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Oscar, Derrida's Cat, and Other Knowing Animals

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When confronted with animals, Western subjects inevitably cast themselves in the superior role of knowing subjects who take for granted that the whole natural world is knowable. Occasionally, though, in descriptions of encounters between humans and animals disturb that complacency. These strange encounters occasion perplexity concerning the status and the limits of human knowledge. They invite us to query not so much what we know about animals but rather what animals force us to (ac)know(ledge) that we want to ignore, or in other words, what is hidden from us in the act of knowing. After looking at the ways in which two accounts of confrontations with cats pose this problem, we will examine a series of texts by American writers that explore the gap that our culture opens between humans and animals.

One such encounter concerns a strange phenomenon occurring in a Rhode Island hospital, discussed in the *New England Journal of Medicine* and subsequently reported in the popular press. It concerns Oscar, one of several cats that reside in the Steere House Nursing & Rehabilitation Center in Providence. The *New England Journal of Medicine* article explains how the normally aloof cat chooses to curl up beside patients a few hours before their deaths. At the time of the article's publication, Oscar had predicted more than 25 patient deaths and was felt to be so reliable that staff began to alert families when a patient received Oscar's special attention.

A number of possible interpretations have been proposed to make sense of this unusual occurrence, yet none has been accepted as conclusive¹. The production of scientific explanations seems designed to compensate the doctors' inability to understand something that an animal senses "instinctively"². The scientific community's response tries to address the feeling of perplexity that Oscar's aberrant behavior inspires. It does not match the usual feline profile—friendly, sometimes distant, but always inferior. This cat takes initiatives, intervenes in domains that belong to the experts. He takes an interest in matters that do not concern him and what's more that are mysterious to humans. What does he know about us that we don't? Why is he interested in us only at death's door?

¹ A recent article in the Providence Journal reports that David Dosa's best theory has to do with ketones; however, the article points out that this doesn't resolve the enigma: "They're biochemicals with a distinct smell that is created when the body's cells begin to degenerate, easily detectable by a cat with its keen sense of smell. But why is Oscar — and only Oscar — attracted to it?" (quoted in Rourke). At the same time, Dosa expresses a curious form of elation at discovering the limits of his knowledge: "My own intellectual vanity made it easier for me to reject the notion that some errant feline could know more than we as medical staff did," Dosa writes. "I felt strangely elated by the notion that I could be completely wrong." (quoted in Rourke).

² Instinct is a problematic concept that denies our link with animals by refusing the similarity in those behaviors that we have in common by asserting that they cannot claim them as humans do. The circularity of this argument is obvious.

An implicit conjecture hovers above this puzzling occurrence: in spite of science, there are zones of knowledge that are opaque to human intelligence, or, maybe more frustratingly, ways of knowing to which we are not admitted. The strange event is not so much notable in itself as for the threat it poses to our ability to account for the world. An article in *Le Monde Magazine* relaying the American story reaffirms cultural assumptions by suggesting that the whole episode could be just a scam³. The French newspaper marks its difference on this particular point. But in fact, it puts the last touch to the general atmosphere of denial surrounding the incident—the whole thing is not credible and the newspaper comments ironically on what to believe and what to dismiss as ridiculous. The editors of *Le Monde* know better in their willingness not to know any more. The paradox evoked superficially by the journalists is taken up by Derrida on a more epistemologically sound basis.

In the introductory chapter of his last book, *L'animal que donc je suis*, Jacques Derrida dares to explore the questions that *Le Monde* ignores. Derrida's reflections on his cat complement and reverse the Oscar episode; the philosopher is more interested in questioning his own certitudes than in speculating about his cat's knowledge. He asks what human knowledge is worth in the eyes of an other-than-human living creature. The capacity to reason supposedly distinguishes humans from animals and defines humanity. But how do we know that animals do not think? Isn't it begging the question to place the human difference in something that we cannot prove that animals lack? Instead of a cat interfering in human affairs, Derrida portrays an elderly philosopher exposed naked to the gaze of his cat. The encounter between man and cat no longer concerns the inexplicable powers of an exceptional animal but the disquieting experience of meeting non-human eyes. Although the situation is different, the feeling of malaise persists; only it is induced by Derrida's questioning mind and more minutely analyzed by him. Naked in front of his cat, he is no longer the acclaimed philosopher; his knowledge and his mind's acumen count for nothing in the eyes of the familiar creature. The exposure to another animal puts his philosophical knowledge in jeopardy but at the same time opens it to a form of renewal or assessment. He humorously declares himself ready for the Apocalypse, for the "unveiling and the verdict" [Our translation]⁴. He discovers himself through the animal's eyes:

Like all bottomless gazes, like the eyes of the other, this so-called "animal" gaze lets me see the abyssal limit of the human: the inhuman or anhuman, the ends of man, in other words the crossing of the limits at which man dares to introduce himself to himself, calling himself thus by the name which he believes he gives himself [our translation]⁵.

