

Incoherent Beasts:
Victorian Literature and the Problem of Species

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ABSTRACT

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This dissertation argues that the destabilization of species categories over the course of the nineteenth century generated vital new approaches to animal figuration in British poetry and prose. Taxonomized by the followers of Linnaeus and organized into moral hierarchies by popular zoology, animals entered nineteenth-century British culture as fixed types, differentiated by the hand of God and invested with allegorical significance. By the 1860s, evolutionary theory had dismantled the idea of an ordered, cleanly subdivided “animal kingdom,” leading to an attendant problem of meaning: How could animals work as figures—how could they signify in any coherent way—when their species identities were no longer stable? Examining works in a wide range of genres, I argue that the problem of species produced modes of figuration that grapple with—and in many ways, embrace—the increasing categorical and referential messiness of nonhuman creatures. My first chapter centers on dog poems by Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Michael Field, in which tropes of muteness express the category-crossings of dogs and the erotic ambiguities of the human-pet relationship. Chapter 2 looks at midcentury novels by Charles Dickens and Charlotte Brontë, arguing that the trope of metonymy—a key trope of both novels and pets—expresses the semantic wanderings of animals and their power to subvert the identities of humans. Chapter 3 examines two works of literary nonsense, Charles Kingsley’s *The Water-Babies* and Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, arguing that they invert and critique prior genres that contained and controlled the queerness of creaturely life—including, in Kingsley’s case, aquarium writing, which literally and figuratively domesticated

ocean ecologies in the Victorian imaginary. In my fourth and fifth chapters, I turn to Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* and H.G. Wells' *The Island of Doctor Moreau*, two late-nineteenth-century works that explore the destabilization of the *human* species while still fighting against the overwhelming irresistibility of both human exceptionalism and an anthropocentric, category-based worldview. Throughout the dissertation, I argue that these representational approaches achieve three major effects that represent a break from the more indexical, allegorical forms of animal figuration that were standard when the century began. Rather than reducing animals to static types, they foreground the alterity and queerness of individual creatures. At the same time, they challenge the very idea of individuality as such, depicting creatures—including the human—tangled in irreducible webs of ecological enmeshment. Most of all, they call into question their own ability to translate the creaturely world into language, destabilizing the Adamic relationship between names and things and allowing animals to mean in ways that subvert the agency of humans. By figuring animals differently, these texts invite us to see the many compelling possibilities—ontological, relational, ethical—in a world unstructured by the taxonomical gaze.

Table of Contents

Introduction: Species Trouble.....	1
Chapter 1: “You See This Dog”: Muteness and Misapprehension in Victorian Dog Poetry	51
Chapter 2: To Err is Canine: The Zoopoetics of Metonymy in <i>Oliver Twist</i> and <i>Shirley</i>	107
Chapter 3: Nonsense Animals: Species at Play in <i>The Water-Babies</i> and <i>Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland</i>	176
Chapter 4: The Beast with the Broken Lance: Humanism and Posthumanism in Tennyson’s <i>Idylls of the King</i>	248
Chapter 5: Insensible Gradations: Perspectival Plasticity in <i>The Island of Doctor Moreau</i>	284
Bibliography	322

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This dissertation is technically older than our son, Raymond Margini, who came into the world only recently. But already he seems to have much more interesting things to say. I want to close by thanking him, too, for enriching our lives beyond measure, and showing us how wonderful it is to simply be.

Introduction: Species Trouble

The root function of language is to control the universe by describing it.

- James Baldwin, "Stranger in the Village"

After describing a set of forms, as distinct species, tearing up my M.S., & then making them one again (which has happened to me) I have gnashed my teeth, cursed species, & asked what sin I had committed to be so punished.

- Charles Darwin to Joseph Hooker, September 25, 1853

Like many works of nonsense literature, Edward Lear's unfinished poem "The Scroobious Pip" contains a menagerie of boisterous, unruly, argumentative animals. But they are not locked in a circuitous debate, or obsessed with pointless riddles. Instead, they have launched an inquisition. Forming alliances across species lines, they team up to answer an urgent question: what kind of being is the Scroobious Pip? "All the beasts in the world"—"the cat and the dog and the kangaroo / The sheep and the cow and the guineapig too"—gather around the Pip, and deputize the wise Fox to get an answer:

At last they said to the Fox—'By far,
You're the wisest beast! You know you are!
Go close to the Scroobious Pip and say,
Tell us all about yourself we pray—
For as yet we can't make out in the least
If you're Fish or Insect, or Bird or Beast.'
The Scroobious Pip looked vaguely round
And sang these words with a rumbling sound—
 Chippety Flip; Flippetty Chip;—
My only name is the Scroobious Pip.

Why such anxiety? The poem suggests that their insecurity stems from a sense of security about themselves. All the animals besides the Pip possess species identities that are stable. They appear as clearly delineated types with signature sounds, recalling the creatures that appear in abecedaries and nursery rhymes. They possess intrinsic attributes that recall the moral menagerie of fables: the fox is intelligent; the lion is kingly; the donkey is obnoxious. Taken together, they form a pleasingly apprehensible and organized picture of totality: "all the beasts in the world."

The Pip, however, confounds their order. Its name has the feel of a common noun—even a Linnaean binomial, specifying its membership within a wider genus (Pips) and a smaller species (Scroobious). Yet the Scroobious Pip is both vexingly interstitial and defiantly individual. It possesses a singularity that defies all categories, even all language—except, perhaps, its own.

Like “The Scroobious Pip,” Victorian literature is plagued by anxieties about categories and kind. At the center of *In Memoriam*, Tennyson’s capricious figure of Nature—“Nature, red in tooth and claw”—surveys a cliff layered with fossils and cries, “A thousand types are gone: / I care for nothing, all shall go” (LVI.3-4). The scene is frightful in part because it portends the eventual extinction of the human “type,” but also because it suggests Nature’s lack of concern for the integrity of “types” in general. The poem presents a primordial world populated by “dragons of the prime, / That tare each other in their slime,” a soup of monstrous vagueness organizable only using a problematic folk taxon (“dragons”). An image of indistinguishable creatures appears again in the opening scene of *Bleak House* (1855), which describes a Megalosaurus stomping across London alongside “dogs, indistinguishable in mire” (1); it appears yet again in post-Darwinian novels like Olive Schreiner’s *The Story of an African Farm* (1883), where Lyndall, the outspoken protagonist, wonders aloud: “Where was man in the time of the dicynodont, and when hoary monsters wallowed in the mud?” (184). Where was man? The question transforms inevitably into the question “What *is* man?”—and into the possibility that the human is not a creature of ontological exception but muddily consubstantial with everything else: “We are sparks, we are shadows, we are pollen, which the next wind will carry away. We are dying already; it is all a dream” (184).

I begin with “The Scroobious Pip,” however, not only because it is a piece of imaginative writing that expresses the problem of species, meditating on the inadequacy of a familiar table of

kinds, but also because it shows us how imaginative writing can try to generate, or at least entertain, a species-less alternative. Over the course of the poem, we never get an answer to the question of what the Scroobious Pip actually is; like a strange prophet, it arrives on the quasi-Biblical scene and continues babbling inscrutably about itself. In the last stanza, however, the other animals eventually come around to accepting its irreconcilability with categories, dancing in a circle and adding their voices to its song: “Its only name is the Scroobious Pip.” This might seem like a nonsensical solution to a nonsensical problem, but it is neither: the idea that the natural world was only composed of individuals, that species categories crudely (if necessarily) bowdlerized the Book of Nature, was a legitimate and growing view among natural scientists throughout the century. In the eighteenth century, Lord Louis Leclerc, the Comte de Buffon, insisted in his sprawling *Histoire Naturelle* that “in reality individuals alone exist in nature” (I.38). A cohort of later post-Darwinian thinkers would subscribe to similar views, envisioning the world of animals as a web of life, always in flux, ceaselessly and imperceptibly generating new hybrids that, like the Pip, necessitate different ways of translating creaturely form into language. The poem entertains just such a possibility within its nonsense-realm: inside its space of imaginative play and unreality, a new way of categorizing (or not categorizing) animals displaces the old, creaky regime of “Fish or Insect, or Bird or Beast.” This new way entails both a willingness to abandon species and a willingness to admit that the Pip itself has language; it is not mute, even if it cannot be understood. Asking what it is, which is now an ontological question rather than a taxonomical one, requires entering into a choric relationship with its mode of self-expression. Of course, the poem is all-too-aware that such a reconfiguration, such an abandonment of the dominion of Adam and the order of the Ark, might be a step too far. It is, after all, just nonsense.

John Berger darkly begins his classic 1980 essay “Why Look at Animals?” with the assertion that “the nineteenth century, in Western Europe and North America, saw the beginning of a process, today being completed by 20th century corporate capitalism, by which every tradition which has previously mediated between man and nature was broken” (3). Many processes indeed transformed the lives of animals irrevocably in nineteenth-century Britain: industrialism mechanized them; urbanism marginalized them; experiments plasticized them; petkeeping, in a strange and tenuous way, humanized them. Perhaps the greatest upheaval of all, however, undergirding and complicating all the others, was that they were thrust into a condition of profound conceptual ambiguity. Due in part to a doctrine of species ‘fixism’ formulated by eighteenth-century taxonomists and practiced by their descendants, and due in part to the widespread popularization of amateur taxonomies, animals entered the popular imaginary of nineteenth century British culture as a grid of types. Each was immutable, molded by the hand of God in an original act of “special creation”; each was distinct from all the others; each was inscribed with allegorical significance.

Over the course of the century, however, evolutionary theory increasingly threatened to overturn the doctrine of species ‘fixism’ with an opposing view, transforming the creaturely world into an inchoate web of variations and transformations—“a teeming continuity of beings all communicating with one another, mingling with one another, and perhaps being transformed into one another,” as Foucault describes it in *The Order of Things*—rather than a grid of immutable forms (152). Especially after the publication of *On the Origin of Species* in 1859, the idea that biological types were constantly (if imperceptibly) changing gained broad intellectual currency, thereby destabilizing the integrity and veracity of the old Linnaean categories. Already in 1856, G.H. Lewes penned an article for *The Westminster Review* proclaiming in no uncertain

terms that “Species does not exist. It is an entity, an abstract idea, not a concrete fact. It is a fiction of the understanding, not an object existing in Nature” (“Hereditary Influence, Animal and Human” 76). Similar views were advanced by a whole cohort of Victorian evolutionists over the latter half of the century, including Charles Kingsley, Herbert Spencer, T.H. Huxley, and H.G. Wells. And yet, Lewes also recognized that “the very latest work on this subject” was still reproducing the doctrine of species fixity; scientists—and here he might have had in mind figures such as Louis Agassiz and Philip Henry Gosse—were still advancing fixist views, even after *On the Origin of Species* (76). Even in a dogmatically anti-species editorial, Lewes had to admit that thinking without species categories was deeply difficult, even if it was also deeply necessary.

