” as discussed by G.W.F. Hegel in his Lectures on Aesthetics, which I will discuss shortly.

In this sense, the “concept” is a sublimation of individual particulars into a singular, determinate form, which produces a form of reality, as conceptual reality, that Nietzsche views as a “lie,” since it abstracts away the material characteristics of the entity it absorbs into the form of the concept. “Conceptual identity,” as the personal identity of an individual rooted in the name, is a similar kind of erasure of the particulars that make up the individual in favor of an all-encompassing form, an identity based on what Gilles Deleuze, in *The Logic of Sense* (1969), calls the “proper name” that guarantees “the permanence of savoir.”\footnote{Deleuze, The Logic of Sense. Trans. Mark Lester. London: Continuum, 2004 [orig. 1969].}

Similarly, Benedict de Spinoza’s *Ethics* (1677), a work which I will be drawing on extensively in this study, critiques the human tendency to create “universal ideas” (or what Nietzsche would more or less refer to as “concepts”) rooted in human notions of “perfection” and to impose them upon the natural world (*E III*, Preface). Spinoza argues that the idea of “perfection” comes from thinking that some construction (of humans or of nature) has reached the “end” that its author supposedly had in mind. Spinoza writes,

> If someone has decided to make something, and has finished it, then he will call his thing perfect—and so will anyone who rightly knows, or thinks he knows, the mind and purpose of the author of the work. For example, if someone sees a work (which I suppose to be not yet completed), and knows that the purpose of the author of that work is to build a house, he will say that it is imperfect. On the other hand, he will call it perfect as soon as he sees that the work has been carried through to the end which its author had decided to give it. (*E III*, Preface)

In response to the problem of not being able to decide on the “perfection” or “imperfection” of something unknown or unfamiliar, “men began to form universal ideas, and devise models of houses, buildings, towers, and the like, and to prefer some models of things to others.” Now “it came about that each one called perfect what he saw agreed with the universal idea he had formed of this kind of thing, and imperfect, what he saw agreed less with the model he had conceived, even though its maker thought he had entirely finished it” (*E III*, Preface). This measure of perfection according to “universal ideas” is also applied to the natural world:

> Nor does there seem to be any other reason why men also commonly call perfect or imperfect natural things, which have not been made by human hand. For they are accustomed to form universal ideas of things as much as they do of artificial ones. They regard these universal ideas as models of things, and believe that Nature (which they think does nothing except for the sake of some end) looks to them, and sets them before itself as models. So when they see something happen in Nature which does not agree with the model they have conceived of this kind of thing, they believe that Nature itself has failed or sinned, and left the thing imperfect. (*E III*, Preface)

Spinoza concludes: “Perfection and imperfection, therefore, are only modes of thinking, that is, notions we are accustomed to feign because we compare individuals of the same species or genus to one another” (*E III*, Preface).
Nature, in Spinoza’s and Nietzsche’s accounts alike, is precisely what resists the imposition of “concepts” or “universal ideas” upon it, for the natural world is ultimately unknowable according to a traditionally anthropic model of knowledge, and this is because it does not act according to a knowable “end” (Spinoza), and “is acquainted with no forms and concepts . . . but only with an X which remains inaccessible and undefinable for us” (Nietzsche).54 In both accounts, it is the particular qualities of the “individual” entity that become lost in the drive to universalize a certain ideal of “perfection” and impose it on all external things.

For Deleuze, following Spinoza and Nietzsche, this kind of conceptual thinking, the thinking that effaces individual differences between things by turning them into abstract, “conceptual differences,” maps onto a particular persistent model of (Cartesian) philosophical thought, which he refers to in Difference and Repetition (1968) as “common sense.”55 “Common sense,” or the “Cogitatio natura universalis,” is what we “presume to know” before we even start thinking, namely, “what it means to think and to be,” and to have a “self.”56 The meaning of “thinking” is to pursue the “true,” which for Deleuze amounts not to any positive content, but to a particular “form of representation” within which everything encountered in the world is made intelligible through its relation to the subject.57 For the “philosopher,” Deleuze explains, all that he proposes as universally recognised is what is meant by thinking, being and self – in other words, not a particular this or that but the form of representation or recognition in general. This form, nevertheless, had a matter, but a pure matter or element. This element consists only of the presupposition that thought is the natural exercise of a faculty, of the talent for truth or an affinity with the true, under the double aspect of a good will on the part of the thinker and an upright nature on the part of thought. It is because everybody naturally thinks that everybody is supposed to know implicitly what it means to think. The most general form of representation is thus found in the element of a common sense understood as an upright nature and a good will.58 “Common sense” is made into a “universal . . . principle,” the principle by which everything we encounter is related back to the perceiving subject, and in which my relation to objects in the external world will “reflect” back to me my own “subjective identity.”59 “Truth,” in this context, is “the form of representation” through which we encounter the external world, or a particular “distribution” of subjects and objects within a fixed frame of reference, a frame within which thought is bound. Deleuze continues:

In this sense, conceptual philosophical thought has as its implicit presupposition a pre-philosophical and natural Image of thought, borrowed from the pure element

---

54 While I am tracing a certain affinity between Nietzsche’s and Spinoza’s thought, and while Spinoza was a clear influence on Nietzsche beginning in 1865 and continuing until Nietzsche’s death in 1900, as Thomas Brobjer claims, it is important to note that Nietzsche often, especially in his mid- to later years, tried to distance himself from Spinoza’s philosophy, claiming for example that Spinoza’s work was the “masquerade of a sick recluse” (77). For a more detailed account of Spinoza’s influence on Nietzsche, see Brobjer, Nietzsche’s Philosophical Context: An Intellectual Biography (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008).
55 Difference and Repetition, p. 131.
56 Ibid., p. 130, 131.
57 Ibid., p. 130.
58 Ibid., p. 131.
59 Ibid., p. 132, 133.
of common sense. . . . Thereafter it matters little whether philosophy begins with
the object or the subject, with Being or with beings, as long as thought remains
subject to this Image which already prejudges everything: the distribution of the
object and the subject as well as that of Being and beings.”

Deleuze’s sense of the “true,” as an “Image of thought” that “already prejudges
everything” thus builds off of Nietzsche’s definition of “truth” as the “invent[ion]” of “a
regularly valid and obligatory designation of things,” in which individual differences
between things can be absorbed into the form of the concept. For Deleuze, “conceptual
philosophical thought” similarly has its origin in the “pre-philosophical . . . Image of
thought” that distributes subjects and objects within a fixed frame of reference. This
leads to the fiction that the human “self” or human “consciousness” is the point at which
the multivalent and irreducible complexity of the external world can become unified.

Following the same line of argument in *The Logic of Sense* (1969), Deleuze claims that
within the referential frame of the “true,” all worldly difference can be subsumed under
the unity of the subject who “identifies and recognizes” all things in terms of their relation
to the self (a universal “self” that can be presumed to be proper to all thinking humans
under the form of “common sense”),

One and the same self perceives, imagines, remembers, knows, etc.; one and the
same self breathes, sleeps, walks, and eats. . . . Language does not seem possible
without this subject which expresses and manifests itself in it, and which says what
it does. Objectively, common sense subsumes under itself the given diversity and
relates it to the unity of a particular form of object or an individualized form of a
world. It is the same object which I see, smell, taste, or touch; it is the same object
which I perceive, imagine, and remember . . . ; and it is the same world that I
breathe, walk, am awake or asleep in, as I move from one object to another
following the laws of a determined system.

In other words, “common sense” absorbs the manifold differences in the world,
the differences that inhere in every external “object” in the world, and “subsumes” them
into a unity that is only a unity for a perceiving subject, a unity that becomes
universalized as “common sense,” what everyone perceives, knows, and takes to be
“true.” Once we have a universalized “common sense,” then we can proceed to form
“conceptual philosophical thought,” in which material particulars are subsumed into the
form of the concept, which becomes a universalized form of knowing for the human
subject, and which marks a particular distribution of subjects and objects and their
determination as such. In *Difference and Repetition*, Deleuze identifies the construction of
“common sense” presuppositions of the world with the work of “consciousness,” as a
machine for producing a particular form of relation between the “I” and the
“representation” as a mode of universal knowledge:

> Consciousness establishes between the I and the representation a relation much
> more profound than that which appears in the expression ‘I have a
> representation’: it relates the representation to the I as if to a free faculty which
does not allow itself to be confined within any one of its products, but for which

---

60 p. 131
61 “On Truth and Lie,” p. 44.
62 *The Logic of Sense*, pp. 89-90 (ellipses in the original).
each product is already thought and recognised as past, the occasion of a determinant change in inner meaning.\textsuperscript{63}

Consciousness, in other words, is what enables a link between the self and the world that presumes that the self can remain a neutral mode of access to the world without being “confined” within anything that it attempts to represent, since each external object attains meaning through its relation to the perceiving subject.

But consciousness, for Deleuze and for Spinoza and Nietzsche, is not coterminous with “thought,” since thinking is not determined entirely by consciousness, but is persistently affected, molded, and reshaped through its interaction with the external world. Thought can be “involuntary,” it can be a violent “trespass,” and it can tear down the strictures of “conceptual thought” and the customary patterns of thought towards which human consciousness tends.\textsuperscript{64} For Spinoza, the “mind” is never in command of what it encounters, since “in the mind,” which is “a certain and determinate mode of thinking,” “there is no absolute, or free, will, but the mind is determined to will this or that by a cause which is also determined by another, and this again by another, and so to infinity” (\textit{Ethics II}, P 48, P 48 Dem). The mind’s activity primarily consists of ordering the “images of things” we have encountered in the external world into lines of thought. In a passage which I will return to in further detail in Chapter Three, Spinoza claims that we pass from one thought to another based on the particular “association” by which we have ordered the images of things in the body. For example, a soldier, having seen traces of a horse in the sand, will immediately pass from the thought of a horse to the thought of a horsemanship, and from that to the thought of war, and so on. But a farmer will pass from the thought of a horse to the thought of a plow, and then to that of a field, and so on. And so each one, according as he has been accustomed to join and connect the images of things in this or that way, will pass from one thought to another. (\textit{Ethics II}, P 18 Schol)

In Deleuze’s analysis, we can break free from the strictures of thought not by using the “power of reason” to “order and connect” the various “affections of the body” and the “images of things . . . in the body,” as Spinoza concludes in the \textit{Ethics}, but by harnessing the violent force of thought to undermine the “common sense” understanding and the conceptual scaffolding that uphold the dominant image of thought (\textit{EV}, Preface and P 1 Dem). Deleuze writes:

\begin{quote}
In fact, concepts only ever designate possibilities. They lack the claws of absolute necessity – in other words, of an original violence inflicted upon thought; the claws of a strangeness or enmity which alone would awake thought from its natural stupor or eternal possibility: there is only involuntary thought, aroused but constrained within thought, and all the more absolutely necessary for being born, illegitimately, of fortuitousness in the world. Thought is primarily trespass and violence, the enemy, and nothing presupposes philosophy; everything begins with misophy. Do not count upon thought to ensure the relative necessity of what it thinks. Rather, count upon the contingency of an encounter with that which forces thought to raise up and educate the absolute necessity of an act of thought or a passion to think. The conditions of a true critique and a true creation are the
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{63} \textit{Difference and Repetition}, p. 14
\textsuperscript{64} ibid., p. 139.
same: the destruction of an image of thought which presupposes itself and the genesis of the act of thinking in thought itself.\textsuperscript{65} Deleuze continues: “Something in the world forces us to think. This something is an object not of recognition but of a fundamental \textit{encounter}.”\textsuperscript{66} Thought, in other words, is capable of working against the strictures of conceptual thinking, and against the presuppositions of “common sense” by which thinking traditionally takes place. At the same time, thought is not determined by the human subject, since the “encounter” with the object is what “forces us to think”: thought does not guarantee and reflect back the consistency of the perceiving subject, who is able to make some external entity into a “unity” by relating it back to the self, because thinking is “involuntary,” born of “fortuitousness in the world,” the product not of the will but of chance encounters in the world.

The danger that Deleuze runs, however, is of unwittingly supposing a higher power of thought or of consciousness, that of a violent “thinking” as “trespass,” that paradoxically guarantees the transcendence of the perceiving (or “thinking”) subject over what it perceives/thinks. In other words, the external world, the place of chance encounters, can too easily become subordinate to the power of thinking itself: entities in the external world “force[ ] thought to raise up,” to assume new powers, but this risks making these entities outside the self into mere occasions for the exercise of thinking and its raising to a higher power within the mind, even if the mind is technically not, in Deleuze’s analysis, fully in possession of the power of thinking. But the external world, and particularly for my analysis, the nonhuman world, resists not only the conceptual categories and structures that human thinking has imposed on it, but also the very ability of human thought to make meaning out of it, even if this meaning is defined as an enhancement of human powers of thinking.

This is where experimental literary language becomes so important, in my analysis: language can force us to dwell amidst the material particulars of the external world, or the nonhuman world, without granting the reader any kind of authoritative position from which to make meaning out of this world, and without allowing the reader to enhance his or her own powers of thinking through encounters with the nonhuman world. Nonhuman life, for Darwin, Carroll, Flaubert, Joyce, Kafka, and Woolf, becomes the point where thinking is turned back upon itself, by the force of an other which resists integration into anthropic modes of perceiving and thinking. These authors are all invested in the failures of thought, and of language, to allow us access to nonhuman subjectivities, and to allow us a complete escape from our own embeddedness in anthropocentric structures of thought. However, they each also imagine the multivalent ways in which language can push against the limits of human subjectivity, and in so doing, they suggest new modes of being in relation to the nonhuman world based on the human inability to appropriate nonhuman life into the workings of thought. This is how we might imagine the detachment of language from consciousness: it is a product of consciousness, but not reducible to its operations. Following Deleuze, we might say that language does not necessarily absorb the manifoldness of the world into the unity of the human subject, or in Nietzsche’s terms, “metamorphos[e] the world in human beings,” since language can suggest an alternative to anthropocentric modes of thinking by

\textsuperscript{65} ibid., p. 139.
\textsuperscript{66} ibid., p. 139.
refusing to sublimate the materiality of the external world into forms of knowledge such as the “concept” or the “universal idea,” or even, contra Deleuze, the “power of thinking.” Language, in other words, can re-engage us with the material particulars of the world that we have been trained to sublimate into concepts or “universal ideas.”

A version of this idea of language as irreducible to the concept-making functions of consciousness is provided in Mel Chen’s recent work Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect (2012). In the “Language and Mattering Humans” chapter, Chen argues for the fundamental materiality of language, a materiality that complicates the idea of language as a universal means of representation detached from what it represents. Chen writes:

Language is as much alive as it is dead, and it is certainly material. For humans and others, spoken and signed speech can involve the tongue, vocal tract, breath, lips, hands, eyes, and shoulders. It is a corporeal, embodied act. It is, by definition, animated. But in spite of, or because of, the so-called linguistic turn . . . and the influence of poststructuralist thought, language in theory has in many ways steadily become bleached of its quality to be anything but referential, or structural, or performative.

For Chen, language takes on a power of both “animating” and “de-animating” different beings, making it so that the materiality of language, its rootedness in the body and its association with bodily gesture, tone, posture, etc., intervenes directly in the world by assigning degrees of “animacy” to different beings, as opposed to merely representing the world. Chen employs the concept of “animacy” to describe this power of language. Animacy is originally a term used by linguists to designate the “quality of liveness, sentence, or human-ness of a noun or noun phrase,” and a term that brings with it a series of attitudes about which kinds of being are more “animate” than others and thus more deserving of consideration. For Chen, animated (and animating) language operates not merely as a system of reference but also as a medium through which degrees of animacy are assigned to different beings (also termed an “animacy hierarchy”). When I speak, I am already operating within a given animacy hierarchy that privileges some forms of life or categories of being over others, but this does not mean that my speech cannot meaningfully intervene into this hierarchy. Insults, for example, can be used to de-humanize or objectify some being by stripping away its animacy, while I can also humanize or de-objectify someone or something else that is traditionally lower on the animacy hierarchy by assigning it a higher degree of animacy. These distinctions regarding what counts as human and what does not, Chen argues, often proceed along the lines of race, gender, class, and ability, but the “animacy hierarchy” is consistently

---

67 Nietzsche, it should be said, is pessimistic about the capacity of language to get outside of anthropocentrism. In the same essay, he claims that it is “language which works on building the edifice of concepts,” language being the repository for the “lies” by which we “equat[e] what is unequal” in the form of the concept (881). I want to argue here, by contrast, that language is also what can challenge and complicate the “construction of concepts” and, by extension, the anthropocentric basis of language, or what Nietzsche calls “the metamorphosis of the world in human beings” (879). These citations come from Ronald Speirs’ translation (instead of the Kaufmann translation used earlier). See Nietzsche, “On Truth and Lying in a Non-Moral Sense,” trans. Ronald Speirs, in The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism, ed. Vincent Leitch (New York: Norton, 2001).


69 ibid., p. 24.
being negotiated and re-mapped through the continued deployment of animating and de-animating speech.

For my own part, I am interested in exploring how written language, or language that is considered “immaterial” because it is not directly tied to the body in the form of speech, as in Chen’s analysis, can still intervene meaningfully into “material” reality. Written language, as I will argue shortly, can take on functions beyond the “referential, structural, or performative”; it can skirt the borders of the material and the immaterial, and in so doing, it can complicate the forms of representation in which animal life is made available to us. In other words, language, and particularly the experimental literary language of the Victorian and Modernist periods, can not only intervene into existing animacy hierarchies, but also can rethink the value of “animacy” itself as a meaningful category for assigning value to different orders of being. Darwin, Carroll, Flaubert, Joyce, Kafka, and Woolf were all invested in challenging the transcendence of the human being, including the very capacity to represent nonhuman life within existing structures and hierarchies of value. In other words, they critique the very capacity to create modes of value as itself a kind of anthropocentrism.

This is why the authors in question all share an uneasy relationship with the production of style as individual signature and style as an opening out to a world of otherness within which the category of the individual, and its grounding in conceptual identity, loses its self-consistency and its capacity to serve as a universal means of representation. Authorial style continually reshapes itself based on the content of what it attempts, but ultimately fails, to express: to wit, nonhuman life. As such, the encounter with animality in works such as Lewis Carroll’s _Alice_ books (1865, 1871), Flaubert’s _The Temptation of Saint Anthony_ (1874), Joyce’s _Ulysses_ (1922), Woolf’s _Between the Acts_ (1941), Kafka’s “The Burrow” ( _Der Bau_, written 1924, published 1931), “Investigations of a Dog” ( _Forschungen eines Hundes_, written 1922, published 1931), and other short fiction denatures the contours of authorial subjectivity, subjects authorial style to fluctuation, and in so doing, puts the logic of species division, or the capacity to create modes of value that can be applied to other beings, into question. In a letter to Carlo Linati, Joyce remarked that the “Circe” episode of _Ulysses_, the subject of Chapter Two of the present work, “has changed me too into an animal,” and this surrender of both authorial mastery and human transcendence to the transformative and contagious power of imaginative encounters with animals is a common theme circulating in various ways through the work of all the aforementioned authors.

More specifically, all of these authors employs different modes of metaphor as a mode of undoing conceptual distinctions between human and animal being. Metaphor, which I am using throughout this study as an umbrella term for theoretically different kinds of figurative comparison between things (such as simile, metonymy, synecdoche, catachresis, and following Aristotle, the “proverb” and “hyperbole”), can operate as a mode of bearing nonhuman otherness into language, without either anthropomorphizing this otherness, expiating this otherness into mute “substance,” sublimating it to the level

---

70 Chen, it should be said, is also critical of the totalizing function of animacy hierarchies, and devotes two later chapters to discussing the intersections between discourses of animality, race, gender, class, and ability, all of which are all defined by a kind of non-normativity, or an “improper affiliation” or improper “intimacy,” that becomes a mode of resistance to the dominant social order (104).

71 Joyce, _Letters: Volume I_, p. 146.
of the ideal that is removed entirely from the world of human meaning. In all of these works, animal metaphor becomes a central trope for moving language towards the non-conceptual, and for rethinking the ways in which the categories of species, and the human and nonhuman, have been defined. Before discussing the works themselves, however, a brief, and necessarily selective sketch of the social role of metaphor may be in order.

IV. Animal and Metaphor

In the conventional understanding, as discussed in Chapter One, metaphor expresses a “carrying over” (from the combination of the Greek words μετά (meta) for “between” and φέρω (phero) for “to carry”) of one framework of conceptual meaning to another. It occurs between two supposedly distinct orders of being, such as the animal and the human or the natural and the mechanical. The metaphor itself is a conceptual relation between two terms. We see this in I. A. Richards’ now-canonical formula, in which the metaphor is broken into two distinct parts based on a strict subject-object relation: the tenor is the subject to which metaphorical attributes are assigned and the vehicle is the object whose attributes are transferred to the subject.

This formula is part of a larger tradition of thought in Western philosophy, in which the metaphor is conceived as a passage from the sensuous to the ideal. In his Lectures on Aesthetics (1835), for example, Hegel considers the formation of metaphor as a narrative of its progression from an originary sensuous content to the abstract concept (or “spiritual sphere”):

Metaphor has its principal application in linguistic expressions which in this connection we may treat under the following aspects:

a) In the first place, every language already contains a mass of metaphors. They arise from the fact that a word which originally signifies only something sensuous is carried over into the spiritual sphere. Fassen, begreifen [to grasp, to apprehend], and many words, to speak generally, which relate to knowing, have in respect of their literal meaning a purely sensuous content, which then is lost and exchanged for a spiritual meaning, the original sense being sensuous, the second spiritual.

b) But gradually the metaphorical element in the use of such a word disappears and by custom the word changes from a metaphorical to a literal expression, because owing to readiness to grasp in the image only the meaning, image and meaning are no longer distinguished, and the image directly affords only the abstract meaning itself instead of a concrete picture. If, for example, we are to take begreifen in a spiritual sense, then it does not occur to us at all to think of a perceptible grasping by the hand. In living languages, the difference between actual metaphors and words already reduced by usage to literal expressions is easily established; whereas in dead languages this is difficult because mere etymology cannot decide on the matter in the last resort. The question does not depend on the first origin of a word or on linguistic development generally; on the contrary, the question above all is whether a word which looks entirely pictorial, deceptive, and illustrative has not already, in the life of the language, lost this its...

---

first sensuous meaning, and the memory of it, in the course of its use in a spiritual sense and been sublimated [aufgehoben] into a spiritual meaning.\(^{74}\) Hegel’s account presupposes a singular, sensuous origin for the metaphor, and its entry into the realm of descriptive language is conditioned by its sublimation of this origin into idealist universality, as concept. The metaphor can belong either as a concrete particularity, bound inextricably to a sensuous origin that can only be represented in terms of absence or negativity (the concrete materiality which language has to disavow in order to function as a universal designating medium), or as a universalized concept, abstracted into a “spiritual meaning” extensive enough to serve as a literal descriptor of phenomena removed from the circumstances of the metaphor’s sensuous origin.

A more contemporary example is Donald Davidson’s account of metaphor in “What Metaphors Mean” (which can be read as an analytic philosophical approach to the same dynamic outlined by Hegel). For Davidson, metaphor bears two primary, yet seemingly paradoxical, properties. The first is a radical indeterminacy of content, despite the metaphor not saying “anything beyond its literal meaning”; the effect of metaphor is to make us notice something that we did not notice before, but this is never a limited or “finite” process.\(^{75}\) As Davidson explains,

[T]here is no limit to what a metaphor calls to our attention, and much of what we are caused to notice is not propositional in nature. When we try to say what a metaphor “means,” we soon realize there is no end to what we want to mention. If someone draws his finger along a coastline on a map, or mentions the beauty and deftness of a line in a Picasso etching, how many things are drawn to your attention? You might list a great many, but you could not finish since the idea of finishing would have no clear application.\(^{76}\) This limitless production of meaning coexists with the tendency of metaphors to “die” by becoming integrated with language in a way that makes the content of metaphorical production identical with a literal description of the object:

> Once upon a time . . . rivers and bottles did not, as they do now, literally have mouths. . . . When “mouth” applied only metaphorically to bottles, the application made the hearer notice a likeness between animal and bottle openings. . . . Once one has the present use of the word, with literal application to bottles, there is nothing left to notice. There is no similarity to seek because it consists simply in being referred to by the same word.\(^{77}\)

As in Hegel, there is a passage from sensuous origin to idealized concept, albeit one fraught with peril, for the integration of metaphor into language also marks its death. For example, Franz Kafka literalizes this notion of the “death” of metaphor in *The Metamorphosis*, when Gregor’s Samsa’s death coincides with the housekeeper’s use of a “dead” metaphor to describe his corpse: “Look for yourselves, it’s croaked; it’s lying there, totally dead!” [Sehen Sie nur mal an, es ist krepiert; da liegt es, ganz und gar krepiert!].\(^{78}\) The housekeeper twice employs the disrespectful and colloquial verb *kreipieren*, meaning “to die,” often “to die a miserable death,” but also translated metaphorically as “to croak.”


\(^{75}\) Davidson, 210

\(^{76}\) ibid, 223.

\(^{77}\) ibid, 215.

This is in place of the more neutral verb *sterben* (to die) and the more specific *verenden*, which has the same meaning but is used primarily for the death of animals. It is difficult to isolate the metaphorical usage of the word from the literal one in Kafka’s prose, though perhaps this is the point: the metaphorical has become the literal at the very moment when the life expires from Gregor. Stanley Corngold’s translation cleverly employs a “dead” metaphor to illustrate this point: “it’s lying there, dead as a doornail!” The passage of the metaphor, and Gregor, into the “spiritual sphere” is made complete.

Gregor’s life is the life of a metaphor, but a metaphor that disturbs the order of traditional language because it does not belong either as a “sensuous content” (in Hegel’s formation) or a literalized metaphor (or concept), and therefore must “die” through integration into symbolic language for the narration to assume a neutral frame of reference. The effect of this integration (or integration by way of expiation) begins with the following phrase after Gregor’s death: “The couple Mr. and Mrs. Samsa sat up in their marriage bed,” which departs from the traumatic narrative uncertainty pervading the majority of the novella by adopting a neutral perspective in which the family unit is unified again. In Gregor Samsa the metaphor comes to life as a body, but this gives him a body without legible form whose actions are not subject to the command of the mind: his metaphorization thus coincides with his animalization.

As this example of *The Metamorphosis* shows, the metaphorization of animals in literature allows us a way to think animal agency in ways that often become obscured in conventional language. Like the metaphor, the animal is available to discourse through the same binary constraints: we know the “animal” in language as either a stable product of a singular origin (as “substance” that is never completely separate from the environment from which it emerged) or as a concept (the “animal sign,” a visual or textual representation of an animal that serves as a locus for the transmission of meaning). Our understanding of the animal as substance, or as an element of its originary environment, takes place in two distinct but related forms. In the first form, the animal is a protrusion of nature into the world of humanity/culture, a common motif in nature writing, as we saw in the example from Leopold’s *A Sand County Almanac*. In the second form, the animal is material, a kind of pure substance which is “rendered” into meat, fur, animal byproduct, the general substance that capitalism develops into exchange value, as described in Shukin’s *Animal Capital*. Like the metaphor, the animal in both of these forms is inextricably bound to its origins and its concrete particularity: it is either a creature of its environment that does nothing more than reflect its natural origin back to the anthropic speculum, or a purely sensuous body that can be slaughtered, ripped into parts, and reassembled for its use-value.

The other structural position in which the animal is available to us is as a sign, an immaterial locus for the transmission of meaning or knowledge, often employed to stand in for concepts such as naturalness, instinct, innocence, the primacy of drives, and pure affect. According to Nicole Shukin,

Animal signs function fetishistically in both Marxian and psychoanalytic senses; that is, they endow the historical products of social labor to which they are articulated with an appearance of innate, spontaneous being, and they serve as powerful substitutes or “partial objects” filling in for a lost object of desire or originary wholeness that never did or can exist, save phantasmatically.\(^79\)

\(^79\) ibid., 3.
Because the animal sign communicates on a level (ostensibly) prior to discourse, it can be employed to suggest, or to create, some version of naturalness or primacy abstracted (or sublimated) from the historical conditions which have constructed the animal sign as such. Shukin’s first example in *Animal Capital* is a Maclean’s (a famous weekly Canadian magazine) advertisement from 2002 which depicts a anatomically cross-sectioned figure of a beaver above the title, “Canada. In Depth.” This beaver is meant to represent an ideal of national unity cemented around “stereotypes of the fur trade nostalgically evoking a bygone era of colonial contact and commerce, an era of imagined authenticity and fullness of nature prior to the ostensible ‘vanishing’ of aboriginal and animal populations,” a unity achieved by foreclosing the violence proper to its formation, including the violence of the fur trade itself. “Ostensibly free of any (human) linguistic, ethnic, racial, class, or gender traits,” Shukin writes, “the indigenous species is put into symbolic circulation as a neutral signifier incapable, it would seem, of communicating political bias against any individual or constituency in Canada.”

Animal life, in this instance and others, is converted from a living body within a set of historical, material, and environmental networks into an abstract and exchangeable signifier that functions, in an anthropocentric order of representation, as a neutral, empty point through which meanings can be transmitted without the need for discursive intervention.

A scene from Sergei Eisenstein’s 1925 film *Strike* offers another illustration of this mode of passage from material body to idealized sign. A pet store is the secret meeting place for a group of counter-revolutionary spies employed by the local authorities to infiltrate the group of striking factory workers. We see the image of a fox before it dissolves into the figure of a human face belonging to one of the spies, followed by a title reading “The Fox.” A similar process happens with “The Owl,” “The Monkey,” and “The Bulldog,” as an owl’s, monkey’s, and bulldog’s face, respectively, dissolve into the faces of spies. Freed from materiality, the animal bodies are now sublimated into figurations, or concepts: the cunning fox, the wise owl, the deceptive monkey – associations for which no narrative intervention (aside from a title which transfers the name from animal to spy) is needed because the viewer has already been culturally primed to understand this meaning.

But outside of these two structural positions exist the lives of animals, which are neither protrusions of a stable, singular environment or abstract signs that transmit meaning. In his study of environmental aesthetics, *Ecology Without Nature*, Timothy Morton hints at the complications involved in reducing animals to protrusions from “nature” (one of the many tropes of ecocritical/ecomimetic prose and nature writing generally with which he takes issue):

> [T]he idea of “our” environment becomes especially tricky when it starts to slither, swim, and lurch towards us. The beings known as animals hover at the corner of the separation of inside and outside generated by the idea of world as a self-contained system. Strangely enough, thinking in terms of “world” often excludes animals—beings who actually live there.

Making animals into mute figures on a landscape we visually consume is a way of silencing or excluding them, denying them a capacity for response, for returning our

---

80 ibid., 4.
consumptive gaze. This is one consequence of ecomimetic prose (exemplified in the works of Aldo Leopold, David Abram, and Lawrence Buell, among others), which, according to Morton, attempts to dissolve the boundaries between human and nature by immersing the author within the natural world that he then reproduces in writing. However, its practical effect is to reinforce the separation between man and nature by setting up nature as an endlessly consumable (because self-replenishing) object (“an object ‘over there’. . . . a pristine wilderness beyond all trace of human contact,” as Morton has it) for the viewing subject, for the enjoyment or enlightenment of an implied reader. Morton writes,

Nature writing relieves us of the obligation to encounter non-identity, sometimes called “nature,” the “more-than-human,” the “nonhuman.” Like a daytime chat show, its mode is one of avoidance rather than escapism. The aesthetic, artful, contrived quality of writing is downplayed. Nature writing seems to be a sheer rendering of the real, just as “reality TV” appears to be real. . . .

This encounter with non-identity is at the heart of Morton’s reworking of the concept of “nature” as less a harmonious and endlessly reproductive whole free from the self-destructive tendencies of human beings and more a non-contiguous, non-singular, non-harmonious field of finite forces, energies, and drives within which we (our actions, behaviors, choices) are fully implicated and from which we are inseparable. Animals pose an implicit challenge to the consumerist separation between the mute, passive environment and the spectating, consuming, and enjoying subject precisely because they skirt the borders of the binary positions (inside/outside, self/other, subject/object) by which we structure the terms of our separation from the natural world. This is the position that metaphors allow animals to occupy in language. Through metaphor, animals are capable of introducing a form of otherness into the field of representation that estranges nature from itself, that troubles any simplistic idea of the ability to reproduce an environment through writing or any other form of representation purged of the distortions that arise through the process of mediation; they denature, as it were, the terms of the separation between inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion upon which anthropocentric conceptions of both nature and representational language are grounded.

This is why rethinking the animal metaphor, or the animal-in-metaphor, is also an ethical endeavor. In undertaking this task, I am conscious of Rob Nixon’s criticism, in Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor (2011), of the academic tendency in the Humanities to “uncouple[ ]” literary studies from “worldly concern,” and thus to produce a historically indifferent formalism that treats the study of aesthetics as the literary scholar’s definitive calling. Questions of social change and power become projected onto questions of form so that formal categories such as rupture, irony, and bricolage assume an inflated agency through what Anne McClintock has called a “fetishism of form.”

What Nixon calls for, and what I am attempting to produce in this study, is for literary scholars to link our study of “vital aesthetic concerns” directly to modes of “socioenvironmental transformation” in the present, as opposed to getting wrapped up in what McClintock calls the “formalist fetishism” that turns “social relations between

82 ibid., 125.
humans’ into “structural relations between forms” and “project[s] historical agency onto formal abstractions that are anthropomorphized and given a life of their own.” In my analysis, I am interested in how our uses of metaphor, and our way of reading and analyzing animal metaphor in literary and other texts, feed directly into sociocultural (and socioenvironmental) reality. The uncritical and unexamined usage of animal metaphor produces a reified, abstractable notion of animality that strips it of its capacity to be the object of violence, or the locus of specific historical, material, social, and cultural pressures, and makes it susceptible to exchange, as an immaterial agent for the transmission of meaning or knowledge.

In other words, the more we think of animals as exchangeable and infinitely reproducible and transmittable figures in discourse, the more we cement the conception of animals as immaterially exchangeable things incapable of bearing the material weight of histories of violence, expropriation, slaughter, abuse, and mistreatment. And the more we assume that stable meanings can be produced out of animal bodies through metaphor, the more we cement a particular attitude of appropriability towards animals: the logic that animals are the material out of which we can make meaning within our world is the same implicit logic that informs contemporary biocapitalism’s appropriation of animal bodies and their genetic material for the profit of human beings. In a more general sense, our usage of metaphors influences our attitudes towards the world in which we live and produces practical consequences within that world, as Lawrence Buell points out in the Introduction to *The Environmental Imagination*:

One obvious sense in which [the influence of the creative arts on scientific investigation and public policy] is true is that we live our lives by metaphors that have come to seem deceptively transparent through long usage. Take for instance “progress,” literally a procession or transit, which the democratic and industrial revolutions of the nineteenth century taught us to equate with “improvement,” first with political liberalization and then with technological development. Whenever we use this word, unless we put it in quotation marks, we reinforce the assumption of a link between “technology” and the “good” and the assumption that continuous technological proliferation is inevitable and proper. How we imagine a thing, true or false, affects our conduct towards it, the conduct of nations as well as persons.

Examining the metaphors we use to map our social, historical, and material realities, goes hand in hand with examining our attitudes towards those realities, a point which seems particularly salient with the animal metaphor, which is one of the primary modes in which we conceptualize animals and our conceive our relationship to them.

Countering recent claims concerning the inevitably anthropocentric terms of the animal metaphor, I want to argue that the animal metaphor is a powerful mode of

---

84 ibid., p. 30-1. McClintock qtd. in 30-1.
86 Susan McHugh, for example, claims in *Animal Stories: Narrating Across Species Lines* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), that the animal metaphor is “a strong defense for poetics in the service of anthropocentrism” and a trope that is “unable to bear animal agency” (7-8). In *Stalking the Subject: Modernism and the Animal* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), Carrie Rohman similarly dismisses metaphor as an anthropocentric tool of comparison. These claims are preceded by Deleuze and Guattari’s claim in *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), where they argue that
making animal otherness present in language. Metaphors that do not obey the logic of confinement to either a purely sensuous origin or an abstract conceptual endpoint can help us think animal agency in the same terms: the animal in language as that which cannot be reduced either to pure material or pure concept. Metaphor, in other words, can “carry” animal otherness into language in a way that does not dispel it into one or another of these binary positions. The use of metaphor in literary language can make this troubling, amorphous, and indeterminate mode of existence legible. In a more general sense, metaphor in literary language can denature the contours of the conceptual frames within which we conceive animals.

Jacques Derrida’s “White Mythology: Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy,” provides one of the most persuasive philosophical arguments for the indeterminacy of the metaphor, or more specifically, its lack of both a stable origin and endpoint. Contrary to the notion that there is some “primitive and concrete meaning that lurks yet present under the abstract and new interpretations [of metaphor],” Derrida argues, metaphors in philosophical, scientific, economic, anthropological, and rhetorical usage embody a tangled and involuted “historical and theoretical distribution” with “limits, interior divisions, and gaps” that remain to be unearthed and analyzed. 87 Far from following a singular, undifferentiated movement from concretion to abstraction, metaphors become sedimented into meanings over time in a way that is not linearly or chronologically consistent. Metaphors, then, are not traceable to some singular origin from which they have became abstracted, but carry within them traces of the different time periods, places, texts, situations, etc., which have coagulated into the metaphor’s present form and which “speak” whenever this metaphor is uttered.

To illustrate this point, Derrida cites Georges Canguilhem’s discussion, in La connaissance de la vie, of the application of the metaphor “cell” to conceptualize the most basic biological unit of existence upon its discovery by Robert Hooke. Even though the metaphor of “the cell” to describe this biological entity seems self-evident and identical with its object, “cell” also relates to the “cells of wax filled with honey” of beehives. So instead of thinking of this relationship between metaphor and object as one of “complete . . . correspondence,” we might wonder whether “in consciously borrowing from the beehive the term cell in order to designate the element of the living organism, the human mind has not also borrowed from the hive, almost unconsciously, the notion of the cooperative work of which the honeycomb is a product.” 88 Instead of conceiving of some metalinguistic position from which metaphors are knowable, mappable, and delineable tropes which serve a designating function, Derrida urges us to consider the possibility that the structure of metaphysical thought and the forms in which we conceive our environment have themselves been conditioned by the metaphors we employ, consciously or unconsciously, and the hidden histories we import into the present whenever we speak these metaphors.

However, metaphorical usage depends, in many ways, on the repression of these hidden histories, these complex, sedimented narratives floating beneath the surface of our utterance. To use a metaphor, we have to abstract away its material particulars, so that it

88 Canguilhem qtd. in ibid., 261.
becomes identical with the representation of some ideal or concept and carries no traces of its historical usage. The metaphor, in other words, lives as long as it is allowed to signify from the position of otherness (or to inject non-identity or unfamiliarity into our standard modes of representation) and dies once it is subsumed into the function of representation, as Davidson argues. The metaphor, we might say, exists in a condition of potentiality: as long as it can stave off the entrance into representational language that would mark its death, it creates a theoretically limitless space (or medium) of production in which a vast multiplicity of meanings can be attached, detached, and reattached to words, and in which new realities can be produced. Metaphysical language subsumes metaphorical production under the functional role of representation, and makes the metaphor into one among many modes of representing (rather than producing) a world or environment.

There is no “concept” of metaphor, or no assignable metavalue to the operation of metaphor, that is not itself involved in the play of metaphor, as Derrida argues: metaphor is always exceeding its functional role as exemplum, and contesting the foundational metaphysical separation between (theoretical) concept and (metaphorical) instance. As metaphor is constructed out of the same philosophemes upon which the edifice of metaphysics is founded, it is impossible for metaphor to be dominated by some transcendent term within metaphysical discourse. There is no way, Derrida writes, “to dominate philosophical metaphorics as such, from the exterior, by using a concept of metaphor which remains a philosophical product.” In this sense, Nietzsche’s critique of the process of metaphorization in “On Truth and Lying in an Non-Moral Sense” is only half-right. For Nietzsche, to create a metaphor is substitute a conceptual reality for “the essence of things,” or the unknown and “mysterious X of the thing in itself,” as discussed earlier. The origin of the metaphor is in a “nervous stimulus, first transposed onto an image,” and then “imitated by a sound.” So, “[w]e believe that when we speak of trees, colours, snow, and flowers, we have knowledge of the things themselves, and yet we possess only metaphors of things which in no way correspond to the original entities.”

Nietzsche is right about the “mysterious” and undiscoverable origins of the metaphor, but his equation of the metaphor exclusively with the concept (metaphor as an abstraction that has lost “all sensuous vigour”) misses the other traumatic dimension of metaphor I have been outlining: its capacity to express from another origin and to resist and denature the framework of meaning into which it has been placed. Metaphor is both internal to metaphysics and unassimilable to it; it is brought into being to fill the void in language which simple designation or nomination cannot fill, but nonetheless persists as an alien element within a discourse which tries in vain to dominate its functioning. The metaphor’s ambivalent origins always have the potential to introduce some other temporality, some other mode of relationality, some hitherto unknown series of connotations into the symbolic order that tries to determine its role, all of which complicate and make uneasy its passage into abstraction/conceptualization.

In a similar vein to Derrida, Hans Blumenberg argues, in Shipwreck Without Spectator: Paradigm for a Metaphor of Existence, that metaphors that appear in “objective

---

88 “White Mythology,” p. 228.
90 ibid., 877.
91 ibid., 878.
contexts” (i.e., scientific, anthropological, or philosophical use) function first as “disturbance[s]” of the “normal harmony” of these contexts. Metaphor “interposes a heterogenous element that points towards a different context from the actual one,” and thus it is the work of “consciousness” to “repair” the “disharmonies” introduced into discourse by metaphors, to “find its way back to the harmony of the data as data of one experience.” In Blumenberg’s analysis, metaphor does not lead forward to the formation of concepts (as Nietzsche argues), but backwards to the “wealth of its heritage” in the “life-world” from which it emerged. Metaphor “suspend[s]” both “the taken-for-granted character of the present” and “expectations of [objective] meaning.” Metaphor thus belongs to the realm of the “nonconceptual,” since it is precisely what cannot be reduced to the contexts in which it is meant to serve, but persistently denatures them from within. In my analysis, metaphor becomes a way of making animal agency legible in language without subordinating it to the concept, but letting it persist within language in its unknowability.

V. Indeterminacy and Immanence

Literary language, to varying degrees, can open up the space for this contingent, anti-teleological interplay between environment and organism, substance and form, origin and endpoint, entelechy and actuality. One of Gilles Deleuze’s major contributions to philosophy is the motif of a “zone of indeterminacy” within which species, lifeforms, metaphors, and figurative imaginings of animals exist. This concept offers us a way to think animality outside of the rigid, anthropocentrically determined boundaries of form and function and to conceive metaphor as less a linguistic trope which merely embodies the process whereby the concrete is immaterialized or idealized than an expressive entity (or being, lifeform) with a continually evolving set of relations to its environment or “world.” Understood in this sense, the term animal metaphor encapsulates a near-infinite series of relations between metaphor and animal, metaphor and world, animal and environment, animal and man, animal and other animal, etc. The term “animal metaphor,” in other words, is itself a metaphor for a certain kind of open-ended relationality in which otherness is allowed to persist in its otherness without being domesticated to the terms of a dominant, stable, and self-evident entity, or used as a locus for the production of meaning for this dominant entity. In the system propounded in Deleuze’s later philosophy, this indeterminateness of category, form, and function is produced when we cease to think of the world as divisible into higher and lower forms of life and instead as an immense “plane of immanence” (a Spinozist concept) upon which all life is “situated” and in which all formal distinctions between entities (or “bodies”) cease to exist. Deleuze writes:

What is involved is no longer the affirmation of a single substance, but rather the laying out of a common plane of immanence on which all bodies, all minds, and all individuals are situated. This plane of immanence or consistency is a plan, but

---

94 ibid., p. 82
95 ibid., p. 85
96 ibid., p. 86
97 ibid., p. 81
not in the sense of a mental design, a project, a program; it is a plan in the geometric sense: a section, an intersection, a diagram.\textsuperscript{98}

[A] body is defined by relations of motion and rest, of slowness and speed between particles. That is, it is not defined by a form or by functions. Global form, specific form, and organic functions depend on relations of speed and slowness. Even the development of a form, the course of development of relations of a form, depends on these relations, and not the reverse. The important thing is to understand life, each living individuality, not as a form, or a development of form, but as a complex relation between differential velocities, between deceleration and acceleration of particles. A composition of speeds and slownesses on a plane of immanence.\textsuperscript{99}

In \textit{A Thousand Plateaus}, written with Felix Guattari, Deleuze expands on this definition to note that the “plane of immanence” or “plane of nature” applies equally to the inanimate and the animate, the artificial and the natural” and “is like the intersection of all forms, the machine of all functions; its dimensions, however, increase with those of the multiplicities of individualities it cuts across” (\textit{ATP} 254).

Upon this “plane” emerges an endless series of “becomings-” (becoming-animal, becoming-woman, becoming-imperceptible, etc.), defined not as “a correspondence between relations” or “a resemblance, an imitation, or, at the limit, an identification,” not a “progress[ion] or regress[ion] along a series” or “an evolution by descent and filiation,” and, finally, not something that “occur[s] in the imagination” as “dream or phantasy.”\textsuperscript{100} Instead, becoming occurs when an entity enters into affective composition with another entity, adopting its relations of “movement and rest, speed and slowness”; becoming concerns “alliances” between one or more entities, in which the involved entities are snatched up from subjective states and put into symbiotic play. This is known as “involution” as opposed to “evolution” or filiation,” a process which “form[s] a block [of becoming] that runs its own line ‘between’ the terms in play and beneath assignable relations” (\textit{ATP} 239). Becoming does not involve formally defined “subjects,” since the definition of the entities involved in every becoming are in perpetual flux: “[A] becoming lacks a subject distinct from itself; but also . . . has no term, since its term in turn exists only as taken up in another becoming of which it is the subject, and which coexists, forms a block with the first” (\textit{ATP} 238).

This conception of radical a-subjectivity and formlessness springs from Spinoza’s \textit{Ethics} (1677), which Deleuze explicitly draws on and which will be central to my own argument (particularly in Chapters Two and Three) as a work which lays the ground for a radical reformation of the body and a reconfiguration of metaphor. In the \textit{Ethics}, Spinoza claims that bodies are fundamentally unknowable entities that human beings do not really (or “adequately”) possess.\textsuperscript{101} Bodies “are distinguished from one another by reason of motion and rest, speed and slowness, and not by reason of substance” (\textit{E II}, L1).

\textsuperscript{99} ibid, 123.
\textsuperscript{100} ibid., 238.
The human body, the bodies of animals, and the bodies of the natural world (trees, fruits, plants, etc.), are all part of the same substance, even though they may have different affective and physical modes of interaction with an environment. In its most radical interpretation, there is no fundamental divide between human and non-human bodies. Both are encompassed within the broad category of nature (as “modes” of a single, monistic “substance”), and neither has ontological primacy over the other since both are equally subject to the laws of nature.