We want to place the following study under the double aegis of the highly charged notion of "*les fins de l'homme*" (the French "fins" being interpretable as aims-ends-finality-limits-extinction, all in one), and the no less intense vision of the abyss (both bottomless chasm and pre-Creation chaos). What limits must humans cross or forgo crossing in order to hold their own in front of an animal? What is human and what is beyond human? Encounters with animals can be definitional in the sense that they confront humans with confusing borders where they perceive what lies beyond the limits of their nature, without the consolation of knowing where they stand. This is the initial position that Derrida adopts in *L'animal que donc je suis*. He then proceeds to review some major texts about animals in the philosophical

³ "Plus que la mort, ce chat-là a tout l'air de sentir l'arnaque" (*Le Monde Magazine* 14). The article was the starting point of this essay, since its editorial smugness urged further investigation.

⁴ "Je suis comme un enfant prêt pour l'apocalypse [...] le dévoilement et le verdict" (Derrida 30).

⁵ "Comme tout regard sans fond, comme les yeux de l'autre, ce regard dit "animal" me donne à voir la limite abyssale de l'humain: l'inhumain ou l'anhumain, les fins de l'homme, à savoir le passage des frontières depuis lequel l'homme ose s'annoncer à lui-même, s'appelant ainsi du nom qu'il croit se donner" (Derrida 30).

literature, including, more extensively, Heidegger in his last chapter, to conclude that they bring no final answer as to where we stand in relation to animals. Our knowledge is unavailing when it comes to certain situations in existence, death and dying most prominently among them. He insists that the whole “question of being” or of the “ontological difference” needs to be radically reinterpreted⁶. This conclusion is infinitely touching and honest but it is also an (inevitable?) evasion.

Human beings are clearly incapable of meeting other species on their terms. Inevitably, we process animals and the world in the image-making factory of our cultural system. We convert whatever we consider as outside the limits of the human in terms of our personal or collective needs. Various ontological (or species-specific) *a priori* make the conversion not only easy but also conceptually justified. In the naturalistic perspective identified by Descola⁷, animals are seen as different from humans, as less than us. We assume that they lack what we have as our cultural heritage: the capacity to represent our own predicament. We see them as guided by instincts that prevent them from availing themselves of the capacity to weigh alternatives and choose among them. Consequently, we consider ourselves as responsible for them, and we justify our stewardship over animals by proclaiming our benevolence. Although this conception is ingrained in the Western consciousness, new developments in biology and ethology suggest that animals are capable of building conceptual universes. Whether we accept the older or the more recent conception, it is clear that encounters between humans and animals are like blind dates in which both parties respond according to pre-defined scenarios, and consequently that direct comprehension is impossible.

If von Uexkühl is right that human and other than human animals inhabit distinct though intersecting *umweltds*, whatever is situated outside or beyond our respective world pictures is inaccessible, or rather the moment we attempt to comprehend other animals, we automatically reconvert them into our own system. Yet what is intriguing in the literature on animals is the way in which they are seen to possess, and sometimes surpass, distinctive human capacities, while strangely altering and transmogrifying them. Animals are like us and yet not like us; as such, they appear as teasing enigmas that beg to be deciphered. This is the origin of Derrida’s inquiry and the cause of the discomfort that is often felt in the presence of animals. Although culturally manacled in our relations with non-humans, we instinctively sense that what lives beyond our human sphere is crucial to our survival, if only because the “beyond” can become a potential threat. The ecological problem is of course initially posed in these terms. Oscar and Derrida’s cat raise another question that is less frequently evoked. As Derrida justly perceives, animal encounters confront us with the imperious necessity to legitimize our culture, our knowledge of the world, and our status as human beings.

Those enigmatic cats not only reveal the limits of our knowledge but they suggest also that it is not an endowment that we acquire, accumulate and transfer, but something that supports or validates our existence. Without knowledge, we are naked, or perhaps we have always been naked. Without knowledge we become non-existent. As the story of Oscar shows, when it comes to confronting death, one of the most basic facts of existence, we are defenseless or in a position scarcely more favorable than animals. Both Oscar’s story and Derrida’s cat seem to demonstrate that our culture, our self-justifying image factory, is an extremely complex construction designed to make us forget or avoid conceptualizing our mortality. Death is

⁶ “L’enjeu, naturellement, je ne le cache pas, est tellement radical qu’il y va de la “différence ontologique”, de la “question de l’être”, de toute l’armature du discours heideggérien” (Derrida 219).

⁷ In *Par-delà nature et culture* Descola distinguishes naturalism from three other ways of conceiving one’s relation to the world: totemism, animism and analogism.

always under erasure; in other words, we conceptualize in order not to think about it. Nevertheless, certain circumstances cause anthropocentric schemata to malfunction. In relating extreme or unusual encounters with animals, certain American writers succeed in opening up a breach in the fortifications of our anthropocentric knowledge.

