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The Gaze Called Animal: Notes for a Study on Thinking

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OVER THE COURSE OF SEVERAL DAYS IN 1997, JACQUES DERRIDA DELIVERED a long lecture to attendees of a conference in Cerisy called “The Auto-biographical Animal.” As part of his opening remarks, the philosopher recounted a curious little scene that served to introduce the central theme of the larger address that followed. The scene begins when Derrida reports that each morning, with an almost ritualistic regularity, he is followed from his bedroom into the bathroom by his cat, an unnamed feline, he insists, that is a real little cat, not the mere figure of a cat: “It doesn’t silently enter the bedroom as an allegory for all the cats on earth, the felines that traverse our myths and religions” (2008, 6). The action picks up when Derrida finds himself naked before this little cat, naked in front of the insistent gaze of the animal, an encounter, he reports, that he always has a “bad time” (*j’ai du mal*) overcoming (4). The regular meeting never fails to flood him with shame, especially if he is caught face-to-face, if the cat observes him frontally naked, as if with a view to seeing. The scene comes to an end when the cat

invariably leaves the bathroom, looking for her breakfast or asking to be let out. After the presentation of this strange theme, Derrida begins to weave a remarkable set of variations, not least of which is treating the encounter as a contemporary iteration of the Biblical Fall, that first, painful moment when the human became aware of its own interiority—a coming to know oneself that means knowing oneself ashamed, in short, a consciousness of good and evil—the original primal scene, which the philosopher points out, occurred under the gaze of a rather famous Biblical *animot*.¹

One feels tempted to try to name Derrida's theme: Moments when the animal regards me. The point of view of animals. An animal looks at me. The experience of the seeing animal. In the beginning, since time, since so long ago, the animal has been looking. Seeing oneself seen naked under the gaze called animal. Or perhaps simply: The gaze called animal. It is a slightly unsettling motif. Upon first hearing, it might sound like a coy play on one of John Berger's (1991) more familiar and comforting themes: "Why look at animals?" But in one of his characteristic deconstructive reversals, Derrida is instead attempting to glean significance from occasions when one feels *seen* by that which we call animal.²

Despite the delicate playfulness of the opening scene, Derrida's long lecture quickly evolves into a fierce *Sturm und Drang*. The bathroom encounter is followed by an ambitious pronouncement about the current "epoch" of thinking on animals, an age beginning with Descartes and his animal-machines: "At bottom," Derrida thunders, there are "only two types of discourse, two positions of knowledge, two grand forms of theoretical or philosophical treatise regarding the animal" (2008, 13). It is, of course, the first that preoccupies him. Of this category he names a handful of philosophical giants—Kant, Heidegger, Lacan, Lévinas—thinkers that have all seen, observed, analyzed, and reflected on the animal, and yet, Derrida insists, have never been *seen seen*. Each has failed to draw significance from those moments when the animal "looks at me": "They neither wanted nor had the capacity to draw any systemic consequence from the fact that an animal could, facing them, look at them, clothed or naked, and in a word, without a word, *address them*" (13). Although their philosophical discourses might be sound, Derrida proposes that their thinking proceeds in the form of a disavowal, as if they have

never been regarded by someone “deep within a life called animal” (14). This remarkable opening movement is followed by a series of three “micrological” readings in which Derrida puts his working hypothesis to the test. As a whole, the lecture sounds as if the philosopher were attempting to let the animals loose in the hallways of his profession.

As for that other type of discourse, that other “position of knowledge” regarding the animal, Derrida imagines it belongs to the poets and the prophets, men and women who have taken upon themselves the animal’s address. But the philosopher bemoans that he has yet to find a statutory representative, someone who has the power to denude, someone who can present oneself as a theoretical, philosophical, or juridical subject capable of drawing significance from the gaze called animal. Indeed, by the end of his lecture, Derrida’s long cantata in four movements, he is still searching.

The complexity of this work, posthumously gathered and published under the title *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, surely calls for an extended analysis, an elaborate commentary with all the requisite patience. As Derrida recalls in the course of his introduction, the question of “the animal” is a recurring motif that circulates in any number of his texts. And yet the fact he returned to this topic in his last seminar (*The Beast and the Sovereign*, delivered in 2001–3) might tempt us to regard the theme as an instance of “late style,” that is, a work that bears a contradictory and perhaps even intransigent relationship to its milieu. As Thomas Mann once proposed, late style emerges at that moment when an artist’s work “has overgrown itself, rising out of the habitable regions of tradition, even before the startled gaze of human eyes” (in Said 2006, 8). The unique and often isolated voice that is characteristic of late style is thought to come from grappling with impending death. What might appear to be stylistic carelessness is in fact an irascible fight against that final sleep, an urgent, pressured breaking away with tradition. In this respect, one cannot help but notice Derrida’s anxious instance on time, and specifically on not having enough of it: “If I had time . . .” is one of the most oft-repeated refrains of this lecture.