According to Spinoza, each body has relations of motion and rest by which it is defined. The human body, for example, is constituted by its “parts” which “communicate their motions to one another in a certain fixed proportion.” As such, “things which bring it about that the parts of the human body preserve the same proportion of motion and rest to one another, preserve the human body’s form.” The human body dies “when its parts are so disposed that they acquire a different proportion of motion and rest to one another,” during which it takes on a different form (E IV, P39 Dem; P39 S). Eating and drinking involve the ingestion of an external body that brings about the preservation of the proportion of motion and rest proper to the human body. To take poison, however, is to ingest a body that alters this proportional relationship, perhaps permanently, in the case of death. The human body, then, can be “affected in many ways, and . . . can affect external bodies in many ways” (E IV, P39 Dem). But lest we determine this to be a purely mechanistic understanding of life, Spinoza emphasizes our radical ignorance of these relations, our ignorance of the body’s capacities, whether we are thinking of human bodies or the external bodies around us. “The mind does not know the body,” Spinoza writes, and “no one has yet determined what the body can do” (E II, P23 Dem; III, P2 S). Neither does the mind “involve adequate knowledge of the parts composing the human body,”102 as these parts are “highly composite individuals, whose parts can be separated from the human body and communicate their motions to other bodies in another manner” (E II, P24 Dem).

Finally, individuals do not control the relations of motion and rest, speed and slowness proper to their bodies, since these relations are in turn determined by the motion of other bodies: “A body which moves or is at rest must be determined to motion or rest by another body, which has also been determined to motion or rest by another, and that again by another, and so on, to infinity” (E II, L3). What we come away with, then, is a conceptualization of the body (and of bodies, of life generally) that is radically indeterminate and not subject to the rule of the mind. “Form” is merely the momentary reification of a body’s particular patterns of motion and rest, speed and slowness, and can change depending on a variety of external circumstances.103

For Deleuze, this radical indeterminacy of form is what defines the plane of immanence, which is populated not by subjects and objects, but by “affects,” which, in

---

102 In Spinoza’s original, P24 of Part II reads: “Mens humana partium corpus humanum componentium adaequatam cognitionem non involvit” (“The human mind does not involve adequate knowledge of the parts composing the human body”). Cognitionem can also be translated as “recognition,” in which case the sense of the mind’s separation from the body shifts towards active alienation and estrangement (the mind cannot control the body because it cannot recognize this strange object, this alien body, to which it finds itself attached) as opposed to mere ignorance about the body and its functions.

103 Spinoza’s philosophy of the body/mind relation will be explored in further detail in Chapter Two, in which I discuss Joyce’s and Flaubert’s use of Spinozist principles to create a version of animal metaphor in the “Circe” episode of Ulysses and in La tentation de saint Antoine, respectively.
Spinoza’s definition, are “affections of the body by which the body’s power of acting is increased or diminished, aided or restrained, and at the same time, the ideas of these affections,” and as “an action; otherwise a passion” (E III, D3). Affects are impersonal forces, capacities, or intensities that circulate between subjective entities but do not relate to and cannot be categorized according to the “molar” distinctions of form and function or species and genus. Deleuze writes:

We know nothing about a body until we know what it can do, in other words, what its affects are, how they can or cannot enter into composition with other affects, with the affects of another body, either to destroy that body or to be destroyed by it, either to exchange actions and passions with it or to join with it in composing a more powerful body. (ATP 257)

In their persistent and contagious patterns of circulation, affects sweep up entities in relations of becoming (or “blocks of becoming”) and eliminate subjective distinctions between these entities. To think of a body or entity in terms of affects simply means that we define it by its relationships of speed and slowness, movement and rest, velocity and suspension, and look to how the patterns of movement (or “haecceity”) of one entity enter into relations with those of another entity on the plane of immanence and make subjective distinctions impossible to locate. Deleuze continues:

The rat and the man are in no way the same thing, but Being expresses them both in a single meaning in a language that is no longer that of words, in a matter that is no longer that of forms, in an affectability that is no longer that of subjects. Unnatural Participation. But the plane of composition, the plane of Nature, is precisely for participations of this kind, and continually makes and unmakes their assemblages, employing every artifice. (ATP 258)

Locating all entities upon a single plane of immanence in which they are susceptible to the affective power of every other entity levels the formal divide between human being and animal. For Deleuze, “becomings-animal” have the particular effect of “uproot[ing] one from humanity, if only for an instant, making one scrape at one’s bread like a rodent or giving one the yellow eyes of a feline.” Writing becomes the primary sphere in which these becomings-animal occur:

If the writer is a sorcerer, it is because writing is a becoming, writing is traversed by strange becomings that are not becomings-writer, but becomings-rat, becomings-insect, becomings-wolf, etc. . . . Writers are sorcerers because they experience the animal as the only population before which they are responsible in principle. (ATP 240)

For Deleuze, writing can produce a powerful anti-anthropocentric gesture, one which complicates what Derrida names as the philosophical “common sense” of conceiving animals in terms of the “general singular” that sets an abyssal “limit” between all human and nonhuman life, because writing makes fungible the boundaries between species and exposes the formerly transcendent human being to the affective contagion of all lifeforms and entities. And for Deleuze, writing has the power to disarticulate and reassemble or reshape these boundaries primarily because it is never reducible to a mere representation, to a map, plan, abstraction, or “image” of some prior existing reality. Instead, writing is

---

in continual dialogue with its world; it is continually producing and being produced by its world. As this well-worn passage from the Introduction to *A Thousand Plateaus* reads:

[C]ontrary to a deeply rooted belief, the book is not an image of the world. It forms a rhizome with the world, there is an a parallel evolution of the book and the world: the book assures the deterritorialization of the world, but the world effects a reterritorialization of the book, which in turn deterritorializes itself in the world (if it is capable, if it can) (*ATP* 11).

Writing, then, is not solely a making-abstract of the world (even if this is one of its most commonly employed functions), but a productive force in dialogue and engagement with a given reality or state of affairs. The rhetorical trope around which the preceding analysis is centered is, of course, the metaphor (and the other forms of figurative comparison absorbed by it, such as simile, metonymy, and synecdoche) which is a particular modality of expression which does not merely represent but produces a relation (or “becoming”) between two distinct entities. In the previous section, I discussed how metaphor is subordinated to a referential function in metaphysical language even though there is no metaconcept of metaphor distinct from the “plane” upon which metaphor operates. The freeing of metaphor from this function in particular modes of writing, however, allows it to intervene directly in the reality of the textually produced “world” or “worlds” in which it is conjured.

This cursory summation of the becoming-animal in Deleuze’s thought and its background in Spinozist philosophy has hopefully provided a clearer understanding of how animal metaphor might be said to exist and express from an indeterminate space outside of the binary poles of sensuousness and abstraction. The plane of immanence allows us to think animals apart from the notions of either a form of substance inseparable from an environment, or an idealized concept uninvolved in the physical world; it allows us to conceive the rhetorical or literary production of the animal as a potential mode of putting animality (as an eternally fluctuating mode of being) in negotiation, symbiosis, and mutual transformation with the world. Metaphor becomes a source of production which transforms and metamorphoses its terms, sets both of them into motion as opposed to simply representing or reproducing a socially determined relationship between them. However, the productive agency of this indeterminate signifying position is always under risk of subsumption by another plane, the “plane of organization or development.” The plane of organization, according to Deleuze,

is constantly working away at the plane of consistency, always trying to plug the lines of flight, stop or interrupt the movements of deterritorialization, weigh them down, restratify them, reconstitute forms and subjects in a dimension of depth. Conversely, the plane of consistency is constantly extricating itself from the plane of organization, causing particles to spin off the strata, scrambling forms by dint of speed or slowness, breaking down functions by means of assemblages or microassemblages. (*ATP* 270)

The “agents” of this plane of organization are entities like the family or the State, which attempt to fix the endless play of becoming and affective relations by replacing them with subjective and formal boundaries and relations of filiation, hierarchy, and descent. At the same time, becoming needs to be restrained by these “molar” entities if it is not to proceed into pure “abolition or death,” or towards “a regression to the undifferentiated”; Deleuze and Guattari insist that it is “necessary to retain a minimum of strata, a minimum of
forms and functions, a minimal subject from which to extract materials, affects, and assemblages” (*ATP* 270).

Similarly, as discussed in the previous section, metaphors are always at risk of being subsumed by metaphysical language, of becoming an abstracted literal description of something, a purely functional trope as opposed to a productive force, and animals are always at risk of being reduced to functional elements within the anthropocentric order of representation, in which they are and can only ever be either 1) material extensions of an environment or material substance/byproduct or 2) purely abstract figures in discourse, or animal “signs,” fixed into singular, culturally determined meanings which are taken as natural. But without a minimal degree of “stratification” or classification by which to recognize animal metaphors within given categories of understanding, by which to translate the affective and expressive power of animal metaphor into established discourses, the productive articulations of animal metaphor would become a pure negation of all discourses and therefore legible within none (as we saw in the third, “sublimating” mode of dispelling nonhuman otherness).

Existence within the zone of indeterminacy is therefore always a precarious matter, but it is where I want to locate the productive power of the animal metaphor: outside the discursive poles of material origin and immaterial abstraction and beneath the subjective states of form, function, and definition. Expression which emanates from the zone of indeterminacy has to be made available to discourse in a form which retains its otherness and non-identity without domesticating it to the limitations of a particular discourse; in other words, its non-conformity to and negation of all dominant forms of representation must be made discursively legible in some way. This is where the literary text is essential, as it is able to occupy this zone of indeterminacy or plane of immanence and employ it as the ground from which its productive expressions of animal metaphor might emerge.

To express a thing in a literary text is not merely to make it “abstract” or to set it apart from sociohistorical reality, since there are different levels of abstraction within literary expression in continual interchange with one another. Whereas La Fontaine, in the *Fables*, only represents this movement from materiality to figurality as uni-directional and teleological, subsequent accounts of animality, and particularly those of Darwin, Carroll, and writers of the Modernist period, will complicate the terms of this movement, disarticulating it from an anthropocentric frame of reference and writing it as an ambivalent and untraceable process, one that occurs in multiple and various forms, in which stable material origins for the animal are impossible to locate, and in which the metaphorization of animals troubles the categories (sensuous/abstract, material/immaterial, virtual/historical) through which we have historically conceptualized animals. In these texts, writing has the power to disassemble the formal divisions and breakages constitutive of the human-animal divide and the organization of life generally, and as such, to produce “animality” as a force that operates within but at the same time denatures anthropic representational logic.

VI. From Darwin to Margaret Atwood

My textual focus in this study will be on literature that employs language to experiment upon the fracture between human and nonhuman life and to place the two in mutually transformative encounters that complicate the dominant understandings of
subjectivity and conceptual identity by which anthropos is constructed. Metaphor becomes a locus of transformation and interpermeation between human and animal bodies that leaves neither intact as a self-consistent conceptual identity. If a particular model of human reason, intention, and agency is embedded in the structures of language itself, the literature of Darwin, Carroll, Flaubert, Joyce, Woolf, and Kafka offers a way to uproot this model and lay the groundwork for a new, non-anthropocentric literary language. These works may not seem to offer much in terms of direct political engagement with the problem of the increasing subjugation and industrialized slaughter of nonhuman life in the nineteenth- and twentieth-centuries, but what I hope to show is that the project of undermining anthropocentrism and the representational logic by which it sustains itself is fundamental to a posthumanist ethics of being-with the world, being genuinely entangled with it, as opposed to being a sovereign and self-possessed subject in a world of mute nonhuman others.

In many ways, this study begins with Charles Darwin’s *The Origin of Species* (1859), which opened up the space for the traumatic decentering of the human from its position of exceptionality and for a literature that refused to take the human as its starting point and as the transcendent zero-vantage point through which nonhuman otherness was to be comprehended. I use the term “immanent metaphor” to describe Darwin’s transformation of metaphor from a knowledge-producing tool to a way of registering the monstrosity produced by the fraught modes of relation and interaction between multiple species over successive generations. I read Lewis Carroll’s *Alice* books as literary engagements with Darwinism that explore the untraceable and fractured “origins” of the human form in the context of Alice’s wanderings, and her loss of the proper name and formal dimensions by which the human being has been conceptually separated from the nonhuman. In Carroll’s works, the anthropocentric order depends upon the expulsion of foreign, “non-sensical” units of linguistic meaning and of nonhuman otherness that cannot be reduced to conceptual difference (the difference of “species”). The *Alice* books stage the overwhelming of representational logic and anthropocentrism by nonsensical elements that denature the making of linguistic meaning and by animals that refuse and refute the role of “dead” metaphor to which they are assigned, as in the Queen’s croquet game, through the act of uncontrolled and unmanageable bodily torsion that disobeys the structural logic by which the “game” is played. The consistency of symbolic meaning depends on the codification (or conceptualization) of arbitrary difference, a system which Carroll is all too eager to implode by confronting it with the irrationality and contingency upon which it is founded.

Chapter Two reads the “Circe” episode of Joyce’s *Ulysses* together with Flaubert’s *The Temptation of Saint Anthony* (a work with which it places itself in persistent dialogue) as texts that reject the definition of humanity in terms of bodily and spiritual self-possession and instead place the human amidst the “substance” (with this term’s indelible Spinozist associations) from which it has emerged. Characters are stripped of agency, a circumstance Joyce associates with “locomotor ataxia,” or the loss of bodily control brought on by syphilitic infection. This self-dispossession of the body, of all bodies, opens up the space for human-animal encounters that denature the formal consistency of each. The summit of the Thebaid and Dublin’s Red Light District are both locales where the world is opened up to the monstrosity and non-conformity of what conceptual language can no longer manage. The textual world is no longer the world of author and character, but one in which human subjectivity and its representational logic are dissolved into a sea
of nonhuman otherness. In what Joyce calls the “intricate zoological design” of “Circe,” human bodies become inseparable from the animal metaphors that are used to describe them (language and bodies are immanent with one another, and do not uphold the conceptual separation between figurative and literal description), and in The Temptation, the procession of fantastical, aformal creatures in Saint Anthony’s hallucinations is precisely what makes the genealogy, lineage, descent, and origin of the human form impossible to locate. In this way, the very possibility of both a transcendent narrative position and a transcendent human subject that would not be materially affected, if not determined, by the world it perceives is called into question. The anthropocentrism that enables animal slaughter (as depicted in the “Lestrygonians” episode of Ulysses) is fraught with this expression of the unrestrained interpermeation of human and animal bodies that calls into question our definitions of what bodies are and undermines the founding logic and ontological validity of species difference.

Whereas Carroll, Flaubert, and Joyce celebrate the collapse of species difference in the abstract, Kafka and Woolf take a more strictly materialist position towards expressing animal life in language. Kafka uses his short fiction to envision what nonhuman modes of thought, modes that challenge the universality of human consciousness as a means of representation, might look like in language, while Woolf views the dissolution into animal otherness as a prelude to the end of the human species. In “The Burrow” and “Investigations of a Dog,” the subject of Chapter Three, Kafka theorizes a world in which the human self is completely irrelevant and meaningless vis-à-vis these stories’ nonhuman narrators, who are constantly subjected to the threat of death that arises not from human predation, but from an unknowable agency of the external world within which human agency is encompassed. Kafka’s animal characters, I argue, have their own modes of thinking that are not quite human, but not reducible to the instinctual drives of animals; instead, their modes of thinking lie somewhere between the conceptual and non-conceptual, and as such, challenge the traditional separation between human (conceptual) and animal (non-conceptual) mental faculties. This attempt to undermine the distinction between conceptual and non-conceptual thought has its precedence in the evolutionary biology of Kafka’s time, particularly in the heavily Darwinist- and Spinozist-influenced work of German biologist Ernst Haeckel, whom Kafka studied from his teenage years on. Haeckel’s The Riddle of the Universe (Die Welträtsel) of 1899 discusses the unity of the world and all of its life in monistic “substance” divided into “modes” that interact in unpredictable and ungovernable ways with their environment, the role of consciousness as a physiological entity or “natural phenomenon” found in humans, animals, and arguably in plants and even at the level of the individual cell, and the human embryo as a collective receptacle for hereditary traces from various aquatic and vertebrate animal ancestors.\footnote{The Riddle of the Universe (London: FQ Legacy Books, 2010), p. 139.} In the two animal stories I analyze, Kafka’s writing bears unflinching witness to the inability of representational logic to express the nature of nonhuman life (“The Burrow”), and to the rootedness of conceptual thinking in the body from which thought originates, and by extension, the contingency of all conceptual formations (“Investigations of a Dog”). Form is de-ontologized in these stories, and subjectivity reconceived as the capacity for “disturbance” that bodies stripped of conceptual or formal identity can inflict upon the sociosymbolic order.
Like Kafka, Woolf is also interested in the problem of expressing the dissolution of human agency into the nonhuman world, and in imagining ways in which linguistic experimentation can be made to express the world from a nonhuman (non-anthropocentric) perspective, as I argue in Chapter Four. The difference from Kafka is that Woolf, in her unfinished novel *Between the Acts* (1941), situates the problem of understanding how nonhuman beings might inhabit the earth, and the problem of attempting to imagine the world from a nonhuman perspective, in the immediate context of global crisis, as the outbreak of World War II threatens to bring an actual end to human existence in certain parts of the world. Human history falters under the weight of “geological time” as the individuality and subjectivity of the characters begin to dissolve into the primordial otherness from which they sprang, an otherness brought into the present through the animals of Miss La Trobe’s stage pageant. Animals thus become both the matrices through which “pre-history” is glimpsed (though not comprehended), and bearers of an eternal present tense, or (in Miss La Trobe’s words) the irrepres- sible “reality” of “present time” that makes all artifice or “illusion” impossible, in which the entire audience is enveloped during the final Act of the pageant. Past and present, prehistory and human history, materiality and conceptuality, origin and finality, animal and human coagulate into one another. Language veers towards inarticulacy and becomes both unable to produce personal or social identity and unable to serve as a neutral medium of designation as it becomes more and more integrated with the objects it designates and muddled in the materiality it tries to disavow. For Woolf, however, the potential end of the human species is not just a source of anxiety, but also marks an opening to the emergence of nonhuman lifeforms with new, nonconceptual modes of apprehension. Through metaphors that register the collapse of human civilization into its primordial origins and experimental attempts to inscribe nonhuman expression, Woolf’s final novel envisions the flourishing of “life without measure” in the absence of humans.

But while Kafka’s animal stories and Woolf’s novel still maintain a vestige or minimal degree of subjectivity against the absolute erasure of the category of the human, later twentieth- and twenty-first-century novelists will take this leveling of human-animal split as the basis of a new ethical stance. In Chapter Five, I analyze the contemporary turn towards emphasizing the practical ethicality of human-animal relations through modes of representation that, out of the desire to make the abjection and social exclusion of animals visible, return to some of the conventions of realist representation. Novels like Benjamin Hale’s *The Evolution of Bruno Littlemore* (2009) and Margaret Atwood’s *MaddAddam* trilogy (2003-2013) demand a renewed and direct concern with animal rights, sustainable consumption, environmental stewardship, and opposition to the regime of multinational capitalism/biocapitalism over and against the formal experimentation upon the frame of representation itself that an earlier generation prized. In my view, this is a noble and necessary aim, but one that only proceeds symptomatically: without an immanent critique of the language by which anthropocentrism reproduces itself as ideology, these and other contemporary literary works still maintain an understanding of *anthropos* in terms of a sovereign subjectivity capable of representing and conceptualizing nonhuman otherness (as that which must be safeguarded, protected, and managed from human instrumentalization). In other words, they miss the traumatic dimension of the encounter with nonhuman otherness and how this encounter denatures the representational modes that *anthropos* has assigned itself to make otherness knowable and familiar. I integrate this discussion with an exploration of three contemporary poetic
works, Anne Waldman’s *Manatee/Humanity* (2009), Jody Gladding’s *Translations from Bark Beetle* (2014), and Sawako Nakayasu’s *The Ants* (2014), that attempt to incorporate linguistic experimentation into a rethinking of human-animal relations and environmental ethics generally.

By way of concluding this introduction, let us look at two brief excerpts, the first from one of Spinoza’s letters to Hugo Boxel in 1674, the second a Kafka story titled “The Trees” (1912). The first:

I believe that a triangle, if it could speak, would say that God is eminently triangular, and a circle that God’s nature is eminently circular. In this way, each would ascribe to God its own attributes, assuming itself to be like God and regarding all else as ill-formed.  

The second:

For we are like tree trunks in the snow. In appearance [Scheinbar] they lie smoothly and the smallest prod should be enough to push them away. No, it can’t be done, for they are are firmly wedded to the ground. But see, even that is only appearance [Scheinbar].

So the human can only think God, and Nature (a term synonymous with “God” in Spinoza’s *Ethics*, as God exists only within the natural order of things) in terms of the same representational logic by which it defines itself. Speech, reason, and the capacity for abstract thought thus become the contingent traits that mark one’s inclusion or exclusion from the symbolic order, and nonhuman otherness is manageable by either including it in the symbolic order as sub-conceptual substance or as anthropic concept, or elevating it above the symbolic order as a sublime signifier removed from the world of humans. But the ground of representation and conceptual identity upon which humanity stakes its self-definition and names as its origin, as we see in the Kafka story, is only ever appearance, a concept, and concepts have no ground unto themselves, or a ground that is not the grounding in another concept (for us as humans to be “like” the tree trunks is itself an appearance or concept). To place human existence within an immanent field, a site that is only ever the site of the ungrounding of the individual and the concept, in which selfhood is never distinct from the bodies it expels from itself in order to become itself, in which nonhuman otherness exists in all its traumatic singularity, as non-conceptual otherness, and in which representation is materially imbricated with its content, is both the beginnings of a posthumanist ethics and a gesture towards and response to Linnaeus’s injunction to “know thyself.”

---


Forms are plastic, names cannot determine the essence of living things, and ceaselessly changing organisms cannot be conceived as elements within a signifying system. Each of these precepts of evolutionary theory finds itself reflected in Lewis Carroll’s *Alice* books: Alice grows bigger and smaller without relation to any notion of a normal or standard size, fantastic organisms such as the “bread-and-butterfly” are generated out of metaphors and puns on taxonomic names, and the Queen’s croquet game cannot function properly because the animals do not fulfill their prescribed roles. Lewis Carroll familiarized himself thoroughly with Darwinian theory in the years leading up to his composition of *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) and *Through the Looking-Glass* (1871). He “read widely on the subject of evolution,”108 possessing “nineteen books on Darwin, his theories and his critics,”9109 as well as five works of social evolutionist Herbert Spencer, including *First Principles* (1862), which put Darwinian theory in dialogue with religious understandings of the world.110 As a lecturer in mathematics at Christchurch Oxford from 1855 to 1881, he was present during the famous 1860 debate at Oxford University Museum between Thomas Henry Huxley, one of the main proponents of evolutionary theory in the late nineteenth century, and Bishop of Oxford William Wilberforce, one of its major critics.111 Carroll’s response to the “Darwinian trauma”112 was a fraught one: he was a devout Christian (he took deacon’s orders in 1861, though he eventually refused the priesthood) who was also scornful of humanity’s self-importance and deeply suspicious of the belief in a world made in the image of man and according to the dictates of human reason, attitudes which his anti-vivisection writings in the 1870s would make more explicit.113 While Carroll may have publicly dissociated himself from the camp of

109 John W. Smith, p. 8
110 Cohen, p. 350; Stern, p. 17.
111 Dodgson’s diary entries from 1853 to 1863 were unfortunately destroyed after his death, but other documentary evidence points unmistakably to his presence at the debate. Morton Cohen claims that Dodgson “served on the reception committee for the men of science from foreign countries and distant parts of the UK”, making it extremely unlikely that he did not attend it (350). More directly, Jenny Woolf, in *The Mystery of Lewis Carroll*, records that Carroll “paid a considerable sum to attend the seminal debate on evolution between Thomas Huxley and Bishop Wilberforce” on 30 June 1860 (191). Finally, Roger Taylor and Edward Wakeling, in *Lewis Carroll: Photographer*, confirm Dodgson’s attendance at the debate by pointing out that he took several signed and dated photographs of important figures who were present at the debate, including Wilberforce and Huxley, on 30 June 1860 and the previous and subsequent days of the week-long event at Oxford Natural History Museum (41).
112 Freud coined the term “Darwinian trauma” in his 1917 essay “A Difficulty in the Path of Psycho-Analysis” (140).
113 For example, see this excerpt from an anti-vivisection letter written in 1875 to the editor of the *Pall Mall Gazette*, titled “Vivisection as a Sign of the Times,” which blames “man’s” assumed superiority over “the animal worlds” for economic, social, and gender inequality:

The world has seen and tired of the worship of Nature, of Reason, of Humanity; for this nineteenth century has been reserved the development of the most refined religion of all—the worship of Self. For that indeed, is the upshot of it all. The enslavement of his weaker brethren—

“the labour of those who do not enjoy, for the enjoyment of those who do not labour”—the
Darwinists and supposedly atheistic men of science, the *Alice* books and their critique of anthropocentric logic can be read as a mode of engagement with Darwinian theory generally, and *The Origin of Species* in particular. In broad terms, both *Alice* and *The Origin of Species* reorder the world outside of the standard representational confines of human subjectivity and the anthropocentric model of time as ordered, comprehensible, and linear progression. In *The Origin of Species*, the living world is produced in aleatoriness, the result of gradual, unintentional, and untraceable modifications to organisms over “tens of thousands” of generations, and shot through with the monstrous that cannot be encapsulated by conceptual designations. In the *Alice* books, events are detached from a sense of progressive necessity and time becomes endlessly reversible. Here the conflict between the ordered and monstrous takes place upon the terrain of language, where bodies (whether human, animal, vegetal, or inanimate) and words become immanent with one another. Metaphors, puns, and portmanteau words destabilize the distinctions between word and reality, immaterial and material, sound and sense. The anthropocentric logic of representation, as what upholds the form of the (human) subject and the ordering of events into narrative, becomes ungrounded.

Appropriately enough, the manuscript that later developed into *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* was titled *Alice’s Adventures Under Ground* (completed by Carroll in 1863), and this motif of exploring the repressed underside of the dominant order of sense and meaning would inhere in the published *Alice* books. The “Under Ground” is also the place from which to subvert the linearity of time. In Gilles Deleuze’s analysis in *The Logic of Sense*, the *Alice* books detach the “event” from any specific spatio-temporal order: events do not just occur in the present out of the past, but alter the past out of which they emerge as much as the present in which they take place. When Alice “grows” or “shrinks,” it is what Deleuze calls a “pure event” that belongs neither to the past nor the present order of things. There is no stable “Alice-before-growing” and “Alice-after-

---

114 This chapter both builds off of and departs from prior studies of Lewis Carroll’s familiarity with Darwinism, the vast majority of which make suggestive allusions to the impact of Darwin on the writing of the *Alice* books, but do not develop them in much further detail. What is continually missed in these studies is the persistence of Carroll’s engagement with Darwinism, not only on an allegorical level, but as a way of questioning the validity of representational logic itself. William Empson’s classic 1974 essay “The Child as Swain,” collected in *Some Versions of Pastoral*, makes one of the first claims about the influence of Darwinism on the *Alice* books. However, Empson limits his analysis to Alice’s emergence from the “pool of tears” at the beginning of *Alice’s Adventures*, which he reads as “the sea from which life arose,” and argues that Carroll uses the scene to express “the absurdity of Natural Selection.” Donald Rackin, in *Nonsense, Sense, and Meaning*, similarly makes allusory gestures towards the intersection between the *Alice* books and Darwinism, but limits the extent of his analysis to general claims about the collapsed faith in “progress” and “order” amidst nineteenth-century scientific and technological upheavals. Morton Cohen’s 1995 biography minimizes the impact of Darwinism on Carroll, claiming that because Carroll never fully believed in Darwinism, his literary works could brook no significant engagement with evolutionary theory. References to Darwinism or evolutionary theory in the *Alice* books are to be understood primarily as “topical joke[s]” for the Liddell children. Finally, Akira Mizuta Lippit’s *Electric Animal* (2000) makes the general claim that “Carroll’s . . . works show the rapid impact that evolutionary thought had on the literary culture of the period,” but only fleshes this out by recapitulating portions of Empson’s analysis of this theme. See Empson, “The Child as Swain,” *Some Versions of Pastoral* (New York: New Directions, 1974), pp. 254-55; Rackin, *Nonsense, Sense, and Meaning* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1991); Morton Cohen, *Lewis Carroll: A Biography* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995), pp. 350-2; and Akira Mizuta Lippit, *Electric Animal: Towards a Rhetoric of Wildlife* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), pp. 136-38.
growing,” since Alice, after the plunge down the rabbit-hole, never exists within a specific set of spatio-temporal coordinates.115 The fall into the Under Ground, according to Deleuze, also marks the “loss of her proper name” and an end to the “permanence of savoir,” by which the “personal self” is granted an identity rooted in “God and the world in general.”116 This stripping of identity, of time, place, and world from the subject, speaks to the revolutionized contours of the post-Darwinian world, the end of formal consistency, teleological progress, and the transcendent, divinely ordained separation between things. The Alice books, as Donald Rackin points out, take place at a time when “natural moral progress, the sense of unitary, purposeful, God-given order and natural motion” are becoming outmoded ways of thinking about the world (93). Novelistic form, narrative progression, and plot, therefore, are the first casualties of Carroll’s world. As Carroll writes in “Alice on the Stage”: “‘Alice’ and the ‘Looking-Glass’ are made up almost wholly of bits and scraps, single ideas which came of themselves.”117 It is as if the bare elements of plot (Alice’s becoming older at the end of Alice in Wonderland and Alice’s becoming Queen at the end of Through the Looking-Glass) exist only to provide some kind of minimal framework for the profusion of events and becomings that comprise the bulk of the works.

The immanence of human and animal life introduced into popular contemporary discourse by Darwin allowed Carroll to rethink the place of the human in the world, particularly in opposition to the fictions of development and logical edifice upon which it is constructed and by which it is separated from the rest of the living world. The Origin of Species, with its critique of the conceptual reality by which the living world is understood, and its exploration of the irrepressible play of the organic world that anthropocentric logic fails to capture, offers Carroll a ground (or “Under Ground”) from which to unground the dominance of “sense” as the primary structuring category of experience. This ungrounding begins, in my analysis, with Darwin’s and Carroll’s reconceptualization of metaphor from its traditional application as an instrument of knowledge-production to a mode of engagement with the living world’s unknowability, and proceeds to Carroll’s mobilization of Darwinian theory through the expression of “nonsense” in the Alice books.118

115 LOS, p. 3.
116 ibid., p. 5.
117 p. 294.
118 Nonsense generally is a well-worn concept in studies of Lewis Carroll’s work, most of which stem from Elizabeth Sewell’s classic theoretical account, The Field of Nonsense (1952). According to Sewell, what we term “nonsense” is simply “sense” deprived of an established framework of meaning: nonsense is “a carefully limited world, controlled and directed by reason, a construction subject to its own laws,” but its particular order does not correspond with the order of “reality” (Sewell 4-5). Another key text in this regard is Deleuze’s The Logic of Sense (1971), which picks up on the sense/nonsense dichotomy from a slightly different angle. For Deleuze, as for Sewell, nonsense is simply what “says its own sense,” or “produces” its own sense, without recourse to another frame of reference, or a higher authorizing category that would grant it meaning in other words, a name cannot refer to its own class of being, such as “species,” to attain meaning or “sense,” but must refer to a “genus,” the “genus” to a “family,” and so on; a name that attempted to generate meaning without referring to an authorizing category outside of its own class would only produce nonsense (LOS 79, 80). Sense also forms a continuum with nonsense, the latter being pure utterance prior to its fixing into propositional content. In a departure from Sewell, however, Deleuze theorizes “sense” as the arbitrary principle, or “doxa,” by which all propositions and things are granted or denied significance (“sense” then also stands as an analogue to consciousness). In general, Deleuze reads the Alice books as a set of counter-logical and “paradoxical” propositions that fit more or less neatly into his
I. Metaphor and Monstrosity

A passage from *The Origin of Species* reads,
In North America the black bear was seen by Hearne swimming for hours with widely open mouth, thus catching, like a whale, insects in the water. Even in so extreme a case as this, if the supply of insects were constant, and if better adapted competitors did not already exist in the country, I can see no difficulty in a race of bears being rendered, by natural selection, more and more aquatic in their structure and habits, with larger and larger mouths, till a creature was produced as monstrous as a whale.119 (OS 210)

In the first sentence, Darwin makes a comparison between bear and whale based on physical resemblance and shared actions and capacities: some bears are “like” whales insofar as they are large mammals that swim through the water and ingest prey simply by catching it in their open mouths. His comparison foregrounds the fundamental difference between these species, which can resemble or be “like” each other, but cannot become one another, or cannot break the boundary of species that separates them. The two can share certain actions and capacities, but not the same essence.

---

exhaustive critique of the limitations of consciousness and the fractured development of the supposedly ontological categories of sense, logic, and meaning. In a more conservative vein, Francis Huxley’s study of Carroll, *The Raven and the Writing Desk* (1976), argues that nonsense is situated on the “limit” between what can be thought and what is “impossible” to think (10). The ultimate “aim” of nonsense is to work through the “self-contradictions” of language in order “to convert what lies on the other side of the reasonable limit” into understanding. For Huxley, unlike Deleuze, nonsense is “convert[ible]” into sense through the work of consciousness (10). Jean-Jacques Lecercle’s *Philosophy of Nonsense: The intuitions of Victorian nonsense literature* (1994) presents a more historically minded argument than either Sewell’s, Deleuze’s, or Huxley’s. Lecercle reads nonsense as a “conservative-revolutionary genre” that is both “respectful of authority” in terms of its adherence to grammatical rules and structures and “joyously” subversive of these rules the same time (2).

Nonsense thus both “supports the myth of an informative and communicative language and deeply subverts it” (3). For Lecercle, then, the emergence of nonsense as a literary and cultural genre can be traced to the rise of the Victorian school, as “the institution that develops the need for meaning and a reflexive attitude towards language, and channels them in socially acceptable ways” (4). Nonsense texts, primarily those of Carroll and Edward Lear, “provide an imaginary solution to the real contradiction between the urge to capture an ever wider proportion of the population for the purpose of elementary schooling, and the resistance, religious, political, and psychological, that such a cultural upheaval arouses.” In other words, since nonsense texts both support the school’s laws of good grammar and proper behavior, “linguistic and otherwise,” and allow for the imaginary possibility of their subversion, they speak to the cultural conditions brought on by the Victorian education system (4).

My account attempts to integrate the posthumanist theoretical strain of Deleuze’s analysis with the historicizing drive of Lecercle’s. I read nonsense in Sewell’s and Deleuze’s terms as “sense” without established frameworks of meaning or reference and as that which resists integration with the determining force of consciousness. At the same time, I am interested in exploring the *Alice* books beyond their function within Deleuze’s (anti-)philosophical project and, with Lecercle, looking at how Carroll’s writing functions in relation to its historical milieu (even as I try to avoid the somewhat strict determinism of his account, which looks at nonsense primarily as a “by-product” of the educational system). As such, my analysis attempts a link between nonsense, as a consciousness-disabling mode of expression, and the questions of evolutionary theory, anthropocentrism, fictions of development, and subjective identity, that loomed so large in the author’s mind and throughout the 1860s and 70s generally. In other words, I look at how the *Alice* books’ immanent critique of logic through nonsense feeds into Carroll’s critique of the conceptual reality upon which humanity is grounded, and of humanity itself.

119 Darwin actually excised this passage from the second edition of the work, but added it back to subsequent editions, after a number of his detractors cited it as evidence of the absurdity of the proposition that existing species have evolved from remote ancestors instead of being individually created.
But the second sentence overturns this more conventional use of metaphor (or metaphorical comparison, since Darwin technically uses a simile here) completely. Here Darwin surmises that the bear, by the action of natural selection, might become “rendered” into “a creature as monstrous as a whale” over centuries of time (time during which the bears that were most whale-like in their habits of consumption became the most successful in passing on their traits to future generations). This relation between bear and whale is what we might call an immanent metaphor: it employs two terms, bear and whale, but does not leave intact the formal consistency of either. It is not that the species of bear in question will simply evolve into a whale, one entity transmuting into another, but that it will develop into a “monstrous” creature that carries traits of both bear and whale but is reducible to neither. Entities are deprived of essences, of any kind of formal or bodily consistency that is preserved across time, and species come to be defined not by physical traits and characteristics, but by actions and capacities in relation to an environment and to other species (the black bear could only become such a “monstrous” creature in future generations if it had rivers in which to swim and a steady supply of insects to consume). This is opposed to what we might call “conceptual metaphor,” or metaphor that compares two entities by extracting a trait from one and applying it to the other while maintaining the formal separation between them (“he is a sloth”).

Metaphor, in Darwin’s second usage, is not necessarily composed of two distinct terms bearing a passing resemblance or set of resemblances to one another, but of two formless, mobile, and malleable terms in ceaseless interaction with one another, and capable of producing a third, “monstrous” term that cannot be subordinated to either. To make a metaphor is to call into question the formal divisions between things, with the full knowledge that, within the space of comparison, one entity may well, somewhere in the vast span of geological time, take on the physical traits of another, become more like the other than itself, or give rise to a monstrosity that is neither self nor other. Immanent metaphor, then, takes place in a realm governed by non-transcendence, in which the forms of things are ceaselessly fluctuating because their consistency is not guaranteed by some external (transcendent) agency. Both terms act upon, affect, and reshape one another within the immanent field in which they are situated, thus undermining the grounds for species difference and creating new modes of interconnection between living things.

In the Alice books, Alice’s bodily fluctuations bear directly on the question of species and the expression of species through metaphor, as we see when three-inch-high Alice, who finds herself without response to the Caterpillar’s question, “Who are you?”, starts to shrink and grow alternately as she nibbles on the “right-hand” and “left-hand” sides of a mushroom (AAIW 46). Lewis Carroll’s own illustrations for this scene suggest the traumatic dimension of this fluctuation more explicitly than the published Tenniel illustrations (fig. 1). In the first, Alice’s body simply ceases to exist: the shrunken Alice is depicted as a disproportionately large head attached to a pair of shoes, with arms emerging from the bottoms of her cheeks. In Carroll’s illustration of Alice’s growth, we see her head growing directly out of her long stem-shaped neck, which in turn emerges from a patch of shrubbery. Her only “body” in this illustration is the earth itself. In both

120 Carroll’s illustrations are part of the Alice’s Adventures Under Ground manuscript and do not appear in the published versions of the Alice books, which are illustrated by John Tenniel.
Carroll illustrations, the body is completely alienated from the head, invisible and uncontrollable, and made incorporate with the bodies around it (the earth, the trees, etc.). The language of visual representation here shifts into the register of immanence: as in Darwin, metaphors become a mode of breaking down the barriers of species and other forms of transcendent separation between things. In performing this function, metaphors also introduce monstrosity into the supposedly stable order of being: “[A]ll she could see, when she looked down, was an immense length of neck, which seemed to rise like a stalk out of a sea of green leaves that lay far below her” (47). In the space of this metaphorical comparison between neck and stalk, the neck becomes impersonal (“an immense length of neck”) and morphed into something not quite vegetal and not quite human: a monstrous “length” that arises neither from the human body, nor from the ground itself (as a “stalk” would), but from a groundless “sea” of “leaves.” The terms “neck” and “stalk” reshape one another within the space of the metaphor to form something removed from existing orders of bodies. In this sense, Carroll’s characterization of his illustrations as “designs that rebelled against every law of Anatomy or Art” can be taken literally: they oppose bodily form as well as the laws of perspective and proportion (“AOTS,” 294).

A second immanent metaphor here further sets Alice’s bodily composition into confusion. Carroll writes, “As there seemed to be no chance of getting her hands up to her head, she tried to get her head down to them, and was delighted to find that her neck would bend about easily in any direction, like a serpent” (AAIW 47). This serpent simile, however, takes on a new dimension when a nearby pigeon mistakes Alice for an actual serpent. Alice tries to assure her that this is not the case, but her stammers do not satisfy the Pigeon, who asks, “Well! What are you? I can see you’re trying to invent something?” Alice responds, “I—I’m a little girl,” but “rather doubtfully, as she remembered the number of changes she had gone through, that day” (48). Her “invention” collapses, however, when it comes to light that she has eaten eggs in the past, which she justifies by the fact that “little girls eat eggs quite as much as serpents do,” to which the Pigeon replies, “I don’t believe it, but if they do, why, then they’re a kind of serpent: that’s all I can say. . . . You’re looking for eggs. I know that well enough; and what does it matter to me whether you’re a little girl or a serpent” (48). The question of species becomes redefined according to actions and capacities and not by any idea of formal consistency. In this case, “species” is merely an unsatisfactory “invention” that fails to account for the appearance of life from a nonhuman vantage point, such as the Pigeon’s.

This introduction of difference into our understanding of life is exactly what is at stake in Darwin’s use of metaphor in The Origin of Species. This is not difference that can be measured or standardized, and not difference that can be encapsulated by concepts such as “species,” “sub-species,” “varieties,” and “monstrosities”: these are hazy distinctions that imply a homogenously similar degree of difference among organisms, when in reality they merely cover over and supplant the vastly varying degrees of difference between organisms. Within larger genera, in Darwin’s analysis, we define as separate “species” those organisms that would have been defined as “varieties” (implying a smaller degree of difference) if they had existed within a smaller genus. “[T]he amount of difference considered necessary to give to two forms the rank of species is quite indefinite,” Darwin writes, and goes on to tell us:

Certainly no clear line of demarcation has as yet been drawn between species and sub-species—that is, the forms which in the opinion of some naturalists come very near to, but do not quite arrive at the rank of species; or, again, between sub-
species and well-marked varieties, or between lesser varieties and individual differences. These differences blend into each other in an insensible series; and series impresses the mind with the idea of an actual passage. (OS 131, 126)

In the same vein, Darwin writes at the end of Chapter Two of *The Origin of Species*: Varieties have the same general characters as species, for they cannot be distinguished from species,—except, firstly by the discovery of intermediate linking forms, and the occurrence of such links cannot affect the actual characters of the forms which they connect; and except, secondly, by a certain amount of difference, for two forms, if differing very little, are generally ranked as varieties, notwithstanding that intermediate linking forms have not been discovered; but the amount of difference considered necessary to give to two forms the rank of species is quite indefinite. (131)

To say that something is of a certain species does not provide that organism with a proper “identity,” only a working differentiation from other organisms that may share traits with it, a differentiation that is always subject to collapse as the criteria for marking groups of animals as “varieties” or as “species” change.

The construction of species and varieties as categories also results from an inescapable anthropocentric bias on the part of scientists and observers, as Darwin notes:

I have been struck with the fact, that if any animal or plant in a state of nature be highly useful to man, or from any cause closely attract his attention, varieties of it will almost universally be found recorded. These varieties, moreover, will be often ranked by some authors as species. (125-6)

So, if the difference that produces metaphor consists of an “insensible series” that allows for the “actual passage” between conceptual distinctions, then it is our task to reveal what this difference is “in-itself,” in Gilles Deleuze’s terms. Deleuze’s analysis in *Difference and Repetition* (1968) is based on the idea that one of the dominant tendencies in Western philosophy is to erase the real differences between things (or “difference-in-itself”) by sublimating them into conceptual differences, and Darwin’s *Origin of Species* seems to participate in the same general project of affirming difference and variation as forces that inhere within all things and that cannot be adequately encompassed by the conceptual register.

Darwin theorizes these two types of metaphor (what I am calling conceptual and immanent), somewhat messily, in a lengthy passage in Chapter XIII of the *Origin*, “Classification”:

Naturalists frequently speak of the skull as formed of metamorphosed vertebrae: the jaws of crabs as metamorphosed legs; the stamens and pistils of flowers as metamorphosed leaves; but it would in these cases probably be more correct, as Professor Huxley has remarked, to speak of both skull and vertebrae, both jaws and legs, &c.,—as having been metamorphosed, not one from the other, but from some common element. Naturalists, however, use such language in a metaphorical sense: they are far from meaning that during a long course of descent, primordial organs of any kind—vertebrae in one case and legs in the other—have actually been modified into skulls or jaws. Yet so strong is the appearance of a modification of this nature having occurred, that naturalists can hardly avoid employing language having this plain signification. On my view, these terms may be used literally; and the wonderful fact of the jaws, for instance, of a crab retaining numerous characters, which they would probably have
retained through inheritance, if they had really been metamorphosed during a long course of descent from true legs, or from some simple appendage, is explained. (366-7)

What literary scholar Jeff Wallace, in his discussion of this passage, calls an “inconsistency” in Darwin’s use of the word “metamorphosis” as both a “metaphor” and a “plain signification,” I consider a grasping for a more nuanced understanding of metaphorical expression and of difference itself.¹²¹ In this context, the “metaphorical sense” of the Naturalists refers to their use of the word “metamorphosis” as a metaphor to mean an abstract comparison of one thing to another based on resemblance: the jaws of a crab look as if they have metamorphosed from legs, for example. They employ this metaphor without realizing that they are not just making an abstract comparison, but literally describing the growth and development of existing lifeforms from common, but unknown, origins (“from some common element,” or from “primordial organs of any kind”). Vertebrae and skull, legs and jaws, stamens and leaves, then, do not necessarily pre-date one another and do not actualize some prior concept of themselves (as legs, jaws, vertebrae, skulls, etc.), but only come into being through their differentiation from a common element and thus from one another, a differentiation that can easily collapse back into the sameness of the common element over the span of geological time. This precarious differentiation is what we might call the “origin” of species.

In this sense, metaphor is a literal metamorphosis or transformation, but one without a singular direction (legs do not become jaws, nor jaws legs, but both emerge out of a common element) and in which the entities in relation do not have the formal guarantee of self-consistency to fall back upon (the leg is not a leg, the jaw not a jaw, prior to its differentiation from the common element, into which it might one day be absorbed again). The term “metaphor” originates from a combination of the Greek words μετά (meta) for “between” and φέρω (phero) for “to carry”: the “carrying” of one thing into another in metaphor, we might say, is only ever a “carrying between,” without fixed origins and endpoints.

The entire metaphorical apparatus of the Origin of Species is indexed by a single metaphor: this is the “great Tree of Life,” the diagram illustrating the action of natural selection on species in terms of the unpredictable and multidirectional growth of branches on a tree (fig. 2). The vast number of existing species are shown to have developed from a set of hypothetical ancient progenitors, numbered A through L, over the course of “thousands of generations,” each interval of a thousand generations marked by a Roman numeral from I-XIV. It is a metaphor for the irrepressible difference and multiplicity of life that, in itself, has no singular origin and no teleological finality: the Tree of Life persistently exceeds the parameters of the diagram in which it is placed; it signifies only its own signification-in-excess. In other words, it is a metaphor that is overwhelmed by the ceaseless interconnectivity and recombinatory play of what it metaphorizes. All species and lifeforms are branches upon the Tree of Life, but the Tree of Life has no singular origin and its structure continually fluctuates based on the uncontrollable growth of its branches.

The Tree of Life metaphorizes the inadequacy of conceptual comparisons between organisms by which to comprehend the living world, since metaphors based on a

shared identity, physical resemblance, or analogical correspondence presuppose an originary and stable essence for each organism. As Darwin explains,

The affinities of all the beings of the same class have sometimes been represented by a great tree. I believe this simile largely speaks the truth. The green and budding twigs may represent existing species; and those produced during each former year may represent the long succession of extinct species. At each period of growth all the growing twigs have tried to branch out on all sides, and to overtop and kill the surrounding twigs and branches, in the same manner as species and groups of species have tried to overmaster other species in the great battle for life. (OS 176)

As buds give rise by growth to fresh buds, and these, if vigorous, branch out and overtop on all sides many a feeble branch, so by generation I believe it has been with the great Tree of Life, which fills with its dead and broken branches the crust of the earth, and covers the surface with its ever branching and beautiful ramifications. (177)

At no point does Darwin answer, or attempt to answer, the question of the origin of the tree or the precise nature of the ancient progenitors of the current living species. In The Descent of Man (1871), the unknown ancestors of the human race are always known as “ape-like progenitors,” not as a singular and definite form (Darwin does not simply say “ape” because he is uncertain whether humanity descended from a progenitor closer to the family of the gorilla or the chimpanzee): the common “origin” is both indistinct and plural, and there is no transcendent position from which to determine the proper identity of the human race, or of any other existing organism.122 In later instances, Darwin speaks of “the advancement of man from a semi-human condition” and tells us that “man is the co-descendant with other mammals of some unknown and lower form.”123 We know nothing, Darwin implies, of the origin of the Tree of Life, and even less of its finished or completed form, but are only privy to its “surface” effects: the “beautiful ramifications” on the surface of the earth that have not yet been covered over by the weight of history and sedimented into the depths. It is a knowledge-disabling more than a knowledge-producing metaphor, since it only describes the bare aspects of multiplicity, difference, and variation prior to their fixing into (and erasure under) conceptual distinctions: in the last sentence, the noun “branches” becomes transmuted into the verb “branching,” the image that ends the “Natural Selection” chapter, and suggests the continual production of an infinite degree of variation and difference (“ever branching”).