Barry Lopez's essay "A Presentation of Whales" is an example of a text that shatters our pretensions to mastery through knowledge. It relates the circumstances following the discovery of forty-one sperm whales stranded on a stretch of the Oregon coast in 1979. The essay recounts the varied reactions of government officials, the scientific community, the press, and the public to the deaths of these massive animals. No one seems able to furnish a satisfactory response. Rather than taking a stand or adopting a theory about the event, the essay depicts a series of unconnected scenes and relays different accounts of the event. In some passages, it reproduces the montage effect of a documentary film:

By midnight, the curious and the awed were crowded on the beach, cutting the night with flashlights. Drunks, ignoring the whales' sudden thrashing, were trying to walk up and down on their backs. A collie barked incessantly; flash cubes burst at the huge, dark forms. Two men inquired about reserving some of the teeth, for scrimshaw. A federal agent asked police to move people back, and the first mention of disease was in the air. Scientists arrived with specimen bags and rubber gloves and fishing knives. Greenpeace members, one dressed in a bright orange flight suit, came with a large banner. A man burdened with a television camera labored over the foredune after them. They wished to tie a rope to one whale's flukes, to drag it back into the ocean. The police began to congregate with the scientists, looking for a rationale to control the incident. (Lopez, 119-120)

This series of short declarative sentences describing the spectators' reactions illustrates the inadequacy of socio-cultural codes in the face of the colossal demonstration of mortality. In the absence of authorial comment, no attitude seems to have preference over another. No one, from the drunks to the scientists, from the environmentalists to the police has a useful reply to the whales' obvious distress. Even the best-intentioned actions are shown to be ludicrously inadequate, even somehow indecent. The human community turns the whales into objects, into news, into scientific data, and finally, into waste for disposal. In dealing with the whales' vulnerable flesh, the humans seem increasingly inhumane. All the reactions, from science to sensationalistic journalism, are like so many screens erected to protect onlookers from a glaring yet unacceptable truth.

Just what is being presented to the onlookers, and by extension to readers, in "A Presentation of Whales"? The choice of the intriguing title suggests that Lopez's essay wants to do much more than simply relate an event. The primary meaning of "presentation" is a gift, offered in a formal ceremony. But the event cannot be justified as a valuable opportunity for gathering scientific data, for the essay places this normally laudable human pursuit on a par with other forms of acquisition:

The temptation to possess—a Polaroid of oneself standing over a whale, a plug of flesh removed with a penknife, a souvenir squid beak plucked deftly from an exposed intestine by a scientist—was almost palpable in the air (Lopez, 129).

A presentation is also a display, a revelation of presence. The whales' stranding links the gruesome evidence of mortality—the colossal bodies being dissected with chain saws, the gallons of blood, the innards strewn on the beach—to evocations of mystery: "No one knows why whales strand" (Lopez, 132); "The general mystery is enhanced by specific mysteries" (Lopez, 123). Lopez charges the stranding of the whales with numinous or inexpressible meaning. Some of the witnesses to the scene are moved and troubled, yet unable to explain or

respond adequately to their discomfort. A graduate student working at the scene recounts how experiencing a live whale's reaction to the dissection of his dead neighbor "broke scientific concentration and brought with it a feeling of impropriety" (Lopez, 139). A law enforcement officer who commands a man splashing cool water on one of the whales to move away asks himself, "Why is there no room for the decency of this gesture?" (Lopez, 130). There is something very wrong, the essay suggests, in the refusal of acts of human decency to members of other species. The whales are not of our kind, and yet they are somehow our kin. In the face of the inhumanity of the treatment accorded them, they seem more human than man. Thus, yet another meaning hovers behind the word "presentation" in the essay's title: man's re-introduction to his kith and kin, an impression of being lost and reborn that dawns upon some of the hushed crowd: "there were hundreds who whispered to one each other, as if in a grove of enormous trees" (Lopez, 130).

Some remarks made by Robert Pogue Harrison offer insight into the problem that Lopez treats obliquely. Having separated ourselves from the rest of the natural world in order to assert our human exceptionality, we suffer, according to Harrison, from "species loneliness" (Harrison, 428). Our language, our modes of representation, in short, our whole culture, both engender and compensate the distance that separates us from the world: "human beings, unlike other living species, live not in nature, but in their relation to nature" (Harrison, 426). Conceiving of ourselves as exceptional, we do not acknowledge the mortal necessity that binds us to the rest of the animal world: "Culture is not the allegory of nature; it is the ritualized institution of the irony that puts us at odds with nature. To say it otherwise, I am at odds with my death" (Harrison, 435). Culture is a construction that keeps us pacified and secure in the ignorance of our own deaths. The whales' stranding presents onlookers with death on a massive scale⁸, while stripping them of the usual human forms of containing and concealing mortality. There is something obscene about it: something that should be hidden is exposed to view; something that is obvious cannot be acknowledged.

Lopez's essay seems to be searching for a language with which to respond to the whales' stranding. It quotes different voices and adopts various styles, alternating passages of detached, factual, scientific notation, journalistic reportage, grotesque realism, and lyrical description. Finally, Lopez abandons the quest for the right kind of discourse. Those who might have found the words or the gesture are absent from the scene:

As far as I know, no novelist, no historian, no moral philosopher, no scholar of Melville, no rabbi, no painter, no theologian had been on the beach. No one had thought to call them or to fly them in. At the end they would not have been allowed past the barricades (Lopez, 146).