In 1889, Joseph Jacobs, the editor of a new edition of *Aesop’s Fables*, asked a poignant question about his own genre: “Has [the Fable] a future as a mode of literary expression?” He was ostensibly talking about its irrelevance to the world of industrial modernity, reasoning that “the truths the Fable has to teach are too simple to correspond to the facts of our complex civilization; its rude *graffiti* of human nature cannot reproduce the subtle gradations of modern life” (xxi). But the phrase “subtle gradations” also calls to mind a key phrase in Darwin’s *Origin*: the “insensible gradations” between biological forms, “insensible” both in the sense that their differences cannot be perceived and in the sense that they shamelessly, even rebelliously, refuse to be “defined objects” (132). If the allegorical figures of old were in a state of peril, it was not just because they were no longer suited to a complex human world; it was also because they were no longer commensurate with the natural world. Jacobs’ preface suggests, too, that the problem of species—of “insensible gradations”—had subtle ways of slipping into domains beyond the natural sciences; like Dickens’ fog of “indistinguishable” dogs, it could spread

metonymically *into* the human world that Nature was expected to explain. The problem of species entailed not only a new problem of ontology—what *were* all these animals if they could not be separated neatly into kinds?—but also a new problem of meaning: how could animals work as figures if their identities were in flux? How could they work as archetypes, as allegories, if their archetypality was a figment of the imagination? What even is the human, if not a being separated from the rest of nature both by its own stable species category (*Homo sapiens*) and by the faculty of categorization itself?

Incoherent Beasts explores how Victorian poets and novelists responded to this category crisis, arguing that the problem of species generated innovative ways of representing and imagining the lives of nonhuman creatures—and the human. What happens to literary animals in the conceptual and historical space between typology and flux—in the space between species as fixed entities and animality as a boundless spectrum of becoming? This dissertation argues that Victorian authors found both difficulty and inspiration in that space. In many ways, the texts in this study register the enduring appeal of fixist thinking, as well as the enduring appeal of archetypal and allegorical ways of thinking: like “The Scroobious Pip,” they dramatize the loss of an Aesopian world, a Biblical world, in which animals (literally) make sense. But they also represent animals in ways that move beyond the logic of archetype and allegory, producing figurative structures that can account for interspecies entanglement, ecological agency, and the slippery boundaries between animals and humans. In the nineteenth century, I argue, the problem of species produced not just representational anxieties, but an expansion of expressive possibilities: a set of new ideas about what literary animal figures could do, and what—or rather, how—they could mean.

Not all the texts in this dissertation advance an evolutionary worldview, nor are they all in dialogue with biological discourses. They approach the problem of species through the formal mechanisms of extremely different genres: sentimental lyric; midcentury realism; nonsense; epic; science fiction. But their generic diversity is intended to highlight the shared project that they all have in common: formulating modes of literary figuration that trouble, rather than reinscribe, species distinctions; liberating animals from the prison of categories, allegories, and archetypes. Chapter 1 examines how the erotic dog poems of Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Michael Field work against the poetic discourse of canine type—a huge body of poetry and narrative devoted to establishing the ‘essence’ of dogs—seeking instead to express the categorical liminalities and erotic ambiguities of the human-pet relationship. Chapter 2 analyzes how the trope of animal metonymy supplants animal metaphor in midcentury novels by Charles Dickens and Charlotte Brontë, constructing dogs as figures of semantic itinerancy who can shape human identity without human consent. Chapter 3 turns to *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* and Charles Kingsley’s *The Water-Babies*, two midcentury works of children’s literature that I read against the highly domesticating and allegorizing discourse of 1850s aquarium writing: in both, the logic (or illogic) of nonsense creates a possibility space where animals—strange, transforming, epistemologically unruly animals—must be encountered anew, decoupled from meaning itself. Chapters 4 and 5 center on two late-Victorian texts that contemplate the dissolution (and the dissoluteness) of the human: Alfred Tennyson’s *Idylls of the King*, an anti-epic about Camelot’s fall into bestiality, and H.G. Wells’ *The Island of Doctor Moreau*, a scandalous early science-fiction novella about animals becoming human. Both texts try to imagine a world without species categories by imagining a world without human exceptionalism, a world in which there is no basis for human distinction. Both texts necessarily (and self-consciously) fail, dramatizing the

intractability of the categories they seek to destabilize, as well as the inescapability of anthropocentrism. In their divided form, however, they function as vivid synecdoches for the dividedness of these texts in general, which register—and sometimes even mourn—the loss of species while trying ceaselessly, restlessly, to imagine something new.

The aim of this dissertation is not to uncover a unitary anti-species aesthetic; instead, my aim is to show how Victorian authors, informed by the destabilization of species categories, produced a constellation of tropes, genres, and figurative structures that destabilize the fixity—or embrace the unfixity—of animal types. And yet, these admittedly disparate approaches to animal representation tend to produce strikingly similar effects. First of all, they individualize animals—which is to say, they represent animals not as interchangeable instantiations of a Platonic species essence, but as individual beings with heterogeneous forms, intentions, and ways of being in the world that demand to be regarded on their own terms. Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s Flush poems try to articulate the large gap *between* an idea of the Dog in general and the nature of “this dog” in particular (as “Flush or Faunus” also suggests through a pun in its title, which asks implicitly if Flush is to be regarded as a named individual or a member of the group fauna). The nonsense animals in Kingsley and Carroll demand to be encountered not as Aesopian moral teachers, but as personalities with their own idiosyncratic desires and modes of reasoning. The most abject yet productively challenging creature in *The Island of Doctor Moreau* is a grotesque “Thing” that can only be encountered as an individual because it is reducible to no category whatsoever. If, as Wells insisted in 1887, “*all being is unique,*” and “nothing is strictly like anything else,” these texts share a commitment to demonstrating that principle through animal figures and human-animal encounters: encounters that often center on a moment of surprise in which the specific animal diverges (behaviorally, morally, ontologically) from the nature of its type (“The

Rediscovery of the Unique” 23). In modeling these encounters, they also come close to modeling a post-Darwinian ethics *based on* individuals, rather than based on species. In his 1993 book *Created from Animals*, the philosopher James Rachels argues that the only ethical system that would be truly compatible with evolutionary theory is a “moral individualism” that regards organisms on a case-by-case basis, according to their capacities rather than the species categories to which they happen to belong. What would it mean to adopt such an ethics? What forms of interspecies engagement—what forms of ethical behavior—would be enabled by a more individualizing, rather than typifying, epistemology? Each text in this study grapples with these questions in its own way.

At the same time, paradoxically, these texts also challenge the very idea of individuality, representing animals instead—including and especially the human—as beings of ontological interpenetration. In her essay “The Body We Care For,” the philosopher and ethologist Vinciane Despret outlines a concept she calls “anthropo-zoo-genesis”: a dynamic in certain relationships between humans and domesticated animals in which each constructs the other in an ongoing process of co-creation and “becoming together” (122). The texts in this study construct similar paradigms: figurations in which identity—being itself—is a matter of interspecies interdependency rather than mutual difference and self-enclosure. Since novels (especially Victorian novels) are adept at charting relational networks, the novels I analyze in Chapter 2, Dickens’ *Oliver Twist* and Brontë’s *Shirley*, illustrate this dynamic most clearly: both texts describe human-dog relationships in which the identity of the human is not “sovereign” (a key term in *Shirley*), not constructed *against* the dog, but something that emerges in and through canine participation. The dog poems in Chapter 1 strive to represent models of identity-in-relationship as well: *Whym Chow*, most prominently, compares the relationship between the two

poets and their dead dog to the Holy Trinity, an image predicated on the idea of irreducible consubstantiality. But even less relational texts like *Idylls* and *Moreau* work to challenge the self-distinction of the human by presenting their human characters as interspecies assemblages, always incorporating—and dependent on—more-than-human others. In animal studies circles, literary figuration has earned a reputation for upholding anthropocentrism and human exceptionalism, since it replaces the ‘real’ animal with an imaginary one intended to embody some sort of human quality.¹ The texts in this study invite us to see figuration in a new light: as something that can express more ecological, networked ways of being in the world; as something that can construct an animal imaginary based in enmeshments rather than distinctions.

The texts in this study also attempt to construct something like a species-less perspective, while acknowledging the difficulty of doing so. Many of them open up representational or conceptual spaces in which the vagaries of animal identity become newly visible: for just one moment, Barrett Browning’s sonnet “Flush or Faunus” shows dog and human blurred together; Kingsley’s *The Water-Babies* and Carroll’s *Alice* books create otherworlds in which both the categories and the rules of engagement that usually govern human-nonhuman interactions cease to apply; *Moreau* takes place on a *Tempest*-like island where its protagonist eventually learns to adapt—both sensorily and conceptually—to the hybridities of the Beast Folk. All three, however, present their species-less worlds only in delimited, temporary ways, calling attention to the difficulty of maintaining a perspective that does not take animal categories—or the more fundamental human-animal distinction—for granted. The problem is often language itself: a human tendency to categorize, and allegorize, that these texts not only display but self-

¹ Susan McHugh discusses how “metaphoric and other aesthetics beholden to substitutive logics” function to “uphold human subject forms” in the essay “Literary Animal Agents,” a methodological call-to-arms for literary animal studies (489).

consciously reenact. At the turn or *volta* of “Flush or Faunus,” Barrett Browning ends up retreating from the sublime, chaotic moment of human-dog contact, choosing instead to distance herself by identifying Flush with the abstract figure of Pan. In one moment, the poem opens the door to a species-less dimension, rendering the communion of human and dog in breathless, broken, synesthetic language; in the next moment, capital-P Poetry itself—a more traditional, allegorical kind of figuration—slams it shut.

And yet, there is more at stake in these moments of linguistic or literary self-consciousness: what these texts do in common above all, I argue, is question language itself as a medium of apprehending and getting close to other creatures. Species fixism was as much a literary philosophy as a biological one; it was founded upon the belief that the nonhuman world could be revealed, organized, and expressed through the creation and manipulation of linguistic categories. These texts, by contrast, present human language not as a vehicle of Adamic revelation that can bring the creaturely world to light, but as a vehicle of misapprehension, domination, and estrangement. They call attention to their own artifice as translations of the animal world; they style themselves as windows onto it rather than unmediated expressions of it. At the same time, precisely through these expressions of linguistic skepticism and self-doubt—precisely through these attempts to destabilize the idea of the human as an Adamic namer—they present more capacious approaches to the relationship between animals and *meaning*, suggesting that it can be produced by animals themselves. “The Scroobious Pip” is only the first of many examples in this study where a poetics of creaturely plasticity becomes a poetics of creaturely expressivity—where, in other words, the animal’s displayed irreducibility to categories enables onlookers to listen, finally, to what it has to say about itself. Those onlookers are often characters, but they are also, just as often, the reader: by inviting us into a world unstructured by

the taxonomical gaze, these texts invite us into a world where animals can confront us wholly anew, without being shrouded in a veil of silence.

