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**Efficacious Uncertainty in Two Animal Texts: The Lives of Animals
by J. M. Coetzee and "The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to
Follow)" By Jacques Derrida**

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EFFICACIOUS UNCERTAINTY IN TWO ANIMAL TEXTS: *THE LIVES OF ANIMALS*
BY J.M. COETZEE AND “THE ANIMAL THAT THEREFORE I AM (MORE TO
FOLLOW)” BY JACQUES DERRIDA

by

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ABSTRACT

Jacques Derrida divides all texts into two categories in light of human encounters with animals. On the one hand are texts produced by those who may have devoted thought and attention to animals but have not imagined that animals might have a gaze of their own directed back at humans. On the other hand are texts produced by those whose thought and attention to animals has indeed been troubled, perplexed, and complicated by the recognition of an animal's reciprocal gaze. Derrida's own text, "The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)," in which he distinguishes between these two kinds of texts, itself belongs to the latter category, as does J.M. Coetzee's *The Lives of Animals*.

The struggle to comprehend animals apart from the use of humans as a standard for evaluating and describing consciousness and being produces in one engaged in such a struggle a profound disposition of uncertainty not only regarding animals but regarding the capacity of a human *self* to have knowledge of a human or non-human *other*. Derrida and Coetzee's texts perform this uncertainty in both the arguments they advance and—more importantly—in the form their arguments take.

The uncertainty they articulate and produce is a model of efficacious uncertainty, a rhetorical disposition that is the foundation of a productive mode of thinking, one that allows for multiplicity and resists the gestures of exclusion characterizing the various fields of human discourse, especially as they are brought to bear on social, political, and ethical life.

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The pride connected with knowing and sensing lies like a blinding fog over the eyes and senses of men, thus deceiving them concerning the value of existence.
—Friedrich Nietzsche, “On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense”

I mean *Negative Capability*, that is, when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.

—John Keats, letter to George and Thomas Keats

The disciplines of the humanities have counterintuitively taken an interest in animals, a phenomenon which Harriet Ritvo refers to as the *animal turn*. “[D]uring the last several decades,” she writes, “animals have emerged as a more frequent focus of scholarship in the humanities and social sciences, as quantified in published books and articles, conference presentations, new societies and new journals.”¹ The *turn* includes scholarship in rhetoric, beginning with George A. Kennedy’s article “A Hoot in the Dark: The Evolution of General Rhetoric” in 1992, and revisited in “Rhetoric among Social Animals,” the first chapter of his *Comparative Rhetoric: An Historical and Cross-Cultural Introduction*.² According to Debra Hawhee, the initial response to Kennedy’s work was “befuddlement,” yet while his interest in animals may have been initially “untimely,” it came to be more “time[ly] than ever,”³ as evidenced by the forum on

1. Harriet Ritvo, “On the Animal Turn,” *Daedalus* 136, no. 4 (2007): 119.

2. George A. Kennedy, “A Hoot in the Dark: The Evolution of General Rhetoric,” *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 25, no. 1 (1992): 1-21; Kennedy, *Comparative Rhetoric: An Historical and Cross-Cultural Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

3. Debra Hawhee, “Toward a Bestial Rhetoric,” *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 44, no. 1 (2011): 81; *Ibid.*, 82.

animals and rhetoric in *Philosophy and Rhetoric* in 2011 in which Hawee makes these retrospective comments on Kennedy. Diane Davis, in addition to a contribution to that same forum,⁴ had written about animals somewhat tangentially in her book *Inessential Solidarity: Rhetoric and Foreigner Relations*, but more recently has brought animals to the fore of her work. In “Autozoography: Notes Toward a Rhetoricity of the Living,” she complicates philosophical assertions that the self-referential *I* foundational to consciousness and language is peculiarly human by considering the work of biologists from Carl Linnaeus down to the present decade. In the aforementioned forum in *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, John Muckelbauer called for “reconceiv[ing] difference (between and within species) as something other than a clumsy hierarchy,”⁵ and Davis moves in that direction by reconfiguring the hierarchical binaries of difference constitutive of so much of the Western tradition as a mutual relation in which the *I* of consciousness and language does not exist prior to the object of thought and speech: “[W]ithout an other, a trace of differentiation, there is no need or possibility for self-reference. The *I*, posing itself in its ‘living presence,’ is already an effect of what we might call this rhetoricity of the living, a specter born each time in an underivable and extrahuman rhetorical relation.”⁶

4. Diane Davis, “Creaturely Rhetorics,” *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 44, no. 1 (2011): 88-94; Davis, “P.S. on Humanism” in *Inessential Solidarity: Rhetoric and Foreigner Relations* (Pittsburgh: U of Pittsburgh Press, 2010), 144-166.

5. John Muckelbauer, “Domesticating Animal Theory,” *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 44, no. 1 (2011): 100.

6. Diane Davis, “Autozoography: Notes Toward a Rhetoricity of the Living,” *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 47, no. 4 (2014): 548.

In my own consideration of the texts below, I want to articulate how that *I*, already unstable and multiple,⁷ might be further destabilized and troubled by encounters with alterity—human, animal, or otherwise. I understand my own struggle to think about these matters as ultimately being a response to another of Muckelbauer’s “paths” articulated in the *Philosophy and Rhetoric* forum: “Problematizing the classical opposition between (instinctive, animal) reaction and (thoughtful, human) response,” which is “something different from rejecting, resolving, or even from dialoguing—each of which might well structurally privilege the familiar human logos.”⁸ What I am trying to write is an apologia for uncertainty.

J.M. Coetzee’s *The Lives of Animals* and Jacques Derrida’s “The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)” present encounters with animals mediated by texts. They are texts that self-consciously confound their own mediating roles as texts. Their representations of encounters between the human “self” and the animal “other” emphasize not what might be knowable about either the self or the other, but instead emphasize the difficulty of knowing either the self or the other. They cast doubt on the immediacy of encounters between humans and animals and cast doubt on the immediacy of encounters between humans and other humans, a problem the texts themselves perform.

Human responses to animal encounters (in books, in the field, in laboratories, in laps, on dinner plates) generally oscillate between two modes, but remain oriented by the

7. “Pure autoaffectation turns out to be an irreducible hetero-affectation in which the ‘sameness’ has already welcomed within itself the trace of an ‘otherness,’ and the *me* to which *I* intend(s) to point has already made tracks.” Ibid., 540.

8. Muckelbauer, 99.

same distinction marked by the paired words *human* and *animal*. One mode of response is to emphasize dissimilarity between the pair, granting a soul, a mind, passions, and language to the *human* while depriving the *animal* of the same. The other mode is to emphasize similarity between the pair, either by attributing to the *animal* the same privileged qualities the other mode reserves for the *human*, or by debasing (as it were) the human to an animalistic nature. But emphasizing similarity does not collapse the distinction between the *human* and *animal* pair and both modes of response seem to rely equally on fanciful and whimsical assertions about the *human* as much as about the *animal*. And neither mode exceeds its limitation as inevitably and ultimately anthropocentric, as both modes are *human* responses to the *human* and *animal* encounter.