“An animal looks at us, and we are naked before it.” What does such an encounter set in motion? Derrida immediately offers his answer: “Thinking perhaps begins there” (2008, 29). I take these statements to be the crux of the

philosopher's intervention. But what does it mean to place thinking under the gaze called animal? What would it mean to think through this primal scene, or indeed, for thinking to proceed *from* this encounter? How does such a meeting open up the logic of, or indeed, rend any traditional theory of thinking? How does Derrida's formula reorient the interminable debates about the definition of "the human?" In response to these difficult questions, the rest of this essay presents my own variations on Derrida's theme. I should immediately warn the reader, however, that what follows is nothing like the "systematic" elaboration that the philosopher calls for, but rather something more like study notes, an attempt to press his motif into yet another variation set. Specifically, Derrida's opening scene sets the stage here for two other moments when "the animal looks at me." One is drawn from Charles Darwin's notebooks, the other from one of Sigmund Freud's early case studies. Both of these historical scenes are central to the respective author's version of what constitutes humanity. And like Derrida's meeting with his little cat, these two scenes contain evidence of the gaze called animal, that deeply troubling encounter which seems to be central to that which we call human.

IN JENNY'S CAGE, "I THINK"

One unseasonably warm spring morning at the end of March 1838, Charles Darwin went out for a ride. The naturalist had taken to eating two dinners a day while holidaying in Shrewsbury and had grown fat as a result. Regular riding, he wrote to his sister Susan on April 1st, was doing "a wonderful deal of good" (1996, 63). Not long returned from his famous voyage on the *H.M.S. Beagle*, Darwin had just presented his collection of mammal and bird specimens to London's Zoological Society, and on that warm spring morning in question, he rode up to the Society's grounds at the northern edge of Regent's Park. (Darwin had become a Fellow of the Society in 1837; the Zoo would not be open to the general public for another ten years.) By "the greatest piece of good fortune," he reports in his letter to his sister, "it was the first time this year, that that Rhinoceros was turned out." Darwin conveys his pleasure at the sight of the ungulate joyfully kicking and rearing, "though neither end reached any great height." In response to the rhino's friskiness, an elephant

in a nearby yard squealed and brayed, “like half a dozen broken trumpets.” Darwin also describes meeting an “Ourang-outang in great perfection”:

[T]he keeper showed her an apple, but would not give it to her, whereupon she threw herself on her back, kicked & cried, precisely like a naughty child.—She then looked very sulky & after two or three fits of passion, the keeper said, “Jenny if you will stop bawling & be a good girl, I will give you an apple.”—She certainly understood every word of this, & though like a child, she had great work to stop whining, she at last succeeded, & then got the apple, with which she jumped into an arm chair & began eating it, with the most contented countenance imaginable.—

So much for Monkey, & now for Miss Martineau, who has been as frisky lately [as] the Rhinoceros.—(Darwin 1996, 63–64)

Darwin would make several more visits to Jenny over the next few months, and being a wealthy and connected Fellow of the Society, was allowed into her cage. Like a typical Victorian suitor, during a September visit he brought her flowers and mints, noting that she “seemed to relish the smell of Verbena & Pocket Handkerchief & liked the taste of Peppermint.” He played her music and recorded in his notebook that she listened “with great attention” to his harmonica and “readily put it when guided to her own mouth” (1987, 554). He noted her astonished reaction to the mirror in detail. He watched her distractedly pick corn out of her teeth with a straw. He wondered whether she cried.

Few people shared Darwin’s fondness for Jenny. The sight of this creature so recognizable and yet so different caused much disquiet among visitors to the Zoological Gardens in the late 1830s, the great majority of whom had never seen an ape before.³ An etched portrait of her graced the cover of the February 3, 1838, edition of the widely read *Penny Magazine* (Fig. 1). According to the accompanying article, the orangutan wears a “Guernsey jacket and trousers,” not out of immodesty (or presumably not hers; as Derrida complains, the animal is often distinguished from the human by their being “naked without knowing it” [2008, 4]), but out of necessity, for warmth in the cold English climate. Published every Saturday and aimed



Figure 1. Jenny, at the London Zoological Gardens, 1838, on the cover of *Penny Magazine*.

at the working class, *Penny Magazine* was created by the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge as part of their program of liberal reform. The article provides a detailed description of Jenny's comportment and the latest scientific knowledge about the species (her specific proportions, "hook-like" hands, dullness of disposition, intolerance of confinement, disinterest in giraffes, curious amazement at a small tortoise). As if guessing the story might provoke anxiety in its readers, the authors close with an emphatic pronouncement: despite the "puerile fancies" among some men of learning about the creature's "affinity to our race . . . we now know that extraordinary as the orangutan may be compared with its fellows of the brute creation, still in nothing does it trench upon the moral or mental provinces of man" (1838, 44).