Although not quite conceding that words are inadequate to respond to the event, the series of negations in the essay's penultimate paragraph underlines the failure of available discourses to cope with the sea mammals' deaths. The essay seems finally to give up the struggle for expression: "The whales made a sound, someone had said, like the sound a big fir makes breaking off the stump just as the saw is pulled away. A thin screech" (Lopez, 146). At this point the writer seems to withdraw, first by quoting an unnamed source ("someone had said"), and second by relaying a strange metaphor to evoke the whales' last agony, substituting a tree for the huge creatures. The pulling away of the saw reminds us of the humans' inability to succor the whales and their disregard for their deaths, as unmourned as the tree's fall. The elliptical last line reduces the monumental animals to "a thin screech"—to the faint noise

⁸ This adds another possible meaning to the title: presentation in the sense of making present something that humans cannot conceive of in time.

before a giant tree's final crash—and lets it linger without any human response.

The human difficulty in responding to death points to a crucial discrepancy between the act of knowing and our perception of our existential status: the two do not match. The ability to know does not prepare us for the act of existing and there is even a suspicion that they might be at variance. Our existence is justified and enhanced by knowledge but has in part to contend with it. At the same time, paradoxically, we have founded our humanity on our ability to acquire a clear perception of our existential status, to think our existence, according to the Cartesian cogito. In *Being and Time* Heidegger opens an escape route by redefining the link between knowing and being. For Heidegger, human beings, as part of Da-sein, never acquire full knowledge of their existential situation because they are distracted by care which keeps them immersed in the world always “being ahead of” themselves and condemns them to a state of unwholeness (Heidegger, 1996, 219). We saw in Derrida's meditation or in Oscar's case and in Lopez's essay that the whole of our knowledge, culture and cognitive acumen are at stake in the confrontation with death. Da-sein's return to wholeness consists in anticipating death. Only in the perspective of that improbable reality is it placed in a position of existing to the full. In being-toward-the-end, “Da-sein discloses itself to itself with regard to its most extreme possibility” (Heidegger, 1996, 242).

Yet Heidegger's conception of being-toward-death is strictly personal and even provocatively individualistic: “Insofar as it ‘is,’ death is always essentially my own” (Heidegger, 1996, 223), whereas the texts that we examine evince a relational, face-to-face dimension. The deaths of other beings are indispensable analogues that trigger an oblique and intuitive perception of what we cannot conceptualize. This idea has been theorized by Lévinas in *God, Death, and Time*: “In every death is shown the nearness of the neighbor, and the responsibility that the approach of proximity moves or agitates” (Lévinas, 17). The individual's death is only significant in the way it links him to others. Death and dying are relational and sometimes communal experiences that create a sense of proximity and a bond of responsibility⁹.

The encounters with animals we have looked at so far call into question any claims for human exceptionality. Hence, it is difficult to integrate into our study of animal encounters Heidegger's well-known distinction in *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics. World, Finitude, Solitude* between the three orders of existence: “The stone is worldless, the animal is poor in world, man is world-forming” (Heidegger, 1995, 186). Even if we ignore the fact that the distinction reopens the now contested argument for man's exceptionalism, it places the animal on an inferior footing as deficient precisely in that in which we would distinctively excel. The impression derived from the texts examined so far is that, on the contrary, on rare but intense occasions animals force us to discover our common engagement with the world. These occasions give us an opportunity to affirm our real nature not as solitary individuals but as members of a community that includes all other existing beings. In front of animals we are both revealed and threatened, and also released from human limitations.

Confrontation with wild animals—because they are rare and often intense—can shock us out of reassuring preconceptions. They can relay intimations that somehow bypass the confusing maze of representations. Again these exceptional realizations should be distinguished from the common cultural consolations expressed in threadbare motifs like “memento mori”, which

⁹ There is a possible similarity between Lévinas's the ‘nearness’ concept and Deleuze's “voisinage” or Derrida's “être serré”, discussed below.

advises the acceptance of death, or the contrary theme of “carpe diem”, which urges the affirmation of life in spite of the inevitability of death. The kind of existential moment that encounters with animals prompt is at the same time more primordial and even brutal. This type of experience is rather like the feeling one sometimes has when leaning over the handrail on a very high bridge to look into the void, or the sensations that people associate with bungee jumping or Russian roulette. In both cases, one has the impression that one is just a step away from accomplishing something momentous because irreparable, as if forfeiting one’s life could become a formidable life experience. These extreme occurrences suggest that our perception of life is entwined with our perception of death, danger or destruction, that one offsets and counterbalances the other, that accepting one involves giving in to the other and that existence without both is lived in vain. This is the existential complex that we explore now in two literary representations of life and death encounters, one by James Dickey and the other by Annie Dillard.

In his poem, “The Heaven of Animals”, James Dickey represents the place animals go after death as the identical counterpart of the places they inhabited in life. In life and death there is no distinction; both states represent the absolute plenitude of existence:

Here they are. The soft eyes open.
 If they have lived in a wood
 It is a wood.
 If they have lived on plains
 It is grass rolling
 Under their feet forever.