Coetzee and Derrida's texts describe and perform both modes of response to the *human* encounter with the *animal*, yet the effects of texts are not to correct, perfect, or exceed either mode, nor to cut through the perplexing fold between the *human* and the *animal*, but to fold and fold it again, to multiply its perplexity, to further confound rather than clarify. Through the effects of their forms and formal features, the two texts gesture vaguely toward an indeterminate thought, a conceptual negative space characterized by uncertainty, circumspection, confusion, apophasis, failure, vacillation, ignorance—and not just in reference to the *human/animal* distinction. But, I will suggest, my reading of the two texts does not necessarily lead to a sterile nihilism, and experiences such as uncertainty and confusion might be productive.

Novelist J. M. Coetzee's *The Lives of Animals* is not a novel and not even quite fiction. It is indeed a narrative and might pass for a novella or a long-running short story,

but it is also the transcript of Coetzee's participation in the 1997-1998 Tanner Lectures on Human Values at Princeton University. In *The Lives of Animals*, Coetzee tells a story about a fictional novelist, Elizabeth Costello, delivering an invited lecture at a fictional university on the ethics of the human treatment of animals. The narrative has many essayistic features, even when it moves beyond Costello's initial lecture to subsequent dialogue: characters advance genuine arguments and the topic of animal ethics is not merely a pretense for telling a story. But neither is the story merely a pretense for advancing an argument: the characters are fully formed and their conflicts are more than intellectual. Together, both story and argument are preoccupied with animal ethics and a problem fundamental to narrative, rhetoric, and ethics alike, which is the difficulty of shared thought and experience between two beings, whether those beings are human or animal. Coetzee's presentation of the problem in *The Lives of Animals* can be parsed in three dimensions: the narrative's presentation as a lecture (and the lecture's presentation as a narrative), the philosophical exchanges within the narrative, and the narrative episodes that frame the philosophical exchanges.

Fiction is already heavy with contradictions, ambiguities, ironies, and multiple perspectives. Assertions about which voice in a work of fiction belongs to the author—or, disregarding the author, which voice speaks for the text as a whole—are difficult to make: a work of fiction has more readings than readers. Academic texts like monographs, journal articles, and lectures might also be said to have more readings than readers, but such academic texts, as opposed to fiction, are more plausibly be read as avowals. Presumably, the author of an academic text knows and accepts their own position, intends

to convince the reader to understand and accept it, too, and so has carefully demarcated what the author has “said” from what others have “said.”

Coetzee’s palindromic ploy of delivering a lecture that is a work of fiction about an author giving a lecture compounds the difficulty in reading his text, whether as a member of the lecture’s immediate audience or as a later reader of the printed narrative. Coetzee’s words, as a lecture, presumably are intended to communicate something that Coetzee wishes his audience to accept, but the audience is vexed at every turn by the fact that they are not hearing a speech but listening to (or reading) a story. Coetzee’s text is spoken but not pronounced, told though not a tale. A gap between author and text becomes apparent, a dissociation between speaker and speech emerges. That gap or dissociation perhaps might be found in any text (spoken or written), but the compound lecture/narrative form of *The Lives of Animals* brings it to the fore as a preoccupation of the reader (or listener), who is unable to discern whether the gap is made wider by the compound lecture/narrative form or made narrower by it. Should the audience make a close identification between Coetzee and his creature, Costello, taking what she says as his words, too? Maybe the correct identification is between Coetzee and Costello’s dissenters? Or could making such identifications be altogether mistaken and Coetzee’s characters are strangers to him? Authorial intent aside, the rhetorical intent of the text is confused: to which position, if any, does the text attempt to persuade the reader? A few episodes from *The Lives of Animals* demonstrate the confusion brought on by the combination of fiction and lecture.

The first and least example is a comparison of Costello with another character, fictional professor of philosophy, O’Hearne. One moment that tempts close identification

between Coetzee and Costello comes in Costello's seminar discussion, which turns at one point to a discussion of *Gulliver's Travels*. Costello, an Australian, offhandedly refers to herself as an "ex-colonial" and suggests that this influences her perspective on *Gulliver's Travels*.⁹ Coetzee, a South African (and later naturalized Australian), is likewise an "ex-colonial" whose works have been concerned with postcolonial political and social realities. A correspondence between Coetzee and Costello seems natural here. Later in the story, during Costello's debate with philosophy professor O'Hearne, it is O'Hearne, not Costello, who at first seems to speak from the "ex-colonial" perspective, arguing that contemporary concerns over animals are a colonial symptom. He calls the "animal-rights movement...yet another Western crusade against the practices of the rest of the world, claiming universality for what are simply its own standards."¹⁰ Costello's rejoinder is that "those who pioneered the industrialization of animal lives and the commodification of animal flesh should be at the forefront of trying to atone for it."¹¹

When O'Hearne critiques the West, one might be inclined to hear Coetzee's voice as an "ex-colonial" speaking through him. In the first instance, in the discussion of *Gulliver's Travels*, identification of Costello as Coetzee's mouthpiece seems reasonable. But in the second instance, in the debate with O'Hearne, Costello's interlocutor seems also to correspond to Coetzee's voice. Even so, Costello's response to O'Hearne's critique of the West is itself a critique of the West and both positions seem to plausibly belong to the "ex-colonial" Coetzee. And a suspicious reader might wonder if the racial

9. J.M. Coetzee, *The Lives of Animals*, ed. Amy Gutmann (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 57.

10. *Ibid.*, 60.

11. *Ibid.*, 61.

identity of the author and his characters allows any of them to legitimately occupy the position of “ex-colonial.” In any case, Coetzee’s text does not present a directly didactic voice, a single thread of argument located in a single character.

The difficulty of recognizing an identification between Coetzee and any of the characters or arguments in his text is better seen in a comparison of Costello with her daughter-in-law Norma. The two are opposed on intellectual points and their familial relationship is likewise fraught, but naming one as the protagonist and the other as the antagonist—and thus identifying the arguments of the more sympathetic character as those the author wishes the reader to accept—is not without problems. The topic of vegetarianism is a point of overlap between the intellectual and personal conflicts between Costello and Norma.

Costello presents herself, in some moments, as moderate and level-headed on the issue of animals’ rights and her own practice of vegetarianism. At the formal dinner following Costello’s initial lecture, the president of the college tells her, “[I] have a great respect for [vegetarianism] . . . [a]s a way of life.” Costello points out that she is “wearing leather shoes” and “carrying a leather purse,” and she counters: “I wouldn’t have overmuch respect if I were you.”¹² And in the debate with O’Hearne, Costello says she is “wary of exclusionary gestures,” philosophical ones or social ones: “I know of one prominent philosopher who states that he is simply not prepared to philosophize about animals with people who eat meat. I am not sure I would go as far as that”¹³ But to Costello’s family, including her son, but especially Norma, Costello’s practice of

12. *Ibid.*, 43.

13. *Ibid.*, 66.

vegetarianism seems to indeed be about exclusion, and, in the end, about power. To her family, Costello's position on animals' rights and her practice of vegetarianism have a more pointed and shrill quality than they do in Costello's public presentation of them.