Three decades ago, Gillian Beer's *Darwin's Plots* changed the face of Victorian studies by exploring the interplay between Darwin's writings and nineteenth century narrative forms. Her point was that these forms and Darwin's theories were not just homologous but mutually informing: "What is remarkable about the mid- and late-nineteenth century is that instead of ignoring or rebutting attempts to set scientific writing and literature side by side," she writes, "both novelists and scientists were very much aware of the potentialities released by the congruities of their methods and ends" (84). Since Beer, critics in the field of Victorian studies have often analyzed the impact of evolutionary theory on literary genres (and vice versa), focusing mainly on superstructural features like timescale, plot, and perspective.² *Incoherent Beasts* aims to contribute to this scholarly conversation by further elucidating how literary forms can shape our conceptions of the web of life—including our ability to conceive it as a web of life in the first place.

But this study also diverges in two ways from previous criticism focused on the relationship between Victorian literature and evolutionary science. First, it focuses on a different kind of analytical object, inspired by the "animal turn" taken by various disciplines—including Victorian studies—in recent years: the individual animal figure. How did animal figures evolve across the period that most profoundly challenged the ontological boundaries of animals themselves? And how did these representations, in turn, enable different ways of thinking about

² George Levine's *Darwin and the Novelists* is the other classic example, but I am also thinking of more recent studies, such as Gowan Dawson's *Darwin, Literature, and Victorian Respectability*; the edited collection *Darwin, Tennyson, and their Readers*; and Jessica Straley's *Evolution and Imagination in Victorian Children's Literature* (2016), in which Straley shows how the recapitulation thesis—ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny—informs the structure of many works of mid- to late-Victorian children's literature.

what animals are, how they can be known, and the relationships between animals and humans? Second, *Incoherent Beasts* examines these figures against a backdrop much larger than the discourse of evolutionary theory: a broader epistemological tension between fixist and mutabilist ways of thinking, which was just as open to literary influence as Darwin himself.

This study proceeds from the premise that literary manifestations of classificatory thinking matter not only because classification impacts culture, but also because culture impacts classification. Cultural forms can transform and complicate the conceptual systems we use to understand the world—which is to say, both the world around us and our place in it. As Foucault reminds us in *The Order of Things*, classification always already creates an unreal, imaginative space—a *tabula*—in which unlike entities become strange bedfellows. That space is subject to change in relation to “the fundamental codes of a culture” and its forms of imaginative expression: *tabula* both generates and can be reshaped by *fabula* (xxii). Eighteenth- and early-nineteenth century natural history frequently used literary modes of figuration—genres; tropes; narrative structures—to lend solidity to the grid of animal archetypes. *Incoherent Beasts* examines figurations that try to do the opposite: representations that willfully resist the logic of creaturely iconicity, attempting to unfix the animal’s form and meaning. They are never completely successful, but they make the epistemological and ethical stakes of their efforts abundantly clear.

My project also proceeds from a somewhat more pessimistic premise: the idea that we have yet to achieve a truly post-Darwinian way of thinking. We have yet to truly regard the world as a web of life, constantly changing, rather than a grid of stable archetypes resting on the even more foundational human-animal distinction; our “habits of phrase,” observes Laurie Shannon, “still treat humans and animals as if they had sprung up on different planets by

different laws instead of having evolved together in one cosmos” (*The Accommodated Animal 2*). As Rachels observed over twenty-five years ago, we are even further away from achieving a truly post-Darwinian ethics. In *The Nick of Time*, Elizabeth Grosz asks: “What would a humanities, a knowledge of and for the human, look like if it placed the animal in its rightful place, not only before the human but also within and after the human?” (13). She observes accurately that such a humanities does not exist yet in any stable or widespread form; as the term “humanities” itself implies, philosophy and other areas of human self-inquiry “[have] yet to recompose [their] concepts of man, reason and consciousness to accommodate the Darwinian explosion that, according to Sigmund Freud, produced one of the three major assaults that science provided as antidote to man’s narcissism” (13). Why the delay? One of the central arguments of this dissertation is that figuration—in its ability not only to define animals but to position them with respect to the human—will always be an integral and easily misunderstood part of the problem. It is a problem of species, a problem of language. It is also a problem of tropes.

On the Origins of Fixism

The first scene of classification in the Western tradition occurs in Genesis, where Adam has no problem naming the animals under his “dominion”: his classifications forge a perfect indexicality between each name and the essence of the named. In Book VIII of *Paradise Lost*, Adam reflects upon this process: “I nam’d them, as they pass’d, and understood / Thir Nature, with such knowledg God endu’d / My sudden apprehension” (VIII.352-354). His names constitute not only impositions, but acts of complete and unmediated “apprehension”; each reflects a perfect knowledge of the “Nature” of its subject. But the example of Adam has always

been an unapproachable ideal. Species has been a problematic concept for thousands of years, vexing thinkers in the Western tradition at least since Plato tried to organize the world into a series of binary oppositions.³ For centuries, philosophers and scientists have debated the question of whether species are real, dividing into ‘realists’ who believe that they describe actual divisions in the world, and ‘nominalists’ who believe that they are mere conventions of speech. As John S. Wilkins points out in *Species: A History of the Idea*, Linnaeus was a species ‘realist’: he called himself a “Second Adam,” and clung sincerely to the belief that his classificatory categories could reveal the ontological differences between animate creatures. Species ‘nominalists,’ by contrast, have preferred to follow in the footsteps of John Locke, who in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* referred to species as “nothing else but an artifice of the understanding,” articulating a pre-Saussurean belief in the disjunction between signifier and signified (I.1.§9).⁴ Evolutionary biology today has long since moved past Linnaeus’ static and immutable grid of categories, but the debate over species itself has never rested. Scientists still divide into ‘realists’ and ‘nominalists’ of various stripes, and the question of what counts as a species—how and where to draw the line between indivisible and discrete units of biological life—remains such a live one that there are currently twenty-six operative species concepts in the biological sciences, each with its own dedicated adherents.⁵

³ In *The Sophist*, Plato addresses the problem of how to classify things by proposing the method of *diairesis* (i.e. division or dichotomy): essentially, a “Twenty Questions”-like process in which the classifier eventually isolates what is precisely distinct about the object by determining what it is not. Objects in this schema could be anything, not just animals: Plato’s example is the difficult-to-categorize art of angler fishing (Wilkins 14).

⁴ The Neo-Platonist Porphyry of Tyre was arguably the first Western philosopher to question the empirical reality of species categories—“whether they subsist or are posited in bare [acts of] understanding only” (Qtd. in Wilkins 31).

⁵ Wilkins provides a useful overview of the twenty-six modern species concepts in *Defining Species*, noting that the “Classical” or “Linnaean” species concept—which he calls “morphospecies,” since it is based in the taxonomist’s observation of consistent morphological distinction—is still alive and well in certain scientific circles, at least as a rough heuristic (197).

The realism vs. nominalism debate was alive and well in the Victorian period, but it was complicated immeasurably by the question of whether species change. Darwin himself was not a species nominalist per se; he wanted to believe in species categories. Yet he spent his entire career increasingly frustrated by his own inability to distinguish between species and “well-marked varieties” (42). In *On the Origin of Species*, he describes species identification as a quixotic endeavor, an attempt to impose meaning on a world of “differences” that “blend into each other by an insensible series”:

Certainly no clear line of demarcation has as yet been drawn between species and sub-species—that is, the forms which in the opinion of some naturalists come very near to, but do not quite arrive at, the rank of species: or, again, between sub-species and well-marked varieties, or between lesser varieties and individual differences. These differences blend into each other by an insensible series; and a series impresses the mind with the idea of an actual passage. (42)

The shocking part of Darwin’s theory of species was not just that it divided the world into “insensible gradations” rather than a grid of clearly demarcated types; it was that these gradations were mutable and temporalized.⁶ One could never arrive at stable species categories because new varieties were constantly, gradually emerging from the old. Everything was becoming something else.

The publication of *On the Origin of Species* was indisputably a seismic event in the long, complicated intellectual history of species thinking, as it was in Victorian cultural history more generally. More than anyone else, Darwin forced the scientific community and the Victorian

⁶ This distinction is important partly because pre-Linnaean (and even certain post-Linnaean) taxonomists who believed in the Great Chain of Being also tended to believe in subtle gradations between forms: one of the “planks” of the philosophy was that *natura non facit saltus* (“nature does not make leaps”) (Wilkins, *Species: A History* 52). But they did not believe that these subtly distinct forms could change over time.

public to reassess their species concepts. Since the mid-twentieth century, however, there has been a myth, arguably propagated by the influential evolutionary biologist Ernst Mayr, that Darwin single-handedly overturned a dogma of species fixity that had been the hegemonic way of thinking for thousands of years, stretching all the way back to Aristotle.⁷ Ron Amundson provides a useful summary of this story:

From ancient days, Western intellectuals had conceived of a stable and unchanging world that had been created by God in pretty much the condition it now exists. Beginning in the early seventeenth century, traditional beliefs were shaken by a series of challenges to the world's constancy and stability. ... Nevertheless, in the early nineteenth century, life itself was still somewhat trustworthy. The ancient stability of the world could still be seen, if nowhere else, in the constancy of species. ... Darwin's job was like that of Copernicus—the overthrow of an ancient belief in stability (*The Changing Role of the Embryo in Evolutionary Thought* 35).

As Amundson and others—especially Wilkins, who spends his entire book rebutting this “Received View”—point out, this myth is misleading for several reasons. First of all, Darwin himself was still something of a species realist; he just believed them to be temporary.⁸ Second, there were many theories of species mutability before Darwin, and there was also a long tradition of skepticism about the concept.⁹ Most importantly, though, fixism was not the perennial

⁷ In *Systematics and the Origin of Species* (1942), Mayr proposed a new species concept that is widely held by modern evolutionary biologists to this day: a species is a population that can breed exclusively with themselves. He advanced this definition of species partly by consolidating a narrative about the triumph of Darwinian population thinking over previous forms of “typological” thinking, which he glossed in neo-Platonic terms: “Typological thinking,” he wrote, “finds it easy to reconcile the observed variability of the individuals of a species with the dogma of the constancy of species because the variability does not affect the essence of the eidos which is absolute and constant” (12).