Having no souls, they have come,
 Anyway, beyond their knowing.
 Their instincts wholly bloom
 And they rise.
 The soft eyes open. (Dickey, 78-79)

The pattern of echoes in these lines creates heaven as a mirror image of earth. The poem suggests that unburdened by “souls” or knowledge, animals are already in bliss, in a life given over to instinct. Nonetheless, it is death that makes this existential fullness possible:

For some of these,
 It could not be the place
 It is, without blood.
 These hunt, as they have done,
 But with claws and teeth grown perfect,

More deadly than they can believe.
 They stalk more silently,
 And crouch on the limbs of trees,
 And their descent
 Upon the bright backs of their prey

May take years
 In a sovereign floating of joy.
 And those that are hunted

Know this as their life,
Their reward: to walk

Under such trees in full knowledge
Of what is in glory above them,
And to feel no fear,
But acceptance, compliance.
Fulfilling themselves without pain

At the cycle's center,
They tremble, they walk
Under the tree,
They fall, they are torn,
They rise, they walk again. (Dickey, 79)

The poem's two movements complement and match each other—the transparent living of the opening stanzas is simply the counterpart of life lived in the donation and acceptance of death. The expression of animal instinct in the relation between hunter and prey is declared to be “full” and “fulfilled” knowledge. The poem depicts a timeless moment “at the cycle's center” that embraces dualities and overrides the conventional life and death binary.

As in all binaries (culture/nature, male/female, mind/body, etc.), the second term is the inferior element; thus, death is conceived as “non-life”. If accepting the binary implies the inauthentic existence denounced by Heidegger, then acceptance of death in life or dying into living, as dreamt by the speaker in “The Heaven of Animals”, means fulfillment expressed in two modalities. The first describes the complete effacement of identity and thus total coincidence with the world. This is not the unmindful “wordlessness” that Heidegger associated with the mineral order, but the expression of the world's substance through a being's own life: “If they have lived in a wood/ It is a wood”. The places where animals lived become complete thanks to their inhabitants' transparent existence. Alternatively but not differently, existence is fulfilled by keeping the two principles of life and death in an eternally renewed embrace, as in the second part of the poem. Shown in slow motion, the Dance of Death becomes the apotheosis of life.

Why does animal existence make the realization of the connectedness of life and death more probable? The situations created by Oscar or Derrida's cat or the encounters with wild animals introduce an essential difference. These animals come to us and look at us without words. We have no words in return to justify our presence or question theirs. When they look at us we perceive our own image in their gaze, but that image is not identifiable. The impression of being seen seeing is sometimes complicated by the perception of a similar perplexity in the animal's eyes, so that our image is fractured by its own incomprehension. Existence is no longer distanced and identified through representation but presented raw in the alien gaze. It becomes inscrutable and, as Derrida senses, decisive for the understanding of our status. Punning in his book's title on the verb “to be” (*je suis* can mean both I am, and I follow), Derrida analyses with extreme sophistication the various aspects of this encounter as being with (“*l'être-avec*”) and being close to (“*l'être-serré*”) the animal (Derrida 27). The human subject loses his status as individualized entity and becomes sufficiently depersonalized as to be able to exist in close proximity with another being. At the same time, Derrida describes the dismaying impression of being considered from the point of view of the absolute other, “*l'autre absolu*” (Derrida 28). These two sets of remarks do not match. How

can the animal be considered as the absolute other and yet be close to us? This is only a paradox in appearance since it is only when a being has abandoned all pretence to distinctiveness that it can experience a feeling of proximity with its neighbor. “Il m’entoure”¹⁰, Derrida concludes significantly (Derrida 28). This is the kind of experience that Annie Dillard explores in her encounter with a weasel.

“Living Like Weasels” begins conventionally enough with a reflection on some of the characteristics of the species and an assertion of their difference from humans: “A weasel is wild. Who knows what he thinks?” (Dillard, 11). Dillard relates two anecdotes from her reading about weasels to illustrate one of their most distinctive characteristics, the tenacity of their bite. The first concerns a naturalist bitten by an animal that refuses to let go: “and he had to walk half a mile to water, the weasel dangling from his palm, and soak him off like a stubborn label” (Dillard, 11). The metaphor illustrates the weasel’s sticking power, while at the same time humorously assimilating him to a familiar object. The second illustration is even more singular:

And once, says Ernest Thompson Seton—once, a man shot an eagle out of the sky. He examined the eagle and found the dry skull of a weasel fixed by the jaws to his throat. The supposition is that the eagle had pounced on the weasel and the weasel swiveled and bit as instinct taught him, tooth to neck, and nearly won. (Dillard, 12)

At first the anecdote merely provokes questions about the relationship of hunter and prey. Later, Dillard returns to this story to explore its existential implications.

Though they start the essay, Dillard claims that these odd pieces of information about weasels were gleaned after a personal encounter with one: “I had been reading about weasels because I saw one last week” (Dillard, 12). This observation is of a different order from the preceding ones. No longer the distanced object of scientific curiosity, the weasel is identified as a subject, capable of engaging with the speaker: “I startled a weasel who startled me, and we exchanged a long glance” (Dillard, 12). After setting the scene for the encounter in a long descriptive passage, Dillard returns to this glance, using her considerable resources as a writer to convey the impact of the moment:

Our look was as if two lovers, or deadly enemies, met unexpectedly on an overgrown path where each had been thinking of something else: a clearing blow to the gut. It was also a bright blow to the brain, or a sudden beating of brains, with all the charge and intimate grate of rubbed balloons. It emptied our lungs. It felled the forest, moved the fields, and drained the pond; the world dismantled and tumbled into that black hole of eyes (Dillard, 14).