At the beginning of the story, when Costello arrives at her son's home, a conflict ensues that is apparently a recurring one. The narrative, from the perspective of Costello's son John, reads: "The children are eating separately because Elizabeth does not like to see meat on the table, while Norma refuses to change the children's diet to suit what she calls 'your mother's delicate sensibilities'."¹⁴ Costello's son John fears that her outspoken vegetarianism will also be divisive at the formal dinner following her lecture, in what is likewise apparently a recurring conflict, a situation in which someone asks Costello why she is vegetarian and it falls to her son ("him and him alone") to "repair the damage" of her acerbic response: "You ask me why I refuse to eat flesh. I, for my part, am astonished that you can put in your mouth the corpse of a dead animal, astonished that you do not find it nasty to chew hacked flesh and swallow the juices of death-wounds."¹⁵ And Norma describes her mother-in-law's vegetarianism, in no uncertain terms, as insincere manipulation:

"I would have more respect for her if she didn't try to undermine me behind my back, with her stories to the children about poor little veal calves....It's nothing but a power-game. Her great hero Franz Kafka played the same game with his family. He refused to eat this, he refused to eat that, he would rather starve, he said. Soon everyone was feeling guilty about eating in front of him, and he could sit back feeling virtuous. It's a sick game, and I'm not having the children play it against me."¹⁶

14. Ibid., 16.

15. Ibid., 38.

16. Ibid., 68.

How Coetzee's narrative depicts Costello and her vegetarianism is ambiguous. Is she sincere or does she have ulterior motives, perhaps hidden even from herself? And if the narrative is already unclear about the identification of Costello as a simple mouthpiece for Coetzee, then it is clearly unclear about a position on vegetarianism. Is the story Coetzee tells an argument for vegetarianism? Even to answer, "Yes...*and* no," would betray unwarranted certainty.

But the difficulty of identifying Coetzee's rhetorical intent in any character or argument of his lecture/narrative is best seen in the comparison of industrialized animal farming to the Holocaust.

Announcing at the beginning of her lecture that she would be speaking "on the subject of animals," Costello almost immediately begins discussing the Holocaust, in particular the Treblinka death camp. She discusses the Holocaust in general terms, invoking the staggering death counts, and emphasizing the tacit complicity of the people living near camps like Treblinka.¹⁷ By the time she draws a direct comparison between the Holocaust and practices of industrialized farming, her fictional audience (and Coetzee's real audience), ought to have seen it coming, even if they are not fully prepared for the force of its statement:

"Let me say it openly: we are surrounded by an enterprise of degradation, cruelty, and killing which rivals anything that the Third Reich was capable of, indeed dwarfs it, in that ours is an enterprise without end, self-regenerating, bringing rabbits, rats, poultry, livestock ceaselessly into the world for the purpose of killing them."¹⁸

17. Ibid., 19-21.

18. Ibid., 21.

Whether one sees the comparison as valid, in poor taste, or otherwise, there is little in the narrative at this point to cue the reader that Coetzee may not be making the comparison himself: Costello's lecture carries on for seventeen pages with only a few brief instances of narrative interruption, and the lecture comes immediately after only three brief pages of an introductory frame that in many ways underscores the parallels between Costello's fictional lectureship and Coetzee's actual lectureship. For a member of Coetzee's immediate audience, these words would possibly have sounded like Coetzee's own, ventriloquized through Costello: the audience would have heard these words from Coetzee's own mouth with little narrative interjection to remind them that at this point Coetzee would be reading a *story* about a lecture, rather than simply *giving* a lecture. For a reader, the text itself would create a similar effect: Costello's lecture is footnoted just as a transcript of an academic lecture would be. Six footnotes appear before Costello comments that she has done due academic diligence by providing citations in footnotes for her claims, and "in an uncharacteristic gesture, [she] raises and brandishes the text of her lecture in the air."¹⁹ Do the footnotes, particularly those first six, belong to Coetzee as annotations of his story, or to Costello as annotations of the lecture Coetzee has contrived to have her speak? Did Coetzee, at this point in his delivery, also "raise and brandish" the pages from which he read? They are, nonetheless, genuine citations of source material; both Coetzee and Costello have done due diligence in the preparation of their lectures.

For one audience member in particular, Costello's comparison of industrial farming to Nazi atrocities is not rhetorically successful, though not without effect. The

19. *Ibid.*, 26.

day following her lecture, Costello receives a note from a poet who had been in her audience. He indicts her not only of an intellectual misstep in the comparison she has made, but of an ethical offense:

“You took over for your own purposes the familiar comparison between the murdered Jews of Europe and slaughtered cattle.... You misunderstand the nature of likenesses; I would even say you misunderstand willfully, to the point of blasphemy... If Jews were treated like cattle, it does not follow that cattle are treated like Jews. The inversion insults the memory of the dead. It also trades on the horrors of the camps in a cheap way.”²⁰

Coetzee’s narrative offers no indication of an authorial judgment about this character’s argument, other than Costello’s response, which is to sigh and simply ask her son, “Who is this man?” That is paltry evidence to conclude that Coetzee’s sympathy or rhetorical intent lies with either of these characters. The two characters are quite similar: Stern, the poet, writes in his note, “Forgive me if I am forthright. You said you were old enough not to have time to waste on niceties, and I am an old man too.”²¹ And in her debate with O’Hearne, Costello refers to a philosopher whose ideas offend her and she comments that she would be reluctant to share a meal with someone who espoused such ideas.²² Stern, for his part, refuses to share a meal with Costello, and is absent from the formal dinner following her lecture.

The episode between Costello and Stern is an example of the confusion and uncertainty that the text’s lecture/narrative form can provoke in the reader. And more than that, the comparison of industrial farming to genocide is an example marking a limit across which two parties cannot communicate. The comparison is a rhetorical choice

20. Ibid., 49-50.

21. Ibid., 50.

22. Ibid., 66.

unlikely to succeed. Its effect is to affirm in their agreement those who already agree with the position of the person employing the comparison, while only further alienating those who do *not* already agree. The comparison throws into relief two opposing parties whose prior dispositions toward the topic are already mutually unintelligible. To one, it is self-evident and powerfully convicting. To the other, it is absurd and repugnant.

The 1997-1998 Tanner Lectures at Princeton included responses to Coetzee's "lectures" from prominent scholars from a variety of disciplines relevant to Coetzee's topic. Peter Singer responds to Coetzee by casting his own arguments in a short narrative. It depicts a dialog between Singer and his daughter about Singer's difficulty in knowing how to respond to Coetzee's lecture/narrative. Singer notices the same difficulty in reading *The Lives of Animals* in order to discover any authorial or rhetorical intent that I have been trying to parse. Singer's persona complains:

"But *are* they Coetzee's arguments? . . . They are *Costello's* arguments. Coetzee's fictional device enables him to distance himself from them . . . Costello can blithely criticize the use of reason, or the need to have any clear principles or proscriptions, without Coetzee really committing himself to these claims. Maybe he really shares Norma's very proper doubts about them."²³

But the effect of distancing author from text and speaker from argument is, whether Coetzee intended it to be or not, more than simply clever. I hold the lack of commitment to a definite position or argument to be the very claim the text (if not the author) makes. Costello articulates the uncertain foundation of Coetzee's text when she says, "I was hoping not to have to enunciate principles . . .," and "I have never been much interested in proscriptions, dietary or otherwise."²⁴

23. Peter Singer, reflection on *The Lives of Animals* by J.M. Coetzee, ed. Amy Gutmann (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 91.

