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STRANGE ANIMAL

I am constrained merely to register as a brute fact the emergence of consciousness in animal bodies. A psyche, or nucleus of hereditary organization, gathers and governs these bodies, and at the same time breeds within them a dreaming, suffering, and watching mind.

– George Santayana, *A General Confession* (1940)

Derrida offers himself up to an extraordinary auto-deconstruction in his 2006 essay *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, one that would quietly exercise its indelible impact on us all.¹ Each one of us, our entire human world would be transformed were we to submit to a comparable passion: the radical, categorical deconstruction effected here. No intellectual violence is carried out in this writing; no efforts to persuade with positive arguments; no logical assent is requested. Quiet tracings of connections and connotations alone commence the great unraveling. The apocalyptic implications explored are nonetheless overwhelming, though the responsibility lies with the reader to draw them out, discerning what is breaking down and what opening up in this dissolution, suffering exposure in an unfamiliar new nakedness starker than any other. It is an apocalypse that approaches, as in Nietzsche's phrase, "on doves' feet." The revelatory event happens uneventfully – silently and privately – in Derrida's bathroom as he stands "stark naked" before a cat. The moment might be called Derrida's Little Apocalypse, for indeed he testifies, "in these moments of nakedness, as regards the animal, everything can happen to me, I am like a child ready for the apocalypse," then he underscores in italics, "*I am*

¹ Jacques Derrida, *L'Animal que donc je suis* (2006), published in English as *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, edited by Marie-Louise Mallet, translated by David Wills, Perspectives in Continental Philosophy series edited by John D. Caputo (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008).

(following) *the apocalypse itself*" (12). Throughout the essay Derrida plays on the ambiguity of the French title, *l'animal que donc je suis*, which can be interpreted as either "the animal that therefore I am" or "the animal that therefore I follow." How to sort out this problematic ambiguity? Can these be the same "animal"? Can I follow the animal that I am?

With no easy answers to such questions, we return to the primal scene. We cannot say Derrida is "seen naked in his bathroom by his pet cat," for he is careful not use such language. Rather, all of a sudden he sees himself being seen and held in the gaze of "*this little cat*." The impact of her gaze commences the wave upon wave of deconstructive reflection that follow in a seeming infinitude of reverberations, unveiling a defensively elaborated world of manipulative naming, protective cultural clothing, and reflexive shame. And immediately he feels ashamed for being ashamed (4). "I hasten to cover the obscenity of the event, in short, to cover myself" (10).

In the privacy of his bathroom Derrida is suddenly caught in the flesh, captured naked, seen and beheld in this condition by a nonhuman, nondivine gaze, obliging him to question all the biblical, theological, cultural layers of "being seen" "naked" by the "gaze of an other" who is now, this moment, more truly other than any other: "Wholly other, like every other that is every (bit) other found in such intolerable proximity that I do not feel as yet justified or qualified to call it my fellow, even less my brother" (12). This other is more other than any human other, ergo, for reasons of anthropomorphic projection, more other than God—at least any common notion of God. Adam and Eve naively respond to God's gaze with aprons made of fig leaves, but no such dissimulations are possible in Derrida's bathroom, for the nakedness is too radical, too far beyond a matter of the "flesh." "The animal is not naked because it is naked," he remarks (5). He wonders, then, is it possible to be naked before an animal?

"Clothing derives from technics," Derrida observes, "We would therefore have to think shame and technicity together, as the same subject" (5). Here technicity is perhaps intended in its broadest sense as the know-how of human culture itself. "Clothing would be proper to man, one of the 'properties' of man," Derrida notes, "even if one talks about it less than speech or reason" (5). Can we have a fleeting idea what it would mean to stand naked in our animal flesh, apart from our "clothing"? Is not even what we know as "flesh," naked flesh, already a clothing? Are we so defended from nakedness that nakedness remains unknown to us, veiled by "flesh"—except perhaps momentarily when exposed before an utterly disarming animal gaze, a gaze that reveals the "naked flesh" as a veil?

