Specters of Animals

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Abstract

This essay takes its point of departure from the theme of "learning to live" that Jacques Derrida addresses both in the "Exordium" to *Specters of Marx* and in his last interview, *Learning to Live Finally*. For Derrida, I suggest, to learn to live means "to learn to live *with* ghosts," in response and with responsibility to the countless animal specters who, particularly over the past three hundred years, have suffered and continue to suffer and die under the Western tradition's man/animal, mind/body, self/other, life/death oppositional logic. Learning to live comes to us as an injunction to inherit the Western tradition in a way other than its binary, oppositional terms. The essay explores Derrida's contention that "to learn to live with ghosts"—whether they are already dead or not yet born—means to learn to live otherwise, more justly, *with animals*.

This special issue of *Frame* asks what the implications might be—for such fields as literary studies, cultural studies, philosophy, and aesthetics—of putting human-animal relations at the centre of enquiry. This question turns us toward the future, what Jacques Derrida might call the "future-to-come," at a time, during an "epoch," of extinction that has been labelled the Anthropocene. Turned toward the future, the question whether nature, its biodiversity diminishing daily, might yet be saved from humans, could be posed as the question of "learning to live." In his "Exordium" to *Specters of Marx*, Derrida suggests that if learning to live "remains to be done, it can happen only between life and death" (xviii). I take this to mean at least three things: first, that the time of learning to live is not the contemporaneity with itself of the living present, not the time of presence-to-self that has dominated the discourses of modernity since the seventeenth century, but as I suggest in the first section of this essay, something more *uncanny* than that. Second, as I discuss in the next section of the essay, again following Derrida, that since learning to live involves inheritance of a tradition that is never gathered together or one with itself—haunting, in this sense, is historical—the uncanny involves learning to live with ghosts. Third, the "between life and death" to which Derrida refers in *Specters* cannot be broached from within a logocentric, oppositional life/death (mind/body, man/animal, man/woman) logic—a matter I take up in the essay's conclusion as one that bears centrally on human/animal relations. By way of approaching these three "learning to live" imperatives, this essay addresses the necessity of moving human-animal relations to the centre of critical enquiry.

Uncanny

Why Look at Animals? This question titles the opening chapter of art critic and historian John Berger's *About Looking*. In this chapter, Berger points out that at one time, well before Western Europe and North America had consolidated its modern oppositional, colonizing, and capitalist paradigm, humans and animals existed "with" each other in mutual relations of dependency; and, as the Lascaux cave paintings suggest, animals illuminated the human imagination as messengers, figures

of wonder, proximity, and promise. With the 17th century came a decisive theoretical break enabled by René Descartes's mind/body dualism and its reduction of "the animal" to a soulless-mindless *bête-machine*. By the 19th century, Berger suggests, Cartesian dualism had peaked as a meta-text for modern Western philosophical-scientific-political-capitalist culture, with the result that, "in the last two centuries, animals have gradually *disappeared*. Today we live without them. And in this new solitude, anthropomorphism makes us doubly uneasy" (9; my italics). Anthropomorphism remains resolutely in place today: it is all-too familiar even in so-called non-speciesist ethics, where the standard of moral worth, dictated by the ethicist himself, is the "mentally normal rational human" (historically male).[1] And yet, as Berger remarks, in our "new solitude" without animals, anthropomorphism makes us uneasy. Anthropomorphism, we might say, is *uncanny*.

In his incomparable book-length study, *The Uncanny*, Nicholas Royle refers to the uncanny as "a peculiar comingling of the familiar and unfamiliar," the uncanny as taking "the form of something familiar unexpectedly arising in a strange and unfamiliar context, or of something strange and unfamiliar arising in a familiar context" (1). In what Berger calls our "new solitude," my mere sighting, the other day, of a black-and-white dog sniffing about in an unfenced yard across the street, was an uncanny experience. For a dog can no longer roam alone, unleashed and unattended. Whose dog is that? Maybe the dog is lost! Perhaps I should run over and save the dog before s/he is apprehended by the dog police. As familiar as a dog might be to me—I grew up with dogs and have always had two of my own—it is altogether strange to see a dog moving freely in my city, strange and unsettling. The uncanny entails a critical disturbance of the proper, Royle reminds us, of the very idea of