24. Coetzee, 37.

Marjorie Garber, in her response to Coetzee's "lectures," asks what she calls the "central question for all literary critics": "What does the form have to do with the content?"²⁵ She describes *The Lives of Animals* as metafiction, places it in the genre of the academic novel,²⁶ and notes the difficulty of taking any character to be Coetzee's mouthpiece, writing, "We don't know whose voice to believe."²⁷ Her ultimate response to her initial question about form and content is to conclude, "In these two elegant lectures we thought John Coetzee was talking about animals. Could it be, however, that all along he was really asking, 'What is the value of literature?'"²⁸

I agree that *The Lives of Animals* cannot be reduced to being *about* animals, but to conclude that the *something more* that it is about might be the "value of literature" seems also to be reductive. The reluctance to "enunciate principles" and pronounce "proscriptions" evident in *The Lives of Animals*, together with the effect of uncertainty it produces in its audience, amount to a claim about knowledge and the ability to speak (or write) that are enmeshed in any discussion of animals, in any reflection on the encounter with alterity that is the human/animal relationship.

Garber makes a passing comparison between *The Lives of Animals* and Plato's dialogues.²⁹ The comparison is apt. The metafictional puzzle that is the form of *The Lives of Animals*, functioning to confuse and defer meaning and to inhibit the communication

25. Marjorie Garber, reflection on *The Lives of Animals* by J.M. Coetzee, ed. Amy Gutmann (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 75.

26. *Ibid.*, 76.

27. *Ibid.*, 79.

28. *Ibid.*, 84.

29. *Ibid.*, 79.

of an intended idea from the mind of the author to the mind of the listener or reader, is not a peculiarly postmodern form. It bears a strong resemblance to Plato's dialogues and functions in many of the same ways. Coetzee works through philosophical problems by having characters discuss them in scenarios like those in which Plato's characters work through philosophical ideas: quotidian encounters, debates private and public, formal dinners, and the occasion of prestigious out-of-town guests. Plato's dialogues can be dialogues within dialogues (like Coetzee's lecture within a lecture) and can have fairly elaborate and seemingly incidental narrative frames. Characters are developed as personalities and not simple personifications of philosophical positions, and identification of the author, Plato, with the dominant speaker, Socrates, may at times seem natural, but at others dubious.

And as with Plato's dialogues, so with Coetzee's lecture/narrative: the stakes of the argument are to be found in the manner in which the argument is made as much as it is in any argumentative thread presented. Something is at stake within the text—between the interlocutors in the dialogue—but something is at stake, too, between the author and the reader, in the reader's textually mediated dialogue with the author.

In the *Sophist*, the Stranger claims that the form of the dialogue, a conversation among a small group of men, is more edifying than is speech-making. Through dialogue, an interlocutor's errors and contradictions can be exposed and thus purged from the soul, whereas long speeches disguise error and contradictions, inducing listeners to overlook and accept the speaker's mistakes. Dialogue ("method of questions," "method of dialogue,"³⁰ "cross-questioning"³¹) brings an interlocutor to a state of knowledgeable

30. Plato *Sophist* 217.c

31. *Ibid.* 230.d

ignorance; it “purges him and makes him think that he knows only what he knows, and no more”.³²

The form of the dialog, while demonstrating the “method of questions,” puts the reader in a dialogic relationship with the text, which would itself otherwise be only the written analogue of a long-winded speech. So, too, with Coetzee’s lecture/story. Rather than explicate a position on a topic, Coetzee draws the listener/reader into a state of questioning regarding his chosen topic, as well as a state of uncertainty regarding its presentation. Coetzee’s *The Lives of Animals* is like one of Plato’s dialogs in the use of characters, interpersonal conflicts, extra-philosophical motivations and conflicts to interpellate an active audience. More importantly, the dialogs are shot through with irony, in much the same way as Coetzee’s story (which voice to trust? who, if anyone, represents the author’s rhetorical intent?) and is at least as concerned, if not more, with exposing contradictions and error rather than resolving them. What matters is the performance of a method that resists and undermines the certitude and comfort of knowledge, leaving the reader bewildered in the face of a host of others: textual, human, and animal others.

But Garber’s question remains: “What does the form have to do with the content?” The topic of animals is not merely a pretense for Coetzee’s exercise in form. The lecture/narrative form serves to confound the audience’s immediate understanding, provoking uncertainty and hesitation in the audience regarding their knowledge of the author as *other*. The topic of human/animal difference, which human language is inadequate to bridge, is actually quite a fitting topic. The keystone holding form and

32. Ibid.

content together, when read against the arguments Costello has been making throughout the text, is the final vignette between Costello and her son.

Elizabeth Costello rejects Western philosophy's rationalist and humanist assertion that humans, possessing reason, have some privileged access to knowledge of the world as it really is, knowledge of which animals are deprived. She rejects the assertion that reason and the universe are "of the same being" and she rejects that reason constitutes *human* being, instead asserting that reason is only "a certain spectrum of human thinking," only "one tendency in human thought"³³, and perhaps no more than the preferred mode of thinking of a small group of humans:

"Might it not be that the phenomenon we are examining here is, rather than the flowering of a faculty that allows access to the secrets of the universe, the specialism of a rather narrow self-regenerating intellectual tradition whose forte is reasoning. . . which for its own motives it tries to install at the center of the universe?"³⁴

Humanistic rationalism, as Costello describes it, is a closed system and "a vast tautology."³⁵ Norma's objection that "[t]here is no position outside of reason where you can stand and lecture about reason and pass judgement on reason,"³⁶ is, from Costello's perspective, a validation of her argument rather than a critique of it. A system that excludes so much in order to privilege its own construction of reality is impoverished in its totality.

Rejecting reason means that in order to level the difference between human and animal Costello does not need to grant humanlike reasoning to animals. Instead she

33. Coetzee, 23

34. *Ibid.*, 25

35. *Ibid.*, 25

36. *Ibid.*, 48

argues that animal thought is neither less than nor more than nor even equal to human reason but merely different, and that human reason, regarding the animal other at least, is debased. She demonstrates her argument through a reading of *The Mentality of Apes* (1917), in which Wolfgang Köhler describes his ethological experiments on an ape called Sultan. The ape must solve various problems in order to acquire bananas. Such experiments of the same ilk are part of the lore of animal behavior and cognition. And while they are anecdotally offered as proof that certain animal species or certain animal individuals might display human-like reasoning abilities, the experiments are simultaneously taken as evidence of animal inferiority. Köhler's conclusions follow the same pattern. But Costello argues that Köhler's experiments on Sultan merely demonstrate the animal's conformity to an absurdly conceived scenario premised on a simplistic version of human reasoning:

“At every turn Sultan is driven to think the less interesting thought. From the purity of speculation (Why do men behave like this?) he is relentlessly propelled toward lower, practical, instrumental reason (How does one use this to get that?) and thus toward acceptance of himself as primarily an organism with an appetite that needs to be satisfied.”³⁷

Such experiments, to Costello, do nothing more than demonstrate the limitation of humanistic rationalism. As she says to O'Hearne:

“[T]he program of scientific experimentation that leads you to conclude that animals are imbeciles is profoundly anthropocentric. It values being able to find your way out of a sterile maze, ignoring the fact that if the researcher who designed the maze were to be parachuted into the jungles of Borneo, he or she would be dead of starvation in a week....It is the experiments themselves that are imbecile.”³⁸

37. Ibid., 29.

38. Ibid., 62.

Over against reason, Costello promulgates a doctrine of *sympathetic imagination*, which she develops through her critique of Thomas Nagel's essay, "What Is It Like to Be a Bat?" Whereas the kind of thinking typified by Köhler conceives of the animal mind not so much as *different* from the human mind as it is *lesser*, Nagel emphasizes the otherness of the animal mind as being a way of thinking, perceiving, and experiencing the world to which the human mind can have no access. Costello quotes Nagel: "I want to know what it is like for a *bat* to be a bat. Yet if I try to imagine this I am restricted by the sources of my own mind, and those resources are inadequate to the task".³⁹ In other words, the difference between a bat and a human is insurmountable; the human mind and its capacity to reason cannot have access to all ways of knowing, thinking, being.