⁸ See David N. Stamos, *Darwin and the Nature of Species*.

⁹ As Wilkins notes, pre-Darwinian concepts of species mutability go all the way back to Epicurus (by way of Lucretius) (*Species* 26).

doctrine of taxonomists since time immemorial; rather, “it became widely accepted for the first time *both among naturalists and theologians* during the eighteenth century” (Amundson 35). It was a distinctly modern innovation, rooted in the thinking of figures like John Ray, Carl Linnaeus, and Georges Cuvier, and propagated well into the nineteenth century—even after Darwin—by successors such as Charles Lyell, Louis Agassiz, and Philip Henry Gosse. Darwin’s mutabilism made a splash not because fixism was the *old* way of looking at animals but because it was a very common and influential *contemporary* way.

Amundson and Wilkins do much to dismantle the “Received View,” but they end up raising another question in the process: if fixism originated in the eighteenth century, why did it come about? Where did this idea come from? What made it so attractive, to the point that it retained currency even after *On the Origin of Species*? Amundson makes the important point that it was a useful idea for its time and an empirically correct one; it would have only been possible to prove species fixism wrong “by considering time scales that are as far beyond the scope of eighteenth-century biology as the energies of a cyclotron are beyond the scope of the Bunsen burners of early chemical theory” (38).¹⁰ And yet, this argument does not explain the dogged fixism of someone like Cuvier, who did more than anyone to radically expand the timescale of biological inquiry by revealing extinct beasts of the prehistoric world—unless, of course, we permit the speculation that he arrived at fixism *because* his work forced him to peer into a vertiginous categorical abyss.

The more persuasive possibility is that fixism grew out of a certain kind of cultural, theological, and even literary terrain, intertwined with compatible theories and beliefs about the

¹⁰ Amundson argues further that we should give fixism credit for giving rise to the Linnaean system of classification and, by extension, evolutionary theory. His argument is dialectical: Darwin would not have theorized the origin of species without there being, already, a stable concept of species.

relationship between the natural world and language. In his 1903 essay “What is a Species?”, the evolutionary biologist E.B. Poulton addresses what had already been a common speculation: that fixism was Milton’s fault, originating in a passage from Book VII of *Paradise Lost*:

The Earth obey’d, and straight,
Op’ning her fertile womb, teem’d at a birth
Innumerable living creatures, perfect forms,
Limb’d and full grown. (VII.463-466)

Milton surely had some part in propagating the idea that animals were brought into being as “perfect forms” at the beginning of creation—as well as the idea that, as Book VIII depicts, the First Man had an equally perfect ability to describe them. As Poulton points out, though, it would be a little ridiculous to assume that a single poem—even a poem as influential as *Paradise Lost*—could give rise to an entire way of imagining the natural world. “I cannot help thinking,” he writes, “that the belief had even more to do with the spirit of the age which spoke, and spoke for all time, with Milton for its interpreter” (56). He identifies this “spirit” with “the Puritan movement, with its insistence on literal interpretation and verbal inspiration,” advancing the hypothesis that fixism was concomitant with a belief in linguistic immanence: a belief that words contained and could reveal the essences of things. He goes on to surmise that fixists were fixated on species precisely because species, too, could reveal the nature of the specified: “the naturalist whose genius sympathized most fully with the Linnaean conception would feel that he was admitted, like a seer of old, into the thoughts of the Maker of the Universe. His convictions as to species were to him more than the conclusions of the naturalist; they were a revelation” (57). Linnaeus called himself a “Second Adam” because he actually believed himself to be one.

The linguistics scholar Hans Aarsleff advances this view in “Language and Victorian Ideology,” arguing that fixism both emerged from and helped sustain a larger and more foundational “Adamicism” that took root in the seventeenth and eighteenth century: a belief not only that “the signifier (the word) and the signified (the idea or concept) are not separable,” as in the case of Adam’s names, but also that words were primary sources in the study of existence itself, making “philology ... another word for philosophy” (365). Locke mounted a disturbing challenge to this view with his theories of the arbitrariness, historicity, and relativism of the linguistic sign; with Locke, it became darkly plausible that “etymological insight will never reveal the camelness of camel” (366). But British and continental intellectuals spent the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries looking for ways to discredit this view, and none other than Cuvier himself stepped in to rescue “Adamicism” and bring it back into the realm of philosophical legitimacy. Cuvier’s principles of comparative anatomy, first outlined in a famous 1795 lecture, not only “rejected the sliding scale of the chain of being and insisted on the fixity of species,” but also maintained that properly identifying the species of an organism—even an organism vastly distant in time—could reveal the external and internal conditions that give rise to its essential nature (368). Ascertaining these conditions, moreover, could reveal the organism’s purpose in God’s grand design. Drawing heavily on anti-Lockean linguistic theories, Cuvier brokered a new “alliance ... between language and science” that carried into the nineteenth century (367). Various Victorian Sages picked up where he left off; “Adamicism” underwent a renaissance that informed the elevation of philology as a privileged philosophical and quasi-scientific pursuit, which would in turn form part of the backbone of the modern study of English. One such Sage was William Whewell, a Cambridge dean of moral philosophy who

explicitly translated Cuvier's method into a general principle of knowledge in his *Aphorisms Concerning Ideas* (1840):

We take for granted that each kind of things has a special *character* which may be expressed by a Definition. The ground of our assumption is this: that reasoning must be possible. (15)¹¹

The last line of Whewell's aphorism is telling: the "assumption" that words could reveal the essences of things was often undergirded by the fear that without such a correspondence, the natural world—even the world more generally—would remain unknowable. Hence, as he put it in the first aphorism, "Man is the Interpreter of Nature, Science the right interpretation" (1).

The idea that eighteenth and early nineteenth-century classification was based in a "theory of words" rather than a "theory of life," as Foucault pithily summarizes, explains the tendency to think of natural history as consubstantial with literary modes of production—to think of it, in other words, as a kind of reading and a kind of writing, even a kind of poetry (176). In the first decades of the nineteenth century, both literary critics and zoologists compared Cuvier's fixist paleontology with literary genres: first Romantic poetry, then serialized publication.¹² In his 1831 novel *The Wild Ass's Skin*, Balzac went so far as to call him "the greatest poet of our century":

Is not Cuvier the greatest poet of our century? Lord Byron reproduces moral throes in verse, but our immortal naturalist has reconstructed worlds from a whitened bone; rebuilt like Cadmus, cities from a tooth ... Cuvier is a poet by mere numbers. He stirs the void with no artificially magic utterance; he scoops out a fragment of gypsum, discovers a print-mark and cries out "Behold!"—and lo, the trees are animalized, death becomes life, the world unfolds. (20)

¹¹ According to Aarsleff, Whewell was not even the most influential Victorian Sage to propound this view: it was also variously articulated by Thomas Carlyle, Richard Chenevix Trench (a future Dean of Westminster who borrowed Wordsworth's concept of words as "living powers" and Emerson's concept that they constitute "fossil poetry" in his 1845 lecture series *On the Study of Words*), and Max Müller closer to the end of the century (51).

¹² Gowan Dawson discusses how Cuvierian paleontology became a favorite metaphor for serialized publication—leading to Henry James' famous characterization of Victorian novels as "loose, baggy monsters"—in *Show Me the Bone: Reconstructing Prehistoric Monsters in Nineteenth-Century Britain and America*.

The comparison rested on a perceived homology: whereas Cuvier would extrapolate an entire living dinosaur from a single fragment of bone, a Romantic poet might recreate an entire psychological landscape from a single fragment of memory.¹³ They were alike in that they both pursued an essentially synecdochic process. But the comparison was more than figurative; it rested on an understanding that synecdoche in the linguistic sense, the poetic sense—forming the creature *through* language, into language—was indeed part of Cuvier’s method, and part of the work of natural history. This idea would go on to inform some of the lavish praise heaped upon Cuvier’s protégé Richard Owen, who became known for using fossil fragments to conjure not only the entire forms of long-dead prehistoric creatures, but also a sense of their lifestyles, crystallized in fable-like micro-narratives. One of the great benefits of fixist discourse was that literary form could plug the plot-holes of natural history.¹⁴

A deeper link between creatures and words, between natural history and literary production, was also at the core of the period’s amateur taxonomies, which did considerably more than professional taxonomy to shape the public’s understanding of the animal world. As Foucault points out, a key part of the conceptual appeal of Linnaeus’ descriptive project was that it disentangled species themselves—‘real,’ observable creatures—from their literary and

¹³ John M. Ulrich has observed that Cuvier’s method was also understood to be homologous with the historiography of Thomas Carlyle—i.e. Carlyle’s ability to form a lavish sense-impression of, say, the French Revolution by extrapolating from its detritus (“Thomas Carlyle and the Paleontological Articulation of the Past”).

¹⁴In 1842, the same year he would coin the term ‘dinosaur,’ Owen studied a pattern of fractures in the skull of the *Mylodon*—a kind of prehistoric ground sloth—and extrapolated a behavioral narrative that explained its untimely demise: he was able to determine that the *Mylodon* had inadvertently killed itself by uprooting a tree that ended up falling on its head. As Alan Rauch notes in “The Sins of Sloths,” this “paleontological parable”—this ur-narrative embedded in the creaturely description—helped solidify an allegorical formulation, already embodied in the term ‘sloth,’ that might otherwise have been destabilized by the discovery of such a powerful, alien beast: “Here was an ancient creature that seemed—to popular readers of Owen—willfully stupid and thus a victim of its own ‘sin’ of stupidity” (221). As one of Britain’s most widely-respected professional scientists, Owen occupied a very different discursive realm than Thomas Bewick and the popular taxonomists. And yet, he, too, used a moralizing, bestiary-like mode of literary figuration—the fable; the “parable”—to give an unfathomably remote creature a more distinct and familiar shape.

imaginative manifestations, a distinction that had never existed in medieval bestiaries (42). The age of classification was at least supposedly the age when “the whole of animal semantics has disappeared, like a dead and useless limb. The words that had been interwoven in the very being of the beast have been unraveled and removed: and the living being, in its anatomy, its form, its habits, its birth and death, appears as though stripped naked” (141). And yet, despite the Linnaean mandate that “Litteraria” could only be a “supplement” to zoological description, amateur taxonomies such as Thomas Bewick’s wildly popular *A General History of Quadrupeds*—first published in 1790 and republished in seven more editions during his lifetime—presented animals with their semantic dimensions firmly attached.¹⁵ Bewick’s first goal was anatomical correctness, which he often achieved in his remarkably subtle woodcut illustrations.¹⁶ Not all of these illustrations were entirely objective, however, and they were followed with descriptions of each animal archetype that elaborated its intrinsic *moral* qualities above all, drawing sometimes from firsthand observation but, more often, from a universe of discourse: folklore, the Bible, narrative anecdotes, other compendia, and received wisdom. As Harriet Ritvo points out in *The Animal Estate*, morality in compendia like these was often synonymous with use value; *A General History of Quadrupeds* praised animals that were easily molded to human intentions and condemned those that would act out, reflecting its bias toward the familiar even in the apportionment of content (the dog, for example, gets 39 pages of its own). Yet some animals were simply bad or good for reasons having more to do with the history of textual and discursive treatments that still trailed them: Ritvo points out that the pig, for example, “despite its incontestable value as a food animal, was routinely castigated as ‘selfish,’

¹⁵ See Ritvo’s *The Animal Estate* and *The Platypus and the Mermaid* for more detailed discussions of the literature of popular taxonomy in this period.