The Tree of Life, then, is a metaphor that consists of the upheaval of conceptual metaphor, and conceptual language, itself. Language cannot contain the signification-in-excess of the ever ramifying Tree of Life, and the concepts of species, genus, and varieties that are meant to adjudicate and standardize the difference between organisms from a metaphysical position are always subject to fluctuation by the organisms themselves and the myriad forms they take over the course of “thousands” or “tens of thousands” of generations under natural selection. Organisms signify from a location somewhere outside the endpoint of the concept (the species) and the origin of the first progenitors, an origin that is not only shrouded but irrevocably lost in the layers of evolutionary and

122 DOM, p. 154
123 DOM, p. 158, 173.
linguistic history. Metaphor, for Darwin, is a mode of reintroducing the force of difference that language, in its nominalist function, covers over or sublimates into conceptual difference. Metaphor injects the monstrous back into metaphysical language; it introduces the trauma of immanence that ungrounds every conceptual designation of what species are and relates language back to the material world with which and through which it has evolved.

But this association of metaphysical language with the material world is not the same as “grounding” it in the material world, because language has no traceable or “definite” origin in this world. Metaphor is a process of persistent ungrounding, but its end result is not to reground metaphysical language in the material particulars from which it emerged (since the “definite origin” of these material particulars, like the heuristic fiction of the primordial progenitor(s), is impossible to trace), but to hold open the space outside of pure materiality and pure conceptuality where all bodies and words co-exist, cohere, and interact. This is the space of immanent metaphor, in which organic forms are made infinitely malleable or “plastic” and in which comparisons between two entities can amalgamate them to form a “monstrous” third beyond the formal nature of either: a bear that swims becomes “as monstrous as a whale” over the course of thousands of generations simply by its continued actualization of certain capacities.

If Darwin’s Tree of Life is the metaphor of metaphor (albeit a metaphor that itself is overwhelmed by the ceaseless interconnectivity and recombinatory play of what it metaphorizes; or a metaphor that only metaphorizes its own sweeping away), it is also a metaphor without ground, based on the fiction or absent origin of a set of progenitors that remain unknown and unknowable to us. As such, it is the immanent metaphor par excellence; it is immanent metaphor itself: the groundless ground upon which immanent metaphors, as modes of connection between two or more living things that do not take into account or leave intact the formal consistency of any of them, come into being. Form itself is a fiction predicated upon an absent origin, a mode of measuring difference that fluctuates based on the action of organisms in time and their persistent introduction of difference that exceeds the demarcations of the formal categories of genus, species, subspecies, and variety.

My analysis thus departs from Gillian Beer’s pathbreaking work *Darwin’s Plots*, in which, she argues, analogy and metaphor are Darwin’s primary methods for both expressing the “multifariousness” of a world no longer governed by the central animating “Idea” of theological design, and for finding a form in which to encapsulate this multifariousness (*DP* 73-4). In her analysis, analogy is based on “discovering structures common to diverse forms” and proceeds in search of a “complete resolution” that will irrevocably unite the two forms as structural parallels to “reveal actual identity” between them (74). Similarly, metaphor functions like hypothesis: metaphors are fictive speculations about a state of affairs that can only be proven true or false, or meaningful or meaningless, in futurity. As such, metaphors, like analogies, take on a fundamentally “narrative” function: their primary role is to breach formerly unexplored terrain as part of a “continuous truth-discovering process” (85). Metaphors are capable of producing new meaning, but this tendency towards “divergence” is checked by the ultimate stabilizing function of metaphor, and what Beer supposes is Darwin’s desire to create “truth” in his writing, defined as a “connection between representation and actuality” (86). “Ideally,” writes Beer, “Darwin would like to restore that which is metaphorically
invoked to complete congruity with the material order, so that imagination is verified physically” (95).

*Darwin’s Plots* assumes that establishing “a stable order” is the great goal of Darwinist thought, that both analogy and metaphor work in the service of cementing a common identity among various forms of life, and that *The Origin of Species*, with all of its emphasis on the unknowability and incomprehensibility of life and the natural world, is meant to serve as a “representation” of empirical reality. In Beer’s words, what Darwin “needs” is “to establish ways in which language may be authenticated by natural order, so that his own discourse and argumentation may be ‘naturalised’, and so moved beyond dispute” (49). What I am arguing, on the contrary, is that Darwin’s *Origin of Species* emphasizes the play of the aleatory, the failure of conceptual form to produce a fixed “identity” between living organisms, and the poverty of the concept, perhaps the fundamental tool of human reason, as a means towards knowledge of the natural world. Additionally, if the natural world is not knowable according to the conventions of human reason and logic and is not a stable, self-evident, and self-defining entity, then it cannot serve as a means of “authentication” or validation for the discourse constructed around it: this has the effect of modeling nature after ideology, as a mode of “naturalizing” and thus placing beyond dispute our own contingent discursive formations and mechanisms of thought.

I hesitate to affirm Beer’s faith in scientific discourse, and the nineteenth-century novelistic form that she claims follows in its wake, as an “authoritative . . . substitute” for the “god-like omnipotence and omniscience open to the theistic narrator” that seeks to convert hypothesis into “truth” (149, 150). In my view, to model metaphor and the novel after scientific hypothesis as a mode of speculatively accessing a calculable notion of the “truth” misses the dimension of Darwinism as a knowledge-disabling mode of thought that calls into question not only the existing concepts by which we comprehend organic life, but also the very capacity of scientific discourse to stand as a representational model of the world. It also aligns both Darwin’s account and the aims of the Victorian novel with a certain model of liberal humanism and teleological progression that seems to elide the more revolutionary upheavals of conceptual language, the logic of representation, and the anthropocentric model of cognition and knowledge-production taking place in *The Origin*.

Darwin’s critique of form, in my analysis, calls for more than just a revaluation of “plot,” which still, after the removal of the theistic grounding for narratorial omniscience in the mid-nineteenth century, implies a knowable, causal, and comprehensible sequence of events by refilling the empty place of theistic omniscience with a new myth of the omniscience-to-come of scientific knowledge. For this reason, the impact of Darwinism is more powerfully registered in those works that reflect on the limitations of “form” itself, in both the literary and biological sense of the word. By these, as I have been suggesting in the present and preceding chapters, I mean works that refuse the assumptions that representation in itself (whether novelistic, poetic, theatrical, artistic, musical, or otherwise) provides a stable means of knowledge about the living world and that bodily form, particularly the form of the human, is something fundamentally stable and comprehensible, whose fluctuations in time and uncontrollable modes of interaction and imbrication with other organic and non-organic bodies do not make its self-definition impossible. Works that do not proceed from these assumptions reject the anchoring points of what Joseph Valente, in another context, calls the “novelistic genre of
reference,” such as individual character, narrative sequence, and human subjectivity, and reject the self-evident concept of the human form as something that marks humans off as agents in relation to a world of nonhuman otherness defined in terms of passivity, if defined at all. They do not attempt to find a form in which reality can be contained, but create a world outside of structural categories, in which metaphors and analogies produce monstrosities that we cannot comprehend, and in which the world is conceived as the result of aleatory forces, pairings, disjunctions, and play.

It is not, finally, that the concept of “narrative” or “plot” needs to be reformulated, but that “narrative” in itself, and the logic of representation, reference, identity, and character upon which it is based, must be confronted with its limits as a mode of containing reality. It is not enough, either, for the novelistic plot to incorporate accident and contingency, since these elements are inevitably subordinated under the omniscience-to-come of scientific knowledge that grounds the referential capacity of the novel. The “form” of the human is no longer something stable and self-evident, and so the “form” of writing that expresses the human can no longer obey its logic of representation. The Origin’s revolutionary upheavals of formal reality, of the body and of genre, and the anthropocentric model of cognition and knowledge-production are precisely, I want to argue, the substance of Carroll’s engagement with evolutionary theory in the Alice books.

II. “A very difficult game indeed”: Evolution in Wonderland

“Get to your places!” shouted the Queen in a voice of thunder, and people began running about in all directions, tumbling up against each other: however, they got settled down in a minute or two, and the game began.

Alice thought she had never seen such a curious croquet-ground in her life: it was all ridges and furrows: the croquet balls were live hedgehogs and the mallets live flamingoes, and the soldiers had to double themselves up and stand on their hands and feet to make the arches. (AAIW 73)

In “The Queen’s Croquet-Ground” chapter of Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland, we have all the elements of evolutionary theory in microcosm: an arbitrarily ridged and furrowed terrain upon which varying species coexist; the formation of organisms as species (balls, mallets) according to certain contingent characteristics; the propulsion of life into motion (via an incomprehensible injunction to order) issued by the voice of an inaccessible, unreasonable, and mindless force (the Queen of Hearts, or Natural Selection); the chaotic interactivity and multi-directional movement among organisms that do not and know not how to adhere to a fixed position or code of behavior; and the persistent threat of extinction by the Queen of Hearts’ arbitrary (and frequent) command, “Off with their heads!” (72). Carroll suggests as much in his description of the Queen in “Alice on the Stage”: “I pictured to myself the Queen of Hearts as a sort of embodiment of ungovernable passion—a blind and aimless Fury” (296). If the Croquet-Ground is the microcosm of a world, it is a world not made in the image of human reason and not driven by intention or “design,” those dogma Darwin spent his life’s work undermining. As with The Origin of Species, the chaos of the Croquet-Ground results from the animals’ incongruity with the conceptual, or with the
linguistic systems of order and classification imposed on them:

The chief difficulty Alice found at first was in managing her flamingo: she succeeded in getting its body tucked away, comfortably enough, under her arm, with its legs hanging down, but generally, just as she had got its neck nicely straightened out, and was going to give the hedgehog a blow with its head, it would twist itself round and look up in her face, with such a puzzled expression that she could not help bursting out laughing; and, when she had got its head down, and was going to begin again, it was very provoking to find that the hedgehog had unrolled itself, and was in the act of crawling away: besides all this, there was generally a ridge or a furrow in the way wherever she wanted to send the hedgehog to, and, as the doubled-up soldiers were always getting up and walking off to other parts of the ground, Alice soon came to the conclusion that it was a very difficult game indeed. (73-4)

While the flamingo is conceived as a mallet, the hedgehog a croquet-ball, the human as an arch, the organisms resist these conceptual designations by simple motion, by asserting the minimal degree of difference that makes them non-functional within the signifying system or the taxonomic order in which they are placed: moving from straightened to twisted neck, rolled to unrolled body, arched to straight back. A hedgehog becomes something other than its designation (as a ball) when it interacts with its environment and with the organisms around it. This is the motion that cannot be incorporated into the game, and that makes order impossible by denaturing the laws of the game from within. Nothing remains what it is; static nouns become transfixed by the twisting, rolling, and arching of verbs. “[Y]ou’ve no idea how confusing it is all the things being alive,” complains Alice (75). This takes place over seconds of the croquet game, seconds which, I am arguing, stand in for thousands of generations of the evolutionary time-scale.

Carroll’s illustration of this scene, which does not appear in the published Alice books, gestures towards the idea of the Croquet-Ground as a crowded, microcosmic world-in-flux (fig. 3). It is centered on the menacing Queen of Hearts, who holds up a (real) croquet mallet with which she threatens a plaintive-looking hedgehog on the left edge of the illustration, the only one among several not rolled into a ball. In the midst of a terrain overpopulated with hedgehogs, the Queen marks the destructive and “blind” force that acts indiscriminately as a check on the hyper-productivity of organisms. In the “Struggle for Existence” chapter of The Origin of Species, Darwin writes concerning nature’s necessary destructive side: “Lighten any check, mitigate the destruction ever so little, and the number of the species will almost instantaneously increase to any amount. The face of Nature may be compared to a yielding surface, with ten thousand sharp wedges packed close together and driven inwards by incessant blows, sometimes one wedge being struck, and then another with greater force” (64). The specter of violence in the scene reflects nature’s potentially violent modes of regulating, by destroying, populations of species: the hedgehog runs the literal risk of being “driven inwards by incessant blows,” if we take the mallet-wielding Queen as an embodiment of Darwin’s metaphor of nature’s destructivity.

Between the Queen and the hedgehog we see a wildly flapping, shrieking flamingo that a courtesan attempts to hold in place by grasping its legs. This flamingo, on the left side of the illustration, is mirrored by another one of its species flailing in the top right corner as a matronly figure clutches it to her breast. Constraint into concept is impossible in this image, since the direction of movement and modes of interaction between beings
and among orders of being are unpredictable. The game has no logical outcome that would accord with its own internal laws, but is continually remade by the aleatory actions of its players. Alice stands mute, passive, and helpless, unable to intervene into the chaos and powerless to prevent it. This crowded, chaotic vision of disorderly bodies in motion expresses both the immanence of humans and animals, as organisms subject to evolutionary pressures and deprived of bodily agency, and the incongruity of the world with the calculable, logical processes and systems of order (whether linguistic, biological, mathematical, or other) by which we have conceived it.

III. Body-words and the Failure of Order

This inability to impose order on the chaotic movement of life is mapped onto Carroll’s use of nonsensical language in the Alice books. The pun and the portmanteau word, particularly, introduce monstrosity into the order of conceptual language and dismantle the anthropocentric order of meaning that divides speaking and reasoning humans from mute, instinctual animals. Puns portend the collapse of conceptual distinctions by which reality is upheld and the remaking of transcendent language as agglutinative material. Portmanteau words concatenate multiple words but strip them of any referential sense or grounding in metaphysical meaning, so that words encounter other words in the absence of a stable, self-evident identity to fall back upon.

In Chapter IX, “The Mock Turtle’s Story,” we encounter two imaginary creatures, the Mock Turtle and the Gryphon, who speak entirely in puns and whose very existence throws into question both the ordered composition of bodies and the ordered constitution of words. In Greek mythology, the Gryphon is an amalgamation of an eagle and lion, and in the peculiar etymology lesson given by the Queen, the Mock Turtle is “the thing Mock Turtle Soup is made from” (AAIW 81), Mock Turtle Soup being “Calf’s head dressed with sauces and condiments so as to resemble turtle.”124 Carroll’s Mock Turtle, then, emerges directly out of language and into the physical world; he is the embodiment of a pun who can only reflect his fractured origins through the act of punning, or employing a mode of language that collapses the distinction between intended meaning and derived counter-meaning. The most immediate pun is the word “mock,” which suggests that the Mock Turtle is both a confused culinary product come to life and the imitation, or “mockery,” of a real turtle, in the process confounding the distinction between original and copy, between real and linguistically produced turtle: as the sobbing Mock Turtle claims, “Once, I was a real Turtle” (AAIW 83).125 His schoolmaster was “an Old Turtle” whom they used to call “Tortoise,” because, as he explains to Alice, “he taught us” (83). Teacher and tortoise, and soon reading/“reeling,” writing/“writhing,” Latin/“Laughing” and Greek/“Grief,” and lessons/“lessens” among others, collapse into one another and disrupt the networks of meaning upon which language is based. As Derek Attridge writes in his analysis of puns in Finnegans Wake,

As speakers, we construct our sentences in such a way as to eradicate any possible ambiguities, and as hearers, we assume single meanings in the sentences we

---

124 OED: “Mock turtle.”
125 Also confounded here is the hierarchical separation between the Gryphon’s ancient mythological origin and the Mock Turtle’s playful, pun-made origin: neither is privileged over the other and two monstrous forms coalesce into one another in Carroll’s illustration, as I discuss below.
interpret. The pun, however, is not just an ambiguity that has crept into an utterance unawares, to embarrass or amuse before being dismissed; it is ambiguity unashamed of itself, and this is what makes it a scandal and not just an inconvenience. In place of a context designed to suppress latent ambiguity, the pun is the product of a context deliberately constructed to enforce an ambiguity, to render impossible the choice between meanings, to leave the reader or hearer endlessly oscillating in semantic space.

I would qualify Attridge’s conception of the pun’s ambiguity by noting that the pun always runs the risk not only of being “dismissed” after the intended semantic meaning is comprehended, but also of enshrining the “real” semantic meaning even more forcefully, now that the divergent possibility posed by the pun has been met, overcome, and expiated from the intended meaning. The binary structures of original/artificial, intended/accidental, etc., then become all the more firmly upheld. To make the ambiguity of the pun inhere, however, Carroll employs puns as pieces of embodied language that disrupt the abstract transmission of knowledge: each mode of knowing is countered by a form of bodily motion (reading/“reeling,” writing/“writhing”) or bodily affection (Latin/“Laughing,” Greek/“Grief”) that the Mock Turtle has apparently been taught. As the punning language of the Mock Turtle collapses the abstract sense and material sound of words into one another, language itself (as a mode of abstract knowledge transmission) becomes conflated with the material counterpart of what it purports to represent, or “be master” over, in Humpty Dumpty’s words. The distinction between concepts and the embodied, concrete particulars that concepts try to contain comes to be undermined, or “lessened,” as Carroll’s puns implode the binary logic that structures this separation. The pun undermines both terms as self-consistent units of knowledge and estranges semantic space from itself. “Meaning,” then, encompasses more than just “semantic meaning” or “sense,” but neither is it reducible to its material referent. As Jonathan Culler proposes in his analysis of punning in “The Call of the Phoneme,” “Puns present us with a model of language as phonemes or letters combining in various ways to evoke prior meaning and to produce effects of meaning with a looseness, unpredictability, [and] excessiveness . . . that cannot but disrupt the model of language as nomenclature” (22). The end result of Carroll’s puns in this chapter is to place us not only outside semantic space, but in a space outside of both carnal and linguistic reality, or what carnal and linguistic modes of knowing can contain.

The binary logic that Carroll implodes with this series of puns is not just the logic of sense and sound, abstraction and materiality, but also the logic of separation between human and nonhuman life. Carroll couples this ambiguity of linguistic identity with a fundamental ambiguity at the core of bodily composition, which we see in his illustrations. In the Tenniel illustrations, the Mock Turtle and Gryphon are amalgamations of multiple forms, but these forms maintain the conceptual distinctions of “calf,” “turtle,” “eagle,” and “lion” (fig. 4). Carroll’s illustrations (fig. 5) give us creatures without concept, monstrous floating forms open-throated in agony, figuratively deprived of formal consistency and literally detached from the ground itself. The flying Mock Turtle throws wide its pitchfork-shaped arms and legs in every direction, the series of stony flaps that make up the shell bending backwards with the “writhing” of its body. The creatures appear to be melded into one another: the Mock Turtle’s head seems to

126 Attridge, p. 141.
grow organically from the side of the Gryphon’s body while the Gryphon’s tail snakes into the shell of the Mock Turtle at the point where the Mock Turtle’s body bends in half, emerging out of an opening on the other side. These are illusions of depth, of course, but all sense of proportion is thrown out of order when we look to the dwarfed Alice, who measures not even a tenth of creatures’ size in this image but has to sit to make herself eye-level with them in the next (fig. 6). Here the creatures threaten to squash the tiny Alice as soon as they make their way back down to earth.

For Carroll, the “animal” generally is not a legible, manageable, and receptive entity inscribed into human discourse, but a monster that corresponds to no existing “species” and responds to no name; in other words, Carroll’s animals refuse both bodily form and linguistic order, and by so doing reveal the contingency of anthropocentric logic. The language Alice believed to be a neutral medium of designation becomes shot through with carnality, with bodily action (“reeling and writhing”) and disfigured bodies that refuse to operate within the limits of sense or of species. The only resolution to the Mock Turtle’s dilemma, as a creature of linguistic fabrication as well as a “real Turtle,” poised between the orders of the semantic and the material, is to dissolve (metaphorically) into the primordial “soup” from which it emerged, a soup that is both “Mock Turtle Soup” (in *Alice’s Adventures Under Ground*) and real “Turtle Soup” (in *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*). The Mock Turtle sings a song with the “melancholy” refrain of “Beau—ootiful Soo—oop!/ Beau—ootiful Soo—oop!/ Soo—oop of the e—e—evening,/ Beautiful, beauti—FUL Soup!”, in the process both doubling semantic meaning over upon itself (by breaking the words at the middle) and converting semantic meaning into bare sound (the detached syllables “eau,” “oo,” “ee,” etc.) (**AAIW** 93). The song urges the consumption of Mock Turtle/Turtle Soup (“Who would not give all else for two p/ennyworth only of beautiful Soup?”), and by extension marks the self-dissolution of the Mock Turtle into the confused linguistic and material origins out of which all life, human and nonhuman alike, emerges (94).

If the pun produces an ambiguity between the linguistic and the physical, abstract name and bodily referent, semantic order and the order of species, the portmanteau word produces an ambiguity in the interactions of words with one another. The portmanteau word does not amalgamate words and bodies (such as the girl-serpent mutation we explored earlier), but concatenates multiple words into a single word. This has the effect of estranging words from their own origins, or de-ontologizing the process by which meaning is attached to words. The portmanteau word, then, strips words of semantic meaning and denatures the relationship between word/thing and meaning/sense by multiplying the valences through which this relationship occurs. We can couple the portmanteau’s concatenation of multiple words unmoored from semantic security with the analysis of immanent metaphor as that which strips organisms of stable and essential form or identity as it puts them into interaction with one another. Words, in this way, are biologized, and made akin to Darwin’s idea of species as fluctuating categories without the transcendental guarantee of preservation over time. In a portmanteau word such as “slithy,” for example, there is no way to isolate any of the words “slither,” “lithe,” “slide,” “slimy,” and “sly,” and the various senses that adhere to each word along with the ways that these words relate to one other, out of the larger space of the portmanteau word. In immanent metaphor, as we saw, the formal definitions of organisms, such as “bear” and “whale,” were thrown into confusion by the possibility of a creature formed over the course of centuries of natural selection that would exist as a monstrous amalgamation of
many existing organisms (a creature both bear-like and “monstrous as a whale”). Evolutionary theory produces monstrous amalgamations of organisms by undermining (or “ramifying,” in Darwin’s words) the one-to-one correspondence between organism and form, just as the portmanteau word produces nonsensical concatenations of words by stripping words of their grounding in stable meanings.

This, I want to argue, is what is at stake for Carroll in the portmanteau word: a redefinition of life away from the stability of plan, progress, and development, and towards the aleatory, disjunctive, and non-teleological. We can read Carroll’s Jabberwock as a “portmanteau organism,” as the messy coagulation of non-conceptual, nonsensical, inhuman language and bodily form in the body of a single monstrous creature (fig. 7). According to Carroll, the term “Jabberwock” condenses both “jabber,” as “excited and volatile discussion” and “woce,” or “to bear fruit,” to make what Carroll refers to as “the result of much excited and volatile discussion” (qtd. in Cohen 443). To “jabber” is also “to talk rapidly and indistinctly or unintelligibly; to speak volubly and with little sense; to chatter, gabbles, prattle,” “to utter inarticulate sounds rapidly and volubly; to chatter, as monkeys, birds, etc.,” and “to speak (a foreign language), with the implication that it is unintelligible to the hearer.” The origins of words are buried beneath endless layers of animal and human “chatter.” The Jabberwock then expresses the uncontrollable growth of nonsense words and the production of unintelligible sound and syllables that denature human networks of meaning from within. As such, it stands as the index (albeit an ominous one) of both linguistic and bodily possibility in the Alice books, much like that other “fruit-bearing” and “ever branching” figure we discussed earlier, Darwin’s Tree of Life, which was the index of all metaphorical possibility in The Origin of Species and of which Carroll must have been at least minimally aware from his studies of Darwinism. The Jabberwock, finally, is also what must be slain in order for language to resume a designating function, without collapsing into the inarticulacy of the cry. “Woce” is also an archaic word for “voice,” with its etymology in the Latin word voce ("voice"), which would make the Jabberwock a creature in whom the “voice,” that supposedly objective, and exclusively human-owned, indicator of individual and biological identity, is continually threatened by the indiscriminate “jabber” that we humans attempt to disavow as “nonsense.”

We can read “Jabberwocky” and its constitutive unknowability and refusal of formal consistency (of the word, body, and meaning alike) as an expression of the post-Darwinian landscape, in which the present state of things has been produced from an illegible set of primogenitors and thus bears an uneasy relationship to its history and pre-

---

127 This is from Carroll’s letter of 3 February, 1888 to the editors of the magazine Jabberwock.
128 OED: “Jabber.”
129 This conflict between order and nonsense plays out on a smaller scale with the “Jubjub bird” of the second stanza of “Jabberwocky” (“Beware the Jubjub bird, and shun/ The frumious Bandersnatch!” [TTLG 132]). While “Jubjub” has an origin in the Latin word jubé, meaning “to order” as well as to “command,” “decree,” or “appoint,” the term “Jubjub” condenses several incommensurate bodily and linguistic frames of reference that resist any imposition of “order” upon them: a “jub” is the “jog of a trotting horse” and “a thrust or knock with something blunt,” while its cognate “juba” is both “a foliage of trees” and the “mane” of a horse or lion (OED). Vegetal forms (“foliage”), animal forms (bird, horse mane), and types of movement (the jog of a horse, a thrust or knock) coalesce into a single organism that escapes stable definition as a species and whose name parodies the imperative to order by morphing jubé into the nonsense word “Jubjub.”
history. Consider Alice’s response to the poem: “Somehow it seems to fill my head with ideas—only I don’t know exactly what they are! However, somebody killed something: that’s clear, at any rate” (TTLG 134). The evolutionary terrain is vast and endlessly productive, but what it produces is unknowable in itself, in its particular spatio-temporal realization; instead, its products are only comprehensible through the hollowed-out categories of “[s]omehow,” “somebody,” and “something,” which cover over the unknown particulars of the processes by which organisms have come to be what they are. Because bodies, species, and words in the present have been formed out of untraceable biological and philological dynamics in the past, the present is something alien to itself. If words, as I have been suggesting, have achieved a stable form and fixed set of meanings in the present, this is only ever the result of excluding millions of other possibilities that did not become actualized in its present form. This process runs parallel to the course of evolutionary change, in which countless mutations and adaptations within a single species occur ceaselessly throughout the lifespan of the species, but only a tiny fraction are taken up by Natural Selection and thus inhere in its present form. “Jabberwocky” speaks to our ignorance of the conditions by which words, bodies, and species have become themselves by differentiating themselves from other words, bodies, and species, and from the “beautiful soup” of the undifferentiated and non-conceptual from which they have emerged. Its portmanteau words create new modes of relation between words stripped of their supposedly ontological grounding in sense, in the process moving our understanding of language and life away from the model of progressive development and towards the forces of accident and aleatory play. We can think of the Jabberwock as the source of all portmanteau and nonsense expression in the Alice books: here is the “fruit-bearing” organism, the metaphor of hyper-production of words, bodies, and senses that multiply beyond the grasp of what can be counted, mapped, and ordered by anthropic sense, and the body-word by which all bodily and linguistic contortion in the Alice books is indexed.

But the Jabberwocky is beheaded, Alice leaves childhood, words settle into articulacy, and Wonderland thrives only in the recesses of “Memory’s mystic band.” All the temporal, spatial, and bodily unbinding we have experienced in the Alice books seems bound to the time of childhood, for Carroll, a temporality in which the ceaseless fluctuation of bodies, things, and words is not only a possible but a desirable state of affairs. To become individuated, which seems almost synonymous with growing older for Carroll, is to accept foreclosure from the world and its multifarious and transformative possibilities as a condition of being in it, as Alice does when she becomes a mother-figure at the end of Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland and becomes Queen in Through the Looking-Glass. As the latter she is empowered over her surroundings and capable not only of reducing them to order, but also of making her version of order correspond with a version of objective reality: “The Red Queen made no resistance whatever: only her face grew very small, and her eyes got large and green: and still, as Alice went on shaking her, she kept on growing shorter—and fatter—and softer—and rounder—and—[.] —and it really was a kitten after all” (TTLG 235-6). This fixation into form and resolution into stable order is what the events of the Alice books resist, but we still seem to close with a capitulation to the logic of bildung.

Or at least we would if the tale ended here. Instead, the final chapter, “Which Dreamed It?”, features Alice speaking to Dinah and her kittens and closes with a scene of Alice posing an irresolvable paradox to the Queen (newly transformed into a kitten):

“Now Kitty, let’s consider who it was that dreamed it all. . . . You see, Kitty, it
must have been either me or the Red King. He was part of my dream, of course—but then I was part of his dream, too! _Was_ it the Red King, Kitty? You were his wife, my dear, so you ought to know—Oh, Kitty, _do_ help to settle it! I’m sure your paw can wait.” But the provoking kitten only began on the other paw, and pretended it hadn’t heard the question.

Which do _you_ think it was? (239-40)

In the closing line, the object of address slips from the kitten to us, the audience, who are put in the same position of being confronted with a question to which we lack the capacity to respond. It is all we can do to oscillate between opposing, irremediable possibilities, the movement of our thought akin to the kitten’s licking one paw and then another.

In a letter to physician and mathematician Daniel Biddle on Zeno’s Paradox, Carroll writes, “[B]ut a thing is not _impossible_, merely because it is _inconceivable_. The human reason has very definite limits” (_Letters Vol. I_ 589). These limits are perhaps what Carroll plays upon in the closing lines of the _Alice_ books, in which the entire anthropic order assumes the condition of the kitten in its ignorance of its own origin (brought into existence via transformation from one being to another) and its inability (or refusal) to respond to the question in the same idiom in which it was phrased: following this metaphor, human reason operates only by the excision of the unanswerable question, the paradoxical instance, or the nonsensical statement from its purview, under the pretense that “the question” never existed (or was never “heard”). Being “Queen,” or assuming the position of mastery, is circuitously equated with Alice’s ignorance of her proper name and bodily composition at the opening of the _Alice_ books, her queenly condition providing only ignorance of her own ontology (the dreamer or the dream?) and mirrored in the devolution of the Red Queen into a kitten.

In the intersecting images of Alice transformed into a Queen and another Queen transformed into a kitten, Carroll affirms an evolutionary vision that resonates with Darwin’s troubling metaphorical concatenation of bears and whale-like creatures in _The Origin of Species_. If such transformations and mutations are inconceivable, that is only because the limits of human reason and the doctrine of anthropocentric sense cannot encompass the reversibility of time and the fungibility of subject-positions that govern the evolutionary world and the world of nonsense alike.
She was a good deal frightened by this very sudden change, but as she did not shrink any further, and had not dropped the top of the mushroom, she did not give up hope yet. There was hardly room to open her mouth, with her chin pressing against her foot, but she did it at last, and managed to bite off a little bit of the top of the mushroom.

"Come! my head's free at last!" said Alice in a tone of delight, which changed into alarm in another moment, when she found that her shoulders were nowhere to be seen; she looked down upon an immense length of neck, which seemed to rise like a stalk out of a sea of green leaves that lay far below her.

This time Alice waited quietly until it chose to speak again; in a few minutes the caterpillar took the hookah out of its mouth, and sat down off the mushroom, and crawled away into the great green mass, remarking as it went: "the top will make you grow taller, and the stalk will make you grow shorter."

"The top of what? the stalk of what?" thought Alice.

"Of the mushroom," said the caterpillar, just as if she had asked it aloud, and in another moment it was out of sight.

Alice remained looking thoughtfully at the mushroom for a minute, and then picked it up carefully, and broke it in two, taking the stalk in one hand, and the top in the other. Which does the stalk do?" she said, and nibbled a little bit of it to try; the next moment she felt a violent blow on her chin: it had struck her foot!

fig. 1, Copyright © The British Library Board
fig. 2, courtesy of www.phys.org

fig. 3, Copyright © The British Library Board
fig. 4, courtesy of the American Museum of Natural History, www.amnh.org
fig. 5, Copyright © The British Library Board
it without lobsters, you know. Which shall sing?"
"Oh! you sing!" said the Gryphon,
"I've forgotten the words."
So they began solemnly dancing round and round Alice, every now and then treading on her toes when they came too close, and waving their fore-paws to mark the time, while the Mock Turtle sang slowly and sadly, these words:

"Beneath the waters of the sea
Are lobsters thick as thick can be—
They love to dance with you and me,
My own, my gentle Salmon!"

The Gryphon joined in singing the chorus, which was:

"Salmon come up! Salmon go down!
Salmon come twist your tail around!
Of all the fishes of the sea
There's none so good as Salmon!"
fig. 7, courtesy of The Lewis Carroll Society of North America, www.lewiscarroll.org
Chapter Two
“Eat it and get all pigsticky”: The Spinozist Body and Contagious Language in Gustave Flaubert’s *The Temptation of Saint Anthony* and James Joyce’s “Circe”

The indeterminability of bodies and forms, as we saw in the previous chapter, is also a prominent feature of Spinoza’s thought, which fed into Flaubert’s and Joyce’s articulations of bodily form and bodily possibility in *The Temptation of Saint Anthony* (1874) and the “Circe” episode of *Ulysses* (1922). In Spinoza’s *Ethics*, as discussed in the Introduction, bodies are both uncontrollable and unknowable, since the body relates to its surroundings and to its own parts in ways that the mind cannot comprehend. In general, the *Ethics* argues for the immanence of God with the natural world and the subsumption of human agency in the laws of nature. Bodies are not distinguished by form or “substance,” but by “reason of motion and rest, speed and slowness” (*E* II, L1). Bodies, as well as body parts, are not subject to the control of the mind and do not have a consistent, singular nature that can be preserved from the contaminating influence of other bodies. There is no transcendent or exceptional form that is immune from change, mutation, and denaturing by external bodies.

This notion of a body radically removed from the command of the mind would find a powerful literary expression in *The Temptation of Saint Anthony* and “Circe,” which was in large part based on Joyce’s interpretation of *The Temptation*. Both texts explore the idea of mind-sundered bodies as a powerful anti-anthropocentric gesture, one that removes the grounds for the transcendent separation of the human from the animal world. In *The Temptation*, Flaubert reimagines the composition of the world by attempting to return to a point in time prior to the fixation of all matter into stable forms. Over the course of Saint Anthony’s hermeneutically driven hallucinations, reality becomes increasingly formless and the bodies of animals, humans, and fantastic creatures, all brought to life through Biblical study, meld into one another in unpredictable ways. Like *The Temptation* (and indebted to it in both formal and thematic ways), Joyce’s “Circe” uses metaphors that blur the boundary between the literal and the figurative in order to introduce new possibilities for how the body interacts and assembles with its surroundings. This is partly accomplished, in both texts, by the use of stage directions that collapse any meaningful distinction between physical action and imaginative figuration. Likewise, in both texts, language takes on a “contagious” character that allows different orders of body (human, animal, hybrid, fantastic, etc.), bodily orders that are traditionally separated by supposedly transcendental criteria, to infect each other and to form complex interassemblages with one another, giving rise to previously unimaginable new forms.

Flaubert read Spinoza’s work extensively, and according to Andrew Brown, Spinoza was “the philosopher referred to most enthusiastically in Flaubert’s letters” (849). For example, in a letter to Mlle Leroyer de Chantepie in 1857, Flaubert writes:

Yes, you must read Spinoza. The people that accuse him of atheism are jackasses. Goethe said, “When I feel troubled, I re-read the *Ethics.*” Perhaps, like Goethe, you too will be put at ease by this great work. About ten years ago, I lost the man
I loved most in the world, Alfred Le Poittevin. During his final illness, he passed his nights reading Spinoza.\textsuperscript{130} Joyce too was familiar with Spinoza’s work, and Spinoza’s presence in \textit{Ulysses} has been well documented.\textsuperscript{131} He is the philosopher Bloom cites in defense of the significance of Jewish contributions to society against the Cyclops’s anti-Semitic rantings. In “Ithaca,” Bloom, in conversation with Stephen, names Spinoza as one of the “anapocryphal sons of the law and children of selected or rejected race” (\textit{U} 18.720-1). Finally, Bloom keeps in his library a volume titled \textit{Thoughts from Spinoza}, from which, as readers learn in “Penelope,” he has expounded fragments to Molly during a carriage ride: “him the other side of me talking about Spinoza and his soul thats dead I suppose millions of years ago,” thinks Molly (\textit{U} 18.1114-16). However, the most radical implications of Spinoza’s physics of the body, as well as the implicit challenges the \textit{Ethics} poses to prevailing psychoanalytic tropes such as the partial object, the dominant agency of the signifier, and the metaphor as a substitutive element within a signifying chain, have gone unexplored in relation to both texts. This essay aims to show that the literary expression of “contagion” in \textit{Saint Anthony} and “locomotor ataxia” in “Circe” speaks to and with Spinoza’s reconfiguration of the body and its relations according to the model of the aleatory and unpredictable. Both authors engage with the Spinozist indeterminacy of bodies as they attempt to create an immanent field in which these bodies can interact through metaphor.

After a discussion of Spinoza’s philosophy of the body, this chapter will then turn to the use of “contagious” language in \textit{The Temptation} and “Circe.” Both texts, in different ways, flatten the field of representation so that abstract/imaginary and concrete entities, or the literal and figurative aspects of metaphor, integrate with one another in ways that, like the “bears” and “whales” in Darwin’s “immanent metaphors” in \textit{The Origin of Species}, produce bodily monstrosities that are outside the natural order of existence. For Flaubert, this flattening of the representational field complicates the present order of things by revealing the messy entanglement of all bodies with one another and the impossibility of locating a singular “origin” of life. Similarly, Joyce uses the blurring between figurative and literal apprehensions of reality to produce metaphors that complicate the division between human and animal bodies and that throw the ideal of an


\textsuperscript{131} See for example, John Henry Raleigh’s “Bloom as a Modern Epic Hero,” \textit{Critical Inquiry} 3:3 (Spring, 1977): 583-598; and Elizabeth Anker’s more recent “Where was Moses When the Candle Went Out? Infinity, Prophecy, and Ethics in Spinoza and ‘Ithaca,’” \textit{James Joyce Quarterly} 44:4 (Summer 2007): 661-677. In the former, Raleigh undertakes a comparison between Spinoza and Bloom as “mild-mannered” and non-violent believers in the power of love to conquer hatred. In the latter, Anker claims that Bloom resembles a “Spinozan prophet” because of the way in which his contemplations on the “infinite” and his acceptance of the “unknowable” and the uncertain in place of a desire for “ultimate meaning” and “final redemption” mirror some aspects of Spinoza’s \textit{Ethics} (1677). Both attend to the textual presence of Spinoza in \textit{Ulysses} while using Spinozist principles to contextualize Joyce’s focus on the corporeal and the limitations of human agency. At the same time, both essays stop short of exploring the most radical implications of Spinoza’s conception of the body and its indeterminate relations with its surroundings. Anker, for example, locates Bloom’s surrendering of bodily agency in moments such as his mutual urination with Stephen and the lexical interpolation of his and Stephen’s names (“Blephe and Stoom”), moments in which the play of bodies and the imbrication of selves is still governed according to the model of reason and ordered, mathematical substitution.
unbroken human lineage across time (or what Stephen Dedalus calls “apostolic succession”) into question.

I. Spinoza, Substance, and the Body

As discussed in the Introduction to this study, both the *Ethics* and the earlier *Theological-Political Treatise* (1669-70) attempt a profound de-ontologization of the Cartesian duality of subject and object and the empowerment of the mind over the body. Both works situate the human being within the realm of nature and oppose any claims of human transcendence over its environment. In place of a subject-object distinction, Spinoza conceives of all living things as expressions, or “modes,” of a single “substance,” which is consistent with God himself. God is immanent with his creation, with the natural world, and every living thing, or “body,” is a “mode which expresses God’s essence” (E II D1). And since “[w]hatever is, is in God,” this means that all things exist “within the divine nature alone, and can be conceived through it alone,” as part of the same “substance” (E I, P15 Dem).

Spinoza’s bodies are defined by relations of motion and rest, which every kind of body possesses in different forms, but these are relations that the mind cannot fully know. Spinoza claims that “The mind does not know the body,” and “no one has yet determined what the body can do” (E II, P23 Dem; III, P2 S). Neither does the mind “involve adequate knowledge of the parts composing the human body,” as these parts are “highly composite individuals, whose parts can be separated from the human body and communicate their motions to other bodies in another manner” (E II, P24 Dem).

Individuals do not control the relations of motion and rest, speed and slowness proper to their bodies, since these relations are in turn determined by the motion of other bodies: “A body which moves or is at rest must be determined to motion or rest by another body, which has also been determined to motion or rest by another, and that again by another, and so on, to infinity” (E II, L3). What we come away with, then, is a conceptualization of the body (and of bodies, of life generally) that is radically unknowable and not subject to the rule of the mind. “Form” is merely the momentary reification of a body’s particular patterns of motion and rest, speed and slowness, and can change depending on a variety of external circumstances.

Spinoza’s system works in contrast to the later Freudian conception of the partial object as fetishistic substitute for some forbidden site of plenitudinous fulfillment. Body parts do not substitute for some banished site of pleasure, or for other body parts, or for the body as a whole, but are in themselves unknowable “individuals” which do not necessarily correspond to the functions we assign to them. Instead, they “communicate their motions to other bodies in another manner [than that of the human body as an organic whole]” (E II, P24 Dem). In *The Temptation*, bodies emerge into reality simply by

---

132 As Spinoza writes in the Preface to Book III of the *Ethics*:

Most writers on the emotions and on human conduct seem to be treating rather of matters outside nature than of natural phenomena following nature's general laws. They appear to conceive man to be situated in nature as a kingdom within a kingdom: for they believe that he disturbs rather than follows nature's order, that he has absolute control over his actions, and that he is determined solely by himself.

133 “God is the immanent, not the transitive, cause of all things,” reads P18 of Part I.

134 See fn. 102 in the Introduction.
the act of Saint Anthony’s reading, and interact with one another in unpredictable and unmanageable ways. Similarly, in “Circe,” the loss of control over one’s own body opens it up to the possibility of recombination and assemblage with surrounding bodies and body parts. In both texts, not knowing what a body can do opens it up to new modes of interrelation with the world around it which are not possible when the body is conceived as a solid, monadic, organic whole impermeable to its surroundings. Or as Spinoza puts it, “For the ideas of the affections of the human body involve the nature of external bodies as much as that of the human body, and must involve the nature not only of the human body [N.S.: as a whole], but also of its parts” (E II, P28 Dem).

Finally, individuals do not control the relations of motion and rest, speed and slowness proper to their bodies, since these relations are in turn determined by the motion of other bodies: “A body which moves or is at rest must be determined to motion or rest by another body, which has also been determined to motion or rest by another, and that again by another, and so on, to infinity” (E II, L3). What we come away with, then, is a conceptualization of the body that is radically indeterminate and not subject to the rule of the mind. “Form” is merely the momentary reification of a body’s particular patterns of motion and rest, speed and slowness, and can change depending on a variety of external circumstances. Both La tentation and “Circe” explore the possibilities not of what a body is, but of what a body can do, how it can interact with its environment, and how it can become transformed (and, in turn, transform its surroundings) through these interactions.

I. The Temptation and the Language of Contagion

The Temptation of Saint Anthony can be read as a text which stages contagion in multiple ways. At a formal level, and much like “Circe,” it is simultaneously a theatrical production which cannot be staged but only read and a novel whose “characters” exceed the limits of textuality and are only legible through performance. The text itself concerns the hallucinations of Saint Anthony (251-356 AD), a Christian monk (and generally considered “the founder of Christian monasticism”) who lived in and organized a monastery in Alexandria, Egypt. In Flaubert’s account, the hallucinations, experienced when Saint Anthony sought solitude at Mount Colzim, east of the Nile and near the Red Sea, subject Saint Anthony’s religious beliefs to the vast multiplicity of heretical, Gnostic, non-Christian, and non-Western religious systems, each with its own founding ontology and set of epistemological conditions that decenter the universality of the Christian belief system and, in Leo Bersani’s words, “suspend reality in an imaginary series with no objective beginning or end.”

These hallucinatory temptations, however, are produced not by evil influences in the external world, but through the act of reading, or more specifically, through the gaps in the text exposed by the act of reading. The book in The Temptation, as Michel Foucault points out in his Introduction to the novel, does not designate some reality outside of itself and does not protect the reading subject from the horror of the “shapeless” and the non-linguistic by safeguarding him within the realm of definable entities and “written signs,”


but rather opens the subject to temptation and [issues] into the world of forms horrible “shapeless figures” which “no language has ever named” and “no book can contain.” Appropriately, we begin the novel with a set of stage directions that places us in the interstitial zone between fixed forms:

It is in the Thebaid, at the summit of a mountain, upon a platform, rounded off into the form of a demilune, and enclosed by huge stones [qu’enferment de grosses pierres].”

The Hermit’s cabin appears in the background [occupe le fond]. (TSA 9)

“[T]hroughout space,” we are told at the end of this set of directions, “there floats a golden dust so fine as to become confounded [se confond] with the vibrations of the light” (TSA 10). We move from the greatest and most stable of forms to the absolutely formless, or rather, the most stable forms (the “huge stones”) create an interstitial space in which the formless “golden dust” can enter the field of representation, or can achieve the minimal consistency that makes it distinguishable from the background (fond). There is a persistent interplay between the noun fond, as the ground, background, or foundation from which stable entities emerge (Anthony’s cabin, in this instance) and the verb confondre, or “to confound,” marking the liquidation of the formal boundaries distinguishing entities from one another and from the background, or fond, from which they sprang. Over the course of the novel, Anthony’s temptations progress from the desire for wealth, power, and sexual libertinage and end with his desire to become integrated with the earth, to become “matter” itself:

Would that I had wings, a carapace, a shell,—that I could . . . divide myself everywhere,—be in everything . . . ,—assume all forms—penetrate each atom—descend to the very bottom of matter [descendre jusqu’au fond de la matiere],—be matter itself!” (TSA 190, my ellipses).

This occurs at the very end of the novel, at a point at which not only do all entities become “confounded” with one another, but so do representations (empreintes) of things and things themselves:

And then the plants become confounded (se confondent) with the stones.
Flints assume the likeness of brains; stalactites of breasts; the flower of iron [des fleurs de fer] resembles a figured tapestry [des tapisseries ornes de figures].

He sees efflorescences in fragments of ice, imprints [empreintes] of shrubs and shells—yet so that one cannot detect whether they be imprints only, or the things themselves [ces choses elles-memes]. Diamonds gleam like eyes; metals palpitate.

The fond has been subject to a confondent; the noun fond, we might say, becomes infected with the verb confondre, which sweeps the fond away, or puts whatever stable “ground” that might have existed into ceaseless motion, making the fiction of an origin impossible to attain except at the level of the purely formless, the level of pure “matter itself” prior to its division into forms. Here, Flaubert deliberately adopts the Spinozist understanding of matter as “substance,” or “what is in itself and is conceived through itself, that is, that whose concept does not require the concept of another thing, from which it must be formed,” and which is available to the senses through its various “affections,” or its presence in a body or a state of affairs through which it is “conceived” (Ethics I. D3, D5).