But Costello is dissatisfied with Nagel, too. She maintains that it is possible for human thought to surmount difference, even the last limit of otherness: death. Humans are capable, she maintains, of "thinking our way into"⁴⁰ a nonhuman state. Refusing scientific reason and denying the strict bounds placed on empathy by Nagel, Costello offers "sympathetic imagination," as a way of thinking that has "no bounds": "If I can think my way into the existence of a being who has never existed [i.e. a fictional character], then I can think my way into the existence of a bat or a chimpanzee or an oyster, any being with whom I share the substrate of life."⁴¹

Sympathetic imagination is an appealing idea. And even though Costello's interlocutors are skeptical, if not incredulous, it is not a purely fanciful idea. For example,

39. Thomas Nagel, "What Is It Like to Be a Bat?" *The Philosophical Review* 83, no. 4 (1974): 439, quoted in Coetzee, 31.

40. Coetzee, 33.

41. *Ibid.*, 35.

the Cambridge Declaration on Consciousness, produced at the Francis Crick Memorial Conference on Consciousness in Human and non-Human Animals at Cambridge University in 2012 surveys the cumulative work of several related neurological fields comparing human and animal brain structures, and then asserts that humans and animals have more in common than humanistic rationalists have generally been willing to concede: “[T]he weight of evidence indicates that humans are not unique in possessing the neurological substrates that generate consciousness.”⁴² If humans and many animals share similar neurological structures then perhaps it is only a small step to imagine that they share similar experiences of being. Additionally, ethologists Alexandra C. Horowitz and Marc Bekoff argue in defense of a cautious, meticulous anthropomorphism in the scientific study of animal behavior; they call anthropomorphism “the explanatory lubrication . . . between visible behaviors and the seemingly inaccessible internal states of the animal.”⁴³ Costello’s own readings of several poems (Rilke’s “The Panther,” and Hughes’ “The Jaguar” and “Second Glance at the Jaguar”) by Ted Hughes and Rilke demonstrate that a poetics of sympathetic imagination is more than simple, sentimental conjecture about animals. However plausible sympathetic imagination might be, or however benevolent seeming it is, sympathetic imagination looks a lot like the reason Costello rejects in so far as both are capacities for special knowledge of the animal *other* that humans unilaterally grant to themselves.

42. Philip Low, “Cambridge Declaration on Consciousness,” ed. Jaak Panksepp, Diana Reiss, David Edelman, Bruno Van Swinderen, Philip Low and Christof Koch (Francis Crick Memorial Conference on Consciousness in Human and non-Human Animals, Cambridge, UK., July 7, 2012), <http://fcmconference.org/img/CambridgeDeclarationOnConsciousness.pdf> (accessed December 28, 2013). A note to the document says that it was signed by the conference participants “in the presence of Stephen Hawking.”

43. Alexandra C. Horowitz and Marc Bekoff, “Naturalizing Anthropomorphism: Behavioral Prompts to Our Humanizing of Animals,” *Anthrozoös* 20, no. 1 (2007): 32.

But plausibility aside, the idea of sympathetic imagination becomes especially salient when it is considered in light of the final vignette with which Coetzee closes his lecture/narrative.

Even though she has been arguing that sympathetic imagination is a capacity with “no bounds” through which one can understand the experience of another being, Costello herself encounters a limit to her capacity to understand the experience of other humans. Those beings that should be to her the most familiar and accessible become frighteningly alien. In answering her son’s question as to why she has become “so intense about the animal business,”⁴⁴ Costello reveals a profound crisis in her psyche—a crisis of conscience and a crisis of *consciousness*.

She cannot reconcile the apparent goodness of the people around her with their complicity in practices she finds horrifying and deems to be evil. She cannot fathom how the people around her reconcile for themselves their benevolent actions in one sphere of life and their deplorable actions in another. The experience of being a meat-eating human is beyond the reach of her sympathetic imagination. But her struggle to understand those non-vegetarian, tallow-soap using human *others* deepens when her consternation becomes unsettling to her perception of the reality around her and her own experience of being herself. “It’s that I no longer know where I am....Am I dreaming, I say to myself? Yet I’m not dreaming....This is life. Everyone else comes to terms with it, why can’t you?”⁴⁵

44. Coetzee, 69.

45. Ibid.

She repeats, emphatically, “*Why can’t you?*” and that question represents a fundamental shift in consciousness from both the rationalistic humanism she rejects and the principle of sympathetic imagination she espouses. Those two ways of thinking are oriented outward from the self and satisfy themselves by asserting knowledge of/over the other. But the question “*Why can’t you?*” is asked by a self whose gaze has been turned back and encounters the self as alien, as other. *I* regards itself as *you*. And the question, demanded of the self by the self, remains unanswered. The question yields no knowledge.

The question, “*Why can’t you?*” reflects the structure of a peculiar response to alterity, whether that *other* is human, animal, or otherwise. Thinking about the *other* often runs first in a single direction, outward from *me* to *you* (or *it*), and often does little more than trace that path between the *self* and the object of its gaze. This is the kind of thinking that characterizes the structure of the many *-isms*: racism, sexism, ableism, speciesism, etc., in which the *other* is not recognized as something more than object perhaps in possession of a being and a gaze of its own. Difference in this scheme (however malevolent, benevolent, or innocuous) is understood as simply “different *from me*.” But in the structure represented by Costello’s “*Why can’t you?*”, thinking about *others* becomes reflexive and some crisis drives back the *self*’s outward gaze to encounter the *self* as *other*. For Costello, the struggle to surmount the difference that occludes her understanding of the people around her becomes a struggle to understand herself. Postulating that the people (and animals) upon which her gaze falls themselves have a being and outward gaze like her own, she strives to understand that being and experience that outward gaze as if it were her own. She fails, with the result of estrangement from herself, finding herself in a disoriented state of uncertainty.

That state of uncertainty is not the result of an apotheosis. It is not a transcendent state. The mode of being and experience represented by Costello's "*Why can't you?*" is not a post-human mode in which the human *self* has attained to something more or other than itself. This uncertain self has not colonized and acquired for itself some foreign mode of being and experiencing. The end result of Costello's sympathetic imagination is not a successful crossing of the abyss of alterity between *self* and *other*. Instead, Costello's sympathetic imagination probes the limit of the *self*, encounters the abyss of alterity, fails to overcome it, and shrinks back within human bounds chastised and more cautious.

The trope of a limit and an abyss between the *self* and *other*, specifically between *human* and *animal*, brings me to Derrida's "The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)". In 2002, *Critical Inquiry* published as "The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)" the first portion of an extended address Jacques Derrida gave at a 1997 conference. The entire address was published in 2008 as *The Animal That Therefore I Am* and included Derrida's treatment of the modern philosophical tradition as it regards the topic of animals. He devotes a great deal of attention to Kant, Heidegger, Levinas, and Lacan. But the first portion is especially interesting because it introduces his themes clustered around readings of narratives: Lewis Carroll's *Through the Lookingglass*, the second account of creation in Genesis, and a personal anecdote about being seen naked by his cat. And just as with Coetzee's narrative/lecture, its manifold texture is as important as—and bound up with—its arguments.