This moment of exchanging gazes with the weasel sweeps away all that has been experienced (or written before). The world of Tinker Creek, recreated in the text, disappears, reduced to a single point that connects the two beings, “the black hole of eyes”. This encounter sweeps away all other forms of knowledge to privilege a direct experience of being:

I tell you I’ve been in that weasel’s brain for sixty seconds and he was in mine. Brains are private places, muttering through unique and secret tapes—but the weasel and I both plugged into another tape simultaneously, for a sweet and shocking time. Can I help it if it was a blank? (Dillard, 14).

During the minute in which they look at each other, words disappear; the tape running in the writer’s brain is suddenly no longer unique and personal, but blank. All remembered and

¹⁰ The expression in French is ambiguous: it may signify “it encircles me” and “it surrounds me with affection”, but also maybe “it contains me”.

learned knowledge vanishes, as she lives for an instant like the weasel; she shares his mental space.

For Dillard, “Living Like Weasels” means abandoning culture, foregoing the detachment from the world that gives rise to human consciousness and choosing instead to immerse oneself in existence:

The weasel lives in necessity and we live in choice, hating necessity and dying at the last ignobly in its talons. I would like to live as I should, as the weasel lives as he should. And I suspect that for me the way is like the weasel’s: open to time and death painlessly, noticing everything, remembering nothing, choosing the given with a fierce and pointed will ((Dillard, 15).

“Living Like Weasels” also means recognizing the place of death in existence. The skull embedded in the eagle’s neck becomes a sign of the wild animal’s commitment to the embrace of both life and death in existence. Imitating the tenacious grip of the weasel’s jaws is seen as the entry to a heightened form of existence, “a dearer life”, that restores the continuity between life and death, figured here as the wild roses and the mud:

I missed my chance. I should have gone for the throat. I should have lunged for that streak of white under the weasel’s chin and held on, held on through mud and into the wild rose, held on for a dearer life. We could live under the wild rose wild as weasels, mute and uncomprehending (Dillard, 15).

In this fantasy of living as a weasel, Annie Dillard imagines crossing the species barrier to enter another realm of possibility. This psychic impulse replicates the “devenir-animal” that Deleuze and Guattari adumbrate in *Mille Plateaux*.

Becomings-animal are basically of another power, since their reality resides not in an animal one imitates or to which one corresponds, but in themselves, in what suddenly sweeps us up and makes us become—a *proximity, an indiscernibility* that extracts a shared element from the animal far more effectively than any domestication, utilization, or imitation could: “the Beast” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, 307)¹¹.

What counts for them in humans’ metamorphoses into animals is the impulse toward something else, molecular living as opposed to molar individuated existence. Dillard admits to the urge toward a more intense form of being, but she pulls back. She thinks before lunging for the throat of existence. She is of two minds, a human living the dream of animal life, unable to give up the faculties that allow her to imagine that other life. The modals in the passage quoted above underline both the attraction of the fantasy and her rejection of it. Seeing animal existence as an either/or status that excludes her humanity, she cannot access the fluid state of “Becoming-animal”. For Dillard, to become animal would be to regress to a state “where the mind is single” (Dillard, 15), and her consciousness situates her elsewhere, on the human side of the divide. The moment of blankness experienced looking into the eyes of the weasel is like the writer’s horror of the blank page. She marks her distance from the weasel through the very act of writing about him:

What does a weasel think about? He won’t say. His journal is tracks in clay, a spray of feathers, mouse blood and bone: uncollected, loose-leaf, and blown.

¹¹ Les devenirs-animaux sont d’abord d’une autre puissance, puisqu’ils n’ont pas leur réalité dans l’animal qu’on imiterait ou auquel on correspondrait, mais en eux-mêmes, dans ce qui nous prend tout d’un coup et nous fait devenir, un *voisinage*, une *indiscernabilité*, qui extrait de l’animal quelque chose de commun beaucoup plus que toute domestication, que toute utilisation, que toute imitation : “la Bête” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1980, 342).

The weasel records his existence with mute material substances—clay, feathers, blood and bone—that remain “uncollected” while Dillard imagines, reflects, writes, and gathers her work into volumes.

All the texts that we have read so far, nonfiction prose, narration, poetry and even newspaper or review articles are various manners of tackling the problem of representing to others the strange encounters with animals that we have tried to characterize. Yet they are fraught with the following paradox—by addressing us in conventional codes, these texts normalize experiences that were inexpressible in the first instance. Dickey imagines an animal paradise from which humans are excluded, while Dillard’s text relates a fantasy of joining the animal world that has been safely textualized. Both texts offer equally improbable projections of the human-animal relation. Animal encounters confront humans with death in life and thereby hold out the promise of a fuller existence. Nonetheless, the texts we have looked at so far suggest that we habitually resist that form of knowing in order to hold onto our human difference. In the quest for liberation from the humans’ mental world, knowledge is an obstacle; it blocks the entry to animal heaven and checks the descent into pure animal nature.

How can we foster an interactive perspective, resisting the impulse to take distance from the natural world? How can one overcome that “species loneliness” that Harrison identifies? Loren Eiseley seems to point the way in his suggestive essay, “The Judgment of the Birds”.