137 Foucault, Introduction to The Temptation, pp. xxix-xxx.
In these terms, Saint Anthony seeks the ground, the pure substance prior to the affections through which it is perceived, and ultimately, a form which might be able to contain the Absolute without breaking apart, decaying over time, or losing its influence over the minds of men. This form is the pure substance before its organization into various forms and modalities, which Anthony beholds for one instant before the day breaks and the visage of Christ appears “in the very disk of the sun” to him to draw him back to his prayers. At this moment, prior to the advent of the sun which reorganizes matter into formal categories, all things have become confounded within one another and with the framing devices by which they are made available to perception, and all things (and representations of things, which are not distinguishable from things themselves) exist and express from the same immanent level. The idea of “origin” is subject to a confounding which blurs all conceptual categories into one another, into the profound shapelessness of the interstitial space between recognizable forms.

However, we do not have to read these blocks of staticity, of fond, of formal consistency, of a motionlessness which resists the relation of becoming, in contrast to the “confounding” formless substances which swirl amidst fixed entities and destratify the subjective divisions upon which they are grounded; rather, we can look at the blocks of staticity or blocks of groundedness as the means through which the temptation or contagion of the interstitial realizes itself. In other words, framing devices such as the huge stones which enclose Anthony’s hermitage, the “tall bamboos” between which Anthony sees the formless “monstrous timberwork” (une charpente monstrueuse) of tree trunks branching out in a multiplicity of “horizontal and perpendicular lines” in Act IV, and Anthony’s prayers themselves, which open and close the action of the text, all establish a minimal formal ground and set of divisions upon which the disassembling work of temptation can act (TSA 87). Anthony’s “prières” which close the novel should sonically return us to the “grosses pierres” of the opening, as blocks of formal consistency between which the text is enclosed, and the pierres of the opening in turn look forward to Act V where the voice of God explains to Anthony that he “engraved” his law upon “tables of stone [tablettes de pierre]” which have “enclosed [enfermait]” his people. To complicate this further, Flaubert introduces the saint Peter, or Pierre, when Anthony turns to the Bible in Act I to ward off thoughts of the misery of hermetic life:

Am I, then, so weak, O my God! Courage, let me rise from here! [Du courage, releveons-nous!]

*He enters his hut, turns over a pile of cinders, finds a live ember, lights his torch and fixes it upon the wooden desk, so as to throw a light upon the great book*

Suppose I take . . . the Acts of the Apostles? . . . —yes!—no matter where! “And he saw the heaven opened [le ciel ouvert], and a certain vessel descending, as it were a great linen sheet let down by the four corners from heaven to the earth—wherein were all manner of four-footed beasts; and a creeping of things of the earth and fowls of the air. And there came a voice to him: Arise, Peter! Kill and eat!” [“Pierre, leve-toi! tue, et mange!”]

Then the Lord desired that his apostle should eat of all things? . . . while I . . . (TSA 15, ellipses in the original)
Anthony’s will to “rise” and set himself above the temptations of the flesh and above the realm of matter work in contradistinction to his final desire to “descend to the very bottom of matter [descendre jusqu’au fond de la matiere]” and become reunited with the eternal substance prior to its division into forms – to become prehuman or nonhuman. Here, the saint Pierre is emblematic of this raising of the human above the material world, or the world of nature, which he can then dominate by the Lord’s sanction. The saint Pierre becomes identified with formal consistency of the human and with the grosses pierres of the opening scene and the tablets de pierre of God’s law, as well as the closing scene of the text, in which Anthony resumes his prayers (se remet ses prières), the rhyme of pierres with prières forming a solid enclosure within which the action of the text takes place. As the rocks define and demarcate a space within which becoming and temptation might intercede into life, and as the engraved law creates a set of constraints which give the forces of temptation and transgression something to work against (and thus realize themselves), so does the figure of the human with a theologically sanctioned dominion over the natural world become the site where the powers of contagion, formal decay, and disassemblage operate.

This passage also demonstrates that the formal contours of the human only come into being once man is granted dominion over the birds, beasts, and fish of the earth. This is a kind of humanity, however, that Anthony has chosen to reject, and the Biblical passage to which he randomly turns to find refuge from the temptations of the world only tempts him further with the life he might well have led and might still lead if not for his hermetic vows. By rejecting this sanction, however, the sanction which would make the human being the universal, transcendent, and eternally immutable subject with dominion over all other subjects, Anthony must confront the terror of the beasts descending from heaven in full knowledge of the groundlessness of any theologically guaranteed right to dominion over them. In other words, he must confront himself in nature, and eventually, as an inseparable part of the eternal substance from which all life has sprung (in Anthony’s words, “matter itself”). The book which is supposed to ward off temptation and solidify the subject by closing it off from the outside world instead produces a gap, as the space between formal entities within which contagion occurs, in the form of the “opening” in the sky from which the beasts emerge (a point of entry which is markedly not a material origin: the animals “appear” outside of the conscious will of anyone or anything). This gap also marks the point of interassemblage between book and world which is to dominate the text from here onwards: the Bible whose legibility and written sanction of a pre-designated narrative of origin and development is supposed to fix the human subject in place now undermines its own claims and floods the world with beasts which cannot be safely demarcated within an anthropocentric order. This performative gap occurs again in the scene in Act V where God’s voice, after explaining the engraving of his law upon tablets de pierre, laments that this world has been destroyed (which, we are later told in a proleptic utterance of Anthony’s disciple Hilarion, is an implicit result of the Copernican and Newtonian revolutions):

138 I discuss the ambiguity of the closing scene at the end of this chapter.
139 As Foucault claims in his Introduction, “It may be . . . that these creatures of unnatural issue escaped from the book, from the gaps between the open pages or the blank spaces between the letters” (TSA, Introduction p. xxx-xxxi).
Woe! Woe! the Holy of Holies is open [le saint de saint s’est ouvert], the veil is rent, the perfumes of the holocaust are dissipated by all the winds of heaven. The jackal whines [piaule] in the sepulchres; my temple is destroyed; my people dispersed! (TSA 160)

Like the Biblical passage to which Anthony turned, this passage describes the opening up of what was formerly enclosed, the susceptibility of the most hardened emblems of formal consistency to the contagion of the imperceptible and formless. It is also an opening which engenders the “jackal” as an agent of profanation (and in fact, the only “agent” in the midst of this set of passively constructed phrases).

In both of these passages, the separation of book and world, along with notions of the purely representative function of the book, is undone as the act of reading and the life of scholarly devotion become precisely what bring temptation into the world and what produce realities heretofore unknown in the natural order of things, or what open the world to monstrosity and non-conformity. Echoing the Spinozist conception of unpredictable bodily interactions and assemblages, Anthony claims that the world has become completely malleable, “a whole of which all parts mutually influence one another, like the organs of one body.” Knowledge of “science” (by which he means Jesus’s miracles and Solomon’s “magic”), he continues, “enables us to know the natural loves and natural repulsion of all things, and to play upon them [puis de les mettre en jeu]. . . . Therefore, it is really possible to modify what appears to be the natural order of the universe” (TSA 17, ellipsis in the original). This modification of the “natural order of the universe” enacts itself at the level of the text and has been enabled by a lifetime of scholarly devotion to theology and the religious and mythic belief systems of the past, which now actualize themselves in the present. Reading produces and cultivates the imaginative capacities to alter physical reality and infect the present order with strains of non-identity and monstrosity, which then grow beyond and overwhelm the imaginative limits of the reader.

Monstrosity, which we can understand as both a set unrealized potentials in the course of evolutionary development (as in The Origin of Species and the Alice books) and the terror of what cannot be assimilated within an anthropocentric order, is a central motif of The Temptation. Ranged before Anthony’s eyes during his hallucinations are monstrous gods, goddesses, and idols of ancient religions; fantastic creatures known only through mythical accounts (unicorns, griffons, chimeras, sphinxes); creatures composed of bizarre combinations of animal and human body parts; and creatures of unnatural bodily formations (such as the Blemmyes, headless beings with faces “imprinted upon [their] breasts” and brains in their stomachs, and the Astomi, who have no mouths and subsist on “breezes and perfumes”) (TSA 183). The Temptation, in a sense, engenders a whole prehuman and nonhuman, and in some ways an antihuman world, conceiving of the category of the human (in terms which resonate with Darwin’s) as merely one possible developmental outcome amidst a near-infinite series of forms within which life, or the eternal substance, might be contained. As such, the human form becomes malleable, as does the natural world around it, and susceptible to the contagion of prior imaginative conceptualizations of the body, of the human/animal division, and of the entire natural world which Christianity has attempted to supercede. One of the “primordial” monsters is Oannes, the fish-god of the Chaldeans, who appears to Anthony in Act V and claims to be “the contemporary of beginnings [origines].” He explains,
I dwelt in that formless world where hermaphroditic creatures slumbered, under the weight of an opaque atmosphere, in the deeps of dark waters—when fingers, fins, and wings were blended, and eyes without heads were floating like mollusks, among human-faced bulls, and dog-footed serpents. . . .

I, the first consciousness of Chaos, arose from the abyss that I might harden matter [pour durer la matière], and give a law unto forms [pour régler les formes]. . . . (TSA 126-7, my ellipses)

In Oannes's account, which recalls the Darwinian motif of inaccessible origins, the present “form” of the world results from the “law” which has fixed life into form, but the present forms are merely possible and contingent outcomes among a potentially infinite series. In language that consciously echoes The Origin of Species, the “origin” or the “beginning” in Oannes’s account is nothing but formlessness, pure matter, or pure substance before its division into bounded, discrete entities. Creation, then, is not identical with an “origin” and does not pre-exist life by any means: it is merely the act of law-giving which fixes the flux of the pre-conscious or pre-formal world by dividing it into legible formal entities.

However, Anthony’s hallucinations (and The Temptation itself) are transgressions against the law of form, producing a vast array of animals, beasts, and monsters without defining formal characteristics and without any stable “origin.” The idea of origin for these animals, whether we conceive of it as a physical origin in a creation narrative or as a figurative origin in Anthony’s overactive imagination (which in itself is a receptacle for a plethora of overlapping mythical and religious sources, none of which can serve as the definitive origin for any creature), is made impossible. As such, the indeterminate presence of animals (neither material/sensuous nor idealistic/imaginative) troubles the division of life into formal categories. Without a stable past or developmental narrative in which they can be confined, mythical, fantastic, imaginative, and “real” animals persist in the present and on a single plane of immanence as contagious carriers of affect which subject the human body to formal decay and dissolution.

 Appropriately, Act VII, which closes the text, extends the motif of the emergence and multiplication of beasts out of the textual “gaps” which Flaubert introduced in Act I. Towards the end of Act VII, Anthony is confronted by various mythical configurations of the human body, such as the Nisnas and Blemmyes mentioned above. When the Sciapods, who are creatures with inverted bodies (their heads are at their feet, their bodies are tied to the earth by their hair, and they absorb light “through the thickness of our feet”), emerge, they transform into a forest in the stage directions:

Their lifted thighs,—resembling the trunks of trees,—multiply.

And a forest appears. Great apes clamber through it on all fours:—these are men with the heads of dogs. (TSA 184)

These man-dog hybrids are the Cynocephali, who boast of their destructive capacities upon their appearance.140 The forest into which the Sciapods transform becomes the ground from which the Cynocephali come into existence: following the logic of the hallucination, without this forest, these trees whose interstices allow them passage, the

140 A fragment of their speech reads, “Lacerating the flowers, crushing the fruits, befouling the springs, violating women, we are the masters of all,—by the strength of our arms, and the ferocity of our hearts.” (TSA 184)
Cynocephali could not realize themselves. This multiplication of life out of life runs counter to any developmental idea of origin, owing to both the deformed and hybrid nature of the entities themselves and the unnatural way in which they come into existence (neither materially born nor purely imagined, since [textual] imagination and [worldly] reality are inseparable within the hallucination). We are never, in fact, given any narrative of their creation, imaginative or otherwise: the forest “appears,” and then the apes “clamber through it,” as if they are realized only in the act of movement (without origin or end) which, according to Deleuze’s reading of the Spinozist “plane of immanence,” constitutes the (aformal) definition of any body: its “differential velocities,” its patterns of motion and rest, speed and slowness, etc. The bodies of the Cynocephali, and the bodies of all the creatures in this Act, subject the organization of life and the organization of bodies to a profound disarticulation. Species cannot be ordered any more than, in the course of these hallucinations, the orders of the past and present, the mythic and the scientific, the imaginary and the physical, can be sundered from one another.

What follows, and what carries us to the end of the text (and Anthony’s final desire to “become matter itself”) is a vertiginous multiplication of beasts that overwhelms any bodily consistency Anthony may still have felt by the last Act. A series of fantastic creatures continue to emerge, including the Martichoras (a human-lion hybrid), the Sadhuzag (a stag with a bull head and a set of white horns), and the Griffin (a “lion with a vulture’s beak, and white wings, red paws, and blue neck”), this last promising to show Anthony the hidden caverns beneath the earth “wherein the Kings of old do slumber” and, even further below, the precious elements buried within the earth. The Griffin “burrows into the earth with his paws, and crows like a cock [criant comme un coq],” and as a result, “[a] thousand voices answer him” and “all manner of frightful creatures arise:—The Tragelaphus, half deer, half ox; the Myrmecoles, lion before and ant behind, whose genitals are set reversely. . . .” (TSA 187, my ellipsis). They continue to multiply “by their own contact” and soon the earth is flooded with creatures of “marvellous anatomies” which overwhelm Anthony by moving “about [him] with a surging motion as though the ground were the deck of a ship [comme si le sol était le pont d’un navire]” (TSA 187-8). The Griffin’s burrowing into the earth is meant to fulfill Anthony’s desire to behold remnants of the ancient past and the precious metals of the earth, to uncover an anthropological as well as a geological lineage, but instead has the opposite effect of making genealogy, lineage, descent, and origin impossible to reach by summoning this cacophonous multitude of deformed and unnatural beasts.

Contrary to the fabular process of knowledge in La Fontaine, in which each animal bears within it a human trait which the fable uncovers and produces for the reader, these fantastic creatures disrupt the idea of their knowability or conformability and confound the search for human origins. And once again, the “ground” (or “soil,” as it may be translated) does not anchor the subject in the earth or root him in formal consistency, but becomes the source of vital multiplicity and the blurring of beings into one another and into “matter itself.” The ship metaphor suggests that life is once again

141 Spinoza: Practical Philosophy, p. 123.
142 As I will discuss below, this thwarted desire for a stable lineage will also occur in “Circe,” as Leopold Bloom similarly attempts to imagine his own place within a family lineage, but finds only the multiplication of animal bodies and body parts that make the idea of a stable “origin” impossible to access.
returning to the fluid oceanic world from which Oannes sprung, prior to the law of form and the hardening of matter. Now Anthony does not “arise” from this world, like the saint Pierre in response to the emergence of beasts into the world in Act I, but “throws himself down upon the ground” and desires to “descend to the very bottom of matter,” foregoing any claim to representative or nominative authority over the natural world and accepting it as an indeterminate and shapeless substance without subjective or formal divisions between bodies.

The flattening of the field of representation; the blurring of the functional distinction between representation and production (and the distinction between representations of things and things themselves); the hallucinative play between imaginative figuration and physical reality; and the messy coagulation of historical past, mythical past, actual present, and potential present orders all make La tentation a text which gives the forces of contagion and temptation a demarcated space in which to realize themselves. Saint Anthony himself becomes a point, a piece of stony ground, upon which these forces can perform their denaturing work, liquidating what is solid, subjective, and arborescent and returning it to its “origin” in the oceanic formless. The real “characters” (or perhaps the agents) of this novel, insofar as there are any, are the temptations themselves, which take the form of various historical, mythical, and beastly “personages” to unsettle Anthony’s self-conception and the imaginative contours of his being until he desires to become unified with “matter itself.” As I have argued, the “prières” to which Anthony returns in the final set of stage directions and his opening devotions in Act I serve as a form of enclosure for the temptations of the text, like the “pierres” which bound and thus offer a minimum degree of visibility or legibility for the “golden dust” floating through the air, and like the sunset and sunrise which open and close the action of the text. It is this liquidation of character, this subjection of character and subjectivity to the powers of temptation and contagion which then become the primary agents of the text, which informs Joyce’s construction of a “posthuman” (and in many ways an anti-human world) in “Circe.”

II. “Circe” and locomotor ataxia

“I don’t want to move anywhere till Circe is finished”
—James Joyce, letter to Frank Budgen, 24 October 1920

Like The Temptation, “Circe” similarly produces a linguistic landscape that rejects the separation between literal and figurative expressions of the world, along with the grounds for separation between different orders of bodies. The stage directions in “Circe,” like the stage directions in The Temptation, remove the distinction between physical action and figurative expression. Bodies become increasingly uncontrollable by the minds to which they are attached, and increasingly muddled in the newly awakened figurative language that now intervenes physically into the lives of the characters. For Joyce, the motif of “locomotor ataxia” brought on by syphilitic infection becomes a key motif for imagining how a body might become detached from the mind.143 Joyce

---

143 In a conversation with Frank Budgen, Joyce claimed that “the rhythm [of ‘Circe’] is the rhythm of locomotor ataxia.” See Budgen, James Joyce and the Making of ‘Ulysses’ (London: Grayson and Grayson, 1934), p. 234.
imagines locomotor ataxia, or the inability to control the movements of one’s body, not merely as a pathological privation, but also a way to rethink mind-body relations generally, particularly in relation to the Spinozist terms outlined earlier, and with which Joyce was familiar (as I will discuss shortly). Locomotor ataxia offers a variant on the “paralysis” that grounds the lives of Joyce’s Dubliners (1914) in the marginalized socioeconomic positions proper to metrocolonial subjects: whereas Joyce’s earlier text dwells on the privation or inhibition of individual movement, “Circe” extracts movement from the individual’s control. It is not that individuals cannot move in “Circe,” but that their movements are excessive, spastic, erratic, and beyond the command of the rational faculties: locomotor ataxia sweeps up individual bodies and places them in relations to other bodies that the mind does not willfully determine. Mind-sundered bodies stumble, thrash in space, crash into other bodies, assemble with some bodies and disassemble from others.

The body in “Circe” cannot control the relations it enters into with others, nor guard itself from the contagion or contamination brought on by the other bodies with which it interacts or combines. If orders of bodies, such as the human, animal, and vegetal, are defined by degrees of self-possession, then the motif of locomotor ataxia does away with fictions of the transcendence of the human form and subjects all bodies to interpermeation and interactivity. Humans and apes alike are subject to syphilitic infection and its attendant ataxia, as readers of “Circe” discover during Lynch’s discussion of Metchnikoff’s experiments, and this shared capacity to lose functional control of one’s body is one of many motifs that level the ontological separation between different orders of bodies. In an oft-cited letter to Frank Budgen on his use of the Homeric motif “moly” in “Circe,” Joyce muses on the possible etymology of the word “syphilis” in the Greek for “swine-love” (σν ϕιλος) (SL 272). “Locomotor ataxia” is thus related, in Joyce’s mind, to the improper melding of human and animal bodies.

Bloom’s loss of bodily control opens up the space for two primary modes of contamination by the outside world: first, the animal and human bodies around him enter into uncontrollable relations with his body, and second, in a thematic that resonates with Saint Anthony’s search for a stable lineage and his resurrection of dead lifeforms, Bloom’s father and grandfather appear as physical, animal bodies that disrupt the idea of paternal succession as an abstract passage of the name across generations. In the first mode, Bloom’s body is no longer grounded in space, and in the second, his body is unmoored from a temporal lineage. Bloom’s family legacy in “Circe” emerges as an embodied and carnal line of succession, as opposed, in Stephen Dedalus’s words, to an abstract, “mystical,” and “apostolic” one. In “Circe,” what is most abstract often becomes what is most embodied. For example, we see Bloom’s grandfather Virag, whom Bloom knows only as a name within his family lineage, manifest himself in grotesque, metamorphic, and symbolically inconsistent physicality. In both modes of relation, Joyce’s metaphors take on the function of melding different orders of bodies. Metaphors


are never abstract comparisons between two things in “Circe.” Instead, they blur the boundary between literal and figurative descriptions and dissolve the formal divisions between different orders of bodies. For example, Bloom buys a pig’s and sheep’s foot early on in the episode and carries them in his hands. The former is a metaphor for his becoming-pig at the hands of the sorceress Bella/Bello Cohen and a motif that links the episode to Homer’s Circe and her transformation of Odysseus’s men into pigs. The latter similarly metaphorizes Bloom’s submission to Bella/Bello, as he initially can only manage a “sheepish grin” in the presence of her “falcon eyes” (15.2762, 15.2753). Importantly, though, the sheep’s foot also looks forward to the metaphorical innocence Bloom recovers through his encounter with Rudy, his stillborn son, who appears at the end of the episode carrying a “lambkin” in his coat pocket (15.4967).

But these feet are also physical objects that take the place of Bloom’s hands and mediate his relationship to what he touches, to the outside world. The metaphor of being a pig is no longer confined to language, but bursts living into the physical world: it is not just that Bloom is abstractly compared to a pig, but that he literally possesses a pig appendage that makes his body “in part” a pig body. His body is no longer a self-enclosed thing, but imbricated with its surrounding bodies: “Eat it and get all pigsticky,” Bloom muses as he weighs the risks and benefits of consuming the foot (U 15.657-8).

Additionally, Bloom’s father and grandfather appear as bodies that are inseparable from the animal metaphors through which they are expressed in the stage directions. Joyce’s “monstrous”146 and hyper-physical presentation of Bloom’s paternal lineage offers us a way to rethink Stephen’s conception of paternity as a disembodied, abstract relationship only accessible through language and its attendant “fiction[s]” (U 9.844). Bloom experiences the symbolic father not as a “name” but as an animalized body that exceeds the mind’s control and that cannot be comprehended through language.

In “Circe,” as in The Temptation, Joyce employs a language which is bound up in the same materiality as the bodies it names. It is a language which is not governed by ontological, formal distinctions between human, animal, machinic, and even inanimate bodies, and which therefore allows for the unrestrained interaction of all bodies. In other words, the world of “Circe” is an immanent one, with no transcendent or metalinguistic position from which to determine the interactions of words, metaphors, bodies, and organisms. Among all of the different relations between different orders of bodies, however, Joyce reserves the most salient interpermeative and denaturing activity for the encounters between human and animal bodies, which take place primarily through the mediation of metaphor. Like “immanent metaphor” in Darwin’s Origin of Species, animal metaphors in “Circe” are not indexed by two given states or orders of bodies (animal and human) and obey no law of ordered hierarchical separation between the two. Instead, they facilitate the comingling of various bodies and body parts with one another during their random, circumstantial encounters. Joyce told Frank Budgen that Circe was an “an animal episode, full of animal allusions, animal mannerisms.”147

Focusing on the

---

146 The first usage of the word “monster” dates back to Geoffrey Chaucer’s Monk’s Tale (c. 1375), and means “a mythical creature which is part animal and part human, or combines elements of two or more animal forms” (OED). The “monstrous” can thus be thought of as any melding of bodies that challenges the grounds for the transcendent nature of any single kind of body, or anything which reduces ontological distinctions between things to immanent relations.

147 Qtd. in Charles Peake, James Joyce, the Citizen and Artist (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1977), p. 144.
immanent play of human and animal bodies in the language of the episode can help illuminate what is entailed by this comment.

“Circe” does not uphold the distinction between conceptual language and embodied materiality, between words and bodies. Like The Temptation, “Circe” uses stage directions to express a degree of literalness in representation, so that metaphors are not just conceptual designations, but literal descriptions of the bodily composition of a person or thing. In other words, metaphorical connection in “Circe” is physicalized, so that the metaphor is not simply a conceptual relation between two distinct things, but a living, embodied element of this relation that becomes physically attached to the bodies it compares. Metaphors change the physical constitution of bodies in the act of comparing them. In the stage directions, metaphors are literalized as the appendages of bodies in “Circe,” appendages that mediate the relations between body and environment. Because body parts, in Spinoza’s analysis, are “individuals” without a determinate relation to the “body” to which they belong, we can analyze metaphors in “Circe” as the appended parts of bodies that are not fully under the mind’s command.

We get something of this bodily fragmentation in the “Sirens” episode, in which synecdoche (which I am analyzing as a subset of metaphor) works to represent characters through their fragmented body parts. For example, Lydia becomes a set of “wet lips” (U 11.72), Mina a “gliding head” [11.421], and Bob Cowley a set of “twinkling fingers” (11.959). In “Sirens,” however, body parts are indexed by a more or less stable sense of the body as a whole. In “Circe,” metaphors destabilize the unity of the body and the synecdochic correspondence between the body and its parts. Metaphors undermine the fiction of an organic, self-consistent bodily form that exists separately from the materiality of its parts. Metaphors in “Circe” themselves become physicalized as the appendages or body parts of characters. They are the radically unknowable and uncontrollable material mediums through which one’s relationship to other bodies and to one’s environment is mediated, as I will explore shortly. To make a metaphor in “Circe,” in other words, is to put two bodies in connection with each other through the medium of another body that is the metaphor itself. Formal distinctions between bodies are undone through metaphor, and through metaphor the form of the human body is disarticulated and remade in relation to its surrounding bodies. That is to say, if a body relies for its self-definition upon metaphors that are physically appended to it, then this body is saturated in the otherness of foreign bodies and no longer a self-enclosed form.

III. “Parcel” objects

Animal bodies enter “Circe” in the form of partial objects: Cissy Caffrey’s “VOICE” first sings a set of ribald verses of unknown origin which culminate in the refrain “the leg of the duck/ the leg of the duck,”148 and soon after Bloom enters a

---

148 The entire section of the rhyme sung by Cissy runs,

I gave it to Molly,  
Because she was jolly,  
The leg of the duck,  
The leg of the duck.  

I gave it to Nelly,
“porkbutcher’s” and purchases two parcels, “one containing a lukewarm pig’s crubeen, the other a cold sheep’s trotter” (U 15.158-9). He will carry these parcels in each hand until he decides to feed them to a hungry dog trailing him. Bloom’s hands in this scene become animal appendages; the feet of a sheep and pig now become part of his own body and the mediums through which he relates to his environment: he presses a “parcel” (15.160) against his ribs to catch his breath, and after a near encounter with an oncoming trolley, “brushes a mudflake from his cheek with a parcelled hand” (15.198). He goes from “standing upright” to “bending to one side” (15.160), and then after recovering from the close call with the trolley he contemplates his need to “take up Sandow’s exercises again. On the hands down.” Of course, the latter phrase recalls the pigs into which Homer’s Circe transformed Odysseus’s men, and the pig into which Bello Cohen will later transform Bloom with the same injunction: “On the hands down” (15.200). Soon he “begins to bestow his parcels in his filled pockets but desists” (15.291-2), as if he is somehow unable to let them out of his hands at the moment.

While holding the parcels, Bloom proceeds with a “stiff walk,” a motion which makes him recall “[t]hat awful cramp in Lad Lane” from some time ago, and then attributes the latter to “[s]omething poisonous I ate. Emblem of luck. Why? Probably lost cattle. Mark of the beast. (he closes his eyes an instant) Bit light in the head. Monthly or effect of the other. Brainfogfag. That tired feeling. Too much for me now. Ow!” (U 15.207-11). The cramp he recalls is the result of his eating “lost cattle,” or in contemporary usage, “beef that has been illegally slaughtered or horse meat that has been substituted for beef.”151 In this case, he literally does not know of what his body is composed, or what parts of what other bodies he has ingested to alter the functioning of his own body, only that his ingestion of them has caused an uncontrollable bodily sensation in the past that most immediately recalls his “bending to one side” in pain while “press[ing] a parcel against his ribs” fifty lines earlier. Moreover, even the recollection of this cramp disrupts his consciousness and self-awareness in the present, as he experiences a sense of “[b]rainfogfag” and feels “light in the head,” and then claims that this might be the “effect of the other,” or the “lost” substance he has consumed. The “[m]ark of the beast,” then, is both a metaphor for religious condemnation and an indication of the impression the ingested “beast” has made on Bloom’s body: the consumption of foreign bodies in the past affects his mental awareness of himself and his own body in the present (recalling Spinoza: “the mind does not know the body, nor does it involve adequate knowledge of the parts composing the human body”).

Bloom’s “body” in this scene becomes something more complex than the counterpart to a mind that controls its function through the will. It is sutured to the

To stick in her belly,  
The leg of the duck,  
The leg of the duck.

She has it, she got it,  
Wherever she put it,  
The leg of the duck. (U 15.44-47, 56-59, 70-2)

149 This is the same dog that Lynch scares away with a kick after Stephen’s invocation of “gesture” as a “universal language,” though here the dog is metamorphosed from a “liver and white spaniel” (U 15.100) to a mastiff named “Garryowen” (15.663).

150 My thanks to John Bishop for this suggestion.

animal bodies he has purchased and consumed and made into a set of parts which enter into relations with the world that he cannot willfully command. The animal appendages mediate Bloom’s relationship to the world and to himself: he touches things with “parcelled hands” (U 15.198), including his ribs, his muddy face, and the “watchfob, pocketbookpocket, purspepocket, sweets of sin, potatosoap” in his pockets (15.242-3). He also hides them from his father Rudolph, who appears in a hallucination to scold him for wasting money. In the stage directions, Bloom “hides the crubeen and trotter behind his back and, crestfallen, feels warm and cold feetmeat” (15.256-7). “[F]eetmeat” takes on a metaphorical connotation in conjunction with the fact that, a dozen or so lines earlier, Bloom, “[s]hocked, on weak hams, . . . halts” (15.241). The literal pig’s foot he is holding becomes, in a way, the condition of possibility for the zoomorphic metaphorization of his other body parts: his legs become “hams” in the stage directions, which are then associated with the “halting” of movement, brought on by the Caffrey twins’ collision with him. Earlier in the day (in the “Calypso” episode), Bloom follows a female customer out of a different porkbutcher’s shop in order to get a glimpse of “her moving hams.” The mirrored reversal of this phrase in “Circe,” which now refers to Bloom’s own, “halt[ed]” legs, has the effect of making Bloom’s body into a partially animal body, integrated with the body parts Bloom has consumed in the past, both physically (animal parts) and visually (the woman as animal/meat) (U 4.172). Bloom has ingested and appended literal animal parts to his body and thus made it an unknowable, unrecognizable, and uncontrollable thing. At the same time, the animal metaphors Joyce uses to “describe” Bloom’s body have the effect of mutating and dissolving the formal consistency of this body. Once the body is no longer thinkable as exclusively human, Joyce seems to imply, it can become the locus for any number of zoomorphic transformations, contaminations, and mutations.

When Rudolph appears, he scolds Bloom for going “with drunken goy,” and asks, “What you making down this place? Have you no soul? (with feeble vulture talons he feels the silent face of Bloom) Are you not my son Leopold, the grandson of Leopold? Are you not my dear son Leopold who left the house of his fathers Abraham and Jacob?” (U 15.253, 259-262). These “feeble vulture talons,” which come into being in the space of the stage directions and in the action of feeling Bloom’s face, correspond to Bloom’s “parcelled hands” with which he brushed his face a hundred or so lines earlier (15.198). Rudolph is being implicitly compared to a vulture because of his “stooped” stature as well as his more general association with the living on death, or anticipation of death, that the carrion-feeding vulture represents: dead himself, he appears to Bloom with “[y]ellow poison streaks” on his face from the time of his suicide, and speaks to Bloom about the long-deceased filial line that Bloom risks joining (“They make you kaputt, Leopoldleben,” he says regarding Bloom’s boyhood “running chaps”) (15.248, 15.250-1, 15.274-5). But

---

152 Finn Fordham notes, in “‘Circe’ and the Genesis of Multiple Personality” (TJQ 45:3-4 (Spring-Summer 2008): 307-320), that in the first extant draft of the episode Joyce wrote in June 1920, Bloom encounters his father immediately after buying the crubeen and trotter:

Bloom comes round the corner hastily and stops. In each hand he has a paper parcel, containing a pig’s crubeen and a sheep’s trotter sprinkled with wholepepper, the other two slices of quartern loaf and a tablet of Fry’s chocolate. He frowns slightly and hesitates. A stooped bearded figure appears beside him, in horned spectacles. (V.A.19, 4r, simplified)

In this draft, the connection between Bloom’s and Rudolph’s bodies as appended bodies is made stronger than in the published text, where Bloom dodges an oncoming motorcoach and receives insults from a policeman before meeting Rudolph.

---

84
the metaphor of Rudolph-as-vulture occurs in a markedly embodied way: Rudolph is not just abstractly compared to a vulture, but is given an actual vulture appendage that comes into being in the stage directions. The metaphor itself is embodied and attached to Rudolph’s body. It is a monstrous third element that belongs neither to the self nor the environment exclusively, but acts as the medium through which the relation between self and environment proceeds.

Bodies become fluid and amorphous entities subject to contagion by the metaphors that express them. As Bloom’s body is physically imbricated with its surroundings, so Rudolph’s body is inseparable from the animal metaphors used to present him: Rudolph is not just a symbol of living death like the vulture, but has actual vulture talons that mediate his contact with Bloom. Rudolph’s gesture of touching Bloom’s face with these “vulture talons” is meant to locate Bloom within a filial line (“Are you not my son Leopold, the grandson of Leopold?” he asks), to establish personal or nominative identity. Looking forward about 2,000 lines to when Bloom’s grandfather Virag Lipoti actually appears, however, the filial connection that Bloom experiences with Virag is corrupted by the mediation of this figure through a set of multiple and contradictory animal metaphors that overwhelm any symbolic or bodily consistency Virag might have had. Bloom’s relations to his father and his grandfather in this episode are less dramatic, character-driven interactions than dramatizations of the de-stabilization of character and the loss of agency, now that these characters possess bodies composed of unknown and uncontrollable “parts.”

IV. Le corps-du-père

The take on filiation in “Circe” contrasts with Stephen’s musings on paternity in the “Scylla and Charybdis” episode. Stephen famously refers to fatherhood as a “legal fiction,” a “mystical estate, an apostolic succession” which is passed on through language and the symbolic order (U 9.844, 838). It is “founded upon the void,” “[u]pon incertitude, upon unlikelihood,” and does not have the immediate certainty of “love of the mother” (“amor matris”) (9.842-3). To rehearse briefly the Lacanian analysis of this motif, fatherhood is a structural position as opposed to a physical one: the father is always conflated into a symbolic function, as lawgiver, as the nom-du-père that is also the law-of-the-father. The lack of the immediate, embodied, sensory connection proper to motherhood means that the relationship to the father is a symbolic one, to be achieved through language (“fiction”) rather than through the (“true”) relations of the body. Says Stephen, “Fatherhood, in the sense of conscious begetting, is unknown to man. It is a mystical estate, an apostolic succession, from only begetter to only begotten. . . . Amor matris, subjective and objective genitive, may be the only true thing in life. Paternity may be a legal fiction” (9.837-9, 842-44). “Apostolic suggestion” denotes a filial line rooted in spiritual practice, the transmission of knowledge that is not “true” in an immediate and knowable sense, but part of a mystical connection that is only available through language and through the unconscious realm opened up by the play of language. This absent

---

153 Joyce does not write, for example, that “his fingers were like vulture talons.”


155 For Stephen, symbolic fatherhood is also tied in with the law-giving institutions of the Catholic Church and the British Imperialist government.
center or locus of the paternal name gives rise to a chain of metaphorical substitutions which attempt to designate it, and it is through these attempts on the part of the subject that the connection to the father is achieved. As Jean-Michel Rabaté writes concerning the motif of Stephen’s search for a (symbolic) father:

To be a father, symbolically, does not imply merely a real paternity; on the contrary, it takes death, absence, and radical otherness into account. . . . A symbolic father is not simply the father of a son, as such can be left to the real father’s function; a symbolic father is, as it were, the father of a father—a grandfather in a way—who fades away to become increasingly identified with a pure name.156

In “Circe,” however, the nom-du-père is not simply the unattainable or unspeakable “pure name” of the symbolic father which initiates the play of language and metaphorical substitution through the individual’s attempt to access it. Instead, the symbolic father and symbolic progenitor Virag is, despite his status as “pure name” in Bloom’s imagination, an overwhelmingly physical presence. It is not the “name” of the father that gives rise to a chain of metaphorical substitutions, but the body of the father from which metaphorical appendages protrude. In “Circe,” it is embodiment itself that gives rise to unknowability. The obstacle to knowledge comes from our ignorance about what bodies can do, what parts they are composed of, and what relations they may enter into, not from the individual’s inability to access the transcendent and idealized nom-du-père into which the physical body of the father has been sublated. “Circe” resists this transcendence, and instead gives us the body of the father itself, as a thing subject to indeterminate mutations, transformations, and recombinations with other bodies around it through metaphor. Unknowability is not produced by radical absence, but by overwhelming and unrecognizable bodily presence, by the monstrous existence of a body that is composed of multiple bodies, that continually combines with more and more external bodies and body parts until it has no legible symbolic consistency as either an individual or a “name.”

Virag emerges in a set of stage directions after Zoe, a prostitute, teases Lynch and Bloom with a view of her backside and then makes “sheep’s eyes” at them (U 15.2297). As he both describes and visually consumes the (female) bodies around him through a mixture of faux biological language and taxonomic metaphors, his own body becomes consistent with a set of animal metaphors that probe and extend into his environment. Where Rudolph only had “vulture talons” with which to touch his surroundings, Virag’s body is granted a vast number of zoomorphic metaphors that are embodied as appendages and protuberances: for example, “his weasel teeth bared yellow” (15.2339), “his yellow parrotbeak gabbles nasally” (15.2414) “his glowworm’s nose running backwards over the letters which he claws”(15.2435-6), “he leans out on tortured forepaws” (15.2574), “he sticks out a flickering phosphorescent scorpion tongue, his hand on his fork” (15.2600-1). In addition to “howling” with a “mooncalf nozzle,” he variously “prompts in a pig’s whisper” (15.2412), “gobbles glutonously with turkey wattles” (15.2433-4), “crows derisively” (15.2404), and “with gibbering baboon’s cries . . . jerks his hips in the cynical spasm” (15.2602-3). With each new animal appendage that is also an embodied metaphor, Virag’s body mutates into more and more symbolically inconsistent forms that make his body physically unimaginable: he has both a “glowworm’s nose” and a “mooncalf nozzle,” “tortured forepaws” and a “hand,” “weasel teeth” and a “parrotbeak,” etc. This scene recalls the Griffin’s digging into the earth, in

La tentation, to uncover what Saint Anthony thinks will be his own genealogical lineage, but turns out to be the multiplication of unnatural, hybrid creatures. With Bloom and Rudolph, we could speculate about provisional reasons for their metaphorization as a pig and a vulture, respectively, and their possession of pig and vulture appendages. The metaphors that express Virag, on the other hand, overwhelm any stable semantic sense we might try to assign him by multiplying the possible “parts” of which his body might be composed.

These metaphors are always coupled with verbs; here the stage “directions” are actually dispossessed of any directive function, as the metaphorical appendages multiply beyond the subjective control of Virag and the subjective comprehension of the reader. These directionless “directions” are loci of becoming and transformation of the individual parts of Virag’s body. His various animal appendages realize themselves and come into being through these descriptions; in a departure from the traditional application of animal metaphor, Virag never “gobbles like a turkey” or “howls like a calf,” as metaphors of this kind operate by resemblance and presuppose two ontological states of being that can be compared. To the contrary, the metaphors that Joyce uses to describe Virag imbricate Virag’s body with a set of animal bodies and do away with any metaphysical tertium quid that might mediate or govern the separation between different orders of bodies. This takes on added significance when we remember that we know virtually nothing about Virag beyond what is given in this scene, and so have nothing like a stable, originary Virag to which we might compare the fantastic depiction of him we get in “Circe.”

V. “most excellent master” (U 15.2855)

But even as the symbolic consistency of Virag’s body dissolves into an indistinct field of animal bodies, Virag nonetheless retains enough presence of mind to employ animal metaphor in the service of degrading the women around him. His metaphors fix the bodies of the prostitutes into formal, taxonomically defined categories such as “mammals” and “insects.” More generally, his metaphors turn the female body into a site of consumption rather than production. Virag taxonomizes the prostitutes in Bella’s brothel, as in this statement exhorting Bloom to pursue one of them: “Her beam is broad. She is coated with quite a considerable layer of fat. Obviously mammal in weight of bosom you remark that she in front well to the fore two protuberances of very respectable dimensions” (U 15.2355-8). He continues, “Such fleshy parts are the products of careful nurture. When coopfattened their livers reach an elephantine size. . . . That suits your book, eh? Fleshhotpots of Egypt to hanker after” (15.2361-2, 2365-6). In these instances, Virag uses animal metaphor as a tool to constrain the body into given forms. This use deviates from the dominant Circean conception of metaphor as an interrogation of the formal hierarchization of bodies. We must therefore distinguish Joyce’s strategic use of metaphor to call all hierarchical distinctions into question from its use by certain characters as a way to denigrate some other and exclude her or him from the sociosymbolic order.

Bella/Bello Cohen is another such character. Her sorcery, through which s/he transforms Bloom into a woman before zoomorphing him into a pig, equates both animality and femininity with degradation, as we see in this scene:

BELLO
Down! (he taps her on the shoulder with his fan) Incline feet forward! Slide left foot one pace back! You will fall. You are falling. On the hands down!

BLOOM

(her eyes upturned in the sign of admiration, closing, yaps) Truffles!

(With a piercing epileptic cry she sinks on all fours, grunting, shuffling, rooting at his feet: then lies, shamming dead, with eyes shut tight, trembling eyelids, bowed upon the ground in the attitude of most excellent master.) (U 15.2846-2855)

This transformation is at once metaphorical and physical: it is a metaphor for Bloom’s masochistic submission to Bello that also produces his literal transformation into a female pig. It is also partially determined by the pig and sheep parts Bloom picked up at the beginning of the episode, his possession of which marks the beginning of his uncontrollable relations with his surroundings. As he then contemplated Sandow’s exercises (“On the hands down”) whilst holding the appendages in his hands—paws, now Bello will command him to the floor with the exact same words.

Bello’s power as a sorceress, however, works in contradistinction to the locomotor ataxia to which Bloom’s body has been subject throughout the episode. Bello’s sorcery has the effect of reducing the unpredictability and uncontrollability of Bloom’s body to the knowable categories of form and function, categories of which she is in command. In place of the endless profusion of metaphors as verbs of becoming in the stage directions, Bello uses imperatives to fix Bloom’s body into given forms such as a pig, a horse, and a cow. Whereas Virag’s, Rudolph’s, and Bloom’s bodies were all represented in terms of sets of non-totalizable parts that acted outside of the mind’s control, Bello now commands Bloom’s body, after its initial “epileptic” sinking to the ground, to adopt certain positions through which it is identifiable as a formal entity.

Paradoxically, then, Bloom’s transformations in this scene serve as a way of reaffirming the formal integrity of the human body and the dominance of the human will. Bello becomes the governing force behind Bloom’s various transformations, and he (Bello) shapes her (Bloom) according to his own intentions and desires. The animal becomes a passive object in relation to the force of the human will. Where zoomorphic transformation in Virag’s scene operated outside the control of any singular agent, Bello becomes the subject for whom Bloom’s transformations take place. Dominance is written as the power to command metaphorical transformation and bodily movement, to direct them towards meaningful ends for some subject, and to make them into the products of individual will and agency.

But Bello’s moment of dominion is a limited one, as Bloom will in turn dominate Bello/Bella by employing animal metaphors to degrade her: “Passée,” he tells her. “Mutton dressed as lamb. Long in the tooth and superfluous hair. . . . Your eyes are as vapid as the glasses of your stuffed fox (15.3112). Now it is Bella’s body that becomes ataxic and uncontrollable as “(her sowcunt barks) Fhrracht!” and Bloom who commands the motions of this body with his words: “Clean your nailless middle finger first, your bully’s cold spunk is dripping from your cockscomb. Take a handful of hay and wipe yourself” (15.3123). This moment of triumph seems to mark Bloom’s affirmation of his individuality in the midst of the contaminating force of animal metaphor. However,
Bloom’s triumph comes at the cost of his own transformation into an oppressor of bodies who employs metaphorical expression to degrade others. As such, this does not alter the structure of oppression whereby an existing dominant force is continually overthrown by another, more dominant force, and where self-possession is achieved by dominating a being, only to be overturned again by another being. Bloom’s triumph over Bello’s oppression by becoming an oppressor himself merely invites a new imaginative tyrant to master him, which is precisely what happens when Blazes Boylan comes to life in “Circe,” literally “cuckolds” Bloom by hanging his hat on Bloom’s newly “antlered head,” and pleases Molly as Bloom watches (15.3764). To become “master” over metaphor, to use it to fix another’s body into stable forms, does not provide a lasting mode of triumph over locomotor ataxia.

By this point in “Circe,” it seems as if the characters are at risk of becoming inextricably mired in their own bodily disempowerment, that they will never recover a stable self after experiencing the alienation of the body produced by embodied metaphors that suture themselves to the bodies of characters. However, Joyce uses the ending of “Circe” to step back from the Spinozist understanding of the body that has hitherto informed the episode and wrested self-possession from the characters. More specifically, Joyce uses Bloom’s imagined encounter with his stillborn son Rudy to give Bloom the triumph of self-control that has formerly eluded him and to re-establish the “apostolic” dimensions of fatherhood that Virag and Rudolph threw into disarray.

VI. “lambkin” (U 15.4967)

As Bloom looks into Stephen’s face at the end of the episode, the stage directions describe Bloom’s vision of Rudy as an eleven year old “fairy boy” or “changeling”:

(Silent, thoughtful, alert he stands on guard, his fingers at his lips in the attitude of secret master. Against the dark wall a figure appears slowly, a fairy boy of eleven, a changeling, kidnapped, dressed in an Eton suit with glass shoes and a little bronze helmet, holding a book in his hand. He reads from left to right inaudibly, smiling, kissing the page.)

BLOOM

(wonderstruck, calls inaudibly) Rudy!

RUDY

(gazes, unseeing, into Bloom’s eyes and goes on reading, kissing, smiling. He has a delicate mauve face. On his suit he has diamond and ruby buttons. In his free left hand he holds a slim ivory cane with a violet bowknot. A white lambkin peeps out of his waistcoat pocket.)

While the idea of filiation has been corrupted in Bloom’s previous imaginative encounters with his paternal lineage, during which his father and grandfather were present as physical bodies sutured to the fleshly parts of animals, Rudy offers the possibility of a paternal lineage that is structured according to the symbolic terms of fatherhood as rooted in “apostolic succession.” With “his fingers to his lips in the attitude of secret master,” Bloom becomes symbolic father to Rudy, passing onto him the “mystical estate” of fatherhood shrouded in ritual and mediated through language and devoid of any physical contact: the climax of the scene is Bloom’s utterance of the name, not an embrace or
other bodily relation. And yet the insubstantiality of this encounter and its mediation through language is what gives it its affective impact. In a sense, Rudy continues to exist only in language, and Bloom’s fatherhood of him is purely symbolic, indexed by what Rabaté calls “death, absence, and radical otherness.”