In *The Lives of Animals*, Coetzee speaks not in the first-person nor in the academic third-person, but from behind the veil of a narrational third-person through which an argument must be inferred by the audience from a series of fictional events and a cast of invented characters. Like Coetzee, Derrida does not speak in the conventional academic third-person (the disembodied, timeless, and placeless voice scholars tend to employ when pronouncing upon texts and truths). Unlike Coetzee, Derrida does not structure his address with the scaffolding of an elaborate pretense. But even so, as he shifts continually between the first and third persons, he does not settle into an unselfconscious mode that purports to be a direct unmediated representation of his mind to the minds of his audience. The digressive structure of his sentences and the baroque, recursive ordering of his arguments prevent his audience from forgetting the mediation of the text. Derrida reminds his audience repeatedly that the conference at which he is speaking is entitled “The Autobiographical Animal” and he self-consciously struggles to present himself before his audience as exposed in his entanglement with words. His very first sentence: “To begin with, I would like to entrust myself to words that, were it possible, would be naked.”⁴⁶ His thought cannot be naked, nor can his words be naked, try as he might to expose both. Instead, the attempt to reveal obscures as much as it exposes, and to Derrida as an elusive animal in his own text as Coetzee is in his.

“The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)” might be thought of as a narrative in which other narratives are embedded. The outermost narrative sphere is the one created by the publication of Derrida's transcript in *Critical Inquiry*; the audience is no longer an audience of listeners present with the speaker, but an audience of readers,

46. Jacques Derrida, “The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow),” trans. David Wills, *Critical Inquiry* 28, no. 2 (2002): 369.

reconstructing from printed word a historical event, a thing that happened, i.e. Derrida speaking those printed words (in French and not English) to a group of people at Cerisy-la-Salle, France, in the summer of 1997. In the next narrative sphere, Derrida is reading those same words (which later translated and published in *Critical Inquiry*) to a living audience from a manuscript. That manuscript is in turn a record (and its reading is a reconstruction) of a prior event: Derrida, alone, composing his address, which itself could not have been a singular, discrete, moment, in which the text appeared ex nihilo. In the innermost narrative sphere is Carroll's story about Alice, the Yahwist's story about the naming of the animals, and Derrida in his bathroom naked before his cat—each of which is taken up again in each succeeding sphere of narrative. Derrida is to Derrida as Coetzee is to Costello. Through the publication of Derrida's words after the fact of their having been spoken—making them a kind of fiction—Derrida becomes a fictional character of his own invention set forth in print for absent readers to later reconstruct (or deconstruct, as it were), and interpret, inventing Derrida anew for themselves.

My description of “The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)” as spheres within spheres might suggest, on the one hand, that there is a center—a point of origin, an essential core—from which the text emanates. To read Derrida that way would be un-Derridean. On the other hand, it might suggest a continually deferred center, an infinitesimal point of origin that might never be located. Perhaps a better model than an onion-like figure would be the interfoliated assemblage that is a printed text: dissociated, disordered fragments on a flat field, folded and folded again until they resemble a unified whole, an illusion of natural and necessary linear sequence masking the breaks, edges, and continual disjunctions of which it is composed.

Either way, metaphors will break down and fail to fully serve the purpose of making my assertion seem inevitable, that is, the assertion that there is a correspondence between the form and character of Derrida's writing and the argument he makes. Derrida writes about time and history as non-linear, and he writes about them in a non-linear fashion. His text is digressive and recursive, and rather than progressing through arguments, it accumulates them until an entangled mass is produced.

For example, with the opening remarks, Derrida places himself, his text, and his audience within a longer narrative. Many conference talks begin with remarks of professed thanks (perfunctory or self-deprecating or flattering or even sincere) to conference organizers and other pertinent parties, but Derrida carries on at length with general and specific expressions of gratitude and explanations of how the present conference came to be, how its topic fits in a larger trajectory of conferences at Cerisy and how his own address fits within that trajectory and within the trajectory of his own work. As a preamble, the first three-plus pages of "The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)" seems perhaps excessive, especially to a reader who is not part of the in-crowd of Cerisy conference-goers (or the in-crowd of Derrida readers), but it does in fact work to frame the opening moment of Derrida's address within a view of history that Derrida's later discussion develops, that structures the whole of the text, that echoes Derrida's personal encounter with the gaze of an animal: a history with continuity and difference but without origin or *telos*, a history that progresses recursively, neither circular nor linear (or perhaps both) with the present moment figured as the point of contact between a rolling wheel and the roadway it rolls upon; a history in which an event can be a functional origin in relation to the present, while yet perhaps never having

occurred at a specific time in the past even as it is perpetually recurring; a history in which mythical time and clock time, individual memory and cultural memory, are enmeshed. Derrida's text itself performs recursivity in its own recursive and digressive style, evident in this one of many similar moments in the preamble alone: "Some of you here, Maurice de Gandillac first of all, whom I wish to greet and thank in pride of place, know that about forty years ago, in 1959, our wonderful hosts here at Cerisy were already offering me their hospitality—and it was the moment of my very first lecture, in fact the first time I spoke in public."⁴⁷ In these polite remarks, Derrida brings his present moment into contact with an original event ("my very first lecture"), that occurred at a more-or-less definite time ("about forty years ago, in 1959"), that was also progressive and recurring, individual and communal.

As an example relying on more than a few phrases, Derrida's treatment of his anecdote about being seen naked by his cat might better demonstrate a correspondence between Derrida's idea of history and his manner of structure his text, with the additional advantage of being a key element in Derrida's discussion of human/animal difference.

At the center of "The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)" is an anecdote Derrida tells about being seen naked by his cat and the crisis of self-consciousness that it precipitates. To say the anecdote is *at the center* of the text is inaccurate: more accurate would be to say that it is *integral* to the text. Derrida's telling of the anecdote is consistent with the rest of his text in that the anecdote tells not of a singular past event but an event that, while having happened at some point for a "first

47. Ibid., 370.

time," is recurring and progressive to the same extent that it was originary, marking off a *before* and *after*.