Derrida observes, writing of the cat, "nothing can ever rob me of the certainty that what we have here is an existence that refuses to be conceptualized [*rebelle à tout concept*]" (9). Thus, as this gaze offers the glimmer or suggestion of a perfect nakedness unknown to us, one for which we have lost the capacity, in a stroke she reveals Derrida—not naked, but caught in the flesh; not merely ashamed, but ashamed of being ashamed (4). Derrida's gambit in this essay seems to be that the gaze of the animal other has the power to incite us—perhaps through shame, perhaps through self-irony, perhaps through compassion and solidarity—to recognize and deconstruct whole millennia of sedimented namings, responses, assumptions, and defenses that

have allowed us to identify ourselves as human in the “great chain of being,” positioning ourselves as securely as possible between beast and divinity. Not a God, to be sure, but thankfully not an animal. The animal gaze seems to ask: Are you so *sure* who you are? Do you *know* something of this in the end? And for a moment we seem to get a chimerical or apocalyptic glimpse into a time before time or without time, a time of no speech, of no speakable evil or ills, a time before or without human shame before the animal (17).

Derrida is arrested by the otherness in his bathroom, “disarmed before a small mute living being,” yet his desire is “to escape the alternatives of a projection that appropriates and an interruption that excludes” (18). Speaking for myself, this encounter of man and cat brought to mind Cole Porter’s lyric, “Just can’t get started with you.” Confronted so, Derrida’s desire is stirred to get started following this little cat like a somewhat grudging Alice in Looking-Glass Land. But in the midst of the task, gradually getting started in his pursuing, Derrida realizes that in following the animal, in attempting to follow the animal, he is only able to follow the *zoon logon echon*, not the *zoon alogon* who sees and watches him. Her disarming gaze gets him started, indeed, but in a pursuit *incurvatus in se*, unable to escape auto-deconstruct mode.

The mention of Lewis Carroll is not a red herring. In an aside to the reader that is at once cheeky and deep, Derrida admits that he would have liked to inscribe his whole talk within a reading of Lewis Carroll. “In fact,” he teases, “you can’t be certain that I am not doing that, for better or worse, silently, unconsciously, or without your knowing” (7). Apropos, let us remember that in *Through the Looking Glass*, Humpty Dumpty says, “When I use a word, it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less.” Alice replies, “The question is whether you *can* make words mean so many different things,” to which Humpty Dumpty replies, “The question is which is to be master—that’s all.”²

And so, “the animal”—what a word. “The animal” as Derrida uses it in his essay is not literally but figuratively always and with every mention ironized in scare quotes (34), for “the animal is a word . . . that men have instituted, a name they have given themselves the right and the authority to give to the living other” (23, 32). He coins the noun *animot* to give visibility to this critical valence; *animot* sounds like the French plural for animal, *animaux*. But it lumps all animals into a single word (*mot*) that announces itself as a word and only a word, “*animot*” (41).

Confined within this catch-all concept, within this vast encampment of the animal, in this general singular, within the strict enclosure of this definite article (“the Animal” and not “animals”), as in a virgin forest, a zoo, a hunting or fishing ground, a paddock or an abattoir, a space of domestication, are *all the living things* that man does not recognize as his fellows, his neighbors, or his brothers. (34)

² Lewis Carroll, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass* (New York: Knopf, 1992), 254.

Lest we forget modern realities for the animal, Derrida takes a moment to elaborate how in the course of the last two centuries traditional forms of exploitation of animals and animal energy have given way to new “*techniques of intervention into their object*,” that is, the living animal—by means of regimentation and farming, genetic experimentation, industrialization of the production for consumption of animal meat, artificial insemination on a massive scale, more and more audacious manipulations of the genome, reduction of the animal not only to production and overactive reproduction (hormones, genetic crossbreeding, cloning, etc.) of meat for consumption, but also all sorts of other end products (though strangely Derrida omits to mention the effects of habitat encroachment, pollution, poaching, climate change, and more on wild populations)—such that no one today can deny the unprecedented proportions of this subjection of the animal, he attests, and such a subjection “can be called violence in the most morally neutral sense of the term” (25).

The impact of Derrida’s cumulative evocations of the animal who says “animal,” the animal who names the animals, as in Genesis 2:19–20 (15–18), is weirdly affecting. We realize we have been listening to a wholly one-sided conversation on the part of one who protests too much, a conversation whose would-be interlocutor is not absent—to the contrary, who is near, even too near—but who is silent, who occupies a persistent and incorrigible position of silence. We then realize that we have entered—since when?—an echo chamber of logocentric naming and reflecting, of questioning and being questioned by our own longstanding postures and impostures relating to “the animal,” while the animal to which we purport to be relating ourselves lives and abides nearby without a word.