The coming-to-life of language that has hitherto dominated the episode, in which metaphors became physicalized as embodied appendages, is now put to rest. Bodies are no longer consistent with the animal metaphors out of which they are constructed: the image of placid animality, the single “lambkin” that “peeps out” of Rudy’s coat pocket, tames the contagious force of animal metaphor that has permeated the episode. The lambkin, as a metaphor for Rudy’s innocence, exists alongside Rudy, but as a total, non-partialized (or non-“parcelled”) body that remains in his pocket and does not become incorporate with Rudy’s body. This is in contradistinction to the sheep’s trotter and pig’s crubeen vis-à-vis Bloom’s body at the beginning of the episode. Borrowing from Don Gifford’s annotations, David Rando, in “The Cat’s Meow: Ulysses, Animals, and the Veterinary Gaze,” notes that the name Rudolph “stems from Old German ‘fame’ (hrothi) and ‘wolf’ (vulf),” which might make Rudy “the most important animal in Ulysses.” Rando reads Rudy as an animal body, and more specifically as a wolf, and looks at Bloom’s encounter with Rudy as a “diagnostic or clinical scene” in which the silent Rudy “appears to Bloom and to readers as a body that must be interpreted.” What I am arguing, in contrast, is that Rudy does not here have the physical body that would make him susceptible either to examination or to the play of embodied metaphor. He is only present as an insubstantial figure who is not, like his father, grandfather, and great-grandfather, constructed out a set of non-totalizable metaphorical animal appendages. In Bloom’s encounter with Rudy, then, the episode returns to the conceptual use of metaphor that it has persistently rejected. By possessing Rudy symbolically, through the mediation of abstract and disembodied language (the name), Bloom in turn comes into possession of his own lineage as a mystical thread uniting himself with his generation. By possessing what is beyond possession, the radically other that exists only in the space of the conditional, Bloom recovers a positive identity and sense of self in symbolic fatherhood.

This scene, then, marks a retreat from the Spinozist unknowability of the body and the relations of its parts: Bloom recovers a conceptual understanding of his body through his symbolic fatherhood of Rudy, escaping the sundering of mind from body in previous sections of the episode. As language becomes de-physicalized again, and metaphor converted to a conceptual medium of relation between entities, Bloom’s body recovers from its fragmentation into uncontrollable parts/“parcels” and Bloom achieves the self-possession that has eluded him throughout the episode. Bloom, “[s]ilent, thoughtful, alert” now “stands on guard, his fingers at his lips in the attitude of secret master,” in contrast to both his “grunting” and “shuffling” at Bello’s feet, as he remained “boxed upon the ground in the attitude of most excellent master,” and his inability to walk properly at the opening of the episode. In full possession of his body and free of the locomotor ataxia that has jolted his body throughout the episode, Bloom now raises himself above the ground. This act performs the defining conceptual gesture of the human separation from the animal world.

157 Rabaté, op. cit., p. 67.
159 ibid., p. 538.
In this sense, Rudy can be identified with the Homeric “moly,” the herb Odysseus is given by Hermes to protect him from Circe’s sorcery, and what Joyce, in the above-cited letter to Frank Budgen about “Circe,” considers the “invisible influence (prayer, chance, agility, presence of mind, power of recuperation) which saves in case of accident” (SL 272, italics in the original).

Accordingly, the first sentence of the next episode, “Eumaeus,” marks the reformation of language as a conceptual as opposed to a material medium, and the recovery of its characters from the radical uncontrollability of the body: “Preparatory to anything else Mr Bloom brushed off the greater bulk of the shavings and handed Stephen the hat and ashplant and bucked him up generally in orthodox Samaritan fashion which he very badly needed” (U 16.1-3). The opening clause establishes a new ground in place of the one swept away by the play of becoming and transformation in “Circe,” and the “brushing off” of the shavings covering Stephen, as material remnants of Nighttown, marks the end of the contagious influence of environment upon character. Here it is “Mr Bloom brushed off . . . and handed,” as opposed to “he brushes a mudflake from his cheek with a parcelled hand” in “Circe”: Bloom recovers his hand (no longer a “paw”), the organ that Martin Heidegger claims represents the fundamental difference between animal and human being.\(^{160}\) He also regains a total, non-partialized/-parcell ed body whose relations with its environment he now controls. Characters become agents once again as opposed to uncontrollable bodies in space, and a new narratorial language represses the contagious embodiment of metaphorical expression: to “buck up” here is to strengthen, to raise up, and does not burst into life in the form of “antlers” or another metaphorical appendage.

It is only at the end of “Circe” and the beginning of “Eumaeus” that Joyce reasserts the authorial power to separate language from bodies and allows Bloom to recover marginal control over his bodily motions. The novel returns self-possession to its characters and frees them from the contagious influence of surrounding bodies and the play of embodied metaphors. Through the vast majority of the “Circe” episode, however, Joyce resists the function of authorship as sorcery, as transcendent domination over the aleatory interactions of orders of bodies in space and in time. Animal parts appended to human bodies, or what Joyce calls the contaminating force of “swine-love,” do not degrade humans to the level of animals or elevate animals to the level of humans, but meld these orders of bodies into one another in the absence of any transcendent, metaphysical standard by which to enforce their hierarchical separation.

Indeed, the monstrosity of “Circe” in large part stems from its reduction of all things to bodies, its radical immanence that is also a refusal of the transcendent dimension of language, bodily form, and identity. Spinoza’s immanence likewise refuses the transcendence of the mind over the body, but, importantly, Spinoza, as his position progresses in the later Parts of the Ethics, views the mind as capable of both understanding the various ways in which the body is affected by external circumstances and by nature.

\(^{160}\) Heidegger writes, in What is Thinking, that “the hand is infinitely different from all grasping organs—paws, claws, or fangs—different by an abyss of essence.” Derrida reads this in terms of Heidegger’s separation between “taking,” or grasping, which apes can do, and “giving,” or more precisely, to “give oneself” to another, which only humans can do (Heidegger qtd. in Leonard Lawler, “‘Animals have no hand’: An Essay on Animality in Derrida” (The New Centennial Review 7.2 (2007): 43-69). See also Jacques Derrida, “And Say the Animal Responded?” in Cary Wolfe (ed.), Zoontologies: The Question of the Animal (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003).
generally and of managing these affections and the body’s thralldom to them. As Spinoza writes in Part V: “There is no affection of the body of which we cannot form a clear and distinct concept” (E V, P4). And in the accompanying Scholium: “[E]ach of us has—in part, at least, if not absolutely—the power to understand himself and his affects, and consequently, the power to bring it about that he is less acted on by them” (E V, P4 S).

And yet Spinoza’s qualifier “in part” leaves room for hesitation about whether it is possible fully to comprehend the ways in which one’s body is affected and to gain power over these affections. This is the ambiguity Joyce presses upon and develops in the closing scene of “Circe,” the encounter with Rudy. In one sense, Bloom has become free from the play of embodied metaphor and has regained control of his own body. In another, his self-recovery occurs through an accidental encounter with the body of another (Rudy) and does not leave him any more equipped to comprehend and manage the past encounters that have denatured the formal contours of his body and his conception of self. This same ambiguity informs the closing of The Temptation, in which, in the stage directions:

Day at last appears;—and, like tabernacle curtains uplifted, clouds of gold uprolling on broad volutes unveil the sky.

Even in the midst thereof, and in the very disk of the sun [dans le disque-même], beams the face of Jesus Christ.

Anthony makes the sign of the cross, and resumes his devotions [se remet en prières]. (TSA 191)

We can read the closing gesture as the end of Anthony’s hallucinations and the resumption of his quiet, monastic life, now that the face of Christ has warded off the temptations opened to him by the book. As discussed earlier, the prières form a closing rhyme with the pierres of The Temptation’s first lines, suggesting that the temptations have been safely confined within the enclosure of the book. However, we can also read the “face of Jesus Christ” as merely another hallucination in the midst of the procession, a face that is integrated with the sun, which suggests perhaps, like Joyce’s metaphors in “Circe,” an improper and traumatic melding of bodies with one another. Since

161 For Spinoza, this is a provisional definition of the “affects.” He writes, “By affect I understand affections of the body by which the body’s power of acting is increased or diminished, aided or restrained, and at the same time, the ideas of these affections” (E III, D3).

162 “Concept,” for Spinoza, is not equivalent with “abstraction,” but is rather a form of understanding based on the relation between my body and another body. Abstractions are imaginations of relations that we do not comprehend because they are not felt or registered in the body and thus cannot be directly known. Concepts, in this sense, are associated with what Spinoza calls “common notions,” which are ideas of “something which is common to . . . the human body and certain external bodies,” (E II, P38 Dem). Gilles Deleuze helpfully outlines the distinctions between common notions (concepts) and abstractions:

[A] common notion expresses our capacity for being affected and is explained by our power of comprehending. On the contrary, an abstract idea arises when our capacity for being affected is exceeded and we are content with imagining instead of comprehending: we no longer seek to understand the relations that enter into composition; we only retain an extrinsic sign, a variable perceptible characteristic that strikes our imagination, and that we set up as an essential trait while disregarding the others (man as an animal of erect stature, or as animal that laughs, that speaks, a rational animal, a featherless biped, etc.).

Anthony’s “devotions/prières” are what began the succession of temptations in the first place, it is unclear whether his resumption of prayers marks the emergence out of temptation or rather the emergence into a further set of temptations.

However we read the closing encounters of *La tentation* and “Circe,” the overall effect of these texts is to take Spinoza’s ethical implications about the unknowability of the body and its unpredictable relations with the mind and with other bodies to their logical extent, at which point the human is incorporate with the aleatory forces and energies of the natural world. Flaubert and Joyce envision a living world in which the mind cannot manage monstrosity, nor tame the affections of the body, nor determine the ways in which bodies relate to their surroundings. Through the medium of hybrid and fantastic bodies that come to living life through the medium of reading and challenge the dominant order of being; and through the medium of metaphors that take on the material consistency of bodies and themselves become attached to the bodies they describe; *La tentation* and “Circe” subject the supposedly transcendent human form to the contagious influence of all that surrounds it and interrogates ideas of the mind’s ability to quell the force of these various affections. Form is a fragile and impermeable thing, both texts teach us, a fiction we impose upon the restless play of bodies in space and in time. To surrender one’s self-preservatory attachment to the hierarchical and supposedly ontological forms into which human, nonhuman, hybrid, fantastical, non-living, and no-longer living bodies are divided; not merely to confront and measure oneself against the unrecognizability and nonidentity of the external world, but to be at home in it, to accept the dissolution of oneself and one’s own body in it: this is perhaps the ethical limit towards which Spinoza’s *Ethics* tends and which *La tentation* and “Circe” birth into full, monstrous being.
Chapter Three
Evolutionary Biology and the Bodily Concept in Kafka’s “The Burrow” and “Investigations of a Dog”

As with the work of Flaubert and Joyce, Franz Kafka’s short fiction is similarly informed by Spinoza’s critique of bodily form. Spinoza served as a “first spiritual mentor” for the young Kafka, in addition to Nietzsche, Darwin, and the German biologist Ernst Haeckel. In a shift from Flaubert and Joyce, however, Kafka imagines the nonhuman animal in terms of its vulnerability and alienation, as a being that is antithetical to human modes of thought. Kafka draws on Spinoza’s idea of the “conatus,” or the force by which each living being attempts to “persevere in its being,” alongside early twentieth-century biological science (primary from Haeckel) in order to experiment with new ways to express nonhuman existence and nonhuman thought in language without subordinating it to the terms of human knowledge (E III, P6). This chapter begins with a short analysis of the non-teleological and formless nature of Kafka’s short fiction generally, before moving onto a discussion of the influence of Haeckel and Spinoza on Kafka’s writing, and then to an analysis of two of Kafka’s “animal” stories: “The Burrow” (written 1924, published 1931) and “Investigations of a Dog” (written 1922, published 1931).

I. The Necessity of Formlessness

In a diary entry of 27 May 1914, Kafka composes an incomplete short story, interspersed between entries about his father, his own “spiritual battle” concerning his writing and his turbulent relationship with Felice Bauer, and another story about a landlady and her prospective tenant. This story begins with a mysterious, ownerless white horse “appearing [erschien]” in the midst of “the city of A,” and the remainder details the horse’s wanderings through “A.” It first passes through a trucking yard, followed by construction workers who abandon it once they realize that it is not one of their own. The horse then travels to the city’s suburbs, adapting itself easily to urban life along the way:

Its slow pace could frighten no one, it never strayed [verliess] out of the roadway or from its own side of the street; when it was obliged to stop for a vehicle coming out of a cross street, it stopped; had the most careful driver been leading it by the halter it could not have behaved more perfectly. (D II, 35)

A policeman takes hold of the horse, and keeps hold, “thinking that the owner would soon be along after the runaway animal [entlaufenen Tier],” and the story abruptly cuts off here, leaving the horse suspended between the policeman and its unknown—or perhaps imaginary—owner (35, translation modified). In the next entry, immediately following the story, Kafka writes:

---

It has meaning [Sinn], but is weak; its blood flows too thin, too far from the heart. There are still some pretty scenes in my head but I will stop regardless. Yesterday the white horse appeared [erschien] to me for the first time before I fell asleep; I have an impression of its first stepping out of my head, which was turned to the wall, jumping across me and down from the bed and then disappearing. The last is unfortunately not refuted [widerlegt] by the fact of my having begun the above.

The horse “appears” [erschien] twice: first as it emerges from Kafka’s “head” as he falls asleep, and second in the first line of the story he composes: “The first appearance [erschien] of the white horse was in the middle of the autumn afternoon in a small but not very busy street in the city of A” (translation modified). Kafka sets himself the task of sustaining the “appearance” of the horse through the story he writes, a story that he imagines as a body, with blood and a beating heart. However, the “weak” story is not enough to allow the horse to persist: in Kafka’s gnomic phrase, the disappearance of the horse is not “refuted” by the fact that he has begun a story about it, meaning perhaps that the story has not been able to keep the horse living, or to keep it from “disappearing” [verloren, which can also mean “forgotten”].

But it is perhaps this very lack of formal closure that provides the impetus for Kafka’s method, a method that would achieve a fuller expression in other works of short fiction, including “Josephine the Singer,” “The Cares of a House-father,” “A Crossing,” “The Burrow,” and “Investigations of a Dog,” the last two of which will be the focus of this chapter. (Many of Kafka’s works, including “The Burrow,” “Josephine,” and “Investigations,” exist in the strange position of having no conceivable audience, or no conceivable way for the narration we are reading to be reaching us.)

We can certainly read the horse in this story as a metaphor for the enterprise of writing: it winds through the streets without fixed purpose after having escaped its “owner,” it never settles anywhere, it has a life of its own that surpasses the control of its creator, and so on. Reading both diary entries together, however, we get the sense that this “weak” meaning, this incompleteness, this non-totalizability is not just a metaphor for writing, but also a means for Kafka to express the fraught and unknowable nature of animal life within the terms of representational language, a language that traditionally works to domesticate what is singular and unknowable into conceptual terms. By expressing the horse as a “weak” story without meaning and that cannot exist in a fixed or completed form, Kafka theorizes animal life as that which cannot settle into meaning, and that which resists the laws of form and formal completion. In this sense, metaphor in this story and other short works becomes less a means of knowledge-production and more a way of unfolding vivid, physical content that cannot be sublimated into stable concepts (or the Hegelian “spiritual sphere”), as in the Alice books, Flaubert’s The Temptation, and Joyce’s “Circe,” and, as will be discussed in the next chapter, Woolf’s Between the Acts. Rather than employing specific animal metaphors in the works themselves, however, in Kafka’s short fiction, animal metaphor becomes integrated into the structure of the stories themselves: without a given
sense of why the subject of the story should be an animal, or narrated by an animal, we readers are caught in the midst of the expression of particular content, the particular exploration of a certain animal world that we may feel is supposed to relate meaningfully somehow to human existence, but that ultimately gives us no stable, extractable meaning aside from the pure expression of this world. As will be discussed shortly, it is the animal body itself, in its materiality, that forecloses the formation of concepts out of it.167

In one of the prototypical works of Kafka criticism, *Franz Kafka: The Necessity of Form*, Stanley Corngold argues that Kafka’s literary works, particularly the longer novels (*The Trial*, *Amerika*, *The Castle*), can be read as a “commentary on the text of the law,” and that Kafka’s writing attempts to “uncover the pure textual body of the law.”168 Though the text of the law is ultimately unknowable, the human subject can constitute him- or herself by clearing away the messy materiality of the world and “uncover[ing] the lost luminousness of the spiritual body”: “[t]his work of clearing is quickly rewarded by Kafka’s love of the word as a beautiful body—the sign, the letter, the printed text” (5). Kafka himself claimed in a conversation to Gustav Janouch that “Mankind can only become a gray, formless, and therefore nameless mass through a fall from the Law which gives it form.”169 For Corngold, this quotation presupposes that Kafka’s great goal is to move back towards the form-giving Law from which mankind has been sundered, and that writing can purify the body of its physicality and render it a luminous “spiritual body.” The dominant critical approach to Kafka claims that Kafka used writing as a way to produce a second body, a body that he could send out into the world in place of his physical body, and a body that, according to Corngold, could be purified into the “spiritual body” under the Law. This other world to which writing gestures is ambivalent, according to Corngold, and tends both towards a new “life” or new “Promised Land” and towards “death,” or an “eternal dying.”170

But what if the “second body” in which Kafka sees his (alienated) self is not conceived as a human body, one that is ultimately purifiable into a “spiritual body,” but as a formless, eternally alienated, nonhuman body? Kafka’s short fiction perhaps moves neither towards neither a “Promised Land” nor an “eternal dying,” but simply avoids the logic of completion itself. Rather than attempting to “uncover the pure textual body of the law,” Kafka’s short fiction stays grounded in the materiality that cannot be sublimated

---

167 In *Kafka: Towards a Minor Literature*, Deleuze and Guattari argue that Kafka “deliberately kills all metaphor, all symbolism, all signification, no less than all designation. Metamorphosis is the contrary of metaphor. There is no longer any proper sense or figurative sense, but only a distribution of states that is part of the range of the word” (22). As a result, “There is no longer man or animal, since each deterritorializes the other, in a conjunction of flux, in a continuum of reversible intensities” (22). Yet Kafka consistently foregrounds the nonhuman-ness of his animal narrators, and imagines animal expression as the unfolding of a particular world that is ultimately inaccessible to human thought; in other words, Kafka maintains a separation between human and animal being, and human and animal modes of thought, but only in order to critique supposed transcendence of the former over the latter, and to emphasize the irreducible otherness of animal being to human being. Rather than doing away with metaphor entirely, Kafka actually uses the structure of metaphor as a way of imagining and expressing a particular animal world in its otherness. In the process, Kafka’s metaphors become akin to the idea of “immanent metaphor,” or metaphor that generates no stable content by comparing one term to another and in which the specific content of the metaphor overwhelms the representational apparatus that attempts to sublimate material content into abstract concept, as discussed in Chapter One of this study.

168 Corngold, p. 4.

169 Qtd. in ibid., p. 4.

170 ibid., p. 8.
into concepts. For Kafka, like Joyce and Carroll before him, animal bodies (and human-animal hybrid bodies) take on a materiality that resists the passage from sensuous content into Hegelian “spiritual” meaning. Unlike Kafka’s novels, the short fiction does not reach back to the law, whether law as a form-giving entity or the law of formal necessity. Instead, it strives for incompleteness (or “non-arrival,” in Judith Butler’s terms), for formlessness, and asserts the non-world-forming agency of the living world over the demands of form. What Deleuze and Guattari famously read as a limitation of the short fiction, namely, its failure to articulate a social totality, can instead be seen as one of its virtues: the short fiction is an escape out of the form-governing law that constitutes any totality, whether the totality of the social world or of the human subject who is formed out of a desire to reach the law.  

Kafka’s refusal of totality, of completion, and fulfilled form has its origins in the biological-philosophical writings of Ernst Haeckel, whom Kafka studied from the age of 16, and who served as the primary interlocutor of Darwinian science for a German-speaking audience in the early twentieth century. Haeckel’s work, primarily *The Riddle of the Universe* (*Die Welträtsel*, 1903), discusses how “form” is just a name given to an order imposed on fluctuations of matter, and as such, is always subject to change based on interactions with an environment. Kafka’s short fiction, by rejecting both formal closure and the logic of form (whether bodily or literary) itself, unfolds a version of this logic, with some key departures, as will be explored shortly.

For Kafka, the animal becomes the site at which representational language collapses and where the failures of form emerge. Animals, for Kafka, are never mere stable and self-evident carriers of anthropocentric meaning, even if that meaning is a Deleuzian “line of flight” away from humanity: Kafka’s animals, to paraphrase Timothy Morton in a different context, reveal the non-existence of any “away” to which the human being might escape. Animals are ceaselessly entangled with human beings, and this entanglement can only be expressed through a language that refuses the production of harmonious meaning out of non-totalizable fragments of being. Additionally, Kafka attempts to situate human consciousness as an evolutionary product that has emerged out of the non-conceptual modes of worldly engagement proper to so-called lower forms of life, from other vertebrate mammals to non-vertebrate insects, a motif gleaned from Haeckel’s writings. To understand and express nonhuman life, then, requires finding a language that does not take human consciousness as a transcendent mode of expression, but one that is immanent with the other forms of non-conceptual thinking out of which human consciousness has evolved.

The remainder of this chapter will first explore the theoretical apparatus of Haeckel’s *The Riddle of the Universe*, a work that Kafka drew on extensively for his understanding of nonhuman life, and then will turn to a discussion of “The Burrow” and

---

171 Deleuze and Guattari claim that “Kafka’s principal animal tales” function “like a sort of counterpoint to the novel which liberates itself from all animal concern to the benefit of a much higher concern,” this “much higher concern” being an articulation of the social totality. As Dean Swinford notes, however, this emphasis on social totality “implies the value of political questions over concerns regarding the limits of the human” (223).

172 In a biography of Kafka, Klaus Wegenbach notes that “[t]he 16 year old embraced the objectives of the Frei Schule [Free School], and under the influence of Adolf Gottwald, his natural science teacher, he read the writings of Charles Darwin, as well as evolutionist Ernst Haeckel’s recently published *Riddles of the Universe.*” Wegenbach, *Kafka*, trans. Ewald Osers (London: Haus Publishing, 2003 [orig. 1964]), p. 27
“Investigations of a Dog” in the context of Kafka’s the attempt to find a language that would integrate non-conceptual with conceptual modes of thinking and make the materiality of animal bodies, and the particular modes of animal thought, inhere in language.

II. The Nonhuman in Haeckel

Ernst Haeckel’s magnum opus *The Riddle of the Universe* couples Benedict de Spinoza’s philosophy of immanence with the revelations of Darwinian science. Nature is conceived in the “monistic” terms of Spinoza’s *Ethics* (1677), meaning that at the beginning of existence is a single and unitary “Substance” out of which all entities are formed as various expressions, or “modes,” of it (E1, D3 and D5). Haeckel attempts to reconcile Spinozist monism with Darwin’s scientific critique of anthropocentrism and human transcendence over the living world. In so doing, he also attempts to reconcile the growing divide between technological-scientific and humanistic-ethical conceptions of life. As Haeckel writes in Chapter One, “The Nature of the Problem”:

An entirely new character has been given to the whole of our modern civilisation, not only by our astounding theoretical progress in sound knowledge of nature, but also by the remarkably fertile practical application of that knowledge in technical science, industry, commerce, and so forth. On the other hand, however, we have made little or no progress in moral and social life. (*RU* 1-2)

It is now the “sacred duty” of “every right-minded and humanitarian thinker” to settle this conflict, which can “only be done by a courageous effort to attain the truth, and by the formation of a clear view of the world—a view that shall be based on truth and conformity to reality” (*RU* 2). The main obstacle to attaining this “clear view of the world” is the “reactionary” dogma Haeckel terms “anthropism,” which he defines as “that powerful and world-wide group of erroneous opinions which opposes the human organism to the whole of the rest of nature, and represents it to be the preordained end of the organic creation, an entity essentially distinct from it, a god-like being.” Anthropism is in turn made of three separate dogmas: the anthropocentric dogma (in which “man is the preordained centre and aim of all terrestrial life—or, in a wider sense, of the whole universe”); the anthropomorphic dogma (which “likens the creation and control of the world by God to the artificial creation of a skilful engineer or mechanic, and to the administration of a wise ruler,” representing God in “a purely human fashion in his thought and work”); and the anthropolatric dogma (in which the human organism, endowed with an immortal soul, is the “apotheosis” of the work of God [*DW* 9-10]).

One of the solutions Haeckel offers to this problem is to insist on the immanence of human and nonhuman life. For Haeckel, building off of the work of mid-nineteenth-century scientists such as Johanes Mueller and Theodor Schwann, the “vitalist” force that traditionally is assigned exclusively to human beings is not separable from the so-called “mechanical” forces of nature, making all human action and capacity inseparable from the physical laws of nature (*RU* 34). Additionally, Haeckel argues, the “soul” is a natural phenomenon not distinct from the material world, and as such is a common possession of all living things. This ultimately leads Haeckel to formulate a new mode of harmony between humanity and nature, a harmony grounded in a newly developed aesthetic sense of the natural world as it appears to human beings. For example, Haeckel writes in the “Our Monistic Ethics” chapter:
Surrounding nature offers us everywhere a marvellous wealth of lovely and interesting objects of all kinds. In every bit of moss and blade of grass, in every beetle and butterfly, we find, when we examine it carefully, beauties which are usually overlooked. Above all, when we examine them with a powerful glass, or, better still, with a good microscope, we find everywhere in nature a new world of inexhaustible charms. (278-9)

And further on:
The infinite wealth of nature in what is beautiful and sublime offers every man with open eyes and an aesthetic sense an incalculable sum of the choicest gifts. Still, however valuable and agreeable is the immediate enjoyment of each single gift, its worth is doubled by a knowledge of its meaning and its connection with the rest of nature. . . . [Alexander] Humboldt . . . , in his standard Prospects of Nature, . . . justly indicated how closely the higher enjoyment of nature is connected with the “scientific establishment of cosmic laws,” and that the conjunction of the two serves to raise human nature to a higher stage of perfection. (280)

Haeckel’s harmonious ideal of nature, while beautifully expressed and full of optimistic promise for the peaceful co-existence of humans with the natural world, would nonetheless mark Kafka’s point of departure from the monistic philosophy of The Riddle of the Universe. Haeckel’s ideal smacks of what Timothy Morton calls the “constructivist” idea of encountering nature, or more specifically representations of nature in the artwork, in which the viewer is initially challenged by some terrifying or threatening aspect of the work, but is subsequently able to absorb this into the workings of his or her mind by creating a new “cognitive map.”173 By domesticating what is traumatic in the external world, the viewer’s mind becomes stronger and better equipped to transmute disharmonious realities into an internal harmony.

For Kafka, on the contrary, nature persists in its disharmony and its irreconcilability with human existence and human forms of thought. Any aesthetic sense of nature must take the form of unknowability, but an unknowability that is achieved through an excess of materiality (as with Joyce’s “Circe” and Flaubert’s La tentation), rather than through the setting up of nature as an aesthetic object for the enhancement of the human mind. Kafka’s monism suggests that even though we are all part of the same “mechanically” governed world, that does not mean we are any less alienated from it. For Kafka, we are intimately entwined with nonhuman beings that resist integration into the workings of our mind. Our relation to them can thus only be expressed through language that “foregrounds” (to borrow a term from the Prague Linguistic Circle) the inability of our minds to access nonhuman modes of being.

Haeckel’s insistence on the fundamental harmonious relation between human and nonhuman worlds, and the ability of human consciousness to “perfect” itself through the aestheticization of nature, seems to run counter to his earlier account of the material character of the human mind. In the “Psychic Gradations” chapter, Haeckel argues that

---

173 In Hyperobjects, Morton writes, regarding the “avant-garde edge” of Wordsworth’s poetics, which Morton names “constructivism”:

Constructivism views the artwork as a machine for upgrading the mind of the viewer. The machine is complex enough and distracting enough to unhinge one’s habitual patterns and encourage new cognitive maps to be drawn. . . . Constructivism is fundamentally Romantic: it gives us too much to know, and Spirit floats free of things like a ghost. The wish of constructivism is an if-only: if only I could displace you enough, dear reader, the world would change. (179)
human consciousness and conceptual thought are evolutionary products that have developed out of similar faculties among other animals: “conscious and rational thought,” Haeckel claims, are found “not only in the highest forms of the vertebrate stem (man, mammals, birds, and a part of the lower vertebrates), but also in the most highly developed representatives of other animal groups (ants and other insects, spiders and the higher crabs among the articulata, cephalopods among the mollusca)” (97). Further, drawing on George Romanes’ _Mental Evolution in the Animal World_ (1893), Haeckel writes:

Man’s power of conceptual thought and of abstraction has been gradually evolved from the non-conceptual stages of thought and ideation in the nearest related mammals. Man’s highest mental powers—reason, speech, and conscience—have arisen from the lower stages of the same faculties in our primate ancestors (the simiae and prosimiae). Man has no single mental faculty which is his exclusive prerogative. His whole psychic life differs from that of the nearest related mammals only in degree, and not in kind; quantitatively, not qualitatively. (87)

Haeckel’s understanding of “conceptual thought” as a not exclusively human possession may very well have been borrowed from Spinoza’s analysis of mental life in the _Ethics_. Spinoza argues that the process of thinking is inseparable from the relations of the body. As such, the “conceptual” thought of human beings is merely a chain of associations that we make based on the contingent images from the external world that affect our bodies. Spinoza writes,

> [Memory] is nothing other than a certain connection of ideas involving the nature of things which are outside the human body—a connection which is in the mind according to the order and connection of the affections of the human body. [. . . .]

> From this we clearly understand why the mind, from the thought of one thing, immediately passes to the thought of another, which has no likeness to the first: as, for example, from the thought of the word _pomum_ a Roman will immediately pass to the thought of the fruit [an apple], which has no similarity to that articulate sound and nothing in common with it except that the body of the same man has often been affected by these two, that is, that the man often heard the word _pomum_ while he saw the fruit.

> And in this way each of us will pass from one thought to another, as each one’s association has ordered the images of things in the body. For example, a soldier, having seen traces of a horse in the sand, will immediately pass from the thought of a horse to the thought of a horseman, and from that to the thought of war, and so on. But a farmer will pass from the thought of a horse to the thought of a plow, and then to that of a field, and so on. And so each one, according as he has been accustomed to join and connect the images of things in this or that way, will pass from one thought to another. (E II, P 18 Schol)\(^{175}\)

---

\(^{174}\) Research assistant, student, and friend of Charles Darwin, Georges Romanes attempted to updated the theory of evolution by natural selection after Darwin’s death in 1888, in part by arguing for the evolution of human consciousness, memory, and cognition out of similar capacities found in lower forms of life.

\(^{175}\) Haeckel echoes this language in his descriptions of consciousness and memory, as when connects “memory” to the “reproduction of presentations”: “The evolution of memory is closely connected with that of presentation; this extremely important function of the psychoplasm—the condition of all further psychic development—consists essentially in the _reproduction of presentations_” (97, italics in the original).
This kind of immanence—the immanence of abstract thought with material being—is what Kafka draws on most profoundly in his short fiction. For Kafka, if human consciousness is grounded in bodily relations and formed out of the non-conceptual modes of thinking of primates and other animals, and if there is no fundamental difference between conceptual and non-conceptual modes of thinking, then the nonhuman world—and the human’s relation to it—can only ever be imagined by approximating the forms of non-conceptual thought with which human thought is inextricably intertwined. “The Burrow” and “Investigations of a Dog” attempt to express the workings of a nonhuman mode of thought that exists somewhere amidst the continuum between conceptual and non-conceptual thought. In “The Burrow” [Der Bau, which is perhaps more accurately translated as “The Building”], the act of thinking, for the nonhuman creature-narrator, becomes specifically tied to his bodily relations with his environment, so that while thought may extend outside of the body, it cannot function when detached from what can be comprehended by this body. In “Investigations of a Dog,” the dog-protagonist’s modes of thinking recreate conceptual thought in the image of his own body, revealing the contingency of consciousness, of the concept-making facilities of the mind, and asserting the rootedness of consciousness in the material particulars that it cannot transcend. Both stories explore the biological (Haeckel’s) and philosophical (Spinoza’s) problematization of thinking as an exclusively human possession, and make an imaginative foray into what nonhuman thought, poised between the orders of the conceptual and the non-conceptual, might look like in language.

III. Thought as World-Building in “The Burrow”

Kafka’s “A Report to an Academy” [“Ein Bericht für eine Akademie,” 1917], perhaps the most famous of his “animal” stories, is a precursor to “The Burrow,” though the latter perhaps fleshes out in experimentation some of the more dissonant aspects of expressing (or attempting to express) nonhuman thought in language. The first features an ape who has learned how to speak German and mimic prototypical human behavior in order to find “a way out” [Ausweg] of the abjected state of the nonhuman, while the latter emerges from the perspective of an indiscriminate creature attempting to build within the earth a protective dwelling place, or a “burrow” (in the Muirs’ translation) or “building” from which it can shield itself from predators. In both stories, the narration from Red Peter and from the burrowing creature arises from the impossible position of an animal with the capacity to speak and compose human language. The impossible narration of “A Report,” however, is at least minimally grounded in some condition of possibility: once we accept the conceit that Red Peter has learned to speak and write, then it is no stretch to imagine him narrating and composing an account of his life. The price of Red Peter’s entrance into human language is the loss of the modes of expression through which his pre-linguistic life was experienced. In other words, Red Peter’s pre-linguistic experience cannot exist on its own terms within human language, but most conform itself both to a particular mode of expression and an existing genre of writing (the “report”). The story thus prefigures the Lacanian idea of symbolic castration as the price of entry into the structure of language: with the entry into language, the pre-linguistic experience

\[^{176}\text{I will be using the Muirs’ translation of “The Burrow” (in Franz Kafka: The Complete Stories) for this essay, with departures from it indicated in the footnotes.}\]
of *jouissance*, and the experience of a purely sensuous, tactile relation to the world, can no longer exist in itself, but only exists through the framework of a language which organizes and distributes *jouissance* in manageable forms among the various sensory organs.

Red Peter does not want what he calls “freedom,” which for him is an ontological condition, prior to the human domination of nature, that is impossible to imagine from the perspective of the present. Rather, he wants a “way out” [*Ausweg*], or in Deleuze and Guattari’s terms, a “line of flight,” that will lead him out of the abjected condition of captivity. But the “line of flight” that Deleuze and Guattari consider a general feature of all of Kafka’s writing does not necessarily apply to such stories as “The Burrow,” which are more preoccupied with the opposite movement: the formation of an interior, the creation of depth, a *Weg im inneren*, or a *way in*. For the creature-narrator of “The Burrow,” there is no imaginable escape from its own abjected condition, for it does not have the capacity to enter the symbolic structure of the human world through language. The creature’s language in “The Burrow” comes from a truly impossible place: there is no imaginable way, no possible narrative conceit, that would allow this creature’s narration to come to us. It can only be imagined as a human narrator attempting to occupy the place of animal life.

Unlike Red Peter’s “report,” then, the narration of “The Burrow” comes to us broken, fragmented, full of logical contradictions and seemingly unnecessary repetitions, with no attempt to communicate according to the logic of narrative conventions. But though the idea of occupying a symbolic position within humanity is completely withdrawn from the creature-narrator, there are still certain satisfactions that he strives after. These go beyond the basic need to hunt prey and protect itself from predators, since the creature is also preoccupied with the act of “building” in itself, of constructing a “building” within the ground, and he takes pleasure in the performance of these acts. In other words, the creature is not reducible to a mere bearer of drives, nor is he merely a screen for the projection of the sublime values of nature upon it. Rather, he exists outside these terms, as an entity with particular capacities and powers that it deploys in relation to its environment in order to achieve satisfactions that go beyond the mere performance of instinctual behavior.

---

177 For this reason, many critics read this story in the context of 19th-century slave narratives such as Frederick Douglass’s *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855), which similarly narrate the attempt to remake oneself in the image of Western humanity in order to overcome the grounds for enslavement.

178 “The Burrow” thus runs counter to the logic of what Kafka’s contemporary, Rainer Maria Rilke, refers to as “the Open” [*das Offene*] of animal existence, a concept introduced in the *Duino Elegies* (1922). In the “Eighth Elegy,” Rilke rhapsodizes on the animal’s sense of peacefulness in existence because, unlike human being, the animal’s

\[\ldots\] being to itself is unending, unbounded, and without sight
of its own condition, pure, like its own outwards sight.
And where we see the future, it sees everything
and itself in everything, healed for all time. (50)

Because animals lack knowledge of death, they are forever in the “Open,” in which they occupy an eternal present tense that allows them merely to partake in the world instinctively rather than spend their energies remembering the past and worrying about the future. Kafka’s creature opposes this idealization of animal life: the creature of “The Burrow” thinks about little else aside from the possibility of its own death, and is constantly recalling its own various attempts to build the burrow or to catch prey or protect itself from predators. The creature formulates itself in terms of vulnerability, and it is out of this sense of vulnerability that his expression proceeds.
“I have constructed my burrow and it seems [erscheint] to be very successful” (“DB” 4). The famous first sentence of “The Burrow” gives us a narrator who is not necessarily trying to tell a story, or at least not according to the narrative conventions that we are accustomed to as readers. We are never granted a transcendent position from which all of the narration we are getting, the creature’s continuous stream of description, will be meaningful for us. The entire 35-page story will be the unfolding of this proposition in the mind of the narrator, with an almost endless amount of pressure placed on the verb “seems” [erscheint, which can also be translated as “appears,” as in Kafka’s diary entry about his horse dream], for the narrator oscillates between believing in and doubting the protection that his burrow offers him.

A few lines later, he will tell us, “But you mistake me if you think that I am a coward [feige] and only out of cowardice [Feigheit] constructed my burrow” (325, translation modified). Yet the next sentence contradicts what he just said, since he claims that if someone were to step on the moss covering the entrance to the burrow, this other creature could “make his way in and destroy everything for good” (325). The narrator is put in a vulnerable position by having only a thin layer of moss separating the entrance from the outside world, but he also cannot cover this entrance with “loose earth” because this would make it too hard to get out at a moment’s notice. Regarding this situation, he notes that “All of this rightly [recht] involves very laborious calculation [Rechnungen], and the pleasure [Freude] of the mind in its own sharpness is often the only reason why one continues this calculation [weiterrechnet]” (325, translation modified). There is a pleasure the creature derives from “calculation,” and from “calculating again” (the literal definition of weiterrechnet): the construction of an interior space is not just about protection, but also provides satisfactions to the creature, such as the satisfaction of forging an interior space unbeknownst to the outside world, the satisfaction of completing work, and the satisfaction of contemplating one’s completed work.

These pleasures and satisfactions exist somewhere between instinctual behavior (or what we might call the pre-conceptual) and conceptual thought: the creature’s actions are individual to himself, to his own mode of engagement with the world and not part of an instinctual, species-wide pattern of behavior, yet the creature still imagines his place in the world through the relations of his body to his environment, rather than in the abstract, conceptual terms of human thought. His world is made up of an amassment of particulars: particular energies, powers, pleasures, and capacities that he expresses in his world. A model for this kind of non-conceptual yet non-instinctual mode of thinking is found in Spinoza’s concept of “striving” (or conatus), which he discusses in the Ethics. Spinoza writes, “Each thing, as far as it can by its own power, strives to persevere in its being” (E III, P6), and following from this, that “The striving by which each thing strives to persevere in its being is nothing but the actual essence of the thing” (E III, P 7).

Similarly, Spinoza writes in Book I of the Ethics, “Whatever exists expresses the nature, or essence of God in a certain and determinate way . . . , that is . . . , whatever exists expresses in a certain and determinate way the power of God, which is the cause of all things” (E I, P 36 Dem). This power of striving proper to each thing is also known as the conatus. Thinking of Kafka’s creature in terms of conative striving towards its own

---

179 As discussed in Chapter Two, God, in Spinoza’s Ethics, is identified with nature, as immanent with the natural world (“God is the immanent, not the transitive, cause of all things”) rather than being the all-powerful deity of the monotheistic religions (E I, P 18).
essence provides us a way out of the binary modes of thought that consider animals as either bearers of instinctual drives or as anthropomorphized human beings. Haeckel’s *Die Welträtsel* argues that the boundary between conceptual and non-conceptual modes of thought should be considered as a continuum rather than an absolute distinction, and “The Burrow” attempts to imagine what this kind of hybridized, partly conceptual and partly non-conceptual mode of thought might look like.

Spinoza’s definition of the “concept,” which he refers to as a “common notion,” means something different than an abstract category, such as “species,” within which individual entities can be subsumed. A common notion, rather, is a form of concrete understanding based on the relation between my body and another body, or as Spinoza defines it, an idea of “something which is common to . . . the human body and certain external bodies” (*E* II, P38 Dem). Abstractions, on the other hand, are imaginations of relations that we do not comprehend because they are not felt or registered in the body and thus cannot be directly known. In his gloss of the distinction between common notions and abstractions, Gilles Deleuze writes,

> [A] common notion expresses our capacity for being affected and is explained by our power of comprehending. On the contrary, an abstract idea arises when our capacity for being affected is exceeded and we are content with imagining instead of comprehending: we no longer to seek to understand the relations that enter into composition; we only retain an extrinsic sign, a variable perceptible characteristic that strikes our imagination, and that we set up as an essential trait while disregarding the others (man as an animal of erect stature, or as animal that laughs, that speaks, a rational animal, a featherless biped, etc.).

“Abstract” thought, in Spinoza’s terms, is more akin to what we would now consider “conceptual” thought, in that it moves beyond the knowledge of what I can comprehend in relation to my body and begins to make judgments about relations between bodies in the world about which I can have no direct comprehension. This opposition between bodily knowledge and abstract, disembodied knowledge becomes, for Haeckel, a way to rethink the division between the supposedly conceptual thought of human beings and the supposedly non-conceptual thought of nonhuman beings, and for Kafka, a way to collapse this distinction entirely.

The narrator of “The Burrow” relates to his world in terms of bodily knowledge, or common notions, but it is a bodily knowledge that verges towards the complexity of abstract or conceptual thought, without ever being fully containable by either mode. The challenge for Kafka is to provide a way to express nonhuman modes of engagement with the world, or nonhuman thought that are irreducible to either purely conceptual or instinctual modes of thinking, in the anthropic medium of language. What emerges, of course, can only ever be an approximation, or a mistranslation, of nonhuman expression, but Kafka’s insistence on the performance of this failure reveals something of the limits of anthropocentric conceptions of the world.

The creature’s expression is most often read in terms of narcissism, psychosis, compulsion, or even sexual anxiety, the general critical consensus being that he is a

---

180 Deleuze, *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy.*
181 Peter Stine, “Franz Kafka and Animals,” p. 75
self-obsessed neurotic who, in his neuroticism, reveals the troubling underside of human existence: are we all really in our own lives anything other than burrowing animals pounding our foreheads into the earth in an attempt to construct a safe dwelling place or secure interiority away from the outside world? But these kinds of readings capitulate too easily to the logic of traditional animal metaphor, in which an animal figure is employed to reveal truths about humanity or the human condition. Thinking of the creature’s work and narration as an expression of conative striving, however, allows us to avoid understanding it in anthropocentric terms. It is perhaps our tendency, as humans, to read as “compulsive” what is merely the creature’s striving towards a more vivid description of his world according to the terms of his own being. In this sense, “The Burrow” can be read as a metaphor, but not a traditional metaphor that articulates meaning about some entity through the vehicle of another, but a kind of immanent metaphor, a metaphor that is the unfolding and expression of vivid, physical content without being sublimated into a given concept of what this content might mean for another entity. The content, in other words, overwhelms the apparatus of meaning that attempts to contain its expression and direct towards a given, idealized end.

The burrow is constructed of a central room, referred to as the “Castle Keep” [Burgplatz], and several smaller “rooms” and “passages” throughout, some of which have been constructed purely for the purposes of deception (“TB” 327). The creature has decided to keep most of his stores of food in this central room, after realizing that while it would be safer to divide his stores among different rooms in order to avoid the attack of a predator, it would be too laborious to divide up his stores in this way. As a result, he is often delighted and tempted by the large pile of food collected in one place:

For some time it gives me a certain comfort to have all of the rooms and passages free, to see the stores of meat piling up in the Castle Keep and sending to the the furthest passages their mingled smells, each of which delights me in its own fashion and each of which I can accurately distinguish from the furthest distance. Then I usually enjoy periods of particular tranquility, in which I slowly, gradually change my sleeping place from the outer circle towards the inside, always plunging deeper into the smells, until I can no longer stand it and one night I lunge into the Castle Keep, fling myself powerfully upon my stores, and gorge myself to the point of numbness upon my best and most beloved meat. Happy but dangerous hours; whoever knew how to take advantage of them could destroy me easily with no risk to himself. (“TB” 330, translation modified)

This is a “greed” that the creature cannot fully guard himself against, even though it puts him in direct danger from predators. The creature’s actions, we see, are irreducible to instinctual behavior, since this management of food supplies occurs alongside the management, or calculation, of his own pleasures and satisfactions. These pleasures and satisfactions are not limited to mere consumption: the “certain comfort” [gewisser Trost] the creature feels at seeing the “stores of meat piling up,” the delight over the “mingled smells” that “delight[ ]” him in their own “fashion,” and the gradual movement, over the course of an extended period of time, closer and closer to the smells of the meat.183 The creature attempts to give us the most thorough possible description of what this “certain comfort” consists of: a combination of the pleasures of calculation, the pleasures of

---

smelling and at the recognition of smells, and, finally, the pleasures of unrestrained consumption, all of which are tied to his body and devoted to the formation of relations between his body and the external world. At the same time, the creature does not exist as a reflection of evolutionary instincts that lead to some harmonious ideal of a perfectly balanced natural world: in this passage, he ravenously devours large portions of what he has set aside for over “half a year,” filling himself much more than is necessary for survival, and even to the point where survival is threatened (328). “Nature” is given to us in terms of excess that leads to vulnerability.

In passages like this, there is also an excess of physical description, or details which cannot quite be incorporated into a larger framework of meaning. The detailed description of him moving his sleeping place closer to the smells, for example, does nothing to advance any narrative trajectory, but only accentuates his illogical modes of thinking that run counter to the survivalist mentality that dominates most of the story. This emphasis on excessive description contrasts with “A Report to an Academy,” in which we are given a framework within which all of Red Peter’s actions and descriptions are significant, since they testify to his humanity, and describe his journey from animal to human being through the mimicry of human behavior. Here, we are given description that cannot be incorporated into a larger framework of meaning, and so we must either invent one (to say that the story is a metaphor for the human condition, or a metaphor of Kafka’s life and writing, or the ravings of a psychotic/narcissistic individual, etc.) or try to engage with the particular terms of this description in the absence of a grounding principle or concept. The story, in this sense, becomes the amassment of particulars without a governing concept holding them together. As such, “The Burrow,” like the horse story in Kafka’s diary, refuses the logic of form as a kind of totalizing closure. If the story is an organism, with “blood” and a beating heart, it is an organism without clear definition and subject to continuous flux.

Mid-story, the creature ventures outside the burrow to survey its entrance, but then returns to the security of the Castle Keep before long:

My burrow takes up too much of my thoughts. I fled from the entrance fast enough, but soon I am back at it again. I seek out a good hiding place and keep watch on the entrance of my house—this time from outside—for whole days and nights. Call it foolish if you like; it gives me infinite pleasure and reassures me. At such times it is as if I were not so much looking at my house as at myself sleeping, and had the joy of being in a profound slumber and simultaneously of keeping vigilant guard over myself. (334)

In contrast to the scene of his gorging on food stores, in which the creature managed his pleasures by moving closer and closer to the pile of meat every night, here the creature’s “pleasure” in surveying the outside of the burrow is precisely not calculable, for it is “infinite.” Again, it is a pleasure beyond the performance of instinctual behavior, yet not quite part of the same abstract, conceptual modes of thinking that the creature perhaps recognizes in the audience, whom he at least indirectly addresses with the clause, “Call it foolish if you like.” The creature is able to contemplate himself outside of himself, or conceive himself as two different entities: one inside the burrow, one outside the burrow. In watching over “himself” inside the burrow, and in narrating the act of watching, the creature takes satisfaction in the expression of his own being, reaching towards a more precise sense of himself in the world. Indeed, when he first leaves the burrow and begins “hunt[ing] through the open woods,” he “feel[s] new powers [neue Kräfte] awakening in
[his] body for which there was no room, as it were, in the burrow, not even in the Castle Keep, though it had been ten times as big” (333). Outside the burrow, he is a different entity, and this difference is expressed through the exercise of new powers. However, watching over himself in the burrow becomes a way of managing both identities in relation to his surroundings, and by extension, creating a more vivid sense of himself in the world. This is perhaps what all of the many seemingly excessive details and repetitions of the story amount to: an attempt to formulate his being in the world in non-conceptual terms, or terms related to his body, but also in non-instinctive terms, in that his actions are not completely determinable by his body.