To open up to the experience of animal existence, Eiseley first identifies a liminal space that blurs familiar human landmarks. He begins his essay by recalling that traditionally men have sent emissaries into the wilderness to gain insight, but Eiseley’s sites of revelation are not necessarily distant from human habitation: “Even in New York City there are patches of wilderness” (Eiseley, 1957, 164). The essay moves from a Manhattan hotel room, to a path near the naturalist’s home, to a lonely stretch of the Badlands, to a mountain glade, to end on a sidewalk outside his home. The episodes related often take place at transitional moments, at dawn or dusk, when the subject hovers between sleep and waking. Insight comes not so much from frequenting isolated spaces as from opening the mind to alternative experiences and being receptive to the moment when “the mundane world gives way to quite another dimension” (Eiseley, 1957, 164). To give readers access to the alternative dimension of experience, Eiseley begins by representing the conditions that gave rise to the moments of insight; thus his essay proceeds through a series of frames that recreate or simulate these liminal places and moments. Then, to open the experience to readers he must refuse the temptation to provide closure; his challenge as a writer is to communicate while refraining from imposing an interpretation.

In order to guide the reader away from conventional modes of thought, the essay’s paired opening scenes resemble inverted mirror images of each other. In the first, Eiseley looks down from the twentieth story of a hotel, “into a series of cupolas or lofts” (Eiseley, 1957, 163). This bird’s-eye view gives him a vision of a flock of circling pigeons and he imagines for a moment that he is one of them:

As I crouched half asleep across the sill, I had a moment’s illusion that the world had changed in the night, as in some immense snowfall, and that if I were to leave, it would have to be as these other inhabitants were doing, by the window. I should have to launch out into that great bottomless void with the simple confidence of young birds reared high up there among the familiar chimney pots and interposed horrors of the abyss (Eiseley, 1957, 166).

New York is turned upside down, so that the *terra firma* of the city streets becomes a “bottomless void” and the sky becomes a familiar element. Poised on the unstable boundary

between two worlds, Eiseley feels the urge to join the city's "other inhabitants". He is ready to leave the windowsill and launch out into world of the pigeons: "by the merest pressure of the fingers and a feeling for air, one might go away over the roofs. It is a knowledge, however, that is better kept to oneself" (Eiseley, 1957, 167). This secret knowledge of becoming a bird recalls Deleuze and Guattari's "becoming-animal". It is a form of knowing that momentarily allows one to look beyond the boundaries of the human and, at the same time, to come very near to death.

Unlike Dillard, though, Eiseley does not subject his urge to logical dissection. He keeps it in the realm of possibility by situating it in the in-between zone of the inexplicable:

To see from an inverted angle, however, is not a gift allotted merely to the human imagination. I have come to suspect that within their degree it is sensed by animals, though perhaps as rarely as among men. The time has to be right; one has to be, by chance or intention, upon the border of two worlds. And sometimes these two borders may shift or interpenetrate and one sees the miraculous.

I once saw this happen to a crow. (Eiseley, 1957, 167)

The passage is shot through with words that introduce uncertainty ("perhaps", "rarely", "chance", "may", "the miraculous"). Part of the uncertainty of existing "on the border of two worlds" is that humans cannot pretend to have knowledge of the other side. Yet this is precisely the zone into which Eiseley's essay ventures; hence, the necessity to create frames which permit our imaginative entry. He depicts a startling encounter with a crow as a moment when "the borders of our worlds had shifted" (Eiseley, 1957, 169). In a mirror image of Eiseley's experience in the New York hotel, the crow accidentally encroaches on the boundary between avian and human worlds. Disoriented by a thick fog, the bird flies lower than usual, so that the naturalist appears to him as: "a man walking on air, desecrating the very heart of the crow kingdom" (Eiseley, 1957, 169). By imagining himself in the crow's mental world, Eiseley tries to ensure that readers do not revert to the normal binaries and hierarchies of human knowledge. He insists that birds and other animals have their own certainties. Once he has established this point, he can go on to suggest what animals can teach us.

Three illustrations follow in the form of paradoxes or riddles. In the first the naturalist stands in the Badlands, a place where nothing seems to live or grow, at the end of a chilly autumn day. Suddenly, a flight of birds rushes across the sky:

Across that desert of eroding clay and wind-worn stone they came with a faint, wild twittering that filled all the air about me as those tiny living bullets hurtled past into the night.

It may not strike you as a marvel. It would not perhaps, unless you stood in the middle of a dead world at sunset, but that was where I stood. Fifty million years lay under my feet, fifty million years of bellowing monsters moving in a green world now gone so utterly that its very light was traveling on the farther edge of space. The chemicals of all that vanished age lay about me in the ground (Eiseley, 1957, 171).

The naturalist asks us to imagine the place where he stands and to make the connection between the birds above and the dead fossils underfoot. Again, he creates an inverted mirror, for the birds are made of the same chemicals as the dead creatures. All that wild energy hurtles like "living bullets" into extinction. The birds are moving signs of the miracle of life in the midst of death.