He doesn't tell the story all at once. First, it is offered abstractly and generically, by way of example—as a hypothetical, almost. Then it is articulated as a specific moment in time, a disruptive and singular event. Later, it is a mundane recurrence. In its most concrete iteration, the incident is one anyone with a cat would recognize, or, for that matter, anyone with dog or any other domestic animal free to roam the house: the animal sees you with your clothes off, you see that it sees you, perhaps it even sees you seeing it seeing you with your clothes off, and you wonder, *what does the animal think of all this?*

The resulting perplexity, for Derrida and for many who have been in the same situation, is like trying to reason through the question about the fallen tree in the forest: *If an animal sees you with your clothes off, has it seen you naked?* Derrida's answer, as expected, resolves none of the perplexity: "The animal would be *in* nonnudity because it is nude, and man *in* nudity to the extent that he is no longer nude."⁴⁸ But the answer is less important than the perplexity itself, produced when confronted by the other and noticing being noticed with no recourse to know what the noticing means to the other, "seeing oneself seen naked under a gaze that is vacant to the extent of being bottomless, at the same time innocent and cruel perhaps, perhaps sensitive and impassive, good and bad, uninterpretable, unreadable, undecidable, abyssal and secret."⁴⁹ The gaze of the animal other displaces one's human self: "[I] no longer know who I am (following) or who it is I am chasing, who is following me or hunting me. Who comes before and who

48. Ibid., 374.

49. Ibid., 381.

is after whom? I know longer know where my head is. . . . I no longer know how to respond"50

The *human* and the *animal* are two aspects of the same thought in the Western cultural and philosophical tradition. The idea of the *human* is not imagined without the idea of the *animal*, and so encounters with animals are formative in the history of human self-consciousness. At some definite point in time or during some progressive phase ("since time, since so long ago" is Derrida's refrain) an "abyssal limit," "a limit that grows and multiplies by feeding on an abyss,"⁵¹ opened between human and animal. Derrida reads the biblical story of the naming of the animals in Genesis (part of the *second* creation story told in Genesis) as typifying the recurring, originary event by which the "abyssal limit" between human and animal is discursively defined. The story is symptomatic of a structure underlying human consciousness (in the Western account at least) and the human relationship to the animal, a chain of gazes imagined to move in only one direction, from God to man to animal: "He lets Adam, he lets man, man alone, Ish without Ishah, the woman, freely call out names. He lets him go about naming alone. But he is waiting in the wings, watching over this man alone with a mixture of curiosity and authority."⁵² God sees man, but is not seen, and man "under surveillance, under the gaze of Jehovah"⁵³ sees the animal "without allowing himself to be seen or named" by the

50. Ibid., 379.

51. Ibid., 399.

52. Ibid., 385.

53. Ibid.

animal.⁵⁴ The animal is not a participant in the event, only an object of knowledge; the animal has no gaze or knowledge of its own.

For Derrida there are "at bottom, two types of discourse, two positions of knowledge":

In the first place there are those texts signed by people who have no doubt seen, observed, analyzed, reflected on the animal, but who have never been *seen seen* by the animal. Their gaze has never intersected with that of an animal directed at them (forget about their being naked). If, indeed, they did happen to be seen seen furtively by the animal one day, they took no (thematic, theoretical, or philosophical) account of it.⁵⁵

On the other hand, are texts "whose signatories are first and foremost poets or prophets," those who have seen themselves seen by the animal they have seen and have endeavored to speak from that decentered subject position, to "[take] upon themselves the address of an animal that addresses them, before even having the time or the power to take themselves off, to take themselves off with clothes off or in a bathrobe."⁵⁶ The decentered subject position of the *seen seen* poet (and here Costello would agree emphatically) is, according to Derrida, not heretofore attested in any philosophical, theoretical, political, or legal discourse. Instead these discourses largely reflect the subject position of Descartes' *cogito ergo sum*, followed (I would observe) by a tacit and implicit *et omnia sum*: "I think therefore I am . . . everything: what I cannot think has no being."

For the first discursive camp, nothing is outside human knowledge or outside the possibility of assimilation into human knowledge. (Though Costello would see herself as opposed to this camp of rationalists, I see her notion of "sympathetic imagination" as

54. Ibid., 386.

55. Ibid., 382.

56. Ibid., 383.

squarely within it.) On the other hand are poets and prophets, whose subjectivity has been disturbed by the experience of crossing gazes with the animal. The knowledge gained from seeing themselves being seen is not knowledge of the animal other's occluded self (nor knowledge of the world or oneself as the animal sees it) but instead a *self-conscious* knowledge, a removal of oneself from the center of being and knowledge, allowing for the possibility that one's knowledge is inevitably limited and predetermined by one's position and capacities, and allowing for the possibility that beyond one's knowledge are ways of knowing and being that one can never access or assimilate.

For Derrida, the animal and the human are discursively bound, and that discourse is bound up in narrative and history as much as it is in syllogism and philosophy. These entanglements are evident in the form and style of his essay, exhibiting the same qualities of recursive progressivity, interrupted by constant digression and deferrals, and disorientation and uncertainty. In addition to what I have already noted regarding Derrida's opening comments, his anecdote about his cat and his reading of Genesis, a rhetorical posture of uncertainty is evident in his style, in his manner of expressing his thoughts in a manner that resists the notion of writing as an *expression of thought*, that resists making the text a simple threshold across which the writer ushers the reader into a realm of knowledge. Digressions, tortured phrases ("It follows, itself; it follows itself. It could say 'I am,' 'I follow,' 'I follow myself,' 'I am (in following) myself.'"⁵⁷), and sentences manifoldly compounded might seem to be evidence of clouded thoughts merely expressed in murky writing or, perhaps, to be a deliberate and obtuse occlusion of

57. Ibid., 371.

Derrida's mind from the audience.⁵⁸ Maybe such is indeed the case; his writing unquestionably makes for difficult reading. But maybe his writing is a performance of a rhetorical posture of uncertainty toward his subject matter, and so only reluctantly asserts knowledge, whether of the self or the other, and is reluctant to ever assert only one possibility. Derrida's writing is also a performance of a rhetorical posture of uncertainty toward the audience. It evinces an acute consciousness of the abyss between self and other created by language even as language attempts to cross it.

Consider Derrida's thoughts on *autobiography*. The title of the conference at Cerisy is "The Autobiographical Animal," but *autobiography* in Derrida's treatment is not the label of a genre of narrative writing. Instead, Derrida construes the word as something more like *the writing of the living self*, or the discourse that creates the self. A sense of *confession* lurks in the sense of *autobiography* that calls to mind the literary genre, a "discourse on the self" that presumes, because of "a fault, an evil, an ill," an obligation, for the sake of "truth," to divulge oneself, expose oneself.⁵⁹ Derrida asks if *autobiography* is possible without this "logic of debt and owing": "Has there been, since so long ago, a place and a meaning for autobiography before original sin and before the religions of the book?"⁶⁰ "I am trying to speak to you," he says, from that time "since so long ago," a conceptual reality that, in the scheme of his reading of Genesis, would be before man had founded the abyss between human and animal by his naming of the

58. Derrida writes, "Although time prevents it, I would of course have liked to inscribe my whole talk within a reading of Lewis Carroll. In fact you can't be certain that I am not doing that, for better or for worse, silently, unconsciously, or without your knowing." 376.

59. *Ibid.*, 390.

60. *Ibid.*

animals, a human being before shame. Derrida's writing is *autobiographical*, not in the sense that he is telling us the story of his life, but in the sense that he is struggling to present himself as a living being through language, against an ancient discourse that seems to have predetermined his writing of himself and the other to whom he addresses himself.

His writing is an uphill battle and it engages the audience in that battle. Derrida's comment on passage he quotes from Heidegger is: "I think I understand what that means . . . ; I can understand it on the surface, in terms of what it means, but at the same time I understand nothing."⁶¹ For me to comment the same in response to Derrida is not because of a failure of Derrida's writing, and not (entirely) a failure of me as a reader, but a necessary intermediary position in the encounter between self and other, between writer and reader—a position fraught with uncertainty.⁶²

Another example might be Derrida's neologism, *l'animot*. As with the anecdote about his cat, Derrida does not introduce this element of his text all at once. He sneaks it in, hinting at it before calling attention to it. First, *animot* and *animots* appear without comment,⁶³ and would not have been as noticeable to the ears of Derrida's initial conference audience as they are to the eye of reader encountering Derrida's text in translation. Then, he explicitly introduces *l'animot*, "a chimerical word that sound[s] as

61. *Ibid.*, 391.