That silence is one that grows through the winding passageways of the essay until it turns disarming and alarming; for this is the disconcerting silence of one who sees, who watches and observes from a bottomlessness neither penetrated nor penetrable by logos. But then we must concede, despite our intentions to follow the animal, that *this* silence too is *our* silence after all, a silence that emerges as the aftereffect of our naming, our commanding and commandeering words, the words we give ourselves the right to give. It is not the silence of the animal we hear—if there is “the animal”—but a chimera of our own invention, that is to say, an *animot*.

So then, seeing Derrida being seen naked in the flesh by that “bottomless gaze” (12), we begin to register along with him the apocalyptic implications of the questioning occurring here—like an earthquake that is barely felt on the surface but immensely violent deep below. Deconstructing the history that man tells himself (22), Derrida recognizes that he is following the *auto-bio-graph-ical* animal, and this autobiographical history is concerned with “what is proper to man, the relation to itself of a humanity that is above all anxious about, and jealous of, what is proper to it” (14). And ultimately Derrida traces everything that is proper to man to an originary fault or lack: to a “default of propriety,” the generic prematurity of birth (45, 130). But to follow this extraordinary theme into its depth would seem to throw us off our track into an endless backtrack or even a trackless nothingness. Another time perhaps.

If Derrida's essay takes on the atmosphere of a tribunal—even a Kafkaesque trial and judgment—it is a tribunal that makes heard as its background condition the absence of voice of the other, the other who is *alogon*. And yet to hear this absence of voice certainly must not be confused with hearing the *other*. The alogological silence of the animal is for us inaccessible, however real and near. It is not too far a stretch to imagine that the power of this silence parallels the power of the silence of Jesus before his accusers. No, it is not the same silence, but each is a silence saturated with unspeakable pathos for the hearer with ears to hear, hearing what one can of an other who deploys no logos, no apology, no defense, no veils.

At this point I would like to call in a few observations from the anthropologist Lewis Mumford for the perspective they bring to this subject, that is, the animal who has logos, the autobiographical animal who writes its own life history: "Fortunately, perhaps," Mumford writes, "one of the first objects of [man's] love was himself: indeed, without his excessive vanity and self-love early man might never have explored the principle paths that carried him beyond his original animal concern with survival and reproduction." He goes on to specify two key traits that color every aspect of "man's" existence:

One is the capacity to dream and, above all, to transform imagined projections into actual projects. The other is the sense of awe and veneration, not unmixed with anxiety, in the presence of forces that lie beyond [his] intelligence. Man lives no small part of his life in the presence of the unconscious and the unknown. . . . In opening up his specific human capacities, the unknown, indeed, the unknowable, has proved an even greater stimulus than the known.³

If there is a profoundly vain self-regard at work in the animal that has logos, it is also the case that that same animal has unusual creative powers to interface in novel ways with the unknown and the unknowable. Powers to listen and hear and harbor a haunting otherness, not only to speak. It seems to me that Derrida implicitly calls for a rebalancing of these specifically human powers, in a sense "dehumanizing" ourselves, becoming stripped of our humanity as we have identified and promulgated it—oppositionally in relation to "the animal" (32)—in order to rehumanize ourselves in a more embracing and compassionate and enlightened relation to the complex heterogeneity of all life, including our own (26-27). How much has human fear, opportunism, vanity, and will to power blocked a perception of organic solidarity that may be struggling toward its day of revelation?

This review is only an indicator pointing to the importance of Derrida's essay, urging one and all to read it and to be deconstructed. To be shamed, stripped naked, reformed, and transformed "like a child ready for the apocalypse" (12); to be regenerated as a human animal still only beginning to understand what it does not know, does not sufficiently *take care* to know as unknown. Derrida announces at the beginning that his reflection will "speak endlessly on

³ The generic masculine is allowed to stand as historical. Lewis Mumford, *The Transformations of Man* (New York: Harper and Row, 1956), 12-13.

nudity” starting from Genesis (1). In the course of patiently exploring layers of religious and cultural mythology, Derrida exposes an anthropocentric establishment in which everything *we think we know* about “the animal” by intervention of the *animot* has been allowed to eclipse all that we anxiously do not know how to begin to regard, and moreover refuse to regard when being caught in *that* regard: seeing ourselves being seen—if only chimerically—by an alogological living being. Following *this* bottomless gaze, we are caught ourselves, beyond nakedness, exposed absolutely—unless we run for cover and erase our tracks. “What this animal is,” writes Derrida, “what it will have been, what it would, would like to, or could be is perhaps what I am (following) [*que je suis*]” (33).⁴

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⁴ Animals are the 99%. This essay is dedicated to Black Jack, who has been catching me in his gaze for eleven years.