¹⁶ For a more extensive discussion of Bewick’s illustrations, see Diana Donald’s *The Art of Thomas Bewick*.

‘sordid,’ ‘brutal,’ and ‘gluttonous’” (21). The “limb” of “animal semantics” was still very much attached, and very much alive. And even if these texts differed from professional taxonomy in style, they emerged from the same set of philosophical assumptions. The creature was indeed interwoven with language; its nature was knowable through—and equivalent to—the palimpsestic layers of commentary attached to it. Taxonomy depended on intertextuality.

In the nineteenth century, the problem of species is not so much its indefinability, but its *irresistibility*—the difficulty of organizing the nonhuman world without believing in the primacy, transcendence, and fixity of species categories. Darwin was not an “Adamicist” by any stretch, but in the *Origin* he displays a deep understanding of the conceptual—even existential—appeal of creating order in the natural world by breaking it into bite-sized chunks. These admissions often take the form of semiautobiographical narrative moments, micro-stories in which he describes a “young naturalist” who desires to “make many species” when he first encounters ambiguous and shifting varieties; it is only with age and experience that he learns to see the homologies between unlike things (41-42). In *Glaucus: Or, the Wonders of the Shore* (1855), a celebration of marine zoology and aquarium keeping (which I discuss at length in Chapter 3), Charles Kingsley paints an even more revealing portrait of the desire to make species, proclaiming that “there is a mysterious delight in the discovery of a new species akin to that of seeing for the first time, in their native haunts, plants or animals of which one has till then only read” (28). What Darwin glosses as a conceptual and perspectival inevitability, Kingsley describes as a source of “delight,” literally akin to locating the pleasing order of the written word in nature. Kingsley began the 1850s as a disciple of the fixist creationism of Gosse; by the end of the decade, he would abandon the views of his former mentor and become one of Darwin’s most

enthusiastic early supporters.¹⁷ In a letter to Darwin he sent shortly before the *Origin* was published, he described how much the book helped him “[learn] to disbelieve the dogma of the permanence of species,” and to “see that it is [a] noble . . . conception of Deity, to believe that He created primal forms capable of self development” (Darwin, *Letters* II 287). And yet, he would never quite abandon the impulse to envision Nature as a giant book, and to imagine the process of ‘reading’ that book—untangling its words; delving into their etymologies—as tantamount to achieving knowledge of, and closeness with, animals themselves.¹⁸

Species categories are an attractive heuristic under normal circumstances. They are a stabilizing technology, staving off epistemic disarray: as Locke himself observed, the “progress” of the human mind “would be very slow, and its work endless,” if “it should proceed by and dwell upon only particular things” (*An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* 370). They became all the more attractive in a period when various ideas that we would now call ‘posthumanist’ were quickly gaining traction: the idea that humans would one day become extinct; the idea that the age of the Earth vastly eclipsed the timescale of the Bible; the idea that humans were animals themselves. It is not accidental that more editions of *Aesop’s Fables* were published after Darwin than before, or that folk taxonomies that divided the world into familiar categories continued to appear with great frequency in the latter half of the nineteenth century.¹⁹ Victorian culture never quite abandoned its animal archetypes; indeed, in some ways, archetypal thinking experienced a resurgence at the end of the century, paving the way for the totemic or

¹⁷ He abandoned Gosse partly because of *Omphalos*, a notorious 1857 natural theological treatise in which Gosse set out to prove that the fossil record was an elaborate test of faith planted by God to make the Earth look older than it actually was.

¹⁸ Will Abberley discusses Kingsley’s lifelong attraction to the natural theological idea of the “Book of Nature,” even after Darwin’s *Origin*, in “Animal Cunning: Deceptive Nature and Truthful Science in Charles Kingsley’s *Natural Theology*.”

¹⁹ Jessica Straley notes the abundance of post-Darwinian *Aesop* editions in *Evolution and Imagination in Victorian Children’s Literature* (22).

symbolic animals of modernism and Jungian psychoanalysis.²⁰ Part of this resurgence can be attributed to a post-*Descent of Man* desire to stabilize the human in particular—to reconstruct human distinction in an age of what Virginia Richter has called “anthropological anxiety” (*Literature After Darwin* 6). But it can also be attributed to a desire to interweave the natural world with words and meaning once again. The first wave of evolutionary thinking after Darwin was a neo-Lamarckian backlash in which species, ironically, “were often thought to be types again” (Wilkins 171).²¹ In this school of thought, the forms of animals were not fixed at all; an individual could evolve, and pass on its changes, within a single lifetime. But animals were ceaselessly (and willfully) transforming *themselves* into higher forms in an intrinsically moral, neo-Platonic ascent: they were becoming archetypes, rather than dissolving them. Samuel Butler and George Bernard Shaw were among the writers who brought this view from biological discourses into literary culture, propagating the attitude that a meaningless, de-hierarchical, and unteleological model of species change was unthinkable.²²

And yet, as the example of Kingsley demonstrates, throughout the century it became increasingly necessary for biologists and literary figures alike to reassess their species concepts and consider mutabilist alternatives. *On the Origin of Species* was the tipping point, but not the only reason. Before Darwin, there was Robert Chambers’ extraordinarily scandalous *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation* (1844), which advanced not only an evolutionary hypothesis about species change, but also the idea that animals themselves possessed forms of language that

²⁰ I am thinking, for example, of D.H. Lawrence’s obsession with symbolic animals in *Birds, Beasts, and Flowers* and essays such as “The Crown,” an obsession that dovetailed harmoniously with the emergence of archetypal psychology and contemporary anthropological debates about the origin, purpose, and nature of totemism.

²¹ Peter J. Bowler offers a useful account of these post-Darwinian views in *Evolution: The History of an Idea* (258-262).

²² As Bowler notes, Butler propounded Lamarckian ideas about species change in *Evolution Old and New* (1879); Shaw articulated them in *Man and Superman* (1901) and *Back to Methuselah* (1921), wherein he “proclaimed Lamarckism the philosophical salvation of the evolutionary movement” (*Evolution: The History of an Idea* 265).

were only different from human language in degree, rather than kind.²³ There were social developments, too, that required Victorians to reassess their thinking about animal kinds, either by entertaining a post-species worldview or by doubling down on an archetypal system. The machinery of empire continually brought strange, category-crossing animals (such as the vexatious platypus) from colony to metropole, often turning them into spectacles.²⁴ The rise of public and private aquaria in the 1850s brought Victorians face-to-face with ocean oddities that straddled every possible Linnaean distinction—even basic categories such as animal and plant. The increasing proliferation of petkeeping led to the creation of ever more “types” (i.e. breeds) within the larger category of dog, yet petkeeping also brought dogs across categorical and ontological thresholds—into the space of the domestic, the erotic, the human—that made their precise definition increasingly difficult to pin down. Animals thus spent the century in a conceptual double-bind, halfway between being Cuvierian ‘forms’ and a formal problem. Fixism and mutabilism overlapped in complex and messy ways, often leading poets and novelists to contemplate the vertiginous disjunctions between classificatory discourse and an increasingly inchoate animal world.

One vivid literary meditation on these disjunctions is “The Kraken,” Tennyson’s dreamy pseudo-sonnet about an unfathomable sea monster. First published in 1830 but not reprinted until the *Juvenilia* of 1872 (a 40-year repression that lends the poem itself something of the submerged mystique of its subject), “The Kraken” was inspired not by myths, nor by dreams, but

²³ In *Victorian Sensation*, James A. Secord offers an extensive account of the scandal of Chambers’ *Vestiges*, which was first published anonymously.

²⁴ As Ritvo points out in *The Platypus and the Mermaid*, many taxonomists were confounded by the platypus when taxidermied specimens first arrived from the colonies in the late eighteenth century. Thomas Bewick himself called it “an animal sui generis; it appears to possess a three fold nature, that of a fish, a bird, and a quadruped, and is related to nothing that we have hitherto seen” (3). George Shaw of the British Museum, meanwhile, found it so unbelievable that he used scissors to try to ascertain whether an “unscrupulous taxidermist might have attached the beak” (4).

by taxonomical sources. As Christopher Ricks reports, Tennyson drew from a description of the sea monster that appeared first in the *Biographie Universelle* of eighteenth-century Norwegian bishop Erik Pontoppidan, which found its way into an 1802 edition of the *English Encyclopedia* that he owned (*Poems* 269). Indeed, the creature the poem describes was not only a subject of classification but perhaps the *ideal* subject of classification: a folkloric holdout on the margins of the known world, ready to be dredged into the light of a new epistemic regime—or, for that matter, debunked.²⁵

Yet the poem takes great pains to situate its subject at a remove from human knowledge and human language. It blocks any attempts to categorize or apprehend the Kraken, enshrouding its “shadowy sides” beneath multiple layers of epistemological obfuscation:

Below the thunders of the upper deep;
Far, far beneath in the abysmal sea,
His ancient, dreamless, uninvaded sleep
The Kraken sleepeth: faintest sunlights flee
About his shadowy sides: above him swell
Huge sponges of millennial growth and height;
And far away into the sickly light,
From many a wondrous grot and secret cell
Unnumbered and enormous polypi
Winnow with giant arms the slumbering green.
There hath he lain for ages and will lie
Battening upon huge seaworms in his sleep,
Until the latter fire shall heat the deep;
Then once by man and angels to be seen,
In roaring he shall rise and on the surface die.