Darwin would not be so easily dissuaded from his affections. Entries about Jenny (as well as Tommy, another ape the Zoological Society acquired shortly thereafter) abound in his notebooks throughout this formative period of his work. Indeed, one might say Jenny served as the scientist's muse. As is well known, Darwin first developed his ideas about the transmutation of species in a series of lettered notebooks that begin mid-July 1837 and are

largely finished by 1840, a period that overlaps directly with his visits to the orangutan.⁴ (Jenny died in captivity late in 1839 and was then replaced with another orangutan, also named Jenny.) These notebook entries show Darwin's thought process in terrific detail, revealing his gradually developing questions and ideas about the origin of species. For instance, his famous branching sketch depicting the system of descent between different species of the same class appears midway through notebook B (Fig. 2). Underneath the firm pronouncement, "I think," Darwin drew the first phylogenetic tree. Early in notebook C, after several pages of speculation about the habits, heredity, and adaptations of everything from cuckoos to jaguars to "monsters," Darwin pauses to enter an impassioned entry about "man" that deserves to be cited in full:

But man—wonderful man "divino ore versum coelum attentior" is an exception.—He is mammalian,—his origin has not been indefinite.—he is not a deity, his end under present form will come, (or how dreadfully we are deceived) then he is no exception.—he possesses some of the same general instincts, all & feelings as animals. they on other hand can reason—but man has reasoning powers in excess, instead of definite instincts—this is a replacement in mental machinery so analogous to what we see in bodily, that it does not stagger me.—

What circumstances may have been necessary to have made man! Seclusion want &c & perhaps a train of animals of hundred generations of species to produce contingents proper.—Present monkeys might not,—but probably would,—the world now being fit, for such an animal—man, (rude uncivilized man) might not have lived when certain other animals were alive, which have perished.

Let man visit Ourang-outang in domestication, hear expressive whine, see its intelligence when spoken [to], as if it understood every word said—see its affection to those it knows,—see its passion & rage, sulkiness & very extreme of despair; let him look at savage, roasting his parent, naked, artless, not improving, yet improvable, and then let him dare to boast of his proud preeminence.—Not understanding language of Fuegian puts on par with monkeys. (1987, 263–64)

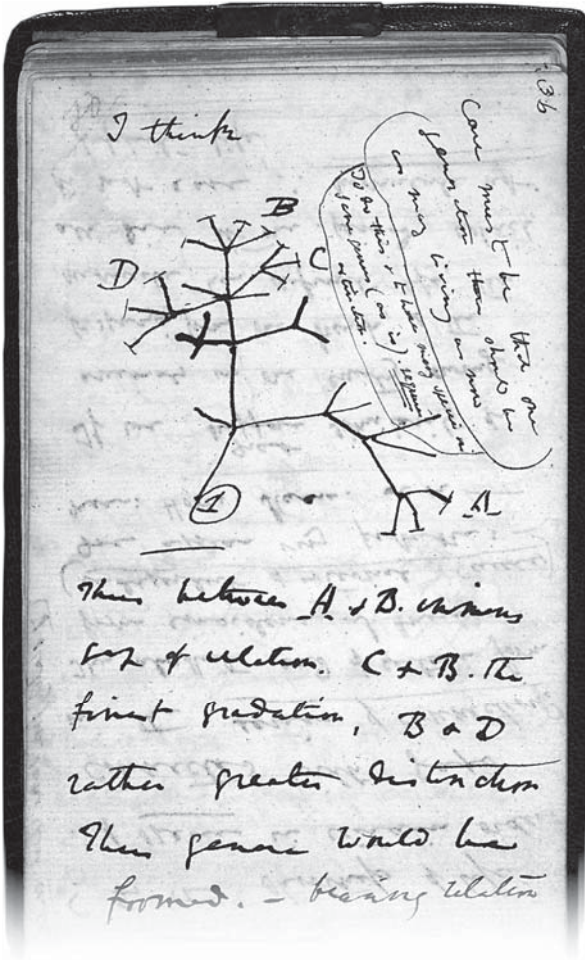


Figure 2. Darwin,
Notebook B, 1837.