These “new powers” that the creature feels growing within himself are, of course, not fully expressible through language, even though language is the medium through which we receive them in the story. The creature’s language performs his being in the world; it is a language that does not move forward towards the formation of concepts, but stays grounded in materiality, in the material relations of the creature’s body to his world. The creature obviously cannot speak in language, but the language in which his thought is given to us becomes a physicalized means of expression, one that enacts his relation between body and world. In several instances, thought itself becomes part of the creature’s physical relation to his world, such as a particularly graphic scene in which he, watching the entrance to the burrow from the outside, imagines how he would deal with an invader:

If [a particular enemy] were actually to arrive now, if in his obscene lust he were to discover the entrance and set about working at it, lifting the moss; if he were actually to succeed, if he were actually to wriggle his way in in my stead, until only his hindquarters still showed; if all this were actually to happen, so that at last, casting all prudence to the winds, I might in my blind rage leap on him, maul him, tear the flesh from his bones, destroy him, drink his blood, and fling his corpse among the rest of my spoil. . . . But nobody comes and I am left to my own resources. (337, my ellipsis)

This imaginary scene of meeting an invader becomes intensely physical, completely rooted in the material relations between the creature’s body and the invader’s body: the invader is conceived not in terms of an abstract threat, but as a “wrigg[ing]” mass with its “hindquarters” on display, soon to become a “corpse” to be added to the creature’s “spoil.” In a sense, this is a conceptual train of thought, based on an imaginary relation and given to us in a conditional tense that is explicitly contrasted with the “actual” (“if he were actually to arrive now,” “if he were actually to succeed,” “if he were actually to wriggle,” “if all this were actually to happen,” etc.). At the same time, however, even the “concept” of an invader can only be encountered as a physical body, one that the creature’s language performatively rips into shreds and adds to a meat pile. Language becomes detached from a conceptual frame, incorporate with the creature’s bodily mode of relation to his external world. Or, rather, language enters a conceptual frame only in order to distort this frame with its physicality, to convert the conceptual frame into a space of non-conceptual, physicalized relations. This is one way to imagine what a nonhuman mode of thinking and being, one that skirts the borders of the conceptual and non-conceptual, might look like in language.

Once back inside the burrow, the creature’s imagination turns towards the fear of invaders within the burrow, which dominates almost the entire latter half of the story. The source of these fears is “an almost inaudible whistling noise” [zischen, which can also
mean “fizzing” or “hissing”] emanating from somewhere inside the burrow (343). The creature explores different possibilities of what this “whistling” might be, whether the murmurings of a “small fry” [Niederjagd] that has made its way into the burrow, a “swarm of unknown creatures” embedded in the walls whose individual cries aggregate into the whistling sound, or, most terrifying of all, the sound of a larger predator who is digging its own burrow underground and may be in the proximity of the creature’s burrow.

As with the imagination of an invader wriggling into the burrow’s entrance, the creature formulates a conceptual understanding of what the whistling noise might portend by translating it into the terms of bodily relations. These bodily relations are all imaginary, since the whistling never actually does become tied to a specific body before the end of the story, though this does not make them any less physical, or any less a part of the creature’s vivid engagement with his surrounding world. Rather than read the creature’s obsession with the whistling noise as a kind of neurosis, it is perhaps more accurate to read it as an attempt to formulate a more precise understanding of himself amidst his world, a way of conative striving based on the continual articulation, the continual unfolding, of his own being in the world. In this sense, imaginary invaders or predators form just as much a part of his world as do real ones (which are never encountered in the narration of the story), since they actively cause him to reformulate what he knows about this world.

At first, when he is awakened by “an almost inaudible whistling noise,” he understands it without hesitation: “I recognized what it was immediately; the small fry, whom I had allowed far too much latitude, had burrowed a new channel somewhere during my absence, this channel must have chanced to intersect an older one, the air was caught there, and that produced the whistling noise” (343). But it becomes impossible to locate the source of the whistling, which seems not to have a single source, but perhaps “two centers” (345), or may even be emanating from “all the passages” (346). In attempting to discover the source of the noise, the creature explains:

In such cases as the present it is usually the technical problem that attracts me, for example, from the noise, which my ear can distinguish in all its finest shades, so that it has a perfectly clear outline to me, I deduce its cause, and now I am on fire to discover whether that conclusion is valid. And with good reason, for as long as that is not established I cannot feel safe, even if it were merely a matter of discovering where a grain of sand that had fallen from one of the walls had rolled to. (344)

But the creature cannot “deduce its cause,” and his constant investigations reveal nothing about the source of the noise or the fellow creature or creatures responsible for producing it. Moreover, his ear cannot really, as he claims, “distinguish [the noise] in all its finest shades, so that it has a perfectly clear outline to me,” since he alternately refers to the noise as an undifferentiated sound punctuated by regular pauses: “the same thin note, with regular pauses, now a sort of whistling, but again like a kind of piping” (344), “exactly the same noise wherever I may hear it” (345), and as a differentiated set of sounds: “Already I have almost fancied sometimes, when I have listened carefully, that I could distinguish, if very indistinctly, differences of tone” (345), and toward the end of the story, “The noise seems to have become louder, not much louder, of course—here it is a matter of the subtlest shades—but all the same sufficiently louder for the ear to recognize it clearly” (351). At first, he tells us that “I did not hear [the noise] at all when I first arrived, although it must certainly have been there” (343) and later, that “I cannot
suddenly begin to hear now a thing that I have never heard before though it was always there” (347). And again, at one point we are told that he hears the noise “more distinctly, for my ear has grown keener through practice, though in reality it is exactly the same noise wherever I may hear it,” and later, “My sensitiveness to disturbances in the burrow has perhaps become greater with the years, yet my hearing has by no means grown keener” (347).

What is the point of all of these apparent logical contradictions? The sound, which some critics argue may even be a product of the creature’s imagination, serves different purposes for the creature at different times: it becomes attached to different bodies, different possibilities, that the creature’s thinking becomes preoccupied with over the course of thought. When he thinks the noise is coming from the wind blowing through the channels bored into the walls by the small fry, he understands his own hearing capacity in a certain way, suggesting that the noise had always been there, but he was unable to hear it before he fully settled back into the burrow after his excursion to the outside. When he rejects the explanation that the noise comes from the very act of the small fry’s burrowing (and not the wind blowing through tunnels they have bored), and begins to think that the noise might be coming from an “unknown animal,” or a “swarm of unknown . . . tiny creatures,” he understands his hearing capacity another way, claiming that he cannot “suddenly begin to hear now a thing that I have never heard before though it was always there” and that his hearing “has by no means grown keener” (347). Finally, when he imagines that the sound is coming from a single, great beast digging its own burrow that may be adjacent to the creature’s burrow, he imagines that the sound is emanating from a single source, which is the “muzzle” of the beast as it draws in breath, though this source changes because the beast is “encircling” him (354).

If this were true, of course, the sound would not be heard uniformly throughout the Castle Keep, since it would be louder in the areas closer to the beast’s present location and softer in the areas further away from it. When he imagines the sound as belonging to this terrifying beast, the sound becomes “louder,” which runs counter to the regularity of the sound the creature had earlier emphasized:

The noise seems to have become louder, not much louder, of course—here it is always a matter of the subtlest shades—but at the same sufficiently louder for the ear to recognize it clearly. And this growing-louder seems a coming-nearer [dieses Stärkerwerden scheint ein Näherkommen]; still more distinctly than you hear the increasing loudness of the noise, you can literally [förmlich] see the step [Schritt] that brings it closer to you. You leap back from the wall, you try to grasp at once all the possible consequences that this discovery will bring with it. (351, translation modified)

As the sound becomes attached to different bodies, and different possibilities emerge into his line of thought, the creature continually reformulates his understanding of his own powers and capacities (hearing, in this case) in relation to the changing external world around him. We can read this not as a symptom of some obsessive disorder or neurosis, but as the conative striving towards a more thorough understanding and expression of his own being in the world, something that is constantly being negotiated in relation to his environment. In this sense, what we see as “contradictions” are really just the process of

---

184 Wiegand, for example, refers to the whistling as a “hallucination.” See Wiegand, “Franz Kafka’s ‘The Burrow,’” op. cit., p. 155.
continual reformation of the creature’s own being in relation to different worldly possibilities. This makes the creature’s thinking non-conceptual, since it exists in language that continually accepts logical contradictions in the service of providing a more vivid, more precise sense of the creature’s own being. But this nonconceptuality still operates within a framework of conceptuality, full of markers of logical thought, such as “hypotheses,” “investigations,” “assumptions” “conclusions,” etc. Conceptual thought, in this sense, becomes a framework within which the vivid, non-conceptual particulars of the creature’s thinking are allowed to flourish.

In the beginnings of his fear of the great beast, the creature’s narration, over the course of a single sentence in the passage quoted above, dissolves the separation between thought and world: “And this growing-louder seems a coming-nearer; still more distinctly than you hear the increasing loudness of the noise, you can literally [förmlich] see the step that brings it closer to you” (351). Where at first the growing-louder “seems” to mark a “coming-nearer,” by the second half of the sentence, the creature tells us that one can “literally” (or more precisely, “officially” or “positively”) “see the step.” The creature’s thought produces his external world, which then determines the formation of his own internal makeup as a response to the external world he imagines into being. In other words, once the creature imagines into “literal” being a more powerful predator in his vicinity, he immediately alters his own self-conception in relation to his external world: no longer boastful of his ability to “tear the flesh from [an invader’s] bones, destroy him, drink his blood, and fling his corpse among the rest of my spoil,” as he was when he ventured outside the burrow to survey its entrance, now he casts doubt on his own preparations against invaders, on the burrow as a place of security, and on his own powers and capacities to safeguard himself:

You leap back from the wall, you try to grasp at once all the possible consequences that this discovery will bring with it. You feel as if you had never really organized the burrow for defense against attack; you had intended to do so, but despite all your experience of life the danger of an attack, and consequently the need to organize the place for defense, seemed remote—or rather not remote (how could it possibly be!)—but infinitely less important than the need to put it in a state where one could live peacefully; and so that consideration was given priority in everything relating to the burrow. . . . I have had a great deal of luck all those years, luck has spoiled me; I have had anxieties, but anxiety leads to nothing when you have luck to back you. (351)

And further on: “I have been as thoughtless as a child, I have passed my manhood’s years in childish games, I have done nothing by play even with the thought of danger, I have shirked really taking thought for actual danger” (355). The possibility of another powerful, burrowing beast leads the creature to reconceive anew everything he has imagined about the protections that the burrow offers him, and to reconceive how his powers and capacities have functioned in relation to the burrow, and to his external world generally.

The story ends amidst the creature’s persistent fear of the “great beast,” a beast whose existence is still purely hypothetical, though the hypothetical is of course inseparable from what really exists, since the creature’s thinking does not allow for a clean separation between conditional and actual being. The story must remain inconclusive because there is no way for the creature to imagine a bodily grounded relation between himself and the predator, since the great beast is precisely what lies beyond the limits of
the creature’s imagination, as he notes: “[T]he things that seem to contradict the hypothesis [of the existence of a great beast] are merely things which make the beast, not so much impossible, as merely dangerous beyond all one’s powers of conception” (353). The last lines of the story involve the creature contemplating whether or not the great beast has, at some point in its own burrowing, heard the creature and knows of his existence: “[I]f it had heard me, I must have noticed some sign of it, the beast must at least have stopped work every now and then and then to listen. Yet all remained unchanged [Aber alles bliebt unverändert]” (359).

Because of its ambiguous conclusion, there is some debate as to whether or not Kafka’s story was actually finished, though even if it did remain unfinished, there still would be no way to bring “The Burrow” to a stable conclusion and no way to dispel its ambiguity, and not just because the creature would be unable to narrate its own death, as Hermann Weigand argues. Rather, it is because the creature is caught trying to relate itself, through thought and body, or through bodily thought, through a mode of thinking that can only grasp things based on their relation to one’s body, to something that cannot be imagined in terms of the body. When the creature imagines meeting the predator, he cannot imagine “an understanding with the beast,” but only a violent confrontation, in which both will “blindly” attack one other without a second thought (358). Additionally, when the creature surmises that “perhaps the beast is digging its own burrow, in which case I cannot even dream of an understanding [Verständigung]” he capitulates to the fact that a bodily relation to another powerful being, a being that possesses the same powers and capacities (for burrowing, among other things), but in an unknown, most likely a superior form, is inconceivable to him (358).

This is perhaps one way to read the closing sentence of the story: “Yet all remained unchanged” (359). At the most literal level, the creature is referring to the fact that the great beast has not yet heard him and thus has not actually entered the burrow, and so nothing has changed. But this “all” can refer not just to the unchanged dimensions of the burrow, but also to the unchanged nature of the creature himself, to the fact that there is no further way for the creature to “change” himself in relation to his surroundings: all must remain unchanged because there is no longer any possible way for the creature to comport himself in relation to the burrowing beast, which cannot be known or managed according to the creature’s mode of thinking. But this is of course not the end of the creature’s life, though it is perhaps the end of what we can know of the creature’s life, now that he will be caught in the midst of an attempt to form a bodily

---

185 Weigand writes, “Is there, then, no possibility of any definitive ending to a story built on such premises? No creature, however miraculously endowed or engineered, can report on its own death” (165). Weigand then imagines a possible ending in which the creature “speak[s] to his very last heartbeat” and “for us to know that it is his last” (165). Weigand, “Franz Kafka’s ‘The Burrow,’ ” op. cit.

186 The creature imagines that the great beast’s chief means of burrowing is not its claws, which it probably employs merely as a secondary resource, but its snout or muzzle, which, of course, apart from its enormous strength, must also be fairly sharp at the point. It probably bores its snout into the earth with one might push and tears out a great lump; while it is doing that I hear nothing; that is the pause; but then it draws in the air for a new push . . . . But quite incomprehensible remains the beast’s capacity to work without stopping; perhaps the short pauses provide also the opportunity of snatch[ing] a moment’s rest; but apparently the beast has never yet allowed itself a really long rest, day and night as it goes on burrowing, always with the same freshness and vigor, always thinking of its object . . . . Now I could not have foreseen such an opponent. (354)
relation to something that cannot be conceived in bodily terms. This is the limit-point of the creature’s thought: at this point of meeting an unthinkable other body, the creature’s thought becomes incapable of connecting to his external world, incapable of forming an interior state that corresponds to the demands of the external world. Since the creature has always been re-negotiating his bodily relation to the external world based on the different particulars of this world, now there is no longer any way for him to form a stable internal state: the creature is continually being remade, but in relation to an indeterminable and non-localizable external world, and this is the point at which the language in which the creature’s thought is given to us ceases.

This is why the story cannot have closure: there can be no return to the “law-giving” form, but only a continually shifting body that refuses to settle into any form. It thus relates back to Kafka’s early draft of the “horse story” in his diary, which similarly ended with an animal suspended between realms of meaning (between its owner and the policeman) and thus insusceptible to the totalizing closure that would force it into a particular meaning. In both cases, the animal body is what rejects the form-granting totality of the law, and this is why the form-denying short story perhaps becomes an ideal locus for the expression of animal being, which resists the imposition of formal definition and conceptual demarcation alike. “The Burrow” suggests that nonhuman thought, and its challenge to the strict separation between conceptual and nonconceptual modes of thinking, can be conceived in language, but only to a certain extent, after which it withdraws from us and leaves us in silence.

III. The Bodily Origins of Conceptual Thinking in “Investigations of a Dog”

If “The Burrow” stands in contrast to “A Report to an Academy,” we can read a similar opposition between “Investigations of a Dog” and “Josephine the Singer, or The Mouse-Folk.” “Josephine the Singer” operates according to a central metaphorical relation between the expression of animals (the “piping” of Josephine) and the work of the human artist, who becomes isolated from the community through her art, but whose belonging to the community is figured in terms of her art’s ability to give the people “strength to bear” the precariousness of their existence, in place of actually “driv[ing] away the evil.” The story proceeds from a nonhuman narrator and focuses on a nonhuman community, but the narrator’s thinking tends to emphasize the status of art within any beleaguered community, whether human or mouse, and the minimal degree of expression required for an activity (“piping”) to become sanctified as artistic production, as opposed to the question of what nonhuman thought itself might look like, as in “The Burrow.” In other words, the narrator’s animality comes second to the explication of the meaning of artistic production in (human or nonhuman) society.

---

188 The narrator’s thinking in “Josephine” is preoccupied with this problem, the problem of trying to isolate an individual out of a community based on her artistic ability, but realizing that this ability was only ever really an invention on the part of the community:
She is a small episode in the eternal history of our people, and the people will get over the loss of her. Not that it will be easy for us; how can our gatherings take place in utter silence? Still, were they not silent even when Josephine was present? Was her actual piping notably louder and more alive than the memory of it will be? Was it even in her lifetime more than a simple memory? Was
In “Investigations of a Dog,” on the other hand, it is the dog-narrator’s nonhuman existence that determines the entirety of his knowledge about the world, aesthetics included. The dog-narrator uses his own body to determine the reason for phenomena in the external world and ultimately, to form conceptual understandings of the external world. Rather than attempt to formulate a philosophy of art based on the role of the singer within the community, the dog-narrator of “Investigations” theorizes his world solely through the external responses that his bodily actions produce (or that he believes they produce). In “Investigations,” as in “The Burrow,” Kafka reaches towards a form of nonhuman thought rooted in the animal body, yet not fully beholden to instinctual drives and not fully made in the image of human conceptual thought. Like “The Burrow,” “Investigations” explores Haeckel’s and Spinoza’s dissolution of the conceptual/non-conceptual divide and, as such, becomes an experimental attempt to visualize how nonhuman thought, or thought that is both non-instinctual and not fully conceptual, might appear in language.

Unlike “The Burrow,” however, the narrator of “Investigations” is not as markedly inscrutable as the creature-narrator of “The Burrow”: the canine narrator’s language arrives to us without what seem to be blatant self-contradictions, without apparently meaningless digressions and points of emphasis, without the pure expression of vivid particulars as a way of continually reformulating the relations between his body and the external world, and, finally, through an almost purely rational language that seems detached from instinctual drives (though this division becomes complicated over the course of the story). Instead, the dog narrates his own existence as if speaking to an imagined audience, as does Red Peter in “A Report to an Academy”:

How much my life has changed, and yet how unchanged it has remained at bottom. When I think back and recall the time when I was still a member of the canine community, sharing in all its preoccupations, a dog among dogs, I find on closer examination that from the very beginning I sensed some discrepancy, some little maladjustment, causing a slight feeling of discomfort which not even the most decorous public functions could eliminate[.]

But if “Investigations” is in fact styled as a report to an audience (we have no real indication for whom this narration is taking place, if anyone at all), it is highly unlikely that this is a human audience (in contrast to “A Report”). Most critics accept the standard position that “Investigations” operates according to a central conceit, namely, that the dog cannot perceive the actions of human beings, nor even human beings themselves. At one point, the dog discusses the phenomenon of what he calls the “soaring dogs” [Lufthunde], or dogs that somehow remain suspended in the air contrary to all known physical laws (the narrator has never actually seen one of these, but knows of them by hearsay [294]). By way of the “conceit” that most critics adopt, the dog is unaware that these dogs aren’t actually “soaring,” but are merely being carried by human beings, or are sitting in human laps.

The main subject of the dog’s “investigations” regard the origins of food, which seems to appear either on the ground of the dogs or comes down to them “from the skies”: “Whence does the earth procure this food?” [Woher nimmt die Erde diese Nahrung?] he
inquires (303, 289). Again, the dog seems not to notice that humans are either leaving food out for the dogs, or bringing it down to them from above, and this knowledge would explain the mysterious origins of food that puzzles the narrator to no end. As John Winkelman writes in an early essay on “Investigations”: If the fictional dogs were able to see, hear, feel or smell their human masters, the mysteries which torment them would be cleared up immediately; as it is, the existence of human beings results in the phenomenon of food whose origin must forever be the subject of fruitless speculation or at any rate tormenting uncertainty.”

But what would knowledge of the presence of human beings actually explain to the dog-narrator? Perhaps not very much, since the narrator’s world is formulated according to a fundamental canine-centrism, in which the whole of epistemology consists of what can be known and experienced according to “the dog.” Anything that falls As the narrator remarks in a key passage early in the story:

Only with the assistance of the whole dog world could I begin to understand my own questions. For instance, when I asked: “Whence does the earth procure this food?” was I troubled, as appearances might quite well indicate, about the earth; was I troubled about the labors of the earth? Not in the least; that, as I very soon recognized, was far from my mind; all that I cared for was the race of dogs, that and nothing else. For what is there actually except our own species? To whom but it can one appeal in the wide and empty world? All knowledge, the totality of all questions and all answers, is contained in the dog. If one could but realize this knowledge, if one could but bring it into the light of day, if we dogs would but own that we know infinitely more than we admit to ourselves! (289-90)

It is not strange to imagine that a dog would imagine canine knowledge to be the source of authoritative understanding about the external world, much as human beings uphold the universal validity of human modes of knowledge. Kafka theorizes a world in which the human self is not missing, but rather is irrelevant and meaningless, and fully incorporated into the contours of an alternative epistemology in which human action is perceivable only through its hazy effects which cannot be linked to a stable, or meaningful, cause or agent. In this vein, Margot Norris argues that the dog’s statement is a satirical reversal of anthropocentric attitudes: “Yet this very occlusion, this failure to give the human recognition, functions as the mirror of human anthropocentrism. . . . [T]he dog represents dogdom purely phenomenologically, without recognizing itself or its species as objects of pathos, as victims, or as oppressed.” And more generally, “In the mirror of Kafka’s story, we recognize ourselves as failing to recognize that we are merely creatures enfolded in an organic universe teeming with myriad life forms that are each to themselves the centers of their universe.”

While I agree with and appreciate the importance of Norris’s argument as a counter to more anthropocentric readings of the story, I find Norris’s emphasis on “Investigations” as a “mirror” for human beings, who recognize their own anthropocentrism in the dog’s canine-centrism, to be slightly limited in that it tends towards the perspective that humans are in some ways the privileged recipients of the

191 ibid., p. 24.
dog’s narration. As mentioned earlier, several of Kafka’s stories, “Investigations,” “The Burrow” and “Josephine the Singer” among them, exist in the strange position of having no conceivable audience, or no conceivable way for the narration we are reading to be reaching us. If this is so, and if it is by mere accident or contingency that we are receiving this narration (and receiving it in language), then why should we imagine that it is somehow directed at human beings, rather than simply being the (imagined) expression of the dog’s world according to his own epistemological discoveries?

In this sense, it would make little difference whether the Lufthunde are being carried by other beings or if they are floating of their own volition: in both cases, by the force of some external agency, some mysterious, other-dogly force, certain dogs float in the air while others do not. The explanation that other creatures have decided to carry dogs in their laps is just as foreign to the narrator’s canine epistemology as would be some other supernatural explanation of how dogs float in the air. Additionally, as Norris notes, it is not that the dogs cannot “perceive” humans, since they do encounter humans and other creatures all the time, but simply choose not to recognize them or form meaningful relationships with them, as the narrator explains early on:

Apart from us dogs there are all sorts of creatures [Geschöpfen ringsumher] in the world, wretched, low, dumb creatures of limited being who can only communicate by certain cries [nur auf gewisse Schreie eingeschränkte Wesen]; many of us dogs study them, have given them names, try to help them, educate them, uplift them, and so on. For my part I am quite indifferent to them except when they try to disturb me, I confuse them with one another, I ignore them. (279, translation modified)

But we should not assume, as Norris does, that these remarks refer in any meaningfully specific way to human beings. Rather, the concept of the non-canine, or the “all sorts of creatures” that the dogs regularly encounter, becomes the equivalent of our concept of the “nonhuman”: this word becomes a catch-all signifier for every life form outside of one’s own species while homogenizing the whole wealth of diversity and difference within this term into a conceptual sameness.

This concept-making function is important to “Investigations” because Kafka is at work in this story to reveal the contingency of all conceptual formations, and following Spinoza, the rootedness of these formations in the body from which the external world is experienced and translated into concepts. As discussed in the previous section, for Spinoza, the ordering of thought into “abstractions” depends on how each individual “has ordered the images of things in the body”:

And in this way each of us will pass from one thought to another, as each one’s association has ordered the images of things in the body. For example, a soldier, having seen traces of a horse in the sand, will immediately pass from the thought of a horse to the thought of a horseman, and from that to the thought of war, and so on. But a farmer will pass from the thought of a horse to the thought of a plow, and then to that of a field, and so on. And so each one, according as he has been

---

192 See fn. 166.
193 Norris writes in “Kafka’s Hybrids”; “These creatures, we may suppose, are humans. Thus, indeed, one effect of this story is to turn anthropocentrism inside out, by parodying the world of species narcissism which allows humans to perceive creatures purely from their own cultural vantage” (24).
acquainted to join and connect the images of things in this or that way, will pass from one thought to another.  \(E-II, \text{P} \, 18 \, \text{Schol}\)

For Spinoza, one’s external world is produced by the joining of these different “thoughts” into an “order,” all of which takes place according to the disposition of the thinking individual. This is exactly what the canine narrator of “Investigations” attempts to do as he creates an epistemology, or perhaps a cosmology, through this “investigations” of the phenomena that govern his world.

“Whence does the earth procure its food?” If “all knowledge, the totality of all questions and all answers, is contained in the dog,” then the answer to this question must proceed from the dog’s self-knowledge, and more particularly, the dog’s knowledge of his own body. We can think of conative striving in this story as the dog’s attempt to formulate a sense of his own being in the world, but in ways that go slightly beyond what the creature in “The Burrow” was capable of achieving: through scientific experimentation and discovery, the dog wants to understand the nature of the world he inhabits, which begins by understanding the place of his own body within the world.

The received wisdom, which the narrator accepts, is that “water[ing] and scratch[ing] the earth according to the rules of science” is what causes the earth to “extrude[ ] nourishment”: “[T]he earth needs our water to nourish it and only at that price provides us with our food, the emergence of which, however, and this should not be forgotten, can also be hastened by certain spells, songs, and ritual movements” (288, 287). Be this as it may, it still does not answer the question of where this food comes from. Against the urging of his fellow dogs not to inquire into inexplicable mysteries, the narrator attempts to answer this question by performing a series of bodily experiments to determine how food emerges from the earth. However, through these bodily experiments, the dog is trying to form concepts about realities outside of the body (i.e., not his own body’s relation to food, the his own body’s relation to the origin of food), realities which are precisely what cannot be known physically, or through the body, and so must exist as Spinozist “abstractions,” as opposed to “common notions.”

This is why the dog’s “investigations,” as with the attempt of the creature in “The Burrow” to formulate a physical understanding of the unimaginable “great beast,” are ultimately destined to fail: caught between bodily and extra-bodily modes of thinking, the dog is unable to formulate a satisfactory epistemological ground for all the phenomena he encounters. Yet the performance of this failure, which occupies much of the latter half of the story, is precisely the means through which Kafka explores what a mode of thought between the conceptual and non-conceptual, or the rational and instinctive, might look like.

What does the dog know of the earth’s food? In the first place, he knows that it comes from two different places: it either appears on the ground, or it descends from the sky. “Science” tells him that there are “two chief methods of procuring food: namely the actual preparation of the ground, and secondly the auxiliary perfecting processes of incantation, dance, and song” (303). Through experiments, the dog takes this insight a step further by determining that the watering and scratching of the earth causes food to appear on the ground, and that sings and incantation causes food to emerge from the sky. To prove this, he tries to sing into the ground, to see if this will still cause food to appear.

\[194\] Recall that for Spinoza, a “common notion” refers to a form of concrete understanding based on the relation between my body and another body, while abstractions are imaginations of relations that we do not comprehend because they are not felt or registered in the body and thus cannot be directly known.
appear from above, but this merely leads to further confusion, since “sometimes the food did not appear,” but then “would appear” later, “as if my strange performance had caused some confusion at first, but had shown itself later to possess advantages, so that in my case the usual barking and leaping could be dispensed with” (304). What we readers know, or can surmise, is that the human owner of the dog is at first confused at the dog’s actions of singing into the ground, then eventually decides to give him the food.

At the same time, it is not entirely accurate to claim that the dog is unaware that someone or something is bringing him the food. The dog clearly registers the presence of another entity, though this other entity can only be expressed through a subjunctive, passive-voice construction, when he notes that “it was exactly as if my performance had caused some confusion at first” [so als wäre man zuerst beirrt gewesen durch meine sonderbare Aufführung]: through his actions, in other words, the dog is appealing to another being or entity or force, even though he is unable to locate this external agency within a stable, situated, and present body. This entity that has been “confused” by the dog’s actions is not theorizable solely as a human being, since human agency, within the canine epistemology, is part of the larger category of “non-canine” agency, and so is incorporated within a network of external causal forces swirling in the midst of the dog’s phenomenal world. Indeed, since the dog believes that all food emerges from the earth, either because it appears directly out of the earth, or because the earth summons the food from above, the term “earth” [Erde], and the term “ground” [Grund] with which its often used interchangeably, can be read metonymically as the site from which all non-canine agency (including human agency) arises, even if there is no firm way to secure this agency within particular external bodies.

Again, non-canine agency is what cannot be conceptualized by the dog, since it involves mysterious forces and actors (stemming from the “ground”) that the dog cannot directly relate to his own body. So in the midst of this experiment, and the next one, in which he takes the more drastic measure of “fast[ing] completely as long as I could stand it” in order to find out if the food will directly descend to his mouth as long as he keeps performing the rituals of scratching and watering the ground and incanting to the sky, he finds himself unable to produce any stable conclusions about how his actions produce effects in the external world, about how his actions influence the “earth” from which all causes proceed (306). Like “The Burrow,” “Investigations” closes at this point of impossible attunement to the causes that are external to the body: after the failed attempt to ascertain the origins of food through fasting, the dog briefly turns his attention to the “science of music,” or more specifically, the “theory of incantation, by which food is called down,” eventually giving up on solving these mysteries due to his own “scientific incapacity,” or his “limited powers of thought,” “bad memory,” and “inability to keep my scientific aim continuously before my eyes” (315). As the closing sentences read:

---

195 For example, if one were to explain to the dog that a human being is leaving out the food, the same questions would still persist: “What is causing the human being to give me the food? What is the causal relation between my actions and the human’s response? What external forces are driving the human being to act?” and so on.

196 Importantly, in German, Grund also means “cause,” a dual meaning that Kafka exploits towards the end of the story, when the dog says that “the profound cause” [tiefer Grund] of his “scientific incapacity” is his devotion to “instinct” (315, 316).

197 For example, the narrator remarks during his discussion of the science of food that “the earth draws one kind of food out of itself and calls down another kind from the skies” (303).
If I wanted to brag I might say that it was this very instinct [Instinkt] that invalidated my scientific capacities, for it would surely be a very extraordinary thing if one who shows a tolerable degree of intelligence in dealing with the ordinary business of life, which certainly cannot be called simple, and moreover one whose findings have been checked and verified, where that was possible, by individual scientists if not by science itself, should a priori be incapable of planting his paw even on the first rung of the ladder of science. It was this instinct that made me—and perhaps for the sake of science itself, but a different science from that of today, an ultimate science—prize freedom [Freiheit] higher than anything else. Freedom! Certainly such freedom as is possible today is a wretched business. But nevertheless freedom, nevertheless a possession [Besitz]. (316)

Rather than fall into the bad infinity of a ceaseless attempt to generate universal concepts out of particular events and circumstances, the dog resigns himself to the ultimate uselessness of all conceptual relations to the external world, and embraces the physicality of his bodily connection to the world, which he refers to as “instinct.” But this is not the un-mediated instinct usually assigned to animal behavior, in which a nonhuman animal’s actions are completely calculable and predictable based on its adherence to fixed laws that govern the reproduction of a species, but an instinct mediated by the dog’s knowledge of his surrounding world, and more specifically, by the dog’s bodily relation to this world. It is in this way that the dog can find “freedom” in the performance of “instinct” (usually defined as a kind of unfreedom, a slavish adherence to particular, de-individualized behaviors): instinct becomes a way of doing away with the necessity of formulating one’s world solely in terms of concepts, or “abstractions,” in Spinoza’s terms. Freedom, for the dog-narrator, becomes defined in part as freedom from the drive to attain a purely rational or purely scientific cosmology that is ultimately impossible to achieve.

It is not that the dog has given up on forming concepts at all, however, since he still formulates conceptual relations, albeit ones that emerge from his own body, even in these last sentences. When he thinks about his relationship to scientific knowledge, he conjures the image of himself “planting his paw even on the first rung of the ladder of science,” suggesting that he is capable of conceptual or abstract thought, though this kind of thinking is grounded in his bodily relation to the external world: it is his “paw” that he places on the “ladder of science” (316). In other words, the concepts the dog forms are inevitably rooted in the body and in bodily relations. This becomes even more apparent in an earlier image the dog conjures in order to describe his relation to scientific discovery and “knowledge” [Wissen] generally:

But it is not merely flesh and blood that we [dogs] have in common, but knowledge [Wissen] also, and not only knowledge, but the key to it as well. . . . The hardest bones, containing the richest marrow, can be conquered only by a united crunching of all the teeth of all dogs. That of course is only an image [Bild], and exaggerated; if all teeth were but ready they would not need even to bite, the bones would crack themselves and the marrow would be freely accessible to the feeblest of dogs. If I remain faithful to this image [Bild], then the goal of my aims, my questions, my inquiries, appears monstrous [ungeheuer], it is true. For I want to compel all dogs thus to assemble together, I want the bones to crack open under the pressure of their collective preparedness, and then I want to dismiss them to the ordinary life that they love, while all by myself, quite alone, I lap up
the marrow. That sounds monstrous, almost as if I wanted to feed on the marrow, not merely of a bone, but of the whole canine race itself. But it is only an image [Bild]. The marrow that I am discussing here is no food; on the contrary, it is a poison [Gift]. (291, my ellipsis, translation modified)

In this passage, the Muirs use the phrase “figure of speech,” in the first occurrence, and the word “metaphor,” in the next two occurrences, to translate Kafka’s original Bild, but the more literal definition of this term is “image,” which is important since the dog-narrator’s relation to the pursuit of “knowledge” is ambiguous, not entirely conceptual yet not quite entirely material either. It is outside the terms of traditional “metaphor,” in other words, since it does something other than make a stable comparison between two entities, using the vehicle (bone) to produce a more precise understanding of the tenor (knowledge). The dog-narrator imagines his relation to knowledge, which he views as a pursuit that begins from collective action but later becomes confined to the individual, in terms of the physical activity of consumption, something we traditionally associate with instinctual behavior (especially on the part of dogs, who are traditionally known for chewing on bones): knowledge is a process of uncovering the inner being of things, of biting through through the external surface of things (bone) to find the real knowledge within (marrow), and then in turn consuming that knowledge itself. The “knowledge” the dog seeks is a conceptual entity in that it lies beyond the grasp of bodily relations, yet it is figured in the material terms of bodily access. The reason the dog cannot access knowledge is because he is attempting physically to reach towards an abstract sense of knowledge that is not tied to the individual, bodily experience of one dog, but is generalized outwards to encompass the entire canine species: the “knowledge” in question has to hold not just for himself, but for all dogs.

The pursuit of this knowledge to the exclusion of the rest of the community is precisely what makes the dog think of himself as “monstrous” [ungeheuer], which is incidentally the same word that Kafka uses to describe Gregor Samsa as an insect in the first sentence of The Metamorphosis, which is similarly related to his separation from genuine communal ties: “ungeheuren ungeziefer,” or “monstrous vermin.” Unlike Gregor, however, the dog-narrator’s monstrosity is figured not as animality, but as the exaltation of the self above the community, a trait he associates with the “all sorts of [non-canine] creatures” of his world, as he observes “how little inclined they are, compared with us dogs, to stick together, how silently and unfamiliarly and with what a curious hostility they pass each other by, how only the basest of interests can bind them together for a little in ostensible union, and how often these very interests give rise to hatred and conflict” (279). This is why the dog figures knowledge as “poison”: it is not that knowledge constitutively cannot be grasped by an individual, it is just that to access this knowledge, to consume it, would be akin to destroying one’s own body with poison: the possession of a full, abstract form of knowledge generalizable to the entire dog-species is what would separate the individual from the community, and what would separate the individual from his own body. In other words, to possess a purely abstract form of knowledge would also mean that the individual would no longer be able to produce knowledge about the world from his or her own instinctive, bodily relations, since these would be encompassed within the form of general or universal knowledge. So knowledge is conceptualized as a substance that kills the body that consumes it, since it makes bodily experience irrelevant
to universal knowledge. This knowledge is not beyond the grasp of the individual, it is not some transcendent entity that is constitutively inaccessible, but this knowledge is nonetheless what alters the make-up of the individual that does grasp it, so that, upon grasping this individual will become a different entity, dissociated from his community and dissociated from his own body, and dissociated from the use of body as a means of relating to one’s world. This is how we should understand the dog’s idea of “instinct” as what leads him towards “freedom”: “knowledge,” and particularly that knowledge that takes one beyond one’s own bodily relations, is ultimately the “poison” of the marrow, which by the end of the story is identified with the purely rational/scientific order that the dog associates with unfreedom and congratulates himself for being incapable of achieving it.

In this sense, the dog-narrator’s position is not all that different from that of the creature-narrator in “The Burrow”: both find themselves in the impossible position of trying to form a bodily relation to what he cannot be understood through the body, which is the “great beast” for the latter, and the idea of abstract, generalizable “knowledge” for the former. The difference between the two is that the dog-narrator simply has a higher degree of self-awareness of what the possession of non-bodily knowledge (and its attendant consequences) would mean. In both stories, Kafka explores what a mode of thought between the conceptual and the non-conceptual might look like, and critiques the idea that possession of rational thought and abstract modes of thinking translates immediately into the superiority of one kind of being over another. In both stories, the passage into the Hegelian “spiritual sphere” of meaning is prevented by the materiality of the body. In “The Burrow,” the creature’s reliance on bodily knowledge, or perhaps more precisely, his conative striving towards bodily knowledge as a means of producing a more vivid sense of himself in the world, is what forecloses a conceptual understanding of the world, and cannot be expressed through the constraints of a concept-based language. “Investigations” reveals that conceptual thinking is merely an outgrowth of bodily relations, albeit one that stretches beyond the body to reach towards abstract knowledge. The possession of abstract knowledge, however, is what destroys the individual and separates him or her from access to the body and to bodily modes of relation to the world. Human knowledge, then, becomes writ as a form of privation, a limitation that forecloses a being from alternative modes of knowledge and alternative ways of being-with and experiencing the world.

---

198 In the Ethics, Spinoza discusses poison, along with other physically harmful substances, as that which can change the “proportions of motion and rest the human body’s parts have to one another,” and thus lead to the death of that body, since each body is defined and constituted by a certain “proportion of motion and rest” proper to it (E IV, P 39 Dem).
In her final, unfinished novel, *Between the Acts* (1941), Woolf, like Kafka, similarly explores the limitations of human-based understandings and perceptions of the world, and how nonhuman modes of being, perceiving, and thinking might be expressed in language. *Between the Acts* can be read not only as an intimation of the end of civilization, but also as Woolf’s examination of nonhuman modes of engagement with the world and her attempt to express them in writing. In it, Woolf seeks a new mode of language attuned to the sensuous dimensions of animal being and dwelling in the world that have pre-dated (and will post-date) the existence of humans. But unlike Kafka, for Woolf, the project of imagining nonhuman modes of thought and being takes on particular resonance in light of her anxieties about the onset of a Second World War that could potentially extinguish the human species and its conscious modes of worldly apprehension — the “complete ruin, not only of civilisation, in Europe, but of our last lap,” or the prospect of a world without “you” there to perceive it.

In Woolf’s diary entries from the beginning of World War II, a world without human consciousness is often conceived as the terrifying limit-point of culture’s collapse into barbarism, with animal life functioning as a threatening, dark, and violent emergence aligned with fascism. But *Between the Acts*, Woolf’s later diary entries, and the work begun on her final incomplete manuscript “Anon” all demonstrate a greater openness to the idea of nonhuman life flourishing in the absence of human consciousness. Instead of approaching animal being as a sign for the negation of life, in these later works Woolf extended her interest in thinking animal being affirmatively, as a possible escape from a self-bound mode of existence and entree into new sensuous, non-conscious modes of apprehending the world. These concerns achieve articulation in a telling moment towards the end of *Between the Acts*, during the Reverend Streatfield’s closing speech: “‘Dare we, I asked myself, limit life to ourselves? May we not hold that there is a spirit that inspires, pervades . . .’ (The swallows were sweeping round him. They seemed cognizant of his meaning. Then they swept out of sight.)” (*BTA* 192). Yes, the swallows’ flight seems to answer, life does inhere outside of the parameters of the human, and expresses itself through modalities that are separate from conscious apprehensions of reality (such as those of the Reverend Streatfield). Woolf’s later works stage the epistemic limits of the human, of a personal “life” mediated by consciousness, as it confronts the overflow of “life, life, life, without measure” embodied by the nonhuman presences inhabiting and

---

199 See, for example, Michele Pridmore Brown, “1939-40: Of Virginia Woolf, Gramophones, and Fascism”; Alex Zwerdling, *Virginia Woolf and the Real World*; and Gillian Beer, “*Between the Acts*: Resisting the End.”


201 As Andrew Ramsay, in *To the Lighthouse* (1927), explains his father’s phenomenological philosophy to Lily Briscoe: “Think of a kitchen table then . . . when you’re not there” (28).

202 For example, Woolf writes in a diary entry dated 2 October 1938: “War broken out already I. thought. Then the statement that all poisonous snakes at the Zoo would be killed, & dangerous animals shot—Vision of London ravaged by cobras & tigers. . . . All this mixture of minute detail; with invocations to God; with Hitler baying & the Germans howling; then the composed & cultured voice breaking in, say about not taking pets.” See Woolf, *Diary Vol. V*, p. 178.
destabilizing the contours of the text. Metaphor in particular, as I will argue, becomes a way for Woolf to reconfigure the representational language that upholds human exceptionality over the living world. This chapter begins by outlining Woolf’s biographical interest in thinking nonhuman being apart from an anthropocentric frame of reference, and then moves to an analysis of Woolf’s experimental uses of language in her later works as a way of both foregrounding the limitations of human consciousness as a means of apprehending the world and finding ways to express nonhuman life outside of traditional, anthropocentric modes of knowledge.

I. The World Without a Self

Woolf had explored the motif of what Bernard in *The Waves* (1931) calls “the world seen without a self” in earlier novels. Interlacing *The Waves* are scenes populated only by the rising sun’s slow coloration of the world and the bird-singing that marks territorial circles on the shore. More explicitly perhaps, in the “Time Passes” section of *To the Lighthouse* (1927), the narrative perspective dissolves the boundaries between subjects and objects into a terrifying fluidity, an all-swallowing night in which “there was scarcely anything left of body or mind by which one could say ‘This is he’ or ‘This is she.’ ” (144). This reversion of the house back to nature, however, is still registered through a human time-scale. Nature is equated with “oblivion” and the absence of life, or regression into the nothingness of what Woolf calls the “long night.” It is only the labor of the cleaning women, Mrs. McNab and Mrs. Bast, acting as “a force working; something not highly conscious,” that shores up the fragments against ruin, preserving the house so that (human) life can persist. The minimal work of “conscious[ness]” is what impels life forward. In contrast to the perspective of *To The Lighthouse* and to commentators on *Between the Acts* such as Gillian Beer, who claims that Woolf’s assault on human civilization aspires to produce “another idea of England, one which might survive,” I argue that in this final text Woolf confronts the possibility that human history

---

203 This chapter thus departs from the terms of much of the current criticism on animals in Woolf’s writing, beginning with Wendy Faris’s influential 2007 essay “Bloomsbury’s Beasts: The Presence of Animals in the Texts and Lives of Bloomsbury.” Faris focuses on the symbolic role that animals play in relation to human psychology. In the 2010 collection *Virginia Woolf and the Natural World,* most of the essays, like Faris’s before them, focus on animals as coded metaphors for human psychology. See Neverow, “The Woolf, the Horse, and the Fox,” and Simpson, “A Woolf in Hare’s Clothing?” Jane Goldman, in “Ce Chien Est a Moi: Virginia Woolf and the Signifying Dog,” discusses Woolf’s use of dog metaphors to critique the patriarchal construction of the self, but operates under the assumption that Woolf’s animal metaphors operate within the realm of representational language and can be linked to the production of knowledge. Vicki Trommanhauser’s 2009 essay, “Animal Life and Human Sacrifice in Virginia Woolf’s *Between the Acts,*” discusses Woolf’s troubling of the boundaries between human civilization and animal life, but focuses more on the collapse of civilization rather than the specific ways in which animal life and animal modes of worldly engagement find expression in *Between the Acts,* which is the focus of this essay.

204 Ann Banfield explores the impersonality of perception in *The Waves* based on the idea that objects “radiate” the same “waves or particles of light and sound,” regardless of whether beings are present to receive them (125). For an extended discussion of the interludes in *The Waves* as a way of destabilizing the conception of artistry as the product of human will, see Rohman’s “Vibration, Aesthetics, and the Inhuman.” See also Elizabeth Grosz, *Chaos, Territory, Art: Deleuze and the Framing of the Earth,* the work upon which Rohman’s arguments are based. Additionally, Derek Ryan’s “Posthumanist Interludes: Ecology and Ethology in *The Waves*” similarly argues that the interludes in *The Waves* foreground “the primacy of nonhuman events over cultural attempts to master life through language” (149).
is meaningful only insofar as it plays a role within a continually unfolding “prehistory,” or evolutionary time-scale, that stretches beyond the parameters of human existence. Woolf imagines a futurity beyond the time of the human, when the absence of human consciousness would not just mark a regression into endless negation, but would allow new nonhuman forms of sensory experience to thrive.

In the years leading up to the composition of Between the Acts, Woolf became more and more interested in thinking nonhuman agency and sensation in itself, outside of an encompassing human framework of meaning. Flush (1933), a short novel written primarily from the perspective of Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s dog, is perhaps the most salient example of this, along with later short stories such as “Gipsy, the Mongrel” (1940), about a runaway dog and the family that ponders his fate. Written immediately after The Waves, Flush was for Woolf a playful escape into nonhuman existence. Flush, Elizabeth’s cocker-spaniel, maps his world by smells and connects to her through recognition of emotional states, pressing his “hairy head” against her to soothe her, for example, when she falls into grief, for reasons unbeknownst to him, after “passing her hand over a white page with a black stick.” But while Flush marks an experimental attempt to occupy a nonhuman subjectivity, the novel ends up falling back into the narrative conventions of biography and ultimately subordinates Flush’s being to the story of Elizabeth Barrett’s and Robert Browning’s courtship, making it unsatisfying as a sustained engagement with animal agency.