What is the Kraken? The question is difficult to answer in part because the creature is impossible to measure; the poem does not specify where it ends and where it begins. It is of indeterminate location and indeterminate size, occupying an unspecified number of ocean chambers

²⁵ Ritvo notes that over the course of the century, as empire and trans-oceanic trade made more and more of the world ‘known,’ the ocean became the final frontier for cryptozoological speculation about legendary creatures: “For most of the Victorian period, therefore, the liminal creatures of choice were the kraken and, especially, the sea serpent” (*Platypus* 183).

somewhere in a liminal zone “below” the “upper deep.” Its age is simply “ages,” apparently coterminous with a Christian timescale—the Last Judgment will be its dying day—but possibly extending into the infinity of deep time. Its contours in every dimension remain blurry, illuminated only by “un” words (“unnumbered,” “uninvaded,” “until”) that provide little specificity. It seems to be an animal, but also displays the qualities (and general lack of animation) of a plant; it seems to be an organism, but also seems to be an environment that plays host to other organisms, “unnumbered polypi” and “huge sponges of millennial growth and height.” Is it a creature or a network? In his 1860 *Studies in Animal Life*, G.H. Lewes would use the “paradoxical” polyp coral—a creature occupying a liminal position between individuality and collectivity—as the basis for a discussion about the slippery definition of the individual in biology: polyps demand that we acknowledge that *any* creature is a network more than a unit. “It is paradoxical to call an animal an aggregate of individuals,” he wrote, “but it is so because our thoughts are not very precise on the subject of individuality—one of the many abstractions which remain extremely vague” (128-129). And yet, the Kraken defies even Lewes’ more open-ended approach to animal ontology. With every question it raises more: is it alive or dead? Is it real or unreal?

Since the Linnaean system was based entirely on observing the morphology of animals with the naked eye, an eighteenth-century taxonomist would find it difficult to categorize the Kraken at all. But the poem challenges the logic of taxonomical discourse in three more interrelated ways. First, it places its subject in an imagined zone that the “light” of natural history cannot ever reach, not only challenging the assumption that humans would eventually be able to document all of God’s creation, but also implying that the grid of taxonomical categories can never fully encompass the natural world they purport to organize. Like the nonsense literature

discussed in Chapter 3 (including Kingsley's own aquatic phantasmagoria, *The Water-Babies*), it creates a possibility space—a dream-space, a field of epistemic and semantic disarray—in which the animal must be encountered on its own terms. Second, like the dog lyrics in Chapter 1, “The Kraken” also broaches the possibility that categorization is a way of doing violence to the creature's liminal ontology. In the last three lines—the sudden *volta* in a sonnet otherwise defined by a complete lack of change—the creature rises into utter clarity, “at once by man and angels to be seen” (a phrase suggesting that it finally shows its place in the Great Chain of Being). But it also dies. To see it is to kill it: in Tennyson's poem, writes Richard Maxwell, “death and visibility go together” (“Unnumbered Polypi” 14). The poem distrusts revelation and foregrounds its own mediation—its own imperfect, faltering ability to bring us into limited contact with another living creature.

Above all, however, “The Kraken” rejects the logic of taxonomy by rejecting the logic of poetry in the Cuvierian sense—by refusing to unfold a complete idea of the animal through literary figuration. In the rhetorical and conceptual universe of Cuvier's fixism, animals are structures that can be extrapolated synecdochically in multiple ways: on one level, a fragment of the body can reveal the structural coherence of the whole organism; on another level, the structure of the individual organism can reveal the *conceptual* coherence—the divine design—of the whole type. “The Kraken” resists both ideas by resisting synecdoche itself. It presents the creature in alluring, tantalizing fragments, but none of them allow for the extrapolation of a coherent structure; like the errant and free-associative animal figures I discuss in Chapter 2, the fragments reject the clarity of synecdoche in favor of the chaos of metonymy, leading seemingly everywhere, forming a network of association with no apparent end. Indeed, the unusual structure of the poem itself—a 15-line sonnet—suggests a misfitting, not a homology, between

the composition of the poem and the composition of the animal. Poetry assists in the creature's Dionysian diffusion rather than its Apollonian consolidation. The Kraken spills out of the linguistic cage that has been constructed to contain it—a cage built from literary convention rather than natural-historical observation. There is no ontological link between poem and creature, sign and signified, word and flesh. And yet, the absence of such a link makes the creature all the more beguiling—all the more strangely, arrestingly alive.

“The Kraken” registers the tension between fixism and mutabilism partly by dramatizing the eternal reticence and incoherence of its central subject. Unlike the meaningful, delineated, morally useful animal types that comprised the imaginary menagerie of early nineteenth century culture, the structurelessness of Tennyson's creature prevents it from being a stable allegory. In some ways it feels enigmatically symbolic, as though embodying the logic of esotericism itself, but even that reading feels too indexical; the design of the poem suggests that the creature will always exceed the semantic structures into which it has been messily, incompletely stuffed. That very incommensurability, however, allows the poem to address a larger question buried underneath the fixism vs. mutabilism conflict: the question of whether human language is coextensive with the natural world at all. In the early nineteenth century, the belief that animals lacked language dovetailed harmoniously with the belief that they were, nonetheless, filled with language: apprehensible and understandable through poetic and philological processes. The doctrine of species fixism was a doctrine of anthropocentrism not only because it made the taxonomizing human into a stand-in for Adam, recreating the scene of “dominion,” but also because it assumed that the nature, purpose, and meanings of nonhuman creatures could be discerned through neo-Adamic processes of nomination and linguistic arrangement. But what if such arrangement were impossible? What if the nonhuman world resisted language—even

rebuked it—rather than being legible and translatable? Do animals have anything to do with the words we use to describe, organize, and imagine them, or do “words”—as Virginia Woolf’s version of Elizabeth Barrett Browning would later muse in *Flush: A Biography*—invariably “destroy the symbol that lies beyond the reach of words” (37)? Each of the texts in this study returns self-consciously to the question that lies beneath species: whether animals are texts themselves.

What do Species Do?

The texts in this study also think about what species categories *do*, often positing them as tools of anthropocentric domination and human-animal estrangement. Primarily, of course, species categories help us think with (and about) animals, forming a fundamental layer of mediation between the human mind and the creaturely world. But they also help determine the moral value of animals in ways that can have severe material consequences; like any epistemological apparatus, they assist invisibly in the formation of certain kinds of ethical norms.²⁶ Just as species divide the creaturely world, they structure the apportionment of moral attention, both by determining which creatures are deserving of moral attention and also by encouraging imaginative leaps to a level of abstraction at which types, rather than individuals, are the units of moral concern. The philosopher Dale Jamieson offers a useful description of this process when he attacks environmentalists who value species over individuals: “Individual creatures have hearts and lungs; species do not. Individual creatures often have welfares, but species never do. The notion of a species is an abstraction; the idea of its welfare is a human construction. While there is something that it is like to be an animal there is nothing that it is like to be a species” (*Morality’s Progress* 186). And yet, as Ursula Heise rebuts, “It is difficult to imagine ... how one could possibly determine what the ‘welfare’ of a particular individual means without reference to species” (*Imagining Extinction* 138). Today, species thinking inexorably dominates questions of conservation and bioethics, from controversial, *Jurassic Park*-esque “de-extinction” programs focused on resurrecting lost archetypes (e.g. the Aurochs), to the charismatic archetypes enshrined in the Endangered Species List.

²⁶ “Remarkably for such a central part of our lives, we stand for the most part in formal ignorance of the social and moral order created by these invisible, potent entities,” conclude Geoffrey C. Bowker and Susan Leigh Star in *Sorting Things Out: Classification and its Consequences* (3).

In nineteenth-century Britain, as Ritvo has argued, “both the manifest content and the metaphorical structure of the literature of popular zoology conditioned all other discourse about animals in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries” (41). Thus, the nascent discourses of anticruelty—even anticruelty legislation—emerged from a concept of the animal kingdom mapped out in compendia like *A General History of Quadrupeds*, a fixist grid of animal archetypes which were themselves morally charged: loyal dogs, noble lions, deceitful cats, gluttonous pigs. Dogs were intrinsically good and thus worthy of protection; cats, not nearly as much. But archetypal thinking did even more to determine the material conditions of living animals: it facilitated not only the protection of some creatures over others, but also the Frankensteinian creation of “types” with ever higher degrees of social and moral prestige. All dogs were basically good, but not all dogs were created equal: because the dog was celebrated for its plasticity as well as its loyalty, it was subject to ever more scrupulous divisions into subtypes—breeds—that had different levels of moral and social value. The table of dog breeds that we now take to be canonical first emerged as “an impressive collective act of will and imagination” among the aspirational Victorian bourgeoisie (Ritvo 93).²⁷ Clubs devoted to individual breeds took on the project of genetically engineering stable “types” themselves, reifying notional categories in a complex bid for social prestige that would often have disastrous, compounding effects on animal bodies. Ritvo describes how the Bulldog Club, for example, took a breed that had fallen out of social repute with the ban on bull-baiting and fashioned the creature anew—not only symbolically, but physically. One need only look at a contemporary bulldog to see how so many years of selective breeding in pursuit of this Platonic form—a form ultimately

²⁷Ian MacInnes discusses the relationship between dog breeds and a sense of national typology—Britishness—in “Mastiffs and Spaniels: Gender and Nation in the English Dog.”

based “in the pleasure of its admirers”—have impacted the health of the breed (113).²⁸ Word became flesh; the ideal begat the real. In the realm of agriculture, too, human commitments to preserving, changing, or even creating animal “types” had a dramatic effect on animal bodies and animal lives, as did the desire to *collect* “types” in menageries and other forms of zoological spectacle.²⁹

In “Some Particulars Concerning a Lion,” an 1837 essay for *Bentley’s Miscellany* that I discuss further in Chapter 2, Dickens registers the moral implications of species archetypes by noting the severe differences between “lions in the abstract,” on the one hand, and “particular” lions whose lives were shaped to fit the bill. “We have a great respect for lions in the abstract,” he begins, but we do not interact with lions in the abstract (515). We interact with individuals, each of which has been transformed dispositionally—even morphologically—by its involvement in human systems of social, economic, and aesthetic exchange. As it turns out, the ongoing pursuit of capital-L ‘Lion’ among animal exhibitors around London has led, ironically, to the display of enervated and depressed specimens that contradict the ideal: “We have seen some under the influence of captivity and the pressure of misfortune, and we must say that they appeared to us very apathetic, heavy-headed fellows,” he writes (515). In some ways, he anticipates Berger’s famous critique of zoos as places that “cannot but disappoint” because they feature fundamentally altered versions of the archetypal megafauna they purport to display (“Why Look at Animals?” 28).³⁰ But the main payoff of Dickens’ essay is not disappointment

²⁸ See e.g. the 2011 *New York Times Magazine* cover story “Can the Bulldog Be Saved?”, which notes the rapidly shrinking lifespans of the University of Georgia’s purebred mascots.

²⁹ See Ritvo, *The Animal Estate* Chapter 1 and Rebecca Woods, *The Herds Shot Round the World: Native Breeds and the British Empire, 1800-1900*.