62. If a text is clear to a reader, then quite possibly the reader is doing nothing more than writing their own self upon the text through their reading of it. A reader's perception that a text is clear might indicate a failure on the part of either (or both) the writer and reader. Perhaps clarity is not a hallmark of good writing.

63. *Ibid.*, 405, 407.

though it contravened the laws of the French language” and exclaims "*Ecce animot*."⁶⁴ The term, with its singular article (*l'*) and plural sounding form (*-mot* would be heard as *-maux*, the plural ending of *animal* in French), juxtaposes *the* animal as "a single and fundamentally homogeneous set"⁶⁵ with the heterogeneity of animals as "an irreducible living multiplicity of mortals."⁶⁶ And substituting *mot* (the French word for *word*) for the ending *-maux* is a signal that to think about the *animal*, and thus the *human*, is to think about language, "the unique and indivisible limit held to separate man from animal."⁶⁷ This last element, *-mot*, because it is not easily distinguished aurally from *-maux*, but would be visually striking in the printed text, also signals the fraught relationship between speech and writing, and the whole host of problems of differentiation and representation that plague language.

The rhetorical function of Derrida's awkward neologism is to jar the ear and shake the listener's thought out of complacent passivity. Derrida promises his audience to avoid overusing *l'animot* out of respect for "French ears too sensitive to spelling and grammar" and asks them to do the work themselves of "silently substitut[ing] *animot*" for "the animal" and "the animals."⁶⁸ When Derrida's address is read in translation, *l'animot*, untouched by the translator, likewise remains a stumbling block to the eye's smooth scan across the page, repelling yet also engaging the reader. Derrida, calling upon his audience as accomplices, willing or no, uses words against themselves, breaking words by

64. Ibid., 409.

65. Ibid., 408.

66. Ibid., 409.

67. Ibid., 416.

68. Ibid., 415.

smashing them together so that the same energy that causes them to crumble causes them to adhere and to lodge like a rough, irritating bit of gravel in the mind of the listener/reader, to excite thought by neural chafing, and produce a brief moment of disorientation.

In the title of this paper, I call my two primary texts *animal texts*. This is not a phrase I am attempting to use to identify a category, type, or genre to which *The Lives of Animals* and “The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)” belong. I simply mean to use *animal* in an adjectival sense, modifying the vague, yet overburdened term *text*, to say that these two works share some qualities in common with animals, and with each other. They are not just texts about animals—animals as living creatures and animals as ideas—but texts that are also animal-like: wily, difficult to hold, pin down, and pen up, inscrutable, unpredictable, uncooperative and at times unresponsive, but at other times seemingly friendly, yielding, familiar, and almost like they could be domesticated. Really, any text could be so described, but these two texts especially exploit the inevitable problems a text presents as a site of encounter between two (or more) *others*. And their exploitation of those problems mirrors the problems of *human* encounters with *animals* that they discuss: on the one hand, familiarity and understanding with the text/animal, and on the other hand, estrangement and misunderstanding with the text/animal.

What is more important to me than asserting the idea of these texts as *animal texts* and making any claims about their peculiar or exceptional qualities, is an assertion that the function of the correspondences between form and content in these texts is to evoke

an intellectual uncertainty in their readers analogous to the crisis face-to-face encounters with alterity can produce—or that I believe them to be able to produce. But in the end, I have to wonder if I have found in these texts only the thing that I set out to look for and not what is “really” there, or potentially there, in the text. Are my readings only an example of anthropomorphism: instead of attributing my human qualities to an animal, I attempt to legitimate my own a priori assertions by describing them as qualities inherent in the text? Perhaps as a *human* encountering an *animal* other, the alterity confronted within that encounter is merely a reflection of myself—a self I already experience for reasons unknown to me according to a particular self/other dynamic. Likewise, close-reading a text would merely be to re-write it in my own image.

In any case, what I wish to assert—as a bald, unwarranted assertion if necessary—is that uncertainty is an efficacious disposition. It is not a proposition or operation in a syllogistic chain, but an attitude toward knowledge with productive results. The “*Why can't you?*” of Coetzee’s fictional Costello and the *seen seen* of Derrida’s autobiographical Derrida are models of a *self* disrupted by an encounter with an *other*, but they are not models of a universal process like the mirror stage or the realization of object permanence. As Derrida notes, many have “observed, analyzed, reflected on the animal,” but not all have “been *seen seen* by the animal.”⁶⁹ The disrupted *self* has a disposition of uncertainty regarding knowledge of the *other*, be it an *animal*, a *human*, or any of the other *others* composing the world, which can be efficacious. Operating with a confident certainty, *humans* have fixed the whole of the world upon a map and placed themselves in the center of that map; even what is undiscovered has a location on the map

69. Jacques Derrida, “The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow),” trans. David Wills, *Critical Inquiry* 28, no. 2 (2002): 382.

and what humans don't know, they know they will soon know it. But a disposition of uncertainty, reluctant to claim knowledge of what is "true" or "real," unfurls the map of the world further to imagine what *might be* rather than what *is* or *must be*. In other words, certainty restricts the conditions of invention, whereas uncertainty multiplies them.

Finally, to suggest what a disposition of uncertainty has to do with rhetoric, briefly consider two *loci classici*.

First, Aristotle: Rhetoric's "function is not so much to persuade, as to find out in each case the existing means of persuasion."⁷⁰ Above all, rhetoric is an art of invention and its aim is to discover (invent) efficacious means of thinking and speaking about the matter at hand (whatever it may be) in a way that is not merely theoretical but that accomplishes some work. But Aristotle assumes a basic human capacity for real knowledge of the world. Some paragraphs prior to what I've just quoted, Aristotle asserts that "men have a sufficient natural capacity for the truth and indeed in most cases attain to it; wherefore one who divines well in regard to the truth will also be able to divine well in regard to probabilities."⁷¹ I would assert, however, that rhetoric's heuristic function is better served by a rejection of an attitude of certainty. A greater multiplicity of the "means of persuasion" might be "found out" if the rhetor instead embraces a disposition of uncertainty and the unlikelihood that any person can ever know everything that need be know, might be known, could be known in order to establish any given path of action with entire certainty in any given time and place.

70. Aristotle *Rhetoric* 1.1.14.

71. *Ibid.*, 1.1.11

Second, Quintilian, who borrows from Cato a phrase that many in turn have borrowed from Quintilian: an orator should be “a good man, skilled in speaking.”⁷² Quintilian emphasizes the importance of the goodness of the orator as a “man” to the degree that he asserts that no one who is not good cannot learn to speak well:

But if the view that a bad man is necessarily a fool is not merely held by philosophers, but is the universal belief of ordinary men, the fool will most assuredly never become an orator. To this must be added the fact that the mind will not find leisure ever for the study of the noblest of tasks, unless it first be free from vice.⁷³

But I assert that a disposition of uncertainty—especially regarding the *other*—is a great virtue, and that the speech of a person with a disposition of uncertainty is likely to be circumspect, restrained, perhaps even stammering and tending toward silence (or toward digressive verbosity), so that lucid and readily persuasive speech is likely to in fact proceed from an evil “man.” Cogency is cause for suspicion.

72. Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria* 12.1.1.

73. *Ibid.*, 12.1.4.

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