1 See, for example, Peter Singer's *Animal Liberation* and Tom Regan's *The Case for Animal Rights*. Singer advances a "non-speciesist" version of utilitarian ethics, while Tom Regan is the proponent of a non-speciesist "rights" approach. For both of these ethical thinkers, however, the standard of moral worth—the question of "who" counts and so is included in either the utilitarian or rights calculation—is simply anthropocentric. For Singer, who takes "freedom from suffering" to be the "good" that is desired by all moral subjects, only those with the mental capacity of a normal adult human (male) have the "capacity" to suffer. For Regan, rights are the adversarial possessions of "subjects-of-a-life," that is, of mentally "normal" mammals of a year of age or more.

personal or private property: in this sense, dogs themselves are uncanny. But my example is prosaic. Allow me then to cite a more powerful and beautiful (at once beautiful and frightening) instance of the uncanny. Royle notes that the uncanny comes above all "in the uncertainties of silence, solitude and darkness" (2). In the opening pages of *The Animal Side*, Jean-Christophe Bailly describes his experience of driving alone at night through a landscape that is familiar to him, but that, because it is night, betrays "the soft but deep growl of something unknown. It is as if one were skidding over the surface of a world transformed, a world filled with terror, frightened movements, silent gaps" (1). Suddenly, a phantom, a deer, bursts forth out of the undergrowth, rushing ahead of Bailly's car down the road, until it plunges into the darkness and disappears. In "nothing but this instant, fleeting and yet so ordinary," the strangeness of the animal world:

> had declared itself anew, as if I had actually been allowed for an instant to see something from which as a human being I shall forever be excluded, either the nameless, purposeless space in which animals freely make their way, or the other way of being in the world that so many thinkers through the ages have turned into a background against which to highlight the supremacy of humankind—whereas it has always seemed to me that this strangeness ought to be considered on its own terms, as a different posture, a different impetus, and quite simply a different modality of being (2).

In his (1919) essay, "The Uncanny (*Das Unheimliche*)," after undertaking an etymological survey of his title term, Sigmund Freud points out that "among its different shades of meaning the word '*heimlich*' exhibits one which is identical with its opposite, '*unheimlich*.' What is *heimlich* thus comes to be *unheimlich*" (224). He goes on to conclude that *heimlich* is thus "a word the meaning of which develops in the direction of ambivalence, until it finally coincides with its opposite, *unheimlich*. *Unheimlich* is in some way or other a sub-species of *heimlich*" (226). Might we say, then,

that animals, once *heimlich*—familiar, friendly, intimate, companionable, providing "the enjoyment of quiet content, etc., arousing a sense of agreeable restfulness and security" (222)—have now come to be *unheimlich*? Indeed, Freud's etymological search does lead him to animals as an example of the meaning of *heimlich*, that is, "belonging to the house, not strange, familiar" (222). And although this reference to the house and hearth implies domestic "pets," Freud submits that both "tame" and "wild" animals can "become quite *heimlich*," and can exist, as John Berger suggests they once did, in familiar and mutual relations with humans. Berger contends that such animals have disappeared, beings once *heimlich*, attendants of old and long familiar, have become altogether unknown to us, *unheimlich* or strange. For, as I suggest in my example above, the once-familiar sight of an unleashed and unattended dog wandering about in an urban neighborhood has now become uncanny.

In the age of the Anthropocene, humans are only slowly, belatedly, beginning to acknowledge that animal species are daily disappearing, and at an alarming rate. Species extinction owes in part to human encroachment upon once "wild" habitats, so much so that "development at all costs" has blurred the distinction between "wild" and "captive" animals. "The plight of animals worldwide has never been more serious than it is today," Jennifer Wolch and Jody Emel write in their Preface to *Animal Geographies: Place, Politics, and Identity in the Nature-Culture Borderlands* (xi). They argue that this reality is obscured by the progressive elimination of animals from everyday human experience. In an effort to bring disappearing animals back into everyday human experience—to render them *heimlich* or familiar once again, and in the process, to abet the threat of extinction—Wolch, an urban planner, uses the term zoöpolis to designate a reintegrated, non-speciesist city that might be designed to curb "the contradictory and colonizing environmental politics of the West as practiced both in the West itself and as inflicted on other parts of the world" (124). Along with encroachment and population growth, deforestation (especially tropical deforestation) contributes significantly to habitat loss and species disappearance. In her publications and public presentations, Jane Goodall, for one, continues to document the disappearance of African ape habitats consequent upon the felling of forests