These remarkable statements from 1838 are, of course, mere fragmentary, fleeting notes. Darwin will famously hold back publishing his evolutionary theory for another twenty years (*On the Origin of Species* was issued in 1859), and he would refrain from making any public remarks specifically about human descent until 1871, when he finally released *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex*, some thirty-three years after his first meeting with Jenny's gaze.

And yet this famous, life-long public reticence makes these passionate, private notes all the more remarkable, not least because Darwin so quickly

and so easily gives over reason, emotion, and language to animals—attributes that were widely believed to belong to humankind alone. As Derrida demonstrates in his Cerisy lecture, the dominant discourse regarding the animal has long been preoccupied with these “powers,” with the animal’s “capabilities” compared to what is thought to be “proper to man”: having the capability to die, to bury one’s dead, to dress, to work, to invent or use a technique, to speak, to possess language or reason. Derrida’s furious allegation against the philosophers is that they all say the same thing: “the animal is deprived of language” (2008, 32). Darwin does not even bother to enter this fray. In these early metaphysical sketches, he simply reports that man’s “mental machinery” does not stagger him. The remark reads like a magnificently casual reversal of Descartes’s insistence that animals are machines, deprived of thought and soul. Here it is man’s sublime reason that Darwin finds no more remarkable than the operations of a clock.⁵

Yet perhaps even more extraordinary are the traces of the gaze called animal. Darwin reveals precisely how he arrived at his revolutionary theory and, indeed, implicitly suggests how the procedures of thought unfold from such encounters: “Let man visit Ourang-outang in domestication, hear expressive whine, see its intelligence. . . .” Our thinking begins here, Darwin seems to insist, when an animal looks at us, and we are naked before it. In this powerful, irascible challenge one cannot help but hear echoes of Derrida’s encounter with the bottomless gaze of his little cat, a meeting that will not occur for some 160 years. In Jenny’s eyes, in her manner, indeed, in her *address*, Darwin, too, perhaps saw “the abysmal limit of the human . . . the ends of man” (Derrida 2008, 12). But if Darwin’s meeting with Jenny begets the end of a common belief in the human’s metaphysical uniqueness, it might also be said to mark the beginning of a new form of thinking.⁶ Or as Derrida might have put it: from this meeting, thinking can follow. A new state of mind can emerge from the disruption caused by the gaze called animal.

A BOY AND HIS HORSE

Darwin’s special audacity was perhaps reborn at the turn of the twentieth century in the form of Little Hans. The five-year-old boy enters the annals

of history as the first case of a child analysis. Hans suffered from agonizing terrors that brought him to Dr. Freud's attention, although he was far from a typical psychoanalytic patient. Freud met the child face-to-face only once. His illness and treatment was relayed through a series of letters that passed between Freud and Hans's father. For this reason, the text of this particular case report gives the overall impression of a tiered set of dialogues, fashioned from the father's detailed record of the family conversations, presented in installments, and peppered with Freud's commentary. As Gillian Beer (2002) has noted, this layering creates the strange sense that the boy was not so much a patient as an "offering" to Freud from an early acolyte, a queer variation on the sacrifice of Isaac, in whose place a ram will be substituted at the penultimate moment.

The narrative of the case begins when Hans is not quite three years old and displaying a precocious curiosity about his mother's *wiwimacher*.⁷ At three-and-a-half he is barred from touching his own organ under threat of castration. The resilient boy initially displays no anxiety about this prospect. Shortly, a little sister is born and Hans expresses an equal interest and enjoyment of her "lovely" though "tiny" *wiwimacher*. And like Darwin, the boy takes great delight in visiting the zoo, though in this case it is Schönbrunn, Vienna's venerable menagerie. Here, too, Hans shows a consistent curiosity, taking special interest in the lion's *wiwimacher*. Later he insists on adding this particular anatomical detail to a sketch his father makes of a giraffe. Of all these curious researches Freud offers the following commentary: "The importance of animals in myth and fairy-tale is due in no small measure to the openness with which they display their genitalia and their sexual functions to the curious young child" (2002, 5). Sexual curiosity and intellectual curiosity are inextricably linked in these prelapsarian scenes, and Little Hans knows no shame. But all this charming immodesty soon comes to an end. By the beginning of Part II, the boy has come to grief.