³⁰ As Berger put it, “The zoo cannot but disappoint. The public purpose of zoos is to offer visitors the opportunity of looking at animals. Yet nowhere in a zoo can a stranger encounter the look of an animal. At the most, the animal’s gaze flickers and passes on. They look sideways. They look blindly beyond. They scan mechanically. They have

but something more like self-consciousness, even epistemological bemusement. He displays an awareness of the operative power of these silly categories, even if they do not fit the animals they describe; an awareness of how their strange, tenacious discursive currency leads inevitably to harmful attempts to reify them in the lives and bodies of animals themselves. Like the other texts in this study, his essay functions as a morally-charged invitation for the reader to imagine thinking without them.

Dickens' meditation on taxonomy goes on to become a satire of *social* taxonomy, of the 'leonine' personages often venerated in tales of upper-class dinner parties, revealing another function of species archetypes in this period: the way they could naturalize systems of social, racial, and class distinction. As Ritvo observes, the animal kingdom was always a metaphoric reflection of the actual kingdom, based on its hierarchies yet also used to authorize them by locating them in nature. "Identifications" with the lower ranks of society "constantly informed the language used to describe the various animals"; those descriptions fed back into discourses about the lower ranks themselves (16). There is perhaps no clearer example of the truly pernicious implications of this metaphoric transference than Louis Agassiz, a respected biologist whose dogmatically fixist conception of species categories—which he clung to even after the publication of *On the Origin of Species*—transformed seamlessly into race science.³¹ It is at this point a commonplace notion in modern psychology and sociology that "human violence against animals is often the first step toward human violence against other humans" (*The Animal in Ottoman Egypt* 178). Posthumanist philosophers of various stripes have been clear on the origin

been immunized to encounter, because nothing can any more occupy a *central* place in their attention" ("Why Look at Animals?" 28).

³¹ Agassiz was a Platonic thinker, resolutely committed to the idea that species categories were immaterial types that reflected the mind of God. And yet, as Wilkins points out, he also had a strange tendency to engage in "excessive splitting" of these categories based in his own personal prejudices: "He claimed that Negroes were not of the same species as whites, because, it seems, of the feelings of revulsion he had for them that led him to deny they could be conspecific to whites" (*Species: A History* 114).

of this relationship: it is rooted largely in the way species distinctions—and especially the human/animal distinction—underwrite social distinctions.³² As Charles Lyell, a dogged fixist, noted to himself in 1857, “The ordinary naturalist is not sufficiently aware that when dogmatizing on what species are, he is grappling with the whole question of the organic world & its connection with the time past & with Man; that it involves the question of Man & his relation to the brutes” (Qtd. in Wilson 164). He was right in more ways than even his capacious phrasing admits. The problem of species is never just the problem of species.

Methodology: On Literary Animal Studies and Positional Meaning

Since the 1987 publication of Ritvo’s *The Animal Estate*, perhaps the first major study devoted to examining the English among “other creatures in the Victorian Age,” a large body of scholarship has emerged analyzing the strange places animals occupied in the fabric of the Victorian social, cultural, and literary world. Much of this scholarly conversation has blossomed specifically over the last 15 years or so, coinciding with “animal turns” across a number of disciplines in the humanities and social sciences; the edited collection *Victorian Animal Dreams* (2007) and a special issue of the *Journal of Victorian Culture* devoted to “Victorian Animals” (2011) have been two of its major touchstones. The menageries of these collections (and of Victorian animal studies more generally) have been wide-ranging: they include essays on bugs, elephants, sheep, horses, giant sloths. In a consistent and characteristic way, though, they share a

³² See e.g. *Bestial Traces: Race, Sexuality, Animality*, in which Christopher Peterson explores how “speciesism engenders the bestialization of social and political others,” noting that the human/animal boundary provides figurative language and a philosophical foundation to various forms of social difference (2). This idea, however, has older roots in 20th century philosophy and political theory, going back (at least) to Theodore Adorno’s observation in *Minima Moralia* that the logic of pogroms is rooted in a logic of species exclusion: “The possibility of pogroms is decided in the moment when the gaze of a fatally-wounded animal falls upon a human being. The defiance with which he repels this gaze—‘after all, it’s only an animal’—reappears irresistibly in cruelties done to human beings” (par 68).

commitment to both extending and challenging Ritvo's original project. Like Ritvo, they aim to produce an expanded idea of Victorian society itself by revealing the nonhuman agents—and the human-nonhuman relationships—that were a constitutive part of it. But they also challenge her argument that Victorian human-animal relationships were always, on some level, top-down, “questioning the sufficiency of ‘domination’ as a master rubric” (*Victorian Animal Dreams* 3). In their preface to the “Victorian Animals” special issue, John Miller and Claire Charlotte McKechnie acknowledge the temptation of “identify[ing] the nineteenth century as the point at which the *Anthropocene* takes a firm hold,” as “an era characterized by the thorough imposition of human agency onto animal passivity, and of human meanings onto animal presences” (“Victorian Animals” 439). But they define their own project as something different: investigating how the “human imaginative worlds” of Victorian culture are “entangled with animal realities so that the non-human is never entirely lost in the anthropomorphic” (439).

Much of Victorian animal studies has proceeded in this fashion, as an attempt not only to understand where and how animals played a role in Victorian society, but also to uncover errant and unstable nonhuman energies in the bowels of otherwise anthropocentric-seeming social and cultural forms. The purpose of many of these studies is to unearth animal agency and multispecies entanglement: modes of relationality in which human and animal construct each other, or in which the animal presence secretly undermines (even deconstructs) the human identity that it ostensibly is there to support. It is no accident, then, that a good percentage of the recent critical work in Victorian animal studies focuses on dogs: as perhaps the most visible and well-documented nonhuman members of the nineteenth century bourgeois household, dogs provide ample opportunities to think about how the domestic was not an orderly microcosm of

the Great Chain of Being but, rather, a messy web of ontological and affective connectivity.³³ In “Dying Like a Dog in *Great Expectations*,” Ivan Kreilkamp discusses Victorian dogs as figures of “tantalizingly incomplete identity: they are granted a name and a place by the hearth in the family circle, but only temporarily, only as long as their human master permits it” (81). In nineteenth century novels, their inconsistent and contingent status as quasi-humans makes them the most minor of minor characters, “the sub-proletariat of the novel”—yet it also allows them to “embody alternative, non-novelistic temporalities— anecdotal, minor interrupted” (84). In *Pets and Domesticity in Victorian Literature and Culture*, Monica Flegel treats them as complex surrogates, child- or partner-replacements who could fill out the “affective economy” of the home but also queer it, deconstruct it, by revealing its contingency on more-than-human participation. In *Victorian Dogs, Victorian Men*, Keridiana W. Chez analyzes them through the useful and revealing metaphor of prosthesis, arguing that the Victorian bourgeoisie—drained by urbanization, left ‘cold’ by capitalism—attached dogs to themselves as tools of “affective resuscitation,” using them to repair and consolidate affective pathways between *people*. Such a relationship is, of course, predicated on domination to some extent: a prosthesis is an object, instrumentalized, its sharp edges filed down. But the prosthetic relationship brought with it destabilizing implications of its own: the possibility that the human was always a creature of “lack”; the prospect that “the human might be more attached to the dog than a mere prosthetic appendage deserved, thus inverting the proper power dynamic between human user and animal tool” (20). Although Chez is not entirely onboard with the multispecies utopianism of Donna Haraway, one of her frequent interlocutors, she nevertheless pursues a project compatible with

³³ See also: Kathleen Kete’s *The Beast in the Boudoir: Petkeeping in Nineteenth-Century Paris*; Beryl Gray’s *The Dog in the Dickensian Imagination*; and Sarah Amato’s *Beastly Possessions: Animals in Victorian Consumer Culture*.

Haraway's philosophical and ethical commitments (as well as the commitments of much recent animal theory more generally, including the work of Despret): her goal is to locate subversive forms of multispecies entanglement in the Victorian archive.

All of this work has been a vital influence on my own project, which seeks to contribute further to this ongoing re-evaluation of the place and role of animals in Victorian literature and culture. Where I diverge, however, is in my focus on literary figuration, and its relationship to epistemological—rather than social—paradigms. As Heather Keenleyside notes in her introduction to *Animals and Other People*, a recent study of animals and literary form in the eighteenth century, there is a tendency in literary animal studies to be distrustful of literature itself. “For scholars who share this view,” she writes, “one of the central tasks of literary animal studies is to liberate animals from the confines of Enlightenment figuration and abstraction”—in other words, to cut *through* the structure of metaphor, or allegory, or fable, and to look for evidence of the ‘real’ (i.e. historically, socially, and materially situated) animal underneath (9). Such a desire to transition from “thinking *with* animals” to “thinking *about* them” is, of course, understandable (9). It reflects an ambivalence rooted in the structure of our discipline, which will always stand at a depressing remove from the ‘real’ animals studied by biologists, social scientists, anthropologists, etc.—or better yet, the new breed of cross-disciplinary animal expert (Vicki Hearne, a philosopher and a dog trainer; Vinciane Despret, a philosopher and an ethologist; Roberto Marchesini, a philosopher and a veterinarian) that animal studies has brought to prominence. This desire also reflects literary animal studies’ continued indebtedness to the critique of language in Derrida’s influential lecture series “The Animal Therefore I Am,” wherein he not only assails the term ‘animal’ itself, but also insists that it is “above all necessary to avoid fables” in our thinking about animal lives—fables being the purest form of “an

anthropomorphic taming, a moralizing subjection, a domestication” of what they are and what they mean (405). Philip Armstrong is one of several literary scholars who have taken up the project of using literary criticism to “go beyond the use of animals as mere mirrors for human meaning,” preferring instead to “locate the ‘tracks’ left by animals in texts, the ways cultural formations are affected by the materiality of animals and their relationships with humans” (*What Animals Mean in the Fiction of Modernity* 2-3). The project of literary animal studies has often been construed as a project of “literary liberation” (Keenleyside 9).

I certainly sympathize with this commitment, and *Incoherent Beasts* seeks in part to demonstrate that the Victorians themselves were engaged in a strikingly complementary project. The question of how best to embed the “tracks” of ‘real’ animals in the amber of literary form, how best to represent the animals close to them in ways that might go beyond the strictures of allegory, animates the poetic projects of Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Michael Field, and the novelistic projects of Dickens and Brontë. Kingsley’s *The Water-Babies* derives much of its playful creaturely queerness in tension with an earlier discourse of highly allegorical, patently artificial aquarium writing. Like Armstrong, these texts are deeply interested in “attending not just to what animals mean to humans, but to what they mean themselves; that is, to the ways in which animals might have significances, intentions and effects quite beyond the designs of human beings” (*What Animals Mean* 2). From Tennyson’s reticent “Kraken” to the repugnant “Thing” in *The Island of Doctor Moreau*, a chimera so disturbingly hybrid that it threatens to collapse *all* meaning, the animal figures in *Incoherent Beasts* are almost always embodiments of some kind of attempt to find a figurative logic beyond figuration in the indexical, allegorical sense.