by loggers and commercial hunters. In *Hope for Animals and Their World*, Goodall notes that right across Africa, the bushmeat trade has had devastating consequences for African ape populations. In response to this, Goodall has travelled the world for decades, sharing with countless numbers of people her knowledge of great apes and her ongoing interactions with them, effectively bringing these forest-dwellers out of the *unheimlich* realm of the strange and unfamiliar, and promoting ideals of human-animal commonality and our common good.

John Berger's observation that animals have disappeared is applicable not only to ongoing species extinction, but also to our incapacity to see animals as, he suggests, humans once did. In a striking and uncanny way, industrial or "factory" farming demonstrates the latter point. One of the most destructive developments of our time, industrialized farming leads invariably to pollution of ground water, rivers and streams, and with its enormous output of methane, to global warming. Over a very short period of time, family farms, once a feature of the North American landscape, have all-but vanished. We no longer see cows grazing in open pastures; livestock barns are gone or falling over; and chickens no longer run free. By and large, the once-familiar family farm has been overtaken by these massive high-density, fast-track industrial operations that confine animals out of sight, behind closed factory walls and doors. With the exception of beef cattle (who are allowed a short grazing time outdoors, after which they are crowded into filthy feedlots to stand, without shelter from extreme heat or cold, in a mix of mud and manure, and fed an unhealthy but high-calorie diet that will bring them quickly to slaughter weight), factory farmed animals never see the light of day, at least not until, if they survive to "finish" weight, they are pushed and prodded into over-crowded transport trucks headed for slaughter—a journey that entails the risk of freezing, trampling or suffocation. We do not see the cruelty to which animals are subjected behind closed factory farm walls, and that is the plan. Consumers first view the industry's "products" only when they are packaged and displayed for sale. No cameras are in place in these huge and darkened buildings where animals are reduced to products for profit. And yet, as Royle observes, the uncanny comes about with "the apprehension, how-

ever fleeting, of something that should have remained secret and hidden but has come to light" (2). It follows that reading Gail Eisnitz's book, *Slaughterhouse*, is an uncanny experience, at once disturbing and frightening, a glimpse of something we must surely have known but preferred to leave in the dark. It is not only the enforced violations, the mutilation and skinning of live, screaming animals as they are processed down the kill line; even more than this, the uncanny emerges in Eisnitz's description of the concerted effort made by American media and network television to withhold her documentary from the viewing public, lest what should remain secret be brought to light.

The uncanny, Royle notes, is double, and as such, it haunts Enlightenment reason (21-22). For the uncanny arises from the awareness—often dismissed but lingering nonetheless—that the self is not simply the *cogito ergo sum* that, since the 17th century, modernity has taken it to be, not simply conscious rationality, but also and perhaps more significantly, *unconscious*. As Freud acknowledges in his essay on "The Unconscious," although humans "are not constitutionally inclined" to qualify the certitude and mastery that comes with equating the mind with conscious reason—as, I might note, today's definition of "personhood" clearly does—psychoanalysis suggests that consciousness includes only a small portion of psychic life (167). It is no wonder that modern rationalists have paid little heed to Freud, for his contention is that unconscious processes "which run directly counter to the attributes of consciousness" provide grounds "for modifying our inference about ourselves" (168). Centrally at issue here is the man/animal opposition that Freud, by the way, did not accept but called into serious question. My suggestion is that the question of human-animal relations will be meaningfully addressed only when the man/animal opposition is let go. Countless, nameless, animals have paid the price of modernity's all-too-shallow logocentric reason, its phantasm of self-presence and its mandate to achieve all-encompassing power and control.