"Esteemed Professor Freud," Hans's father writes, "I am sending you another instalment of Hans . . . he has been suffering recently from a nervous disorder, which greatly concerns my wife and myself as we can see no way of dealing with it" (2002, 17). Now, aged five-and-a-half, Hans has grown terribly anxious about going into the street for fear that a horse will collapse or will

bite him. He ventures onto his balcony and can stand at the street door, but upon the first sign of a horse, runs back into the house in terror. (It bears noting that directly across from the family home was a warehouse of the Office of Consumer Tax, and all day, carriages and carts pulled by horses arrived at the loading dock to collect and unload packing cases.) The source of this phobia is much speculated about, with Hans's father immediately suggesting its connection to "fear of a big penis" (17). Hans himself points to two specific incidents as the cause of his troubles: while on vacation in Gmunden he overheard a warning about a white carriage horse: "Don't touch the horse!" a father warned his daughter. Hans interprets this to mean: "If you hold out your finger, it bites you" (22). Then one day back in Vienna, while out shopping with his mother, he witnesses a dray horse collapse. Later the boy acts out the terrifying scene for his father, lying down and kicking his legs to imitate the horse's thrashing. For a time, his phobia seems to center on horses wearing harnesses and pulling carts.

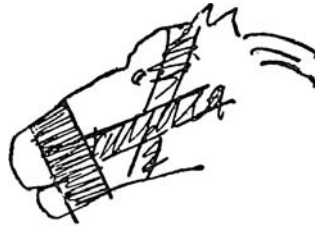
For Freud, Hans's fear is a parcel of the Oedipal conflict, that complex emotional scene that the Viennese doctor situated at the heart of humanity. As it plays out here, Hans's desire for mother is blocked by father, whom the child both admires and wishes to replace. At the unconscious level, these feelings are both sexual and murderous. From Hans's desire grow feelings of guilt, a fear of retaliation, and more specifically, a fear of castration. Hans struggles with this emotional conflict: fearful of and yet wishing to love and be loved by his father. In Freud's mind, the horse phobia provides an innovative respite from this tension. Hans's anxiety is both able to find expression and can be managed through a change of signifier. Father is replaced with horse, and the danger situation (i.e., castration) can therefore be avoided by staying away from horses. Hans's phobia provides the means to bind his anxiety, a creative attempt to turn what is felt as uncontained angst into a specific fear by focusing it on a particular object. Anxiety seeks representation. The horse is a surrogate, a representation of the vengeful father in a depersonalized form.

But why this particular substitution? Returning to the case years later, Freud describes how the species displacement is made easier by the fact "that at this tender age the traces of totemistic thinking innate in all of us

are still easily rekindled. The divide between man and beast is still not acknowledged” (2003, 170). To the child’s way of reasoning, man and beast are symbolically equivalent. But why horses? Deborah Britzman suspects the boy was in search of “a private knowledge to contain the force of the loss of the first phantasy”—the unspeakable desire for his mother and fear of his father’s castrating revenge (2006, 74). In Britzman’s view, the horse is Hans’s personal symbol, a move that signals the inauguration of thinking, a reaching toward symbolic knowledge that will help him tolerate the painful emotions of love and fear. In this respect, the horse might be thought of less as a direct father substitute than as a composite symbol, a means for Hans to represent the complex dynamic felt to exist between himself and his parents, a way for him to begin to represent and think about his chaotic emotional world. And although the horse may be Hans’s private symbol, it is not be the last time the creature appears in the psychoanalytic literature. In the last chapter of *The Apprehension of Beauty*, Donald Meltzer describes a love and fear of horses that has gripped him since childhood (though, strikingly, he fails to mention Little Hans). The size of the animal, Meltzer insists, has a great deal to do with the child’s lack of a sense of reciprocity: “The magnitude, the power of the horse mobilizes an infantile component, both of awe and fear” (Meltzer and Williams 1988, 202). To the child, the parents must seem so large and this inequality so painful.

When Hans is asked to describe the horses he is most afraid of, he singles out those “that have a sort of thing on their mouths.” Hans’s father queries further, suspecting the boy is referring to the bit. No, Hans says, “they have something black on their mouths.” Hans’s father offers yet another substitution: “a moustache perhaps?” Hans laughs at his silly father, no, not that: “Something black” (Freud 2002, 38). It is precisely at this point that the boy acts out the story of the collapsing horse. Hans’s father, still searching for a signified for Hans’s signifier, suggests in his letter to Freud that what the boy means by “something black” is the broad leather strap on the muzzles of the dray horses. He even includes a sketch that is reproduced with the published case study (Fig. 3). But Hans resists anchoring the fearful “thing” to a definitive object. In fact, he resists three times: the horses he fears have a sort of thing on their mouths, something black on their mouths, some *thing* black.

Figure 3. 'Something black'
(Freud 2002).