Yet this era of allegory and of anti-allegorical experimentation also demands that we *attend* to literary figuration rather than piercing through it, interrogating tropes and representational strategies—forms of describing, narrating, elegizing, and especially naming—as potent epistemological actors, always able to shape and reshape material relationships in the world. There has perhaps never been a more illuminating thinker on this subject than Claude Lévi-Strauss, whose theories of totemism and the material implications of classificatory thinking have been integral to my project from the beginning. In Lévi-Strauss’ framework, the names humans use to organize the nonhuman world are always already tropes, and they are important because they produce structural relationships. In Chapter 2, I discuss a strange passage in *The Savage Mind* in which he unpacks how the names of pet dogs and pet birds, respectively, work to modulate their perceived ontological proximity to the human. Because “birds are *metaphorical human beings*,” because they have social lives that reflect our own, we give birds “metonymical” names—names contiguous, that is, with “the preserve of ordinary human Christian names” (207). Because dogs are “*metonymical human beings*,” already conjoined *to* our society rather than an image *of* it, we give them metaphorical names, even “stage names,” names “rarely borne by ordinary human beings” (207). It is easy to find exceptions to Lévi-Strauss’ chiasmus in the contemporary world, where dogs have regular human names all the time (and perhaps in the Victorian period, too, although their dog names tended to be more metaphoric than not). But the point of his analysis is not to produce a unified theory of pet names; it is to demonstrate how the figurative logic of animal names can be a powerful way of managing their positionality with respect to the naming human subject. To give dogs metaphoric names—to inscribe them with the logic of metaphor itself—is to stave off their intrusion upon the ontological borders of the human. To make birds metonymic is to bring them closer.

In Lévi-Strauss' structural anthropology, writes Susan Stewart, "all meaning becomes positional meaning—meaning defined by a relationship to an *other*" (*Nonsense* 58). *Incoherent Beasts* borrows this hermeneutic framework, using it to analyze not only the "positional meaning" of species categories—where they placed animals in relation to the human—but also the "positional meanings" generated by various forms of literary figuration. Of course, "positional meaning" is not the only hermeneutic through which we can understand classification in the nineteenth century, nor is it the only hermeneutic we should use to understand the anti-classificatory maneuvers attempted by the authors in this study. But it offers a useful way of thinking about the consequences of animal naming and other forms of figuration in this period, especially since, as Ritvo notes, "their positions in the physical world and in the universe of discourse were mutually reinforcing" (*The Animal Estate* 5). In the nineteenth century discourses of species, figurative structures could have an enormous effect on where animals were understood to be 'positioned' on the Chain of Being (i.e., in a vertical hierarchy), and these positions could have an enormous impact on the lives of animals themselves. In the texts that I examine, different figurative structures become crucial ways of expressing and enacting different forms of positional desire. Instead of asking what these literary animals mean, in other words, my readings ask: Where does the text locate the animal? Where does it want the animal to be? As the example of "The Kraken" shows, the formal unity—or disunity—these creatures express is often dependent on their coordinates in imaginative space. An animal at the margins can more easily be an animal without form, and vice versa: a poetics of vagueness keeps Tennyson's Kraken at the bottom of the abyss, outside the reach of knowledge. A poetics of self-doubt tries arduously, hopelessly, to keep Whym Chow close; a poetics of metonymy gives freedom to the errant, wandering dogs in Dickens and Brontë. The discourse of nonsense creates a topsy-turvy

semantic netherworld—through the rabbit hole, through the looking-glass—where the creatures of Kingsley and Carroll play with words, unmoored from signification. Reclaiming a discourse of species all over again is perhaps the only way that *Moreau's* narrator, the marooned and desperate Prendick, can create distance between himself and the chaos of a radically illimitable world of hybrids.

My approach to literary animal studies is thus an epistemological approach, focused on unpacking how literary texts use figuration to produce and promote different conceptual configurations—different ways of positioning animals in relation to the human. In some ways, this makes *Incoherent Beasts* more akin to recent studies of animal figures in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, which also tend to focus on figuration: works like Laurie Shannon's *The Accommodated Animal*, Tobias Menely's *The Animal Claim*, Laura Brown's *Homeless Dogs and Melancholy Apes*, and Keenleyside's *Animals and Other People*, all of which locate sincere attempts to overturn Descartes' *bete-machine* doctrine (i.e. the notion that animals are unthinking things) in the formal machinery of various literary tropes and genres. This dissertation has begun already, of course, with a narrative about the rise of fixism that might make it tempting to see the eighteenth century—as it has often been seen—as a period in which anthropocentrism solidifies at the expense of all other ways of thinking about the human in relation to the nonhuman. But eighteenth century animal figurations were at least as complex and heterogeneous as nineteenth century ones, and perhaps even more pervasively self-doubting. Species fixism arose just as the discourse of sensibility was earnestly asking how to listen and respond to the voices of other creatures;³⁴ it arose over a century *after* a widespread tendency, in early modern natural history, to construe Adam's "dominion" as a form of fellowship and stewardship, rather than a form of

³⁴ See Tobias Menely's *The Animal Claim* for an engagingly thorough account of sensibility as an ecological discourse predicated on attentiveness to the "Cry of Nature."

domination.³⁵ None of the representational strategies adopted by the poets and novelists in this dissertation are strictly nineteenth-century inventions; all of them draw from prior models, prior ways of figuring and understanding animals. And yet, the nineteenth century was unique in the pervasiveness and intensity of its exposure to the idea of species change, and these texts reflect that: their restless formal experiments emerge from a tension specific to the age of epistemic tumult that began with Cuvier's solid forms and ended with post-Darwinian formlessness.

Incoherent Beasts also contributes to the recent ecocritical turn in Victorian studies, which has involved a similar effort to reclaim the Victorians as weirder—less anthropocentric, more posthumanist—than they might initially seem. To be sure, “climate change,” as Benjamin Morgan and others have pointed out, is a “Victorian problem” as much as a contemporary one; the Anthropocene arguably began in the nineteenth century's age of coal.³⁶ Even so, some of the most innovative recent scholarship in the field has been devoted to uncovering instructive modes of ecological thinking in the Victorian archive, further complicating Ritvo's initial (if still largely true) narrative that nineteenth century culture worked to solidify an anthropocentric worldview. It is often assumed that ecocriticism and animal studies, though conceptually adjacent, have different things to say because they prioritize different (and in some ways incompatible) analytical objects: ecocriticism focuses on ecosystems; animal studies focuses on individual animals. One of the goals of *Incoherent Beasts* is to bridge this methodological gap by demonstrating how the individual animal figure—even animal characters—can encode

³⁵ In *The Accommodated Animal*, Shannon explores how various early modern genres placed animals *with* humans in a shared “cosmopolity” founded on similarity rather than difference. It was only after Descartes, she argues, that natural historical “classifications” started aligning with “the fundamentally modern sense of ‘the animal’ or even ‘animals’ as humanity's persistently ontological foil” (10).

³⁶ See “Fin du Globe: On Decadent Planets,” in which Morgan provides a useful summation of recent Victorian ecocriticism, and Patricia Yaeger's recent *PMLA* essay “Literature in the Ages of Wood, Tallow, Coal, Whale Oil, Gasoline, Atomic Power, and Other Energy Sources,” in which she urges Victorianists to re-classify the nineteenth century literary archive in relation to the energy regime from which it emerged.

ecological theories just as vividly as macroscopic formal features such as descriptive panorama, plot structure, and point of view.

Chapter Overviews

The trajectory of this dissertation is circular: it begins and ends with creatures close to home. But it also begins and ends with destabilizations close to home—deconstructions of species categories integral to the Victorians’ self-understanding. My first two chapters focus on the dog, not only because it is perhaps the most familiar and widely represented animal in the Victorian literary archive, but also because it remained, throughout the century, a classificatory conundrum. What *is* the dog? How exactly is it different from other species of canid? Where did it come from, and to what extent were humans responsible for its separation from the rest of the beasts? Natural historians were flummoxed by these questions, even as they extolled the dog’s tremendous use value; as Thomas Bewick put it in his *General History of Quadrupeds*, “Nothing appears constant in them but their internal conformation, which is alike in all” (325). But his phrasing also exemplifies another discourse that arose in parallel to this rhetoric about the dog’s murkiness: a discourse of archetypicality that attempted to ascertain, nonetheless, the essential definition of canine nature. In different but equally complex ways, the texts I look at in my first two chapters work against the ever-solidifying notion that there was a universal canine “type,” a moral essence of the species enshrined in the category *canis familiaris*: intrinsically loyal; a figure of faith, fidelity, and unconditional attachment; a creature whose identity could assist in the construction of the human.

In Chapter 1, I examine the poetics of self-doubt and self-erasure in Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s Flush poems and Michael Field’s *Whym Chow: Flame of Love*, an outrageously

decadent collection of 30 lyrics memorializing the Fields' dead Chow dog. Responding to a long tradition of dog poems—e.g. Wordsworth's "Fidelity"—that use lyric form to consolidate the essence of the Dog writ large, Browning's Flush poems and *Whym Chow* are highly individualized and idiosyncratic representations, always interrogating their own ability to capture a single dog's fleeting presence. "You see this dog," begins the memorable opening line of Barrett Browning's sonnet "Flush or Faunus." Do we really see him? Can poetry ever succeed at recreating the embodied texture of a human-canine bond? Or does cross-species "significant otherness" (to use Donna Haraway's term) necessarily confound poetic representation? Such questions stalk the margins of these poems. And yet, such self-doubt is also precisely what makes them complex portraits of the erotics of interspecies entanglement. Rather than solidifying canine (or human) identity, they gesture toward forms of identity-in-relationship that necessarily escape the representational apparatus of the lyric "I."

In Chapter 2, I look at similar relationships within a very different generic frame, arguing that the trope of metonymy, the rhetorical building-block of Victorian realism, both represents and embodies the slipperiness of dogs in two mid-century novels: Charles Dickens' *Oliver Twist* and Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley*. The rise of bourgeois petkeeping in the Victorian period produced a new breed of animal semiotics: dogs functioning as metonyms of their owners, signaling everything from social status to moral character. What happens when this process goes awry? Recent theorists of metonymy have been acutely alive to the queerness of the trope's activity—the way "it threatens," as Elaine Freedgood puts it, "to disrupt categories, to open up too many possibilities, to expose things hidden" by proceeding through the boundless drift of contiguity (*The Ideas in