A similar insight comes from the episode that gives the essay its title. Waking up in a woodland glade, the unseen observer witnesses "a judgment on life" that "was not passed by

men” (Eiseley, 1957, 173). The sounds that wake him are the cries of protest emitted by birds whose nestling has been devoured by a raven. Other birds gather in the glade and begin to add their voices to the anguished complaint. Gradually, though, “as though some evil thing were being forgotten” (Eiseley, 1957, 175), the shrieks of distress change into a joyful chorus: “They sang because life is sweet and sunlight beautiful. They sang under the brooding shadow of the raven” (Eiseley, 1957, 175). The chiaroscuro effect of the scene recalls the other moments depicted in the essay. The animal world holds together contraries: light and dark, life and death. These elements are not hierarchical or separate, as in rational thought, but blended in indissociable continuity.

In the final scene Eiseley offers a meta-literary comment on his method. Late in the year on the suburban street outside his house, he climbs a stepladder to examine a spider building her web in front of a street lamp. He begins to draw a moral from the scene, seeing her as “a great black and yellow embodiment of the life force, not giving up to either frost or stepladders” (Eiseley, 1957, 176). He compares her to a doomed but heroic warrior engaged in “our final freezing battle with the void” (Eiseley, 1957, 178). But finally he pulls back from explanations:

It was better, I decided, for the emissaries returning from the wilderness, even if they were merely descending a stepladder, to record their marvel, not to define its meaning. In that way it would go echoing on through the minds of men, each grasping at that beyond out of which miracles emerge, and which, once defined, ceases to satisfy the human need for symbols (Eiseley, 1957, 178).

Eiseley’s conclusion resonates with religious language, so that the naturalist seems like a latter-day prophet emerging from an experience with the numinous. However, he humorously undercuts this elevated image of himself with the fragmentary jottings in the style of field notes that conclude the essay. The indefinable “beyond out of which miracles emerge” is nothing more or less than the natural world, from which men are exiled because of their urge to master it through definitions. Instead, what he tries to promote through his writings is a different form of knowledge—what he calls “grasping at th[e] beyond”—which still implies a individual act of appropriation but does not necessarily predicate its conversion into existing social codes. Grasping places the emphasis on the endeavor rather than on the objective. In the same way, by multiplying perspectives on his animal encounters, Eiseley keeps us grasping, even sometimes groping for, and thus constructing for ourselves an image of what he calls the beyond.

Animal encounters bring us to a strange border that is both an opportunity and a leap in the dark. In their presence, our existence no longer speaks for itself; we have to identify ourselves—to say who we are and where we stand. We may assert the dominion of our science or the omnipotence of our knowledge; we may try to leap over the borders that divide us and indulge in fantasy worlds like Dickey or Dillard; however, the question of how and where we conceive the demarcation between us and them persists. Is it an impassable limit that divides incommensurable realms or just a “multiple, overfolded border” that needs to be explored, as Derrida suggests?¹² Is it a closed border between territories or a zone of exchange? Is there a possibility of fusion or interchange between different orders or does the barrier itself bring out those differences? The texts that we have studied remain undecided but

¹² “La discussion mérite de commencer quand il s’agit de déterminer le nombre, la forme, le sens, la structure et l’épaisseur feuilletée de cette limite abyssale, de ces bordures, de cette frontière plurielle et surpléée” (Derrida, 52). The discussion can validly begin when it deals with deciding the number, form, meaning, structure and layered thickness of that abyssal limit, of those edges, of that multiple, overfolded border [our translation].

they hover round these questions, and their hesitation sketches out a maze of lines more convincing than all the divisions that we usually conceive.

What is clear is that our knowledge and our very cognitive makeup are disrupted and invalidated by these encounters. They cannot cope with the challenge that animals issue. We do not know how to interpret the forms of intuitive communion that engross and inhibit our power of comprehension except through reactions of escape or emotional empathy. These unsettling signs of perplexity are particularly pronounced in situations in which death is involved and which adumbrate under the divide between species a certain overlap between our respective conditions. Death is life's shadow companion that we refuse to recognize. Animals, on the contrary, seem to confront it with simplicity and draw their energy from it.

Born of denial, a feeling of malaise arises from the texts that we have examined, including Dillard's and Dickey's, in which momentary euphoria is like a paroxysmal form of anguish. Yet this feeling of malaise is not a handicap, a curse or even a challenge, it is the very tenor of human existence which has to find sustenance in a constant dilemma: either we answer the call that animals send from the other side of the barrier of species and we abandon our humanity, or, by cutting ourselves off from those fellow beings, we assert our human difference and we lose contact with the bedrock of existence. There is no escape from that existential malaise but we can confront it tangentially, for example through the kaleidoscopic visions that Eiseley offers in "The Judgment of Birds". Multiplying the various reflections in the mirror of experience permits a degree of insight, a vague feeling of release. Literature can help us avoid the disillusion of science, but it need not condemn us to another form of desperation, as Eiseley seems to fear:

[...] I abandon science disillusioned and turn to literature like the bull at the wall, realizing at last that the esoterics and magicians, if foolish, at least have known the other road was hopeless and that something more desperate had to be tried—but what? (Eiseley 1987 135).

As opposed to scientific knowledge, literature leaves room for Eiseley's "But what?" and its specific function is to keep the question open.

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