This thing, this black spot at the edge of the horse's muzzle that escapes every attempt by Hans's father to be pressed into the form of an object, can perhaps be read as evidence of the function of the gaze. Indeed, is this not precisely what Jacques Lacan meant by the gaze, that which is not what we see but rather how we imagine ourselves *seen* in the field of the Other? "The gaze," he writes in his seminar on *The Four Fundamental Concepts*, "surprises me and reduces me to shame" (1998, 84). Like Derrida who feels himself perpetually chased into shame by his cat, Little Hans manages to convey his own experience of being caught naked under the gaze called animal by drawing attention to this perceptual failure in the field of vision. Indeed, this particular moment in the case study can perhaps help us understand Lacan's enigmatic remarks about "the function of the stain" as governing the gaze. The black "thing" Little Hans identifies on the horse's mouth is perhaps the site of such a stain. In Lacan's terminology, the stain is that which blocks vision rather than offering itself up as a thing to be seen. It constitutes a disruption, a point of indeterminacy in the visual field where the subject *fails* to see (c. Copjec 1994). In this respect, Little Hans offers us yet another account of how subjectivity depends not only upon how "I look," but also upon how "I am looked at," how one can be caught in the field of the *other's* gaze (Freud 2005). The case illustrates how the child's voyeuristic sexual researches—Hans's precocious pursuit of sexual difference—precipitates a sense of wounding anxiety, a sudden realization that one can also be seen, caught in the field of vision.

I imagine this to be the very same disquiet that Jenny caused to her visitors at the London Zoo in 1838. Like Little Hans's horse, she not only represented an object to behold, but a site where one might shudder at the

possibility of being *seen*. This is a return of the Oedipal conflict, the resolution of which provides nothing less than the historical and emotional foundations of culture, law, civility, and decency. Here, then, is one way the human descends into the world: in a flood of anxiety that demands to be thought, under the watchful gaze called animal.

IN SEARCH OF THINKING

“An animal looks at us, and we are naked before it. Thinking perhaps begins there” (Derrida 2008, 29). Coming from a professional philosopher, this statement must surely be read as a deeply enigmatic pronouncement about the origins of thinking. Or perhaps it should be read both as hesitant *and* as an urgent call to rethink thinking itself. But what would such a project entail? Derrida would return to this question. On September 22, 2001, the city of Frankfurt awarded the philosopher the Theodor W. Adorno Prize. In his acceptance speech, Derrida touched on a number of topics, but spoke at length about one of Walter Benjamin’s dreams from 1939. Working closely with this strange historical artifact, Derrida makes a plea for dreaming as a special form of thinking.⁸ He asks his audience to care for what “the dream lets us think about, especially when what it lets us think about is the possibility of the impossible” (2005, 168). Derrida admits in this speech that he has been “panting” after this “other thinking” for some time, rushing around in pursuit of it, organizing his courses in search of it. He knows there is little time and much work yet to be done to get closer to this “other thinking,” to try to think it differently, “to think thinking differently . . . outside what has dominated our metaphysical tradition” (168).

Some of these statements sound as if they could have been plucked from the philosopher’s Cerisy lecture. Indeed, the Frankfurt address ends with Derrida dreaming of writing yet another book, this time about Adorno, and one senses he is still searching for his “statutory representative.” Derrida goes so far as to imagine the future book’s seven-chapter structure. Of the last chapter he says: “Finally I get to the chapter that I would most enjoy writing. . . . It is about what we call, in the singular—which has always shocked me—the *Animal*. As if there were only one of them” (2005, 180). Much praise

is given to Adorno's critique of Kant's intolerance of the affinity between man and animality: "The Kantian man feels only hate for human animality" (180).⁹ Disavowal of the gaze called animal will always be marked by hatred, Derrida seems to suggest, like Ahab's terrible pursuit of the white whale in Melville's grand novel, as if the Captain's rage toward the creature could disencumber his own personality of that which he cannot bear. Such destructive hatred is perhaps always aimed at "the animal" in man, a profound attack upon one's own mind, upon one's very capacity to think and feel.

Had he the time, Derrida might have found another ally in his attempt to "think thinking differently" in the form of the British analyst Wilfred Bion. Bion also borrowed Freud's insights about dream function and placed these at the center of his psychoanalytic theory of thinking. His model is thrillingly counterintuitive:

It is convenient to regard thinking as dependent upon the successful outcome of two main mental developments. The first is the development of thoughts. They require an apparatus to cope with them. The second development, therefore, is of this apparatus that I shall provisionally call thinking. I repeat—thinking has to be called into existence to cope with thoughts.

It will be noted that this differs from any theory of thought as a product of thinking, in that thinking is a development forced on the psyche by the pressure of thoughts and not the other way around. (1962b, 306)

Bion's theory situates thinking as emerging from the capacity to represent emotional experience. Thoughts—which the analyst understands to include sense impressions, perceptions, preconceptions, and concepts—press upon the psyche. Thinking is the activity by which the mind copes with this impressing. It bears emphasizing that in Bion's system, thoughts are treated as epistemologically *prior* to thinking. When the frustration these impressions generate becomes too great, the development of the apparatus for thinking can be disturbed.