Haunting

In *Specters of Marx*, citing Hamlet and appealing to Marx's plural "specters," Derrida refers to our time as "out of joint," as "a disjoined or disadjusted now" (3). Surely, as I suggest above, these words are applicable in many ways to current human-animal relations. For this reason, it is all-important to consider the matter of inheriting tradition, particularly the modern Western tradition that has positioned "the animal" on the underside of a binary, oppositional divide. The man/animal binary is central to the oppositional thinking we inherit from Western modernity. This man/animal opposition is dependent in turn on a mind/body dualism, famously theorized by René Descartes in his *Discourse on the Method* as the division between non-material reason *(res cogito)* and animal embodiment (*res extensa*). Yet, as Derrida points out, in part with reference to Marx's plural specters, since every tradition is heterogeneous, the work of inheritance is never a matter of "gathering together" or of reducing a tradition's multiplicity (3-4). "An inheritance is never gathered together, it is never one with itself" (16), which means that an heir of tradition must discriminate, "filter, sift, criticize, one must sort out several different possibilities" that inhere in a tradition at any given moment (16)—including the moment that has been labelled Cartesian.[2] Derrida takes up the same point in a "Positions" interview, where he characterizes "deconstruction" as "dual" or "two handed," involving *both* overturning violent hierarchical dualisms, preeminently the man/animal opposition, *and* at the same time, operating on a terrain that casts human-animal relations otherwise (41-42).[3] By the same token, inheritance entails a responsibility to *embody* the self, not to repeat the

[2] For example, in "The Ethics of Animal Experimentation in Seventeenth-Century England," Anita Guerrini points out that not all students and scientists were persuaded, as was William Harvey, by the Cartesian argument that animals are simply machines, but were convinced, rather, that during vivisection, animals show emotion and feel real pain. In other words, even during the early years of modernity, at least some thinkers attempted to bring animal-human relations to the center of moral enquiry.

[3] Derrida explains in "Positions" that the phase of overturning binary oppositions is necessary because "in a classical philosophical opposition we are not dealing with the peaceful coexistence of a vis-à-vis, but rather with a violent hierarchy. One of the two terms governs the other (axiologically, logically, etc.) or has the upper hand. To deconstruct the opposition, first of all, is to overturn the hierarchy at a given moment. To overlook this phase of overturning is to forget the conflictual and subordinating structure of opposition" (41).

Cartesian-rationalist mind/body opposition. Derrida's use of the term "specters" is doubly relevant to this point. For the "specter," he explains in *Specters of Marx*, is not a disembodied mind or spirit, but rather "a paradoxical incorporation, the becoming-body, a certain phenomenal and carnal form of the spirit" (6). The spirit and specter are not the same thing in that the specter, "this non-object, this non-present present, the being-there of an absent or departed one no longer belongs to knowledge" (6). We might say that specters of animals who have perished by human hands interrupt specularity and the linear time of self-presence. Animal specters *haunt* the modern Western man/animal regime and its discourse of mastery, perhaps especially during the present age of the Anthropocene, when man's oppositional logic and linear march to full control has come to threaten the very survival of the planet. In Derrida's words, the specter "de-synchronizes, it recalls us to anachrony" (6-7).

How, more precisely, might we relate these passages on the specter to Derrida's, and indeed our own, inheritance of Western modernity's pervasive man/animal opposition? Two points strike me as particularly relevant. For one thing, as Derrida reminds us, we *must* inherit tradition. We cannot simply wipe the slate clean as Descartes attempted to do by rejecting the scholastic-Aristotelian tradition in which he was schooled. Rather, in Derrida's words from *Specters of Marx*, "the *being* of what we are *is* first of all inheritance, whether we like it or know it or not" (54). Thus, while we might prefer to leave the man/animal opposition in the dark, we cannot responsibly inherit the modern Western tradition by ignoring its oppositional logic and the violence against animals to which this opposition has led. Everyone knows of modernity's reduction of animals to objects for manipulation and experimentation, Derrida argues in *The Animal That Therefore I Am*. Everyone knows of the acceleration and intensification of violence against animals, "the *unprecedented* proportions" of the subjection of animals that has occurred over the course of the past two centuries in particular, where:

> traditional forms of treatment of the animal have been turned upside down by the joint developments of zoological, ethological, biological, and genetic forms of *knowledge*, which

> remain inseparable from *techniques* of intervention *into* their object, from the transformation of the actual object, and from the milieu and world of the object, namely the living animal. This has occurred by means of farming and regimentalization at a demographic level unknown in the past, by means of genetic experimentation, the industrialization of what can be called the production for consumption of animal meat, artificial insemination on a massive scale, more and more audacious manipulations of the genome, the reduction of the animal not only to production and overactive reproduction (hormones, genetic crossbreeding, cloning, etc.) of meat for consumption, but also of all sorts of other end products, and all of that in the service of a certain being and the putative human well-being of man (25).

Rather than ignoring this information, learning to live with ghosts requires heirs of the Western tradition to bring human-animal relations to the forefront of their critical enquiries. Indeed, the question of animals is not one question among others, Derrida suggests in "Violence Against Animals," a dialogue with Elisabeth Roudinesco published in *For What Tomorrow*. This decisive question "represents the limit upon which all the great questions are formed and determined" (62-63).

As a second point, "learning to live" comes to the heir as an injunction and a responsibility to inherit differences without opposition; it implies a mode of thinking knowledge otherwise than through a hierarchical discourse of mastery. Today, especially, scholars-as-heirs are enjoined to recognize, make room for, even foreground, differences, rather than some anthropocentric ideal of sameness. This mandate includes recognition of the incalculable differences that pertain between individual animals and animal species. As Derrida points out in *The Animal That Therefore I Am*—a book title that plays on Descartes's "I Think therefore I Am"—there is no such thing as "the animal." Widely used, "the animal" is a term "that men have given themselves the right to give," and this "in order to corral a large number of living beings within a single concept" (32). All of the major thinkers of the Western tra-

dition, "from Aristotle to Lacan, and including Descartes, Kant, Heidegger, and Levinas," all of them say the same thing, that "the animal is deprived of language. Or, more precisely, of response" (32), whereas, Derrida argues, it is man who has demonstrated his incapacity, or unwillingness, to respond, and be responsible, to animals.

In the second volume of the last seminar he gave before his death, published in English as *The Beast & the Sovereign* Volume II, Derrida considers the three theses that Martin Heidegger proffers in his 1929 seminar, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: World, Finitude, Solitude*. Heidegger formulates his theses this way: "1) the stone (material object) is *worldless*; 2) the animal is *poor in world*; 3) man is *world-forming*" (177). Here, the distinction between man and animal concerns what Heidegger refers to as "attunement" or "being attuned" to the essence, the "as such," of things or of life in general, in particular, attunement to what he calls "world." Obviously, Heidegger attributes fundamental *attunement* to himself when he declares the *essence* of "the animal" to be an incapacity to access the *as such* of life and world. In his well-known example of the lizard who has climbed up on a rock to bathe in the sun, but who cannot access essences, the *as such* of rock or the *as such* of the sun, Heidegger attributes animal poverty or incapacity to its condition of being "stunned," stupefied, or benumbed (*Benommenheit*). Unlike man, Heidegger maintains, the animal—and he insists that this term includes all animals, every animal, be it a bee, a frog, a chaffinch, and so on—is poor, that is *deprived* in its relation to world (193-95). In *The Beast & the Sovereign* Volume II, Derrida inherits Heidegger's use of the nefarious term "the animal" by way of offering three theses of his own. We might bear these theses in mind in our efforts to bring human-animal relations to the center of critical enquiry:

> 1. Incontestably, animals and humans inhabit the same world, the same objective world even if they do not have the same experience of the objectivity of the object. 2. Incontestably, animals and humans do not inhabit the same world, for the human world will never be purely and simply identical to the world of animals. 3. In spite of this identity

> and this difference, neither animals of different species, nor humans of different cultures, nor any animal or human individual inhabit the same world as another, however close and similar these living individuals may be [. . .] There is no world, there are only islands (8-9).