While “words,” Elizabeth thinks, may “destroy the symbol that lies beyond the reach of words,” Woolf reserves her more radical efforts to remake the language by which nonhuman modes of existence are represented for her final novel. Flush can be read as the beginning of Woolf’s explicit writerly engagement with nonhuman agency, but one that was only ever intended as a flight of fancy, a momentary indulgence to “ease [her] brain, knotted by all that last screw of The Waves.”

This interest in thinking nonhuman agency is perhaps why Woolf felt so hampered while writing Roger Fry (1940), a biography of her friend, the eponymous painter, which was composed alongside Between the Acts. Woolf frequently referred to this work as “drudgery” that sapped her creative energies. At this stage of her career, there was perhaps nothing less interesting to her than amassing and narrativizing the details of an individual human life. Between the Acts (or Pointz Hall, as it was originally titled) was written almost entirely in short bursts, during fugitive moments snatched away from the

---

205 Beer, p. 147. In the same vein, Christine Froula, in Virginia Woolf and the Bloomsbury Avant-Garde, argues that both Between the Acts and La Trobe’s play within it are meant not as interrogations of the exceptionality of human being itself, but as attempts to find a new set of common values or a new sensus communis ("common sense") through which human civilization can be remade, improved, and carried into the future (321).

206 Flush, p. 38, 36.

207 In “The Bispecies Environment, Coevolution, and Flush,” Jeanne Dubino argues that Flush can be read as a novel about “coevolution,” or the mutually beneficial relationships between species (humans and dogs, in this case). In Dubino’s analysis, the novel traces Flush’s gradual entry into the contours of human being, his becoming-human, in a way: “As Flush benefits from the mutual exchanges he has with Elizabeth and the other humans in the novel . . . he becomes more like them” (142). While Dubino is positive about the coming together of human and animal being in this way, I view the becoming-human of Flush as a mode of dispelling the otherness of animal life into the limited constraints of human subjectivity. In this respect, Woolf’s insistence on the radical otherness and unknowability of animal lives in Between the Acts is what makes this text a more challenging engagement with animal agency than Flush.


composition of Roger.\(^{210}\) It provided Woolf with a way to think life prior to and apart from its incarnation in a single individual, or even in a single species.

In this regard, Woolf also took an interest in nature writing at this time: she read Gilbert White’s *A Natural History of Selborne* (1789) in 1937 and reviewed it in 1939, in an essay titled “White’s Selborne.” What fascinates her most about White’s method of nature writing is his ability to observe natural landscapes without the impediment of “self-consciousness,” as she writes in “White’s Selborne”:

> The chief question in dispute – it is indeed the theme of the book – is the migration of swallows. . . . With all his faculties bent on this great question, the image of science at her most innocent and most sincere, he loses that self-consciousness which so often separates us from our fellow-creatures and becomes like a bird seen through a field-glass busy in a distant hedge. This is the moment then, when his eyes are fixed upon the swallow, to watch Gilbert White himself.\(^{211}\)

And further on:

> His mind, like the bird’s crop that the farmer’s wife found stuffed with vegetables and cooked for her dinner, has nothing but insects in it and tender green shoots. This innocent, this unconscious happiness is conveyed, not by assertion, but much more effectively by those unsought memories that come of their own accord unsought. . . . Even the strident voice of the cricket, so discordant to some, fills his mind “with a train of summer ideas, of everything that is rural, verdurous and joyful.”\(^{212}\)

Woolf admires White’s ability to observe without the “self-consciousness which so often separates us from our fellow-creatures.” Thinking, in this mode, is not a process of constructing categories and concepts, but one of allowing the “train of ideas” to emerge of its own accord; thinking is a product of the natural world rather than a translation of the natural world into concepts.

*Between the Acts*, however, departs from the conventions of nature writing that participate in what Timothy Morton refers to as “ecomimetic” prose, in which the author attempts to dissolve the boundary between human and nature by immersing him or herself within a natural setting which is then reproduced in writing.\(^{213}\) Ecomimesis tries to work as “a sheer rendering of the real,”\(^{214}\) without mediation by an authorial self, in which the natural world is neatly folded, without authorial mediation, into the page of a book. In *Between the Acts*, by contrast, nature is ceaselessly entangled with human consciousness and processes of thought. For Woolf, to express nonhuman life in writing involves registering how the assumptions and conventions of the mediating framework are themselves changed by the attempt to absorb the living world into writing. As Woolf was aware, and as we will explore shortly, the living world also acts on the frameworks, the categories and concepts, that consciousness imposes on it, troubling any attempt to simply assimilate it into writing without confronting the tension between thought and world.

*Between the Acts* takes place during a single day of June 1939 in a small English

\(^{210}\) On 23 November 1940, Woolf records: “This book was only (I must note) written at intervals when the pressure was at its highest, during the drudgery of Roger.” *Diary Vol. V*, p 340.

\(^{211}\) “White’s Selborne,” p. 190. Like White, Lucy Swithin, from *Between the Acts*, is also obsessed with tracking and analyzing the migration patterns of the swallow.

\(^{212}\) ibid., p. 191.


\(^{214}\) ibid., p. 125.
The central event is the annual pageant that represents the development of English history from the time when the British Isles first geographically separated from the landmass of the “Continent” to the present day. The director, Miss La Trobe, uses the pageant not just as a glorification of the present order, however, but also as an interrogation of cultural values and the idea that the present has somehow transcended its prehistoric beginnings. In both novel and pageant, prehistory reverberates as the uncertain and unknowable point of origin for both the Oliver family, upon whom the novel is centered, and the “present time” of humanity generally. In the absence of a fixed patriarchal lineage (the house has been bought over a century ago by the Olivers, but they have no connection to the ancestral families who have lived there before), the collective search for origins extends back towards the “prehistoric,” or the time when, as Lucy Swithin (Isabel Oliver’s aunt by marriage) ponders upon reading H.G. Wells’ *The Outline of History*,\(^{215}\) “the entire continent, not then, she understood, divided by a channel, was all one; populated, she understood, by elephant-bodied, seal-necked, heaving, surging, slowly writhing, and, she supposed, barking monsters; the iguanodon, the mammoth, and mastodon; from whom presumably, she thought, jerking the window open, we descend” (*BTA* 7, 8).

“History” and “pre-history” become confounded at this very moment, when Lucy cannot mentally separate the entering maid, Grace, “from the leather-covered grunting monster who was about, as the door opened, to demolish a whole tree in the green steaming undergrowth of the primeval forest,” and feels on her face “the divided glance that was half meant for a beast in a swamp, half for a maid in a print frock and white apron” (8). In a similar moment, George, the Olivers’ child, becomes enraptured by a field of flowers, only to be interrupted by a “peaked eyeless monster moving on legs, brandishing arms” with a voice that “boomed at him from a beak of paper” (his grandfather, Bart Oliver) (12). These passages call for us to consider the human, like the “barking monsters” of prehistory, as an incompletely formed species, or a botched outgrowth of the evolutionary process that has no fixed place along a line of descent, if we take into account the Darwinian valences of the word “monster.”\(^{216}\)

---

\(^{215}\) This monumental work by H.G. Wells attempts to provide what the author calls “a plain history of life and mankind” from the beginnings of life on earth to all of human history, ending with the Treaty of Versailles in 1920 (the year of publication for the first edition). In formulating her thoughts about the prehistoric “monsters” from which humans descend, Lucy may be thinking of Wells’ assertion that “modern mammals” are an outgrowth of reptiles:

Now a modern mammal is really a sort of reptile that has developed a peculiarly effective protective covering, hair; and that also retains its eggs in the body until they hatch so that it brings forth living young (viviparous), and even after birth it cares for them and feeds them by its mammae for a longer or shorter period. (39-40)

She may also be consulting one of Wells’ many diagrams, employed throughout the “Age of Mammals” and “Ancestry of Man” sections, that depict a “Six Foot Man” drawn to scale alongside the many mammals from which he has descended, including the “Tetrabelodon (long-jawed mastodon),” the “Oxydactulus (primitive giraffe-camel),” the “Hairy Mammoth,” “Musk Ox,” and “Woolly Rhinoceros” (41, 48). For a further discussion of the role of *The Outline of History* in *Between the Acts*, see Gillian Beer, *Virginia Woolf: The Common Reader* and Vicki Tromanhauser, “Animal Life and Human Sacrifice in Virginia Woolf’s *Between the Acts.*”

\(^{216}\) The first usage of the word “monster” in English dates back to Geoffrey Chaucer’s *Monk’s Tale* (c. 1375), and means “a mythical creature which is part animal and part human, or combines elements of two or more animal forms” (*OED*). In *The Origin of Species*, Darwin converts this rudimentary definition into
present lie not in an ancestral line that can root the family in a historical lineage, but in the monstrous and ultimately unknowable prehistory from which the human has emerged and that troubles any stable notion of “history” the characters might want to hold on to.

This traumatic absence of a structuring and sustaining paternal lineage takes on a new dimension through the portrait of the Olivers’ “ancestor” hanging in Pointz Hall. Woolf writes, “Two pictures hung opposite the window. In real life they had never met, the long lady and the man holding his horse by the rein. The lady was a picture, bought by Oliver because he liked the picture; the man was an ancestor. He had a name. He held the rein in his hand” (36). And further on: “He was a talk producer, that ancestor. But the lady was a picture” (36). Elizabeth Abel, in Virginia Woolf and the Fictions of Psychoanalysis, has analyzed the fraught gender dynamics of this scene, in which the masculine patriarch’s portrait “generates history” while the “lady has an exclusively imaginary status: rather that being represented as a picture, she is a picture. Existing only as image, she has no name.” In Abel’s account, this is part of the novel’s larger critique of the expulsion of maternal figures from the historical record, and the impossibility of female characters to adopt an “alternative construction of maternity” apart from the “purified image of maternal generativity” that is imposed upon them by the novel’s male characters. The gender dynamic here, however, becomes slightly more complicated by the animal presence both inside and outside the frame.

The “ancestor,” we are told, wanted to include his dog in the picture:

He had said, “Ain’t there room for Colin as well as Buster?” Colin was his famous hound. But there was only room for Buster. If he, it seemed to say, addressing the company not the painter, a damned shame to leave out Colin whom he wished buried at his feet, in the same grave, about 1750; but that skunk the Reverend Whatshisname wouldn’t allow it. (BTA 36)

The ancestor’s patriarchal authority is marked, in part, by his holding “the rein in his hand,” signifying his domestication of the horse, Buster, and thus his dominance over animal agency. However, the spectral presence of the dog haunting the frame troubles the idea of a human historical lineage based on the paternal metaphor, or “name of the father.” If fatherhood is structured by the physical absence of the father, to whom the subject can only forge a connection through language (as discussed in Chapter Two), the absence of a symbolic father here becomes entangled with the dog’s absence. In a later scene, Lucy imagines that the ancestor is saying “Paint my dog”: the frame itself is structured by the dog’s absence (49). Moreover, when Bart Swithin (Giles’s father) discusses the painting, he explains: “That was my ancestor. He had a dog. The dog was famous. The dog has his place in history. He left it on record that he wished his dog to be buried with him” (48). The dog, Colin, becomes an unstable presence vis-à-vis the portrait: not only does his exclusion structure the frame, but Colin is also not subject to the will of the master-ancestor-patriarch, who wished Colin to be, first, included in the

scientific terminology. According to Darwin, all species and varieties of organisms develop out of gradual differentiation from another species, or a “common element.” A “monster” is simply an organism that breaks off from a species by developing an “anomalous” variation but, because of various environmental and hereditary factors, dies off before it can develop into a species or variety of its own (160). For Darwin then, monsters can be creatures that contain traits from multiple species but cannot be said to belong to any of them. See fn. 146.

218 ibid., p. 110
picture, and second, buried with him, neither of which came to fruition. The dog, then, becomes the place where the agency of the primordial father collapses. Further, the motif of the absent father to whom a relationship must be forged with language is complicated by the voided presence of Colin, who now becomes entangled with the “history” of the Oliver family.

Indeed, Colin takes on more of the characteristics of the symbolic father than the ancestor himself, if we adopt Rabaté’s analysis of the symbolic father as the one who does not imply “a real paternity,” but takes “death, absence, and radical otherness into account” and becomes “increasingly identified with a pure name,” as discussed in Chapter Two. The name of the dog and his enforced (but structuring) absence from the frame is all we know of him, and connection to the lost father through language must also become a search for the lost dog. In the Lacanian account, we come to know the symbolic father through the chain of metaphorical substitutions that attempt to locate the name of the father and that become the basis of language. In *Between the Acts*, with its confounding of the division between history and pre-history, the present and the evolutionary past of humanity, metaphor becomes one way of accessing the lost evolutionary history/pre-history of the human being, but to do this, it must take on a non-conceptual function and remake metaphor as a material medium of relation between the human and nonhuman world. To know the evolutionary past of the human, in other words, is to know the effaced animals from which and alongside which the human has emerged.

Animals in *Between the Acts* and in La Trobe’s pageant thus confound the history/prehistory division by carrying the prehistoric into the present; they embody the living world prior to conscious apprehensions of it and gesture towards a future characterized by the absence of human consciousness. But to think nonhuman life (and the prehistoric with which it is associated) in itself, and not as it appears for consciousness, and to express it in language, demands that the artist call into question the mechanisms of representation by which the nonhuman is made available to us. Since the living world exceeds the means of representation provided by consciousness, it must be expressed in terms of a disturbance of conscious means of apprehension. This is how animal life in both the novel and pageant exists: as momentary flashes of disharmony, heightened moments of intensity that disturb the regular order of being and throw its concepts into question. In the midst of the pageant, La Trobe imagines herself as “not merely a twitcher of individual strings”; rather, “she was one who seethes wandering bodies and floating voices in a cauldron, and makes rise up from its amorphous mass a re-created world” (153). La Trobe, like Woolf herself, wants to expand the order of life widely enough to encompass both human and nonhuman modes of being, but the risings up of the “amorphous mass” of “wandering bodies and floating voices” are only ever flickerings, instances of pure possibility poised against a world ordered by consciousness. The pageant, and the novel itself, can be read as a place of dwelling for these moments of intensity, moments that trouble the harmonious order that consciousness imposes on the living world.

To unpack Woolf’s strategies for troubling the boundaries between consciousness and the living world, I will trace three separate but intersecting linguistic experiments in *Between the Acts*. I begin by analyzing Woolf’s use of knowledge-disabbling metaphors as a

---

219 Rabaté, op. cit., p. 67
way to critique human exceptionality. I then turn to her depictions of modes of animal expression that trouble the limits of human perception, and conclude by analyzing the attempt, by both La Trobe and Woolf herself, to invent a language and an artistic form capable of registering nonhuman modes of expression without subordinating them to consciousness.

II. Discordant metaphor

Woolf uses metaphor in *Between the Acts* to register the disharmonious realities of a confounded history and prehistory, or the present and evolutionary past of humanity, in which the concepts that structure human existence, along with its place in a stable historical continuum, cannot so easily be abstracted out of the vast living world that precedes it. Woolf’s metaphors refuse the production of meaning out of a living world that disturbs the modes of conscious apprehension that attempt to name and categorize it. Her deployment of metaphor thus contrasts with traditional uses, in which, as discussed in the Introduction, an abstract or “spiritual” meaning is sublimated out of a comparison between two entities. In the previously cited passage from *Lectures on Aesthetics*, Hegel claims that metaphors arise from the fact that a word which originally signifies only something sensuous is carried over into the spiritual sphere. *Fassen, begreifen* [to grasp, to apprehend], and many words, to speak generally, which relate to knowing, have in respect of their literal meaning a purely sensuous content, which then is lost and exchanged for a spiritual meaning, the original sense being sensuous, the second spiritual. Over the course of time, however, the metaphorical element in the use of such a word disappears and by custom the word changes from a metaphorical to a literal expression, because owing to readiness to grasp in the image only the meaning, image and meaning are no longer distinguished, and the image directly affords only the abstract meaning itself instead of a concrete picture.

Metaphor in these terms is a passage from a sensuous engagement with the world to an abstract concept. In Donald Davidson’s analysis as well, as explored in the Introduction, the passage from sensuous origin to idealized concept is fraught with peril, for the integration of metaphor into language also marks its death.

Woolf’s metaphors in *Between the Acts* refuse this function, this passage from the sensible to the spiritual, by dwelling in the indeterminate zone between these two states and interrupting the movement towards the concept that is also the movement towards

---

220 Jane Goldman’s analysis of Woolf’s metaphors, in “‘Ce Chien Est a Moi’: Virginia Woolf and the Signifying Dog,” runs along similar lines. Goldman argues that Woolf’s dog metaphors in particular are unstable entities that skirt the boundary between the literal and the figurative. According to Goldman, Woolf employs the “dog” in texts like *A Room of One’s Own* and *Flush* as “a sliding signifier representing not least the historic, unequal struggles between men and women over artistic subjectivity and voice,” in the process becoming “a constructed, monstrous, multivalent figure” without a clear “referent,” whether an actual dog, or the figures of the woman or slave with which it is associated (50). Goldman’s analysis, however, replaces a singular referent for the animal metaphor with multiple referents (woman, slave, actual dog), whereas in what follows I argue that Woolf’s animal metaphors attempt to move language beyond a referential function, so that metaphors become sites in which the human is imbricated in its unknowable evolutionary past.

221 Hegel, p. 404-5.
death. This refusal of conceptual meaning, for Woolf, becomes an anti-anthropocentric gesture; animals cannot be forced into anthropic networks of meaning. Instead, they are the points where human self-knowledge becomes entangled with an impersonal prehistory out of which and alongside which the human has emerged. This constitutes a reversal of traditional employments of animal metaphor, which were meant illustrate a particular trait about humanity, a convention dating at least as far back as the fable tradition, as explored in the Introduction. The fable genre, as conceived by La Fontaine, presupposes that all animals are translatable into immaterial concepts, or morals that instruct readers about human nature, their otherness absorbed into a world of human meaning, reason, and logic. Woolf’s animal metaphors, on the other hand, work against the pedagogical function of animals by reversing the terms of the fable tradition, and of traditional animal metaphor generally.

The first such metaphor occurs very early on in the novel, before we even have a sense of who the main characters are, during the narrator’s description of the flirtation between Isabel Oliver and Rupert Haines, the “gentleman farmer” of the village. Isabel is first described coming in “like a swan swimming its way” before she meets with Giles and Rupert (4). Bartholomew, the Oliver family patriarch, quotes to her two lines from Byron, recalled because he is presently in the room where his mother, now deceased, once gave him a copy of Byron’s works:

“She walks in beauty like the night,” he quoted.
Then again:
“So we’ll no more go a-roving by the light of the moon.” (5)

Upon hearing these lines,

Isa raised her head. The words made two rings, perfect rings, that floated them, herself and Haines, like two swans down stream. But his snow-white breast was circled with a tangle of dirty duckweed; and she too, in her webbed feet was entangled, by her husband, the stockbroker. Sitting on her three-cornered chair she swayed, with her dark pigtails hanging, and her body like a bolster in its faded dressing-gown. (5)

The Byronic excerpts, from two different sonnets, act as forms of enclosure, or “perfect rings,” that sustain the characters within the inherited, exalted language of the British literary canon. The idealizations involved in this kind of language, of young Isabel’s feminine beauty in the first sonnet (“She Walks in Beauty Like the Night,” 1817) and of

\footnote{222 Woolf’s use of metaphor thus prefigures both Hans Blumenberg’s and Jacques Derrida’s analyses of the “nonconceptual” function of metaphor, as discussed in the Introduction. In Shipwreck With Spectator: Paradigm of a Metaphor for Existence, Blumenberg argues that metaphors that appear in “objective contexts” (i.e., scientific, anthropological, or philosophical use) “interpose a heterogeneous element that points towards a different context from the actual one.” It becomes the task of “consciousness” to “repair” the “disharmonies” introduced into discourse by metaphors, to “find its way back to the harmony of the data as data of one experience” (82).

Similarly, Jacques Derrida, in “White Mythology: Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy,” claims that far from following a singular, undifferentiated movement from the concrete to the abstract, metaphors become sedimented into meanings over time in a way that is not linearly or chronologically consistent. Instead of conceiving of some metalinguistic position from which metaphors serve a designating function, Derrida urges us to consider the possibility that the structure of metaphysical thought and the forms in which we conceive our environment have themselves been conditioned by the metaphors we employ, consciously or unconsciously, and the hidden histories we import into the present whenever we speak these metaphors (228).}
Rupert’s world-weary resignation in the second (“So We’ll No More Go a Roving,” 1830), take shape in the figure of the two swans, into which, in Isa’s mind, both characters are metaphorized.

However, the materiality of the metaphorical world quickly impedes the overdetermined symbolic resonance of the swan: Rupert’s “snow-white breast” is covered in “dirty duckweed” and Isa’s “webbed feet” are “entangled, by her husband.” The language of the canon, we see, cannot sustain subjects in the present by anchoring them within a stable historical lineage and cannot fix them into stable metaphorical states that would reflect their grounding in history. The sensuous particulars of the scene, the weeds and webbed feet, impede the formation of concepts such as youth, beauty, and agedness out of the swans; the life-world of the metaphor resists the movement from materiality to conceptuality. Additionally, the metaphor itself becomes unstable when it describes Isa’s “webbed feet” as “entangled, by her husband”: we expect that the entanglement of each swan, Rupert and Isa, among weeds or other material impediments, will serve as a metaphor for the marriages in which both characters are trapped. However, the swan’s feet are entangled not by something within the metaphorical world (some physical object in the stream), but by Isa’s husband. With the reference to Isa’s husband, the concept that was supposed to have been sublimated out of the metaphorical world (the restrictions of marriage) now becomes an immanent part of that metaphor, something that the swan’s feet are literally entangled in, if we take the metaphor at its word. This becomes even more significant when we consider that our introduction to Isa’s husband, Giles, occurs within the terms of this metaphorical world: Giles is given to us as a substance that impedes the free floating of the swans, as if he as a character is an incidental outgrowth of this metaphorical world. The animal metaphor, in this case, proceeds as a failure to subordinate the animal to the terms of humanity; instead, it entangles the material and conceptual within one another, snatching up idealized concepts and incorporating them into the sensuous life-world of the metaphor. Human characters grow out of the metaphor’s world, evolving into being alongside animals.

For Woolf, the animal metaphor produces knowledge about the human (the traditional function of animal metaphor, as the fable genre attests to) by using the human as a vessel of knowledge into an evolutionary past or fictional point of origin that no longer exists. But this probing of the evolutionary past does not culminate in a coherent body of knowledge about the human, since Woolf’s reversal of these terms works towards the dissolution of all coherent forms of knowledge about the human or its prehistoric past. A striking instance of this reversal takes place both before and in the midst of Lucy Swwithin’s perusal of the natural history book. Amidst Lucy’s fears of primitivity and the fraught evolutionary past of the ground on which she stands comes the realization that all culture is sublimated from these origins, from the swamps, from the bodies of polymorphous and now-extinct “barking monsters” that once dominated the land- and seascape. This fear extends to the singing of birds: “She had been waked by the birds. How they sang! attacking the dawn like so many choir boys attacking an iced cake” (8). Our expectation that the comparison of the birds to the choir boys will relate somehow to singing, since this is the most obvious point of relation between the two terms, is thwarted by the unexpected phrase “attacking an iced cake.” This makes the specification that these are “choir” boys excessive and unnatural (the phrases “hungry boys attacking an iced cake” or “choir boys singing out of tune,” for example, would make more conventional sense). Now the human is being used to produce knowledge (however
limited and fragmentary) about the action of animals. If civilization progresses by sublimating the phenomena of the natural world, such as birdsong, into the products of culture, or the “choir,” then this metaphor both asserts the primitivity of sublimated cultural formations (“choir boys” are known by their voracious appetite for cake, not for their aesthetic capacities) and employs these formations as nothing more than a means of transmission for knowledge about the way birds sing. In a larger sense, this metaphor resists the meaning-making function of metaphor entirely. Its incommensurate mode of comparison prevents the sublimated (or “spiritual”) meaning from emerging out of the “sensuous content” of the metaphor, and as such, challenges the idea of a metaphysical language that would be transcendent over what it names.

Woolf’s exploration of the indeterminate zone between materiality and meaning contrasts with the dispositions of Giles Oliver (Isa’s husband), whose inability to dwell in this zone produces a desire to “command” metaphor and to privilege resolute action over reflection. Giles, in other words, asserts an anthropocentric control over signification and the production of meaning that is unsustainable in the world of the novel. At one moment in the text, Lucy Swithin remarks that the view from the Oliviers’ estate as described in an 1833 guidebook is nearly identical to the view in 1939 (the only difference being that “the tractor had to some extent superseded the plow”): “’That’s what makes a view so sad. . . . And so beautiful. It’ll be there,’ she nodded at the strip of gauze laid upon the distant fields, ‘when we’re not’” (52, 53). However, Giles cannot share in this reverie, and instead becomes overwhelmed by rage over old fogies who sat and looked at views over coffee and cream when the whole of Europe—over there—was bristling like. . . . He had no command of metaphor. Only the ineffective word “hedgehog” illustrated his vision of Europe, bristling with guns, poised with planes. At any moment guns would rake that land into furrows; planes splinter Bolney Minster into smithereens and blast the Folly. (53, ellipsis in the original)

Giles’s anxious push towards meaning comes at the expense of reflection, of dwelling in the uncertainty of a world in which history is not simply the product of human will and desire, but has existed before and will continue beyond the parameters of the human. Lucy’s “we” refers less to the group of individuals gathered than to the human species as a whole, and her melancholic ponderings come from considering that the land will continue to exist long after human extinction. Giles, on the other hand, considers “we” in terms of the present individuals, himself and his family and Mrs. Manresa, and cannot contemplate the “view” without asserting a violent human will upon the landscape in the form of the “guns” and “planes” that will “rake that land into furrows” and destroy Bolney Minster and Hogben’s Folly.

Giles attempts to represent this attitude to himself by making a metaphor that will crystallize his dissatisfactions with Lucy and the “old fogies” and his need to reassert the force of human will, agency, and history above evolutionary pre-history into an image. This leads to the “ineffective” metaphor of Europe “bristling like a. . . hedgehog,” which then only demonstrates to Giles his inability to “command” metaphor. The hedgehog in this instance is not subservient to his desired terms, in large part because it does not make the transition from material to sublimated meaning properly. The metaphorical “hedgehog” emerges from Giles’s use of the verb form “bristling” to describe Europe’s preparations for war, but the only figures this verb anticipates are decidedly non-aggressive creatures like hedgehogs, who primarily use their quills for defense. The
metaphor is thus incongruous with the meaning Giles wants to extract from it; in philosopher Hans Blumenberg’s terms, the metaphor introduces a “disharmony” into the order of representation which consciousness tries, unsuccessfully in this instance, to “repair” by integrating it with the world of concepts. However, the metaphor persistently leads backwards to what Blumenberg calls the “life-world” from which it emerged, not forward to the conceptual world, and in this case the failure to sublimate material into meaning through metaphor speaks to the failure of Giles’s ideal of history as a product of human agency. Giles’s frustrated desire to achieve “command” over metaphor stands in opposition to Woolf’s own reticence about making conceptual meaning out of the living world, or controlling its signification. With the failure to command metaphor or signification, the definitions of what carries significance in the landscape are thrown out of order, especially in light of Lucy’s reflections on how the view will be here after “we” are gone. Anthropic criteria of visual significance become merely one of many modes of seeing and responding to the pre-conceptual living world.

Woolf stages this conflict between imposed anthropic meaning and the resistance of the life-world again during the first intermission period of Miss La Trobe’s pageant. In a particularly strange moment, Giles comes across a snake attempting to swallow a living toad and decides to crush both creatures under his shoe:

There, couched in the grass, curled in an olive green ring, was a snake. Dead? No, choked with a toad in its mouth. The snake was unable to swallow; the toad was unable to die. A spasm made the ribs contract; blood oozed. It was birth the wrong way round—a monstrous inversion. So, raising his foot, he stamped on them. The mass crushed and slithered. The white canvas on his tennis shoes was bloodstained and sticky. But it was action. Action relieved him. He strode to the Barn, with blood on his shoes. (99)

This “monstrous” aggregation of bodies marks the mutation of nature, or the life-world, beyond the powers of human recognition, beyond what conceptual reality can comprehend. It is also a kind of nonconceptual metaphor, or a metaphor prior to its fixing into the form of the concept, if we think of metaphor in the most primal sense as the amalgamation of two incongruous entities, such as, in the Davidson example, “mouths” and “rivers,” which then must take on a conceptual content in order to function within language. In this respect, the snake-toad’s monstrosity, from Giles’s point of view, comes from the fact that it is an integration of multiple bodies (or, in Darwinian terms, of traits from multiple species) without a conceptual mode of relation to unite them. The “monstrous” can be thought of as any melding of bodies that challenges the grounds for the transcendent conceptual separation between bodies, or anything which reduces ontological distinctions between things or bodies to immanent relations not governed by concepts. The snake-toad aggregation has no original or stable form available to consciousness and does not in itself symbolize anything aside from its own incongruity with the mechanisms of signification that would allow its passage from sensuous material into the “spiritual” realm of meaning.

Of course, Giles cannot abide the monstrosity of the non-conceptual, and so must destroy it, and by destroying it, sublimates it into the sphere of meaning. Now it becomes symbolizable, to Giles, as an interminable conflict requiring violent resolution of some

---

223 Blumenberg, op. cit., p. 82, 85.
224 See fn. 216.
kind, and further, as a metaphor for the self-destruction of Europe leading up to the Second World War. Before it is crushed, however, what is it other than an amalgamation of bodies in nature, each attempting not to prey on the other but simply to survive, even if this appears grotesque to the human eye? As Christina Alt astutely points out in *Virginia Woolf and the Study of Nature*, there is nothing “unnatural” about this scene, as Giles is witnessing “typical feeding behaviour for snakes.”225 Giles’s stamping of the “mass” converts it from a naturally occurring phenomenon into part of a symbolic narrative in which he serves as the arbiter of justice over an unruly and chaotic world, a metaphor for the right kind of decisive action required on the world-political stage.226 This lends itself to critical readings that associate Giles’s action with the emergence of fascism and fascist violence in England.227

But what is being expressed here is perhaps not only the outburst of fascism, defined as a regression to “barbarism” and animal “violence,” but the human need to force the life-world into meaning, to insert non-conceptual relations between bodies into conceptual systems of signification, or to make the natural world speak in anthropic terms by subordinating it to the workings of consciousness and to the political concerns of the present.228 The snake-toad amalgamation is not a metaphor congruent with the large-scale allegorical underpinnings imputed to it, either by Giles or by the critics critiquing Giles’s action. The fascism Woolf critiques in this scene would not only be the overt violent aggression of Hitler’s armies engulfing Europe, but the proto-fascism of belief in the superiority of human consciousness and the drive to reduce all things to conceptual order. The challenge for Woolf, then, is to find ways to express the incongruous living world through non-conceptual means, and by extension, to transform language from a conceptual into a sensuous medium of expression.

III. Discordant perception

Many of these tensions, between history and prehistory, consciousness and the living world, come into play through Woolf’s description of the “Noble Barn,” into which the villagers crowd during the first intermission of the pageant. The structure, which, we are told, “had been built over seven hundred years ago and reminded some people of a Greek temple, others of the middle ages, most people of an age before their own, scarcely anybody of the present moment, was empty” (99). Later, Lucy imagines the swallows

223 Alt, p. 165.
226 Similarly, Sarah Cole, in *At the Violet Hour: Modernism and Violence in England and Ireland*, offers a reading of this scene as the creation of a kind of abstract art, suggesting that art itself is intimately bound up with the violent conditions out of which it emerges. The act of symbolization itself, in other words, is a mode of violence. “[R]elieving his mental strain in a spasm of violence,” Cole writes, “Giles also enacts the practice of creating art. His sneakers, here named as ‘white canvases,’ refer also to a kind of painterly canvas; the blood that stains them in the moment of killing—a blood painting in effect—remains visible throughout the day, a trace and reminder of the act itself” (199).
228 The “absence of concept” can still, of course, always be read as just another concept, but within an ultimate horizon within which all linguistic expressions are concepts, it is important to make distinctions between concepts that adhere to traditional modes of sublimating sensuous content into an abstract category and concepts that attempt to do away with this structure, such as Blumenberg’s “nonconceptuality” and Derrida’s indeterminacy of metaphorical meaning.
returning to the barn year after year, from the time when the barn was “a swamp” (103). As such, it becomes one of many overdetermined sites of connection to the ancestral and prehistoric past of the Oliver family and the characters generally. The notion that the barn is “empty” is repeated two more times in the next sequence, beginning with Woolf’s intensely physical description of the interior of the barn:

The Barn was empty. Mice slid in and out of holes or stood upright, nibbling. Swallows were busy with straw in pockets of earth in the rafters. Countless beetles and insects of various sorts burrowed in the dry wood. A stray bitch had made the dark corner where the sacks stood a lying-in ground for her puppies. All these eyes, expanding and narrowing, some adapted to light, others to darkness, looked from different angles and edges. Minute nibblings and rustlings broke the silence. Whiffs of sweetness and richness veined the air. A blue-bottle fly had settled on the cake and stabbed its yellow rock with its short drill. A butterfly sunned itself sensuously on a sunlit yellow plate. (100)

The “emptiness” is multivalent here: the Barn is empty because there are no humans present, because there are no humans to observe what is inside of it (and thus no anthropic criteria of significance) but also because the different creatures are engaged in a process of producing “empty” spaces, or hollowed-out dwelling places, within the barn: the mice are sliding in and out of holes, the swallows are building nests to contain their eggs, the beetles are burrowing into the wood, the dog is making a “lying-in ground” for her puppies in a corner, and the blue-bottle fly is digging a hole into the cake. The barn now becomes linked to the post-anthropic future, as we get a glimpse of the perpetuation of life within it in the absence of humans. We witness how the different creatures not only interact with and resignify the structures of human civilization by creating new modes of dwelling within them, but also how they replace the outmoded human ways of seeing with the richly variegated and sensuous modes of perception of multiple kinds of “eyes, expanding and narrowing” and “look[ing] from different angles and edges.”

The “[m]inute nibblings and rustlings” that “break the silence” suggest a minimal degree of expression required to cross the threshold from imperceptible to perceptible, but the lack of a human consciousness (for “the barn was empty”) to register these larval forms of expression suggests that they take place beneath what consciousness is accustomed to perceiving.229 Beginning with the sentence about the multiple “eyes,”

229 My definition of “consciousness” and “conscious perception” here is indebted to the philosophy of Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, who in the “Preface” to the New Essays of 1704, suggests the existence of “tiny perceptions” (“petites perceptions”) that persist beneath the surface of what the human mind, because of its attunement towards objects that “demand” its attention, normally perceives. Leibniz writes:

[A]t every moment there is an infinity of perceptions in us, but without apperception and without reflection—that is, changes in the soul itself, which we do not consciously perceive, because these impressions are either too small or too numerous, or too homogenous, in the sense that they have nothing sufficiently distinct in themselves; but combined with others, they do have their effect and make themselves felt in the assemblage, at least confusedly. It is in this way that custom makes us ignore the motion of a mill or of a waterfall, after we have lived nearby for some time. It is not that this motion ceases to strike our organs and that there is nothing corresponding to the soul, . . . but that the impressions in the soul and body, lacking the appeal of novelty, are not sufficiently strong to attract out attention and memory, which are applied only to more demanding objects.

(295)

For an extended discussion on the role of Leibniz’s “small perceptions” in Woolf’s fiction, see Maureen Chun, “Between Sensation and Sign: The Secret Language of The Waves.”
Woolf uses this passage to catalogue all of the five senses in miniature form, as if to suggest the persistence of sensual activity beneath the register of consciousness: sight (“all these eyes, expanding and narrowing”), sound (“rustlings”), taste (“nibblings”), smell (“whiffs of sweetness”), and touch (“a blue-bottle settled on the cake stabbed its yellow rock,” “a butterfly sunned itself sensuously on a sunlit yellow plate”). This miniaturized epic catalogue of the senses is not just description from which the human observer has been absented (although, inevitably, implied by the presence of language), but an attempt to occupy the place of nonhuman modes of sensory connection with the world.230 The authorial voice also seems at home in this setting and itself finds a dwelling amidst the sensuous particulars of this world.231 The representational content of the sentence, “A butterfly sunned itself sensuously on a sunlit yellow plate,” is overwhelmed by its aural lushness, particularly through the luxuriating sequence of “s” and “l” sounds coupling with one another; the sentence itself, in which the semiotic emphatically predominates over the symbolic, seems to participate in the “sensuous” dwelling of the butterfly on the plate.232

However, human perception intrudes more directly into this scene in the next paragraph (marked by the forceful conjunction “but”) in the form of the Olivers’ cook. Whereas Mrs. McNab and Mrs. Bast save the Ramsays’ house from regression to nature in *To the Lighthouse*, here human intervention comes as a foreclosure of life and a narrowing of perceptive possibilities:

> But Mrs. Sands was approaching. . . . She could see the great open door. But butterflies she never saw; mice were only black pellets in kitchen drawers; moths she bundled in her hands and put out of the window. Bitches suggested only servant girls misbehaving. Had there been a cat she would have seen it—any cat, a starved cat with a patch of mange on its rump opened the flood gates of her childless heart. But there was no cat. The Barn was empty. (100-1)

Now there is a human criterion of significance, but it comes at the expense of experiencing the richness of the living world, as if the act of signification itself is what silences both nonhuman modes of expression and the authorial capacity to inhabit the

---

230 In a similar vein, Derek Ryan, in “Ecology and Ethology in The Waves,” discusses how Woolf uses the interludes in *The Waves* to express the natural world as it exists not just for humans, but for nonhumans as well. Ryan cites Woolf’s familiarity with Jakob von Uexküll’s theory of the “Umwelt” (or “environment,” or “environment-world”), which holds that there is no single “world” in common to all life-forms, since the “world” is constituted by what each organism finds to be “significant” within its own environment, which varies according to species (Uexküll 53). Ryan writes, “The interludes of *The Waves* are full of details of nonhuman Umwelten, where Woolf’s own foray into the worlds of animals is characterised by a studied, observational tone that respects and responds to different animal environments” (158).

231 In this respect, Woolf’s art is aligned with what later theorists have termed “ecopoetics,” which Jonathan Bate, in terms influenced by Martin Heidegger, defines as “a way of reflecting upon what it might mean to dwell with the earth” (266) and which emphasizes the ways in which poetic writing (which is not necessarily synonymous with verse, but indicates any writing that attempts to escape from the confines of standard representational language) functions as “a making (Greek *poeisis*) of the dwelling-place—the prefix eco- is derived from Greek *oikos*, ‘the home or place of dwelling’” (75).

232 Julia Kristeva defines the “semiotic,” also called the “chora,” as the realm of pre-verbal articulation that “precedes and underlies figuration” and exists as a kind of “vocal or kinetic rhythm” prior to any significance (26). It is opposed to the “semantic,” which organizes the pre-symbolic articulations of the semiotic into meaningful syntax and social significance, also taking the form of “a proposition or judgment” (43). Literary and poetic language mediates between these two realms, each trying to make the semiotic appear within the constraints of the semantic, or to make “rhythm . . . intelligible by syntax” (30).
sensuous particulars of the living world. Nonhuman expression thus exists in a precarious situation, for it can only emerge in the absence of a human consciousness.

From Lucy’s perspective, in contrast to Mrs. Sands’, the barn itself is significant insofar as it serves as a dwelling place for the migrating swallows: “‘They come every year,’ said Mrs. Swifthin, ignoring the fact that she spoke to the empty air. ‘From Africa.’ As they had come, she supposed, when the Barn was a swamp” (103). Again, the narrator emphasizes the “empty” air of the barn, emptiness figured both as the absence of a perceiving human consciousness and the irrelevance of this consciousness against the weight of the prehistoric, the migration of the swallows to this site over a time-span that both pre-dates and will post-date the time of human existence. In this sense, it is as if the human and the products of human construction only gain significance through their place in the continuum of time, from the pre-historic to the present, that the swallows knit together. In contrast to ecomimetic conventions, Woolf’s narrator does not simply accumulate details about a natural scene which she observes from some neutral vantage point, but stages the failure of human consciousness and its mechanisms of apprehension to register animal lives and their varied modes of engagement with the world.

The bellowing of cows in the midst of the Valentine and Flavinda portion of the pageant provides another instance of animal expression poised against the mechanisms of human consciousness. However, in this instance, animal expression does not persist beneath the register of human consciousness, but moves in the opposite direction, by becoming too powerful to be apprehended by consciousness. It exists as a kind of pure “emotion” (the cows’ “yearning bellow”) that opens up a shared affective space between humans and animals. Woolf’s focus in this scene shifts to the force of affective capacities as they become progressively detached from human characters. Woolf stages the passage of affect from a drama centered around emotions tied to human subjects (the Valentine and Flavinda story) to the laborers, as a collective mass prior to the formation of subjects that “continues the emotion” through song, and finally to the cows, who “take up the burden” by expressing a “primeval” affective force that overwhelms the mechanisms of consciousness and momentarily absorbs the entire network of human and animal presences into itself. It is a movement, in other words, of de-subjectification: we move from the emotional states possessed by human subjects to the circulation of abstract emotional content among human beings prior to subject-formation to affect as an elemental force that encompasses everything within its expression.

While the inaudibility of the actors, whose words become snatched by the wind, at the end of the Valentine and Flavinda story marks what La Trobe calls “the failure of illusion” (and, more bluntly, “death” [140]), the bellowing of a herd of cows marks the persistence of life beyond the death of the human subject and its aesthetic capacities.

Then suddenly, as the illusion petered out, the cows took up the burden. One had lost her calf. In the very nick of time she lifted her great moon-eyed head and bellowed. All the great moon-eyed heads laid themselves back. From cow after cow came the same yearning bellow. The whole world was filled with dumb yearning. It was the primeval voice sounding loud in the ear of the present moment. Then the whole herd caught the infection. Lashing their tails, blobbed like pokers, they tossed their heads high, plunged and bellowed, as if Eros had planted his dart in their flanks and goaded them to fury. The cows annihilated the gap; bridged the distance; filled the emptiness and continued the emotion.

(140-1)
Here, we see the expression of emotion, as affect no longer tied to an agent, in a grotesque and overpoweringly sensuous material form, “the primeval voice sounding loud in the ear of the present moment,” that “annihilate[s] the gap” between conscious apprehension and pre-lingual expression. Human aesthetic capacities become incorporate with the affective lives of these animals, who “continue” the emotion initiated by the Valentine and Flavinda scene. The “dumb yearning” is not a regression back to some kind of savagery or to the nothingness of “death,” but a new mode of sensuous engagement that comes into being by modulating the emotions initially provided by the human actors and characters and using them to “fill the whole world.” But, “Suddenly the cows stopped; lowered their heads, and began browsing. Simultaneously the audience lowered their heads and read the programs” (141). In the program, we are told, the producer has described a scene that was “omitted” from the Valentine and Flavinda portion due to time constraints. Now that the cows have “stopped,” the audience can once more go back to its mute consumption of text and immerse itself in the conventions of narrative representation. As with the barn scene, we are given a glimpse of a future in which life proceeds in new modes in the absence of humans before we return once more to a world apprehended through human consciousness.

In the pageant’s closing scene, this motif of animal expression poised against human consciousness rises up again, this time in a more explicit form. The pageant culminates in what La Trobe calls “present time,” which is intended to “expose” the audience, to “douche them, with present-time reality” by having mirrors held up to them to reveal them “as [they] are” (179, 184). As a group of children hold mirrors to the audience, they begin to recognize themselves in their fragmented reflections. “Look!”, a voice from the audience sounds. “Ourselves! [. . .] Here a nose . . . There a skirt . . . Then trousers only . . . Now perhaps a face . . . . Ourselves? But that’s cruel. To snap us as we are, before we’ve had time to assume . . . And only, too, in parts . . . . That’s what’s so distorting and upsetting and utterly unfair” (184). This fragmentation of individuals into “parts” re-imagines the self as a collection of raw materials, prior to their unification into the form of the subject. It also marks a moment of pure possibility, in which the raw materials out of which the human is constructed (a nose, a face), the singularities prior to the individual, are liberated from the form of the subject and free to reassemble in new ways. In this cacophonous moment, the forms of all things, or the idea of what should count as a significant or insignificant form, are thrown into disarray. Additionally, the

---

233 For another take on the “bellowing cows” scene, see Derek Ryan’s “‘The reality of becoming’: Deleuze, Woolf, and the Territory of Cows.” In Ryan’s analysis, the cows in *Between the Acts* serve as a Deleuzian “assemblage” that entangles nonhuman and human entities with one another. Their “bellowing” marks a new territory over which human subjectivity is no longer in complete control, and in so doing, performs the “deterritorialisation of humanity,” in which the “gap” between cows and audience is bridged (349). However, Ryan’s analysis tends to subsume the particulars of Woolf’s expressions of animal life into Deleuze and Guattari’s philosophical concepts, most particularly their notion of a utopian line of flight that leads out of the constraints of human subjectivity, or what they call “becoming-animal,” that writers can undertake through language. Woolf, however, is well aware of the limits and tensions involved in attempting to occupy the place of nonhuman life in language, as well as the ways in which human consciousness can always, in Deleuze’s terms, emerge to “reterritorialize” the new territories and assemblages created by nonhumans, as we saw in the “Noble barn” scene. In the bellowing cows scene, what Ryan glosses over is the fragility and ephemerality of the “assemblage” produced by the cows: once the cows stop bellowing, the audience forgets them and re-absorbs the territory they have created back into the domesticated space of human thought.
prehistoric and the present have collapsed into one another, now that there is no significant differentiation between the time of humanity and the time of the nonhuman world. The anthropocentric order of life is temporarily suspended as the nearby animals are swept into the frenzied remaking of the old order:

And Lord! the jangle and the din! The very cows joined in. Walloping, tail lashing, the reticence of nature was undone, and the barriers which should divide Man the Master from the Brute were dissolved. Then the dogs joined in. Excited by the uproar, scurrying and worrying, here they came! Look at them! And the hound, the Afghan hound . . . look at him!” (184)

The human/animal divide collapses in this moment, as does the order of representational language that would separate entities from one another by any transcendental criteria. In a scene based on vision, in which the significance of an entity arises not from some essence that it possesses but simply by virtue of the fact that it appears in the mirrors that reflect the audience (“as we are”), the concepts of “Master” and “Brute” become lost in the “jangle and din” of various human and animal presences. A series of imperatives from audience members (“Look at them!”) indicates the presence of dogs, including Sohrab, the Afghan hound, but says nothing more about them, as if their presence itself were identical with their expression (the mirror-bearing children at the beginning of the paragraph are introduced the same way). As every entity in the scene is brought to the foreground—including the dogs, the cows, the children, along with various faces, noses, and skirts—the entire order of representation becomes flattened amidst the overwhelming “jangle and din” that refuses to differentiate between modes of being or to elevate one over another, and instead makes every presence equally significant.

This fragmentation of subjectivity culminates in the frenzied “uproar” in which all the pageant characters from the different ages reappear simultaneously on the stage and recite “some phrase or fragment from their parts”:

I am not (said one) in my perfect mind . . . Another, Reason am I . . . And I? I’m the old top hat . . . Home is the hunter, home from the hill . . . Home? Where the miner sweats, and the maiden faith is rudely strumpeted [. . . ] The owl hoots and ivy mocks tap-tap-tapping on the pane . . . Lady I love till I die, leave thy chamber and come. . . Where the worm weaves its winding sheet. . . I’d be a butterfly. I’d be a butterfly. . . . In thy will is our peace. . . . Here, Papa, take your book and read aloud. . . . Hark, hark, the dogs do bark and the beggars . . .