Reminiscent of Darwin's sense of a shared "mental machinery," here Bion might agree that all sentient organisms must grapple with "thoughts." And perhaps "Man—wonderful man" has the machinery for thinking these

thoughts “in excess,” but this surplus provides no guarantee that this creature will be able to think. Derrida’s rail against the philosophers might be an analogous way of accusing his discipline of being thus disembodied: full of thoughts but without a thinker. Bion actually sounds closer to Darwin’s sense of time when he remarks: “‘Thinking,’ in the sense of engaging that activity which is concerned with the use of thoughts, is embryonic even in the adult and has yet to be developed fully by the [human] race” (1962a, 85).¹⁰ The analyst goes so far as to suggest that speech can sometimes function as an avoidance of thinking. Although talking might potentially be a method of communicating thoughts, Bion suggests it can just as easily be a means to *rid* one’s self of them, an “employment of the *musculature*,” no different than any other bodily action (1962a, 83). Possession of language does not necessarily lead to thinking.

Where Bion’s theory meets Derrida’s theme is in their tacit agreement that grappling with emotional experience is at the heart of the labor of thinking. Both are attempting to distinguish between an intellectual ability to manipulate concepts and the emotional capacity to genuinely espouse such concepts. Bion designates these different modes of functioning as *K*, a thirst for knowledge, and minus *K* (or *-K*), a mental state in which experience is stripped of its truth, when knowing becomes an activity that consists of being absorbed with facts, where knowledge is treated as a commodity (1962a). The degree to which an individual can entertain his capacity for thinking depends, to a great extent, on the nature of the learning that occurred at a young age (cf. Waddell 1998). But at all ages and stages, we inevitably encounter moments and occurrences that confront us with something that is psychically painful. Bion suggests that how one treats the emotional effects of these difficult “thoughts”—whether to avoid the pain and frustration they generate or attempt to modify them—will determine the subject’s relationship to knowledge, and therefore the capacity for thinking.

Derrida’s Cerisy theme offers a concrete example. The philosopher’s encounter with his little cat invokes a “reflex of shame,” an intense embarrassment, a terrible “passivity,” a “malaise,” a “madness” which he hastens to escape (2008, 4, 11). Only when the instant of this “extreme passion” passes is he able to find peace again (12). Only then can he calmly consider the

beasts, visit them in the zoo, see them in paintings, read about them, speak about them. But in the terrible instant of this passion, Derrida admits to being unable to think. For this moment in his bathroom, he is beset by the same anxiety that chased Little Hans from the street. In Bion's terms, this emotional encounter with the gaze called animal engenders thoughts that urgently call for an apparatus to cope with them. An inability to tolerate the extreme passion—a temptation to take flight from the “malaise”—will obstruct the development of the capacity to think, although paradoxically, a capacity to think would diminish the force of the emotion and allow for the transformation of pain into an appreciation of the gap between a wish and its fulfillment (Bion 1962b, 307). Thinking does not allow us to avoid the frustration of such encounters, but is rather a kind of operation that seeks to give the emotional experiences of our lives representation through symbol formation, an operation that makes “learning from experience” possible. Derrida's theme—his wonderfully evocative description of his daily “madness”—provides testimony to the lack of unity in the human mind, to the regularity with which anxiety threatens to overthrow one's personality, to the acute difficulty of what it means to try to think, to struggle for a mind of one's own, and to develop a respect for that of others.

Over and over again one finds animal tracks at the site of this profound conflict. As the various historical scenes reanimated here aim to display, some of the most enlivening accounts of the human condition involve a sustained thinking concerning the animal. Or to return to Derrida's opening theme, efforts to deconstruct the traditional determinations of the human have exposed an anxious encounter with the gaze called animal. As the furious contestations over the definition of the human expand, and as the gap between this and other, nonhuman creatures continues to diminish, let us at least agree on one point: the centuries-old debate about what it means to be human necessarily begs the question of the animal.