Derrida remarks of the last line of the above citation that it suggests "one of the thousand directions" in which he would be tempted to interpret Paul Celan's "*Die Welt ist fort, ich muss dich tragen*" ("The world is gone, or far away, and now I must carry or bear you") (9). In "Rams: Uninterrupted Dialogue—Between Two Infinities, the Poem," a public lecture Derrida delivered in memory of Hans-Georg Gadamer on February 5, 2003, discussing Celan's line at length, he relates the line both to human-animal relations and to Heidegger's designation of "the animal" as poor in world. Drawing all-too briefly from Derrida's rich reflections on the Celan line in "Rams," I might note his contention that "to carry" does not mean to take possession of the other or to include the other (human or animal) in one's own egological consciousness; it means, rather, to "*bear oneself toward* [se porter vers] the infinite inappropriability of the other" (161). If this were the meaning of Celan's *fort*—that *the* world Heidegger posits is gone—then we might begin our reading of Derrida's reading of both Heidegger and Celan "by recalling how much we need the other and how much we still need him, need to carry him, to be carried by him, there where he speaks, in us before us" (163).

Life death

In the above two sections of this essay, I suggest that moving the question of human-animal relations to the center of enquiry might well require a keener awareness of the ways in which binary oppositions structure our thinking, writing, and teaching. In the section of the essay on the uncanny, I argue that in today's world animals have largely *disappeared*, to use Berger's word, with which I refer not only to the alarming and escalating rate of species extinction, but also to the removal of animals to behind factory or laboratory walls where they are used, cruelly

exploited, as experimental objects or products for production and profit. Once familiar and close to us, animals have become *unheimlich*. In the second section of the essay, I argue that this state of affairs requires renewed efforts to inherit the West's dualistic man/animal, mind/body tradition in ways that both highlight the violence each opposition inscribes, and cast this binary logic otherwise. To conclude the essay, I comment briefly in what follows on the life/death opposition that we also inherit from the Western tradition: a thinking of life first, and then death as what follows it; and an association of life with the essentially rational (historically male) subject whose reason has been interpreted as a mandate to seize power and control over the animal and natural world. This opposition, in company with those I discuss in the above two sections, invariably removes "the animal" to the outside, all-too-often the underside, of the life/death binary.

During the 1975-76 academic year, Derrida delivered a seminar titled *La vie la mort* at the Paris École Normale Supérieure. The seminar brings the question of inheritance to the fore, with particular reference to oppositional ways of thinking life. In the first of several sessions of the seminar, Derrida undertakes a critical reading of the Nobel Prize winning molecular biologist and geneticist François Jacob's *La Logique du Vivant*. Derrida's engagement with genetics—its treatment of DNA as a logocentric text, and as inseparable from that, its theory of inheritance as the communication of a message cast in oppositional terms—is quite unique in his work, particularly in that in the seminar he brings Jacob's logocentric account of genetic inheritance together with the work of Heidegger, Nietzsche, and especially, Freud. In the course of his meticulous reading of *La Logique du Vivant*, Derrida foregrounds the ways in which Jacob relegates the animal to a stage of evolution in which genetic inheritance is blind and subject entirely to chance, without any prospect of control. All of the West's familiar binaries feature prominently in Jacob's text, including and perhaps especially, in those sections of *La Logique* that deal with the uniqueness of the human, the upright human, whose arrival at the "cerebral" stage of evolution he equates with the power to assume eugenic control over prized animal species and prized human specimens (politicians and beauty queens are two of his exam-

ples). Reading Freud's "athetic" *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* alongside Jacob's *La Logique du Vivant*, Derrida performs in *La vie la mort* what I would call a radical and necessary work of inheritance that is pertinent to the "learning to live" imperatives that interest me in this paper. Indeed, Derrida's "two-handed" reading-writing of the relation between the terms "life" and "death" in the 1975-76 seminar performs a work of inheriting difference without opposition. The seminar text, soon to be published in both French and English, suggests that the task of bringing human-animal relations to the center of enquiry belongs to scientists as well as so-called humanists, poets as well as philosophers, religionists, political and social theorists, literary critics and psychoanalysts alike.

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Biography

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