(185)

In this collection of fragments, the different “ages” that mark the progress of humanity forward in time are flattened into a singular instant in which language does not sustain an individual human subject amidst the varied murmurings of the world. The lyric “I” becomes unstable from the first utterance, which can be read as a rejection of a transcendent consciousness (“I am not in my perfect mind”), and continually shifts in and out of various human and nonhuman bodies, from “Reason” to “the old top hat” to “a butterfly.” The power to speak that is supposed to secure identity and perform human transcendence over the natural world out of which it has emerged now becomes incorporate with the hooting of owls and “ivy” that “mocks tap-tap-tapping on the pane.”

The human being is no longer conceivable as a subject, broken as it is into what La Trobe calls “orts, scraps, and fragments” that pre-date the formation of an individual out of the natural world. This condition calls for the formation of a new language, which is part of the focus of La Trobe’s closing speech (delivered by an “anonymous” voice
emanating from a gramophone). The voice enjoins the audience to “*talk in words of one syllable, without larding, stuffing or cant. Let’s break the rhythm and forget the rhyme. And calmly consider ourselves*” (187). La Trobe wants to find “words of one syllable” that will make legible the fragmentation of the old order, a language no longer made in the image of consciousness and a harmonious order of “*rhythm*” and “*rhyme*,” but broken into the singularities that pre-date the individual. La Trobe first seeks this language through the gramophone, which closes the play by “affirming” the fragmentation of the audience by playing parts of tunes from different records, an act that is meant to disperse human subjectivity among the broken remains of its culture. But this remains unsatisfying to La Trobe, who still feels that her play has been “a failure” at its end. I would argue that the gramophone fails to express the sought-after “words of one syllable” because it still operates within the realm of representation, that it re-arranges the products of human culture (a la Coleridge’s definition of “*Fancy*”) rather than opening up a space to think of a fragmentation that precedes humanity and the human/animal divide.  

### IV. Discordant syllabling

It is amidst the stirrings of the natural world that La Trobe locates the foundations of a new language, but this only occurs after the play has concluded and the audience has dispersed. As she conceals herself behind a tree at the end of the play, musing to herself about its “failure,” her thoughts are interrupted by a pack of starlings:

> Then suddenly the starlings attacked the tree behind which she was hidden. In one flock they pelted it like so many winged stones. The whole tree hummed with the whizz they made, as if each bird plucked a wire. A whizz, a buzz rose from the bird-buzzing, bird-vibrant, bird-blackened tree. The tree became a rhapsody, a quivering cacophony, a whizz and vibrant rapture, branches, leaves, birds syllabling discordantly life, life, life, with measure, without stop devouring the tree. Then up! Then off!  

The starlings create a new kind of assemblage with the tree, which becomes a “rhapsody, a quivering cacophony” through their engagement with it. The tree becomes enlivened through the action of the starlings, shaken out of the stasis that it occupied during the pageant, when trees “barred the music” and “prevented what was fluid from overflowing” (182). Now the starling-tree assemblage bursts through the solid contours that attempt to assign “measure” to expression. The world is momentarily enveloped in new sonic articulations that resist incorporation into conceptual language, and can thus only be registered by the continuous repetition of sensuous “words of one syllable,” such as “whizz” and “buzz”: words evocative only as units of sound.

---

234 In the *Biographia Literaria*, Coleridge divides the mind into two separate faculties: “Imagination” and “*Fancy.*” The Imagination is “the living Power and prime Agent of all human Perception,” a creative force that “dissolves” in order to “recreate,” and a “repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM.” “*Fancy,*” on the other hand, is not a creative force but merely the recombination of “fixities and definites” that must “receive all its materials ready made from the law of association” (196).

235 Maureen Chun, in “Between Sensation and Sign: The Secret Language of *The Waves*,” discusses a similar linguistic dynamic at work in *The Waves*, in which Woolf attempts, in the novel’s soliloquies and interludes, to “unsettle” the “symbolic function of language” by employing words and images that bear with them traces of their sensuous origins, rather than serving merely as representational indicators of some other reality (54).
starling-tree assemblage, finally, is only expressible as the collection of “branches, leaves, birds syllabbling discordantly life, life, life without measure”: it is sound without harmony, and sound that resists the passage into meaning, or from “syllable” to word. It does not belong to any single entity, branch, leaf, or bird alike, and does not exist “for” any perceiving consciousness. This is the overwhelming presence of “life” that destabilizes conscious modes of apprehension, and suggests a future in which new modes of expression and engagement among nonhuman entities will exist without mediation by anthropic knowledge or criteria of significance.

Here is where La Trobe’s idea for a new mode of art emerges, out of this nonhuman production of sound as the expression of unmeasured life, a “life” that refuses to conform to the scale of the human. After the starlings fly off, driven away by “old Mrs. Chalmers,” La Trobe wanders through the darkening landscape that now, with the coming of night, no longer exists as a “view”: “There was no longer a view—no Folly, no spire of Bolney Minster. It was land merely, no land in particular” (210). She makes plans for a future play that will take place on this spot: “‘I should group them,’ she murmured, ‘here.’ It would be midnight; there would be two figures, half concealed by a rock. The curtain would rise. What would the first words be? The words escaped her” (210). She then enters a pub and looks “through the smoke at a crude glass painting of a cow in a stable; also at a cock and a hen.” As she listens to the conversations around her, “Words of one syllable sank down into the mud. She drowsed, she nodded. The mud became fertile. Words rose above the intolerably laden dumb oxen plodding through the mud. Words without meaning—wonderful words.” At last she has her vision: “There was the high ground at midnight; there the rock; and two scarcely perceptible figures. Suddenly the tree was pelted with starlings. She set down her glass. She heard the first words” (212). This play that takes place on “no land in particular,” featuring “scarcely perceptible figures” that are “half concealed by a rock” departs from the pageant’s emphasis on human history; instead, it suggests a completely atemporal and impersonal landscape enveloping all history and the individuals who make it. However, the “long night” of this scene is not, as in To the Lighthouse, the place of nothingness or pure negation, but rather a site of boundless generativity, the site from which new sensuous and non-conscious modes of inhabiting the earth might emerge. La Trobe extracts “words without meaning” from the chatter of the pub patrons, who are metaphorized as “intolerably laden dumb oxen,” and imagines how these meaningless words may fertilize the mud into which they sink. La Trobe’s vision is of a language born out of the earth itself, the re-planting of human “words” into the living world (the “mud”) from which they have emerged.

The forms these words might take, finally, are suggested by the tree-pelting starlings that allow La Trobe to “hear the first words” of the new play (words which are never revealed to us). The sounds of the bird-tree assemblage that express the immeasurable profusion of “life” now form the basis of new words that are also “the first words,” words forged out of the interactions between animals and the natural world that take place in the absence of human consciousness. La Trobe’s new play, from what little we know of it, is to be founded on the indeterminacy and impersonality of these words, or the “discordant syllabling,” that express “life, life, life, without measure” but do not belong to any single human or nonhuman individual.

Woolf’s idea for her next work (which was never completed due to her death in March 1941) arose immediately after completing Between the Acts, as she records in a diary
entry dated 23 November 1940: “Having this moment finished The Pageant—or Poyntz Hall?—(begun perhaps April 1938) my thoughts turn, well up, to write the first chapter of the next book (nameless). Anon, it will be called.” The title, “Anon,” as well as the designation of the book as “nameless,” suggests something of the impersonality of La Trobe’s future play and bespeaks an identification with La Trobe’s artistic method generally.236 The unpublished draft manuscript of “Anon” begins with the hypothesis that human art, beginning as “the desire to sing,” arose when primitive man first heard the songs of birds (or what La Trobe calls “the first words”) and tried to imitate them. “Anon,” the name Woolf gives to this primitive singer, is “sometimes man; sometimes woman,” the homeless “common voice singing out of doors.” “By shutting out a chimney or factory,” Woolf writes, “we can still see what Anon saw—the bird haunted reed whispering fen, the down and the green scar not yet healed along which he came when he made his journeys.”237 “Anon,” the essay, discusses the emergence of English literature out of the primeval voice of Anon, a voice that is “not self-conscious,” that “repeats over and over again that flowers fade; that death is the end,” and “celebrat[es] red roses and white breasts.”238 But the voice of Anon, a voice incorporate with the murmurings of the natural world (“the bird haunted reed whispering fen”), is eventually fragmented into “individuality” by the playwright (and later, in the post-Elizabethan age, by the “man who writes a book”), who returns to the audience “their own general life individualised in single and separate figures.”239 This incarnation of a vast impersonal life into “single and separate” figures, which can be read as the production of subjects out of pre-individual (and pre-human) forces, also marks the murder of Anon, as Woolf declares in no uncertain terms to close the essay: “Anon is dead.”

In an earlier diary entry, dated 31 March 1940, Woolf records ideas for stories which suggest her own attempt to make the voice of Anon inhere, to inhabit the primitive moment of the first recognition of nonhuman expression and to maintain its all-pervading vitality without distributing it into “individuals”:

I would like to tell myself a nice little wild improbable story to spread my wings after this cramped ant-like morning. . . . The story?—oh about the life of a bird, its cheep cheep—its brandishing of a twig by my window—its sensations. Or about Botten becoming one with the mud—the glory fading—the million tinted flowers sent by the doleful mourners. All black like a moving pillar box the woman was—& the man in a black cardboard casing. A story dont come—no but I may unfurl a metaphor—No. The windows very dove grey and & dim blue islanded—a rust red on L. & V. & the marsh green & dark like the floor of the sea. . . . To carry the virtues of the sketch—its random reaches its happy finds—into the finished work is probably beyond me.240

Neither idea, the one about the “bird” and “its sensations” or of Botten’s (a local farmer’s) corpse “becoming one with the mud,” presents itself as a self-enclosed narrative (“A story dont come”) or lends itself to the composition of a “metaphor.” Instead, Woolf is only able to dwell on the vivid particulars these scenes elicit, particulars which seem to belong

236 The work, meant to be a history of English literature from its origins to the present, was later given the title Reading at Random, and then Turning the Page.
237 “Anon,” p. 382.
238 ibid., p. 397-8.
239 ibid., p. 398.
both to the world of the “stories” and to Woolf’s own surroundings at the time of writing this entry: the “dove grey windows,” the “rust red” on “L. & V.,”241 the “green & dark” marsh. In these two images, of human death (and reintegration into the earth) and animal “sensation,” culminating in the pure expression of sensuous atmospheric particulars, Woolf mirrors La Trobe’s vision of words formed out of the earth itself and a language rooted in vivid yet impersonal engagements with the natural world. Woolf’s suggestion of her own limitations in terms of integrating these particulars into a “finished work” speaks as well to the limits of human consciousness and the conceptual language made in its image, which demands the enclosure of “random reaches happy finds” within larger frameworks of meaning that would inscribe the vivid into sense.242 In the speculative groundwork for an unfinished (and perhaps unfinishable) work, Woolf seems to be grasping at a way to think a vividness prior to its incarnation into solid forms and prior to the synthesizing work of consciousness, a vividness impersonally dispersed across “no land in particular,” and a vividness that calls back into being Anon’s first encounter with the “discordant syllabling” of the living world.

241 “L. & V.” refer to two elm trees outside of Woolf’s Monks House residence (where she wrote this entry), which she named “Leonard” and “Virginia.” Woolf’s ashes are now buried in the ground beneath “V.”

242 Brenda Silver’s analysis presumes that both “Anon” and Between the Acts are based on “Woolf’s inability to see a transition from present to future” and her attempt to “create a form” to “capture . . . the growth of human consciousness and experience” (359). Likewise, Maria DiBattista argues that Anon’s voice is an attempt to achieve “spiritual recuperation through a rescued image of the past” (243-44), modeling Anon after the human artist and his/her “redeeming” “creative mind” (242-3) However, these accounts presume that Woolf was only able to conceptualize the future as the artist’s redemption of the human past, while as I hope to have shown in this chapter, futurity in Woolf’s late work was as much about the persistence of nonhuman life in the absence of human consciousness.
Conclusion:
Language, Ethics, and Environmentalism Now

The “discordant syllabling” of *Between the Acts* finds new voice in contemporary poetry, of which this conclusion will offer a cursory sketch, after a discussion of two contemporary works of speculative fiction: Margaret Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake* trilogy (2003-13) and Benjamin Hale’s *The Evolution of Bruno Littlemore* (2011). The contemporary moment, unlike the period from the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries, is marked in part by the emergence of movements that demand a direct public engagement with environmental sustainability (the contemporary environmentalist movement that grew in large part out of Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* [1962]) and the rights of nonhuman animals (the contemporary animal rights movement that was spurred on by Peter Singer’s *Animal Liberation* [1975]). These are in addition to the newly developing movement against biocapitalism, as in the work of the theorists Ashley Dawson, Melinda Cooper, and Kaushik Sunder Rajan, and in the visual art projects of the “Multispecies Salon,” a collective of artists, theorists, ethnographers, and scientists which attempts to complicate the utopian visions through which biotechnology presents itself. However, what I want to argue, or at least gesture towards, in this conclusion is the continued importance of Modernist-era experimental language, as opposed to realist modes of representation, as a way of articulating an ethical stance regarding the human relation to nonhuman being in the age of biocapitalism. What emerges here is a critique of speculative fiction that, even as it engages directly with biocapitalism and concerns with animal welfare and environmental sustainability, does not critique the language by which nonhuman life is made available to knowledge, and thus does not challenge the essentialist understanding of the dichotomy between human and nonhuman life that continues to produce violence in the present.

I do not mean any of this to be dismissive towards Atwood and Hale and other contemporary novelists interested in the problems of bioethics and nonhuman life, and I certainly do not mean to proffer some “right” kind of ethics (i.e., complicated forms of expression, awareness of the limits of representation regarding the nonhuman other, etc.) to set against the “wrong” way of doing ethics (reliance on stable means of representation through which to depict nonhumans, focus on human rather than nonhuman agency, etc.). I consider Atwood’s *MaddAddam* trilogy to be one of the most important literary works of the twenty-first-century, and not least for its contribution to shaping our sense of bioethics in an age when corporate and entrepreneurial control over the practices and the outcomes of genetic engineering threatens to override the ethical regulations offered by individual nation states and the United Nations. But what I want do in foregrounding the contribution of Modernist aesthetics to contemporary ethical questions is to suggest a mode of ethics that insists on the epistemological limits regarding the being of nonhuman others, and on irreducibility of nonhuman otherness to our existing means of

---

243 See fn. 4 and fn. 5 in the Introduction.
245 For more information on the ongoing struggle to regulate Synthetic Biology, see synbiowatch.org, particularly the post “Regulate Synthetic Biology Now: 194 Countries,” at http://www.synbiowatch.org/2014/10/regulate-synthetic-biology-now-194-countries/
representation, and to the contraints of human consciousness-based modes of worldly apprehension. This is not to say that Victorian and Modernist literature is somehow more “important” or more appropriate for forging an ethics in the present than is contemporary literature. We may need to keep open the space for some kind of “strategic essentialism,” to borrow Gayatri Spivak’s formulation, or to put it more simply, a kind of malleable ethics that, when necessary (and when calling for a mode of direct action, or directly addressing the political actors and forces operating within the biocapitalist regimes), draws on essentialist categories like “animal” and “human” that are depicted through more or less stable frames of representation, but an ethics that ultimately strives to challenge the human ability to know and appropriate nonhuman life for human purposes. In this sense, works like Atwood’s MaddAddam trilogy, while they may be rooted in a series of essentialisms and anthropocentrisms regarding nonhuman life, as I will argue shortly, are nonetheless valuable for formulating a more direct ethical statement in the present, while the more experimental works of the 19th and early 20th-centuries that I have analyzed in the preceding chapters might be more useful for the larger purpose of examining the limits of human reason and human modes of worldly engagement (such as consciousness) as a way of producing knowledge about nonhuman bodies, or as a way of appropriating non-human bodies into anthropocentrically defined networks of meaning.

I. Speculative Fiction and the Limits of Realist Representation

Margaret Atwood’s MaddAddam trilogy (2003-2013) is one of the first engagements with contemporary biocapitalist culture. The series of novels, Oryx and Crake (2003), The Year of the Flood (2009), and MaddAddam (2013), is set in the near future, during which corporations, primarily biotech corporations, have assumed the role of acting governments for their employees and their families by securing them within luxurious “compounds” detached from the rest of the world, while the rest of the population festers in unmaintained urban slums. Crake, whom we first meet as a precocious young boy, the friend of the main protagonist, Jimmy, grows into a mad scientist whose frustration with the self-destructive tendencies of human beings leads him to create and spread a virus (in the form of a pill that supposedly protects the user from sexually transmitted diseases, provides “an unlimited supply of libido and sexual prowess,” and “prolong[es] youth”) that wipes out nearly the entire human population (OAC 294).

To replace human beings, who can no longer be trusted to take care of themselves or their environment, Crake has genetically engineered into being a new species to replace them. First named “Paradice people,” after the “Paradice Dome” in which they were manufactured, and eventually, “Crakers,” these beings are human-like creatures who have been designed to have none of the malicious and destructive features of human beings. As Crake explains to Jimmy:

What had been altered was nothing less than the ancient primate brain. Gone were its destructive features, the features responsible for the world’s current illnesses. For instance, racism . . . had been eliminated in the model group, merely by switching the bonding mechanism: the Paradice people simply did not register skin colour. Hierarchy could not exist among them, because they lacked the neural complexes that would have created it. Since they were neither hunters nor agriculturalists hungry for land, there was no territoriality: the king-of-the-castle hard-wiring that had plagued humanity had, in them, been unwired. They
are nothing but leaves and grass and roots and a berry or two; thus their foods were plentiful and always available. Their sexuality was not a constant torment to them: they came into heat at regular intervals, as did most mammals other than man. (305)

The genetic manufacture of new, hybrid beings is very much the norm among the biotech corporations in the world of Atwood’s trilogy, with the Crakers merely being the culmination in a long line of transgenic experimentations with the purpose of forming new beings to provide surplus value for human beings. The Crakers, we learn, were initially designed in order to provide beings with pre-selected genetic characteristics for sale to both individual and corporate purchasers: by employing some of the desired genes from Crakers into a newborn, a “vegan” couple could have a “very beautiful, smart baby that eats nothing but grass,” and world leaders could be given “whole populations” with “pre-selected characteristics” such as “beauty,” “docility,” and “immunity” from disease (305, 304). And well before the Crakers, there were the transgenic beings known as pigoons, beings in which pig and human genetic material are integrated, and which are meant to serve as a factory for organ transplants to human beings:

The goal of the pigoon project was to grow an assortment of foolproof human-tissue organs in a transgenic knockout pig host—organs that would transplant smoothly and avoid rejection, but would also be able to fend off attacks by opportunistic microbes and viruses. . . . A rapid-maturity gene was spliced in so the pigoon kidneys would be ready sooner, and now they were perfecting a pigoon that could grow five or six kidneys at a time. Such a host animal could be reaped of its extra kidneys; then, rather than being destroyed, it could keep on living and grow more organs, much as a lobster could grow another claw to replace a missing one. (OAC 22-3)

Importantly, as Ashley Dawson points out, Atwood includes a sentence in the “Acknowledgements” section of MaddAddam that suggests that the transgenic creatures of the novel are not as fantastic or otherworldly as they might seem, but very much a part of contemporary biocapitalist culture. Atwood writes: “Although MaddAddam is a work of fiction, it does not include any technologies or biobeings that do not already exist, are not under construction, or are not possible in theory” (MA 392). We can compare this statement with the first paratactic element of the novel, an epigraph from Jonathan Swift’s Gulliver’s Travels: “I could perhaps like other have astonished you with strange improbable tales; but I rather chose to relate plain matter of fact in the simplest manner and style; because my principal design was to inform you, and not to amuse you.”

Atwood’s trilogy, we see, strives for a kind of realism, the main goal of which is to “inform” the reader, and by extension, to make the reader aware of the perils of currently existing biotechnological capabilities.246 This is of course an important and necessary goal, and the novel intervenes directly into debates revolving around the ethics of biotechnology and genetic engineering.247 Atwood’s reliance on the realist mode,

---

246 Swift’s use of realism, of course, is highly different from Atwood’s, since Gulliver’s Travels employs the realist method ironically, in order to describe a completely fantastic set of worlds, and thus to distance the mode of representation from the content of the narrative.

247 Atwood styles her project in large part as a critique of the utopian proclamations of synthetic biologists, as we see in this excerpted statement from an interview: “If you’re going to do gene-splicing, you’re going down a very strange path indeed. If you’re going to do it on humans, what you have to ask yourself is, do
however, is ultimately what limits the depth of the trilogy’s engagement with nonhuman forms of life. As I have been arguing throughout this study, realism is an inadequate mode of expressing the otherness of nonhuman life and its incommensurability with stable forms of representation, precisely because it does not challenge the language by which nonhuman life is given to us in representation and does not question the ability of the human subject to turn the nonhuman body into an object of knowledge.

We can take the example of the pigoons, who, since they are hybrid human-pig organisms that possess cells from the human brainstem, are capable of higher forms of thought than regular pigs. The pigoons express complex emotional states and engage in detailed burial rituals to mourn their dead, though their role in the trilogy is, first, to serve as the antagonists of Jimmy as they impede his progress from place to place, and in the final volume, to form an alliance with the human characters as they fight back against the criminal vigilantes that have taken some of the human characters hostage. The pigoons’ story, and their complex, hybridized mode of being in general, becomes incorporated into the narrative of the human protagonists’ struggle to save themselves. In other words, the pigoons become a device through which to carry forward the plot, which implicitly mimics the logic behind their transgenic production: they are bearers of value that can be easily incorporated into both human networks of production and human networks of meaning. In their biotechnological production, they provide organs for xenotransplantation for the human being; in their novelistic production, they play a role in furthering the aims of the human characters’ journey, without being valued as characters or as beings in themselves, and without disrupting the means of representation through which they are depicted.

We see a similar dynamic at work with the Crakers, who, with the help of Toby, Ren, and some of the other central human characters, learn how to sign, speak, and eventually, to write. The Crakers, like the pigoons before them, are complex, hybridized, multi-species beings with modes of thinking and being that are different from human consciousness. However, these modes of thinking are given to us primarily as lack: the Crakers are genetically deprived of the destructive tendencies of human beings, and so their modes of thought are merely a simplified version of human thought. The Crakers, in other words, are in many ways versions of human children (hence the other name they go by, “the Children of Crake”), which is how they are treated throughout the novels by the human characters, most of whom become exasperated with the difficulty of explaining abstract things like figurative expressions (“You will be the death of me,” for example [MA 108]), “hallucinations” (147), and “music” (214) to the Crakers.

In Oryx and Crake, Jimmy remembers the advice of a “book in his head,” apparently an anthropological study of “indigenous peoples” as he attempts to communicate with the Crakers: “When dealing with indigenous peoples, says the book in his head – a more modern book this time, late twentieth century, the voice a confident female’s – you must attempt to respect their traditions and confine your explanations to simple concepts that can be understood within the contexts of their belief systems” (OAC 97). Jimmy rejects this advice, imagining the writer as “[s]ome earnest aid worker” and a “[c]ondescending self-righteous cow [who] thinks she’s got all the answers. . . . If she were here she’d need a whole new take on indigenous” (97). The problem with the advice is not that it proceeds

you want the human race to remain human?” Qtd. in J. Brooks Bouson, “It’s Game Over Forever”: Atwood’s Satiric Vision of a Bioengineered Posthuman Future in Oryx and Crake,” p. 94.
from the assumption that indigenous peoples are child-like and possess inferior modes of thought in comparison to the observer, but simply that the Crakers are even more child-like and less capable of understanding than would be the indigenous peoples encountered by the book’s author. (And I would be remiss not to point out the latent problems behind Jimmy’s use of an animal metaphor as both a gendered insult and a way of reinforcing a certain mode of *anthropos* based on the exclusion of some category of being.)

After Toby teaches the Crakers are taught to read and write, *MaddAddam* becomes interspersed with short excerpts of their storytelling. The final few pages are written in the voice of one of the Crakers, named Blackbeard, whose writing becomes a chronicle of the actions of the central human characters of the novel: Jimmy, Toby, Zeb, Adam One, and Ren, among others. As Blackbeard writes:

> Now I have added to the Words, and have set down those things that happened after Toby stopped making any of the Writing and putting it into the Book. And I have done this so we will all know of her, and of how we came to be. And these new Words I have made are called the Story of Toby. (387)

And further on:

> The three Beloved Oryx Mothers cried very much when Toby went away. We cried as well, and purred over them, and after a while they felt better. And Ren said, Tomorrow is another day, and we said we did not understand what that meant, and Amanda said, Never mind because it was not important. And Lotis Blue said it was a thing of hope.

> Then Swift Fox told us that she was pregnant again and soon there would be another baby. . . . And Swift Fox said that if it was a girl baby it would be named Toby. And that is a thing of hope. (MA 390)

The role of the Crakers becomes reduced to their storytelling function, their preservation of the narrative of the human characters that they have encountered. The mythology that arises from the Crakers is based around the chronicling of the lives of the human characters, with the main purpose of the writing being “so that we will all know of [Toby],” with the story of “how we came to be” subordinate to it. It is important to note that the baby in question in the last paragraph is actually a cross-breed between human and Craker, though Blackbeard is excluded from any meaningful child-rearing duties. Earlier, another of the human characters gives birth to a human-Craker hybrid, which Shackleton (a minor character), upon seeing it, tellingly remarks, “We will all have to pitch in, because this is the future of the human race” (380). The hybridization of human and Craker genes leads to a new future for the human, but not a new future that is beyond the limits of human thought or imaginability, a future as it may be thought or experienced by nonhuman entities (as Woolf, for example, attempts to envision in *Between the Acts*), since the Crakers merely preserve a lesser developed model of human thought without being able to think beyond or outside it. This is a sentiment that Atwood’s sentence in the “Acknowledgements” perhaps unwittingly reinforces: nothing in the novel is beyond what can be theorized (by modern science, by a human consciousness), and so nothing in it, however fantastic it may seem, can challenge the limits of human thought.

---

248 Atwood’s own critique of Synthetic Biology is couched in terms of preserving a “human” future (see fn. 230): “If you’re going to do gene-splicing, you’re going down a very strange path indeed. If you’re going to do it on humans, what you have to ask yourself is, do you want the human race to remain human?”
or question the limits of what human thought can contain, or go beyond the horizons of a given model of thought.

A similar set of limitations informs another recent novel about human-animal relations and the production of knowledge out of a nonhuman other: Benjamin Hale’s *The Evolution of Bruno Littlemore* (2011). Bruno Littlemore is a chimpanzee, the grandchild of Kafka’s Red Peter (from “A Report to an Academy”), who has learned to speak, read, and write, and who eventually becomes romantically involved with the female scientist (Lydia Littlemore, from whom he takes his last name) who has trained him and indoctrinated him into the ways of humanity. The novel is the recorded recitation of Bruno’s memoirs to a lab assistant, told in his wry, funny, and extremely learned narrative voice. But the critique of anthropocentrism is this novel (humans are, as might be expected, viciously mocked for nearly all of their behaviors and cultural presuppositions) ultimately fails to translate to a critique of the language by which anthropocentrism reproduces itself as ideology. Unlike Kafka’s animal stories, from which Hale derives inspiration, the narrative frame of *Bruno Littlemore* remains stable and perfectly referential throughout the novel, with very little uneasiness or disturbance amidst the transmission of Bruno’s nonhuman consciousness into human language. In Kafka’s animal stories, as we saw, the representational frame is continually distorted due to the limitations of the author’s imaginative foray into the mental and psychic life of a nonhuman being. Hale seems be able to occupy rather easily the place of nonhuman subjectivity, since Bruno’s narration does not explicitly register the disjunctures between human and nonhuman modes of thought, logic, and relationality.

Bruno’s “evolution” then, like that of the Crakers in Atwood’s *MaddAddam* trilogy, is into human existence from animal existence along the lines of a child’s growth into an adult. The acquisition of language is what marks Bruno’s entry into the human sociosymbolic order, and what allows Bruno to inhabit the world of humans, even as he is physically marked as nonhuman. Early in the novel, while he is first being experimented upon, Bruno tells us,

> I had not yet acquired language, so I couldn’t have articulated my thoughts. (That, by the way, is the ironic thing about acquiring language relatively late in life: words don’t exist to adequately describe what it’s like when that tempest of wordless thoughts whirling around in your head suddenly snaps to definition; that great hop from prelinguistic to linguistic is squarely in the realm of the ineffable.)

To imagine that the possession of language is the sole means of “artculat[ing]” one’s “thoughts” is to reject the importance of affective, gestural, and other non-linguistic modes of communication as equally valid modes of articulating thought. As Haeckel’s writings on evolutionary biology show, the possession of consciousness is not and cannot be defined by the possession of language, since nonhuman mammals, birds, and insects all exhibit modes of thought that cannot be separated from “conscious” thought. This seemingly minor assertion at the beginning of Hale’s novel speaks to a greater limitation of the work as a whole: while it may push boundaries thematically (depicting, for example, what Mel Chen would call the “improper affiliation” of a romantic relationship, including the depiction of explicit sexual acts, between Bruno and Lydia), Bruno still remains a human in ape’s clothing, a narrator crafted so thoroughly in the model of

---

human consciousness that his nonhuman otherness becomes virtually insignificant to his modes of thought and interaction with the world.

Again, none of this is meant to be dismissive towards Atwood or Hale or other contemporary writers of speculative fiction; through this critique, I merely mean to suggest that thinking about the present age may also, in addition to cautionary tales about the advances of genetic engineering and other forms of biotechnology like Atwood’s and Hale’s, require modes of ethical engagement that couple a critique of the violent appropriation of animals and the nonhuman world in the present with a critique of the language that has enabled anthropocentric attitudes more generally. I am locating this dual mode of critique in three works of contemporary poetry, Anne Waldman’s *Manatee/Humanity* (2009), Jody Gladding’s *Translations from Bark Beetle* (2014), and Sawako Nakayasu’s *The Ants* (2014), to which I will now turn.

III. Contemporary Poetry and the Ethics of Non-Appropriation

In this regard, I want to conclude by looking at three works of contemporary poetry (all of which may be read as works of ecofeminist poetry) that attempt to integrate Modernist aesthetic experimentation with contemporary ethical concerns, and thus suggest a way in which experimentation and ethics might co-exist. The first of these is Anne Waldman’s *Manatee/Humanity* (2009), a work which begins from the assumption, derived from Tibetan Buddhism, that, “animal and human minds are both participants in reality. We share the planet with many non-human temporalities. Minds exist at the quantum level, below the level of atoms and subatomic particles.” From this position, the use of language as a mode of expression comes with its own limitations, and bounds the speaking and writing human within a set of dispositions and temporalities that foreclose him or her from other possibilities of worldly experience and knowledge.

Waldman discusses the evolutionary formation of human speech (“& important changes/ in the throat structure allowed the sounds/ uttered by _homo erectus_ to approximate human speech”) as what eventually sets human beings apart from other life forms. This setting apart, however, is not conceived as a kind of superiority to the nonhuman world, but as a knowledge of the lost possibilities of being and experiencing that the human being can no longer access, that the human is permanently withdrawn from. In a section of “day 1,” in which an observer is experimenting on chimpanzees and other animals in a laboratory in order to discover the origins of the human, Waldman writes:

> & you are suddenly outside
> what you thought
> you saw, you a gazing-one,
> watcher, seer
> maiden of the laboratory
> with shock wires
> probes calibrating tools
> measuring

---

what you are not,
what was just in there, not lost but
what went wobbly, water-tailed, winged
where language held your hand in
too-freighted kinship (20)

In analyzing the origins of the human, the observer discovers not positive
knowledge, but the lost evolutionary possibilities of what the human might have become if
it had not followed the path it ended up taking, if not for the contingent “throat
structure” that enabled humans to speak and that produced anthropological development
along a certain course and produced a certain order of “neural representation” leading to
the formation of the human “mind” (21). The development of language is a kind of
privation, a “too-freighted kinship” with the human being, that has prevented the human
from access to “what you are not.” To be human is to be embedded in a particular mode
of perception and experience, for “seeing is always ‘seeing as . . . ’”: we see according to
the dictates of a particular formation of mind, a particular “neural representation” (21).
In other words, “language reflects mind structures/ strictures on ways to be in the world”
(92).

But unlike Kafka, Waldman does not attempt to inhabit nonhuman subjectivities
directly. Her method, more akin to Woolf’s, is to suggest the presence of alternative,
nonhuman modes of being in the world, modes which language is ultimately incapable of
accessing. For example, when Waldman recalls her encounter with the eponymous
“manatee,” she writes:

& standing in the nimbus of that genus of strange species
as if saying, this is the mind of manatee
Manatee reminded me ~
that multiple
hydra-headed
universes,
all fractals in
chaos
including more cycles
will emerge

formation,

stabilization,

disintegration,

emptiness . . .

make it work give it a shape let it come apart

start over constantly (72-3)

As the human encounters the manatee’s completely different modes of relation to time
and space, the spatiotemporal relations of human perception are thrown into disarray,
cast into an endless cycle of attempted attunement to the incomprehensible time and
space of the nonhuman other: “formation, stabilization, disintegration, emptiness.”
Further on: “& what kind of anchor, then, is time?/ if in the grammar of sound it’s always revolving around/ ‘what is the time of manatee?’ or/ ‘what sound caught in waves in manatee-larynx?’ (74).
Waldman couples her analysis of the contingency and limitedness of human consciousness as a mode of worldly engagement with a series of direct incitements against human-directed ecological violence, from species-destroying carbon pollution to the devastation of marine life to carbon pollution and factory farming. The anthropocentric definition of “time” becomes linked both to the scale of species extinction (“& what of animals on desperate clocks of survival & flood, famine, ice-caps/ melting . . . what of them”) and to the time of industrial progress “it=was=a=time=of=fossil=fuel=priorities=of=precious=business=time” (66, 64). The abstract equivalence of all things, and the homogeneity of time as the time of industrial production, under modern capitalism is directly associated with indifference towards the larger-scale ecological consequences of human progress. This definition of time then becomes bound up with the time of the future, or “generations hence”: “that’s what they’ll say about us: what were they thinking? stupid fuckers it was commodification fun-hog time, time-modification time, got on with time we killed time they fucked us over in our future time”
Waldman suggests the adoption of a kind of reticence in our action, a reticence that should ideally be rooted in our inability fully to comprehend the forms of life, and the earth itself, that we have attempted to encapsulate within the contingent evolutionary mechanisms of language and consciousness:

Apprehension unfold  implode
threshold of language saying, kindly I will
not kill & animals with senses we do not
possess at all?

Not kill them too?
Soon my neuron is deciding to fire or
not to fire

choice by what mechanism? corny
empathy

Not wholly passive recipient of external
action resumed to be acculturated (58)
Waldman suggests an ethical injunction that precedes language, an injunction she locates ( provisionally) among nonhuman beings: “does the bird understand its oviparous offspring?/ do not each this thing/ & would that thought be motor or sensory?/ & would that thought occur to you anyway” (19). There is a kind of “apprehension,” Waldman suggests, that precedes language, a mode of apprehension that we can access through non-linguistic means (in the poem, this pre-conscious state becomes associated with Buddhist meditation practices) and through which we can “implode/ threshold of language” with the pre-linguistic ethical injunction not kill “animals with senses we do not/ possess at all.” The way to think of a state beneath consciousness is to realize the materiality of consciousness itself, and the distinction between human subjectivity and
consciousness: my (possible) empathetic connection is ultimately inseparable from the agency of the “neuron[s]” in my brain, their “deciding to fire or not fire.” The human subject is caught between deterministic passivity and creative activity ("Not wholly passive recipient of external/ action resumed to be acculturated"), suggesting a space for action that is both constrained by biological necessity but still open, within the space of those constraints, to new possibilities of creative, and non-destructive, non-appropriative relations with the nonhuman world.

Jody Gladding’s Translations from Bark Beetle (2014), which is somewhat analogous to Kafka’s animal stories, is an imaginative attempt to inscribe the thought and expression of insects (primarily, the bark beetle) into language. The conceit of the book is that the poet is “translating” the language of the bark beetle by examining the traces they leave behind by digging tunnels through trees, first by making graphite etchings of these traces, then by converting these patterns into language. A “translator’s note” explains: “Certain elements of the grammar make translating Bark Beetle problematic. There are only two verb tenses: the cyclical and the radiant. Prepositional phrases figure prominently and seem necessary for a complete syntactical unit. The same pronoun form (indicated as •) is used for first and second person in singular, plural, and all cases.”

The language of the bark beetle, as imagined by the poet, does not formally distinguish between singular and plural entities, between the self and the other (first and second person), or between the past and the present (the only verb tenses are the “cyclical” and the “radiant,” which, while ambiguous in meaning, do not refer to states in time, but to the particular qualities of beings or elements of one’s environment). From the outset, the language in which the expression of the Bark Beetle is given to us is alienated from us, filled with verb, sentence, and grammatical structures that are impossible to translate: even though the poet attempts a “translation” of this language, the bark beetle’s expression still remains incongruous to our available means of representation.

In an early poem, “Spending Most of Their Time in Galleries, Adults Come into the Open on Warm Sunny Days: Translations from Bark Beetle,” Gladding writes:

- •’ve learned through wood
- you can only travel in one direction
- but turn again with m• there love
- sap in the chamber
- red the friable
- taste of yo• •’ve learned

---

251 In a review of Gladding’s book, entymologist Dezene Huber explains regarding the “communication” of bark beetles:

“One [bark beetles] attack a tree, the parents and then the hatched brood etch their marks on the wood of the tree as they mine through the tissues just under the bark. The under-the-bark patterns of bark beetle galleries are about as diverse as the number of bark beetle species. In general terms, one or both of the parents excavate a main gallery, the female lays eggs on the walls of that tunnel, and then the hatched larvae bore outwards from the parental gallery. This means that an interested observer can strip back the bark of a tree – whether attacked recently or in the rather distant past – and can measure the length of the parental gallery and the length and number of the larval galleries. These measurements and counts give information on the number of eggs laid, the number of larvae hatched, and the success of the larvae among other things. (Huber)


there are other ways in the wood’s
growing
if not for m•
find hollow
find spell (6)

Gladding reads the bark beetle’s tunneling into a tree not merely as instinctual behavior, but as an expression of itself, an attempt to externalize its own being (a being that is not completely separable from other beetles and other life forms) by creating forms of expression upon and within (and with) the tree. There is only “one direction” in which to “travel” through the tree, but there are many ways to “turn,”253 and to “turn again” (a “cyclical” verb) with other beetles towards the “sap in the chamber,” which the poet conceives as an act of “love.” We can view this as a kind of conative striving, to use the Spinozist terms of Chapter Three, or the striving towards a more precise and vivid expression of the particulars of the beetle’s world, and of the beetle’s sense of itself (and its fellow beetles and fellow life forms) in the world.

At the same time, the beetle in this poem recognizes, or has “learned”254 that it is not at the center of any world, and that its relationship with the tree, its tunnelling, is merely one among many “other ways in the wood’s/ growing/ if not for m•[.]” The beetle recognizes that the “wood’s/ growing” is not just “for me,” but is caused by a complex assemblage of other agents, whether from other bark beetles, from other insects, from mammals, or other forces. The beetle’s language does not distinguish the agency of the individual, or even of the species, from other types of agency, so tunnelling is simply tunnelling, expressed by the indicative phrase “there are other ways in the wood’s/ growing”: the “there are” in this phrase gives us creative action without a clear or determinable agent.

Like Waldman’s Manatee/Humanity, then, Translations from Bark Beetle also suggests a kind of non-appropriability of the nonhuman other, and asserts the contingency and non-universality of human consciousness as a means of worldly apprehension. It is an arbitrary feature of (most) human languages, Gladding suggests, that they privilege individual agency and distinguish it from other kinds of agency, whether that of a species or of the natural world more generally. Finally, as in Manatee/Humanity, Gladding links her exploration of nonhuman modes of thought and agency with a critique of anthropocentrism more generally, particularly the environmental destruction wrought by the expansion of human settlements. In a series of poems that are not Bark Beetle translations, Gladding addresses a set of different trees that are felled by loggers, forming affective relationships to these trees in the course of memorializing them, perhaps in an imitation of the bark beetles’ own mode of relating to trees. The bark beetles themselves register the impact of human-driven ecological devastation, as we see in the series of poems titled “Bark Beetle Fragments in Regional Dialects.” “1 Southwestern” reads:

through think on thin commercial
success going under
strip malls they’ve ruined

253 The Latin root vert, which means “to turn,” is also the origin of the word “verse,” and the word “conversation,” a motif that Gladding may very well be playing upon.

254 We must of course note that the subject of this verb is unclear, because the Bark Beetle language does not distinguish between first and second person.
whole up (61)

In this poem, the beetle is able to conceive of a clear “they” apart from itself, which is a departure from the standard dictates of Bark Beetle (though these poems are written in “regional dialects,” and so may encompass such differences): this perhaps speaks to the un-naturalness of human presence amidst the world conceived by the bark beetle. But while there is a clear “they,” there is no clear “me,” since the self is given to us in the word “m*y,” perhaps meaning that the beetle does not formulate the “quiet cul-de-sac” in terms of personal belonging, but as part of a larger natural system that is currently being destroyed by the “they.” In this sense, the beetle registers a protest against capitalist development not by making a counter-demand for the sanctity of one’s own personal belonging, by way of some natural right to this piece of land or this cul-de-sac or this tree, but by resisting the very logic of private property and the expansion of one’s own being beyond the natural confines of the self. This is an ethical injunction as well as a poetic method: the refusal of self-imposition upon the place of the other, and the refusal, ultimately, to encapsulate the other within mechanisms of containment, whether representational language or physical domination of the other’s environment.

The last work I want to look at here is Sawako Nakayasu’s The Ants (2014), a multi-layered exploration of animality, otherness, and the intersections between the logic of species division and racial and gender othering. For Nakayasu, these modes of otherness are, quite simply, inseparably entangled with one another: the human-ness or animal-ness of a poem’s subject is often impossible to determine, as is its literalness or figurativeness, all of which are tied into the knotted, indefinable figures of the “ants” populating the majority of the poems. Nakayasu produces an idea of entanglement that is not precise, that is always shifting in relation to categories of belonging, such as race, gender, class, all of which are bound up with the consideration of species difference. The indeterminacy of animal metaphor, and the capacity of metaphorical comparisons to produce not self-evident knowledge, but monstrosities that are irreducible to the order of representation, is very much at work in The Ants.

In nearly every poem, either a single ant or a colony of ants finds presence as some illegible being, neither completely literal or figurative, always as a metaphor for something, but a “something” that can never quite be grasped; ants, in other words, emerge as disturbances into the order of meaning and reference they enter. For example, the poem “No Collective” reads:

Believing themselves to be quite progressive for their species, a group of ants gets together and decides to form a collective. They gather the necessary documentation, fill out all the proper information in the correct little boxes, get photos taken in the right size and dimensions and angle, and step precisely through every single hoop required of them to become an officially recognized collective.

Their application is denied, however, on the grounds that ants are an inherently collective species, and this designation would be redundant and downright unnecessary.

One ant is so upset by this verdict that it begins to cry, thereby forging a breach in the collective emotional unity of the group. This very breach, however, makes the
officer falter, reconsider for a brief moment, entertain the possibility of a radical change of heart, but this very possibility of a change in the officer’s heart makes the ant’s tears dry up, which lands them all back at their original, inherently collective state, and that’s the end of that story.255

The ants seem to be standing in as a metaphor for a refugee group, or some version of a marginalized human community attempting to gain official state recognition as a “collective,” though the poem also stands as a kind of allegory about the ways in which nonhuman animals or insects are denied individuality as beings and instead always-already absorbed into the category of the collective or group or species. The discourse of “species” intersects with discourses of immigration or minority recognition within a dominant order, and the specificity of both the literal statement that these are “ants” and the details about the ants’ production of “documentation,” “forms,” and “photos” makes the metaphor impossible to resolve. The ants of this poem then exist somewhere between literal and figurative orders, somewhere between refugees and insects, the multiple categories of otherness having been blurred irresolutely into one other within the poem.

In other poems such as “Ants in the Wind,” ants are more directly figured as an illegible disturbance into a pre-existing social and representational order. In this poem, we are told that

ants are filling the air, both the physical air as well as the radio and TV airwaves, not to mention the internet. I can’t take two steps in any direction without being accosted by an hourly-updated regional chart of the current ant density levels. . . .

I believe it too, because I look out the window and can’t see them. Or rather, I can’t see very well through them, and this is how I know of their presence, fogging up vision throughout the world over” (39)

These ants have “studied countless tutorials, textbooks, videotapes, DVDs, podcasts, everything but the real thing, all invested in the sole purpose of helping to train young ants to prepare for the ride up (which can be quite lovely if caught on the back of a bird), as well as the inescapably treacherous way down” (39). The ants are identified with some kind of disturbance of physical, social, and technological space, an identification that shifts from weather to a flood of immigrants and back to actual ants who seek out “partially chewed strawberry shortcake” while trying to “remain aware of the nearby presence of humans” (40). In some sense, nonhuman life here becomes figured as precisely what distorts forms of identification, and by extension, the logic of a concept-based language: ants appear in a different singularity each time we encounter them, a singularity that is bound up with different conceptual and identificatory frameworks that all remain inadequate as the guarantors of stable meaning.

In “Apple Speed,” the ants are more legible as actual insects, though their agency becomes manifested in their ability to disturb the neutral, representational function of language itself. An excerpt:

We have our light years, and they. Their longest unit of time is based on nothing else but. The lifespan of one of their own and. Different colonies may use different varieties of apples, but. The time it takes for a single ant to eat an entire. Apple. The fact of the matter is, working alone makes the task excruciatingly.

Slow. Working alone, a single ant is unable to eat the entire. Thus a new replacement ant must. Take over for the old ant at exactly the right. [. . . .] (11) The poem mimics the unfurling of “apple speed” in the lives of the ants, with each sentence marking the progress of one ant as it expends its energies on consuming a portion of the apple, then resting to let the next ant, marked by the next sentence, continue the work the first ant has begun. The poem’s language becomes morphed as it attempts to register, or attune to, the agency and the time-scale of the ants, which cannot be comfortably contained within standard modes of referential language. Like Waldman and Gladding, Nakayasu’s work ultimately produces an ethics of non-appropriability of the nonhuman based on its incongruity with traditional modes of knowledge. Metaphor is not a source of knowledge production, but the point at which knowledge collapses, and where different forms of otherness (whether based on race, nationality, gender, or species) intersect to trouble the fiction of a universal language or means of representation within which these different forms of otherness could be contained.

What I hoped to have shown through readings of these works by Waldman, Gladding, and Nakayasu is the emergence of an aesthetic movement that couples the modes of linguistic experimentation prized by a strain of Victorian and Modernist authors, with a renewed focus on ecological ethics in the present. If the current biocapitalist regime is attempting to create and normalize a version of human-nonhuman entanglement that preserves a certain hierarchical, violent, and appropriative relation between its two terms, what is needed now more than ever are modes of writing and thinking that continue to insist on the limits of human-based forms of understanding and the constantly shifting nature of our entanglement with nonhuman beings. By complicating the ways in which we know, understand, and encounter nonhumans, literature can suggest new, non-appropriative modes of relation that remain indeterminate, undefined, and persistently remade through continued interaction with the nonhuman in all its multivalent unknowability.
Bibliography


Bouson, J. Brooks. “‘It’s Game Over Forever’: Atwood’s Satiric Vision of a


Directions, 1974. Print.


---------------. “Introduction” to The Temptation of Saint Anthony, op. cit.


Neverow, Vera. “The Woolf, the Horse, and the Fox: Recurrent Motifs in Jacob’s Room