NOTES

1. The linguistic invention is Derrida's shorthand way of sounding an alarm about the dangers and confusion of placing all nonhuman living creatures within a general and common category of animality. When uttered, the word sounds like the plural *animaux*, which is heard in the singular, and therefore recalls the extreme diversity of animals that "the animal" erases. And yet when read, *animot* makes plain that this word (*mot*), "the animal," is precisely only a word.
2. To be fair, John Berger inverts his own question at several points in his well-known essay. Pausing over picture books in a window display, for instance, Berger notes that a full third of them picture animals. The unstated assumption of such books is that the animals are always the observed, and their bodies have been made visible to us in more and more arresting images: "The fact that they can observe us," Berger bemoans, "has lost all significance" (1991, 16).
3. Randal Keynes describes how almost all visitors found their encounter with the first apes exhibited in England in the 1830s to be disturbing (2001). Queen Victoria, who visited the "second" Jenny in 1842, famously remarked that she was like a "frightful and painfully disagreeable human" (36). Keynes, who is Darwin's great grandson, also finds significance in the scientist's encounter with Jenny.
4. As far as we know, Darwin filled seven notebooks. According to Paul Barrett, the editor of the definitive edition, these include: Notebook A: Geology (1837–1839); Notebook B: [Transmutation of species (1837–1838)]; Notebook C: [Transmutation of species (2–7.1838)]; Notebook D: [Transmutation of species (7–10.1838)]; Notebook E: [Transmutation of species (1838–1839)]. Two other notebooks, Notebook M: [Metaphysics on morals and speculations on expression (1838)] and Notebook N: [Metaphysics and expression (1838–1839)], are marked "Private" presumably because they record details of his friends and family. Finally there also exists a "Torn Apart" notebook (1839–1841) and some "Old and useless Notes about the moral sense & some metaphysical points" (1837–1840).
5. During this same period, Darwin was also deeply affected by his reading of Hume's *Treatise on Human Nature* (1739–1740), which proposed that the science of man should take account of the links between human reason and the mental powers of animals. Hume demoted the reasoning faculty to a "slave of the passions." As his notebook entry suggests, Darwin brought these metaphysical speculations to natural history, treating reason as an evolutionary inheritance shared among sentient beings (cf. Keynes 2001, 39).
6. If the philosophers have largely accepted that the human is not alone in its metaphysical essence (or at least no longer base their arguments on the idea we possess a uniquely transcendent soul), contemporary scientific debate continues about whether nonhuman animals are capable of developing a "theory of mind." Among primatologists, theory of mind (ToM) refers to the ability to recognize the mental states of others. Still marked by the discourse of "capability," some scientists insist that ToM is uniquely human (Tomasello 1999; Povinelli 2000). Others present

evidence of “visual perspective-taking” in apes, which is thought to demonstrate ToM (Shillito et al. 2005; Hirata 2006). As an example of *méconnaissance* par excellence, during the course of his 2003 Tanner Lecture, Frans de Waal (who is among the latter camp) reproduced a photograph of one of the chimpanzees from his Yerkes Field Station, gazing directly into his camera. The caption reads: “Georgina, our naughtiest chimpanzee, fascinated by her own reflection in the camera lens” (2006, 60).

7. This is Hans’s original German nickname for his penis. James Stratchey’s Standard Edition translates the German word into a colloquial English equivalent: “widdler.”
8. The subject of this second address perhaps implicitly calls up Freud’s *Interpretation of Dreams*, and indeed more specifically, the well-known footnote Freud added to the book in the 1920s, in which he insisted that “[a]t bottom, dreams are nothing other than a particular *form of thinking*, made possible by the conditions of the state of sleep” (2006, 650; emphasis added). To translate this into Derrida’s language, dreams might be regarded as exemplars and guardians of this “other thinking” that the philosopher was chasing in his late work, this thinking about the possibility of the impossible, which deserves not to sink down into the night of nothingness.
9. Derrida’s sentence perhaps recalls Emmanuel Lévinas’s enigmatic remarks about “Bobby,” a dog who greeted the philosopher and his fellow prisoners while they were interned in a Nazi slave labor camp during the war (1990). Bobby’s excited greeting—his recognition of the prisoners as men rather than a subhuman “gang of apes”—compels Lévinas to describe the creature as “The last Kantian in Nazi Germany” (153). The remark is not without ambivalence. David L. Clark, who parses the fine gradations of the contradictory thoughts and feelings that the animal evokes in Lévinas, suggests that if the thought of “the animal” is in question, so, inevitably, is the thought of “the human” with which it has always been inextricably bound (2004, 44). In his Cerisy lecture, Derrida is more ruthless in his interrogation of Lévinas’s remarks about Bobby (2008, 107–18). One wonders if the “Kantian man” of his Frankfurt address is a shorthand reference to Lévinas’s disavowal of the gazed called animal.
10. To be clear, I am not suggesting that Bion is making an argument for evolutionary psychology as an explanatory theory of human behavior, nor am I attempting to side with what has been dubbed, in recent years, “Literary Darwinism.” Bion’s psychoanalytic approach to thinking is not investigating cognition but rather the structures of unconscious fantasy (or “phantasy,” as Melanie Klein distinguished it). Put simply, here the presumed unity between the activities of the brain and the activities of the mind is called into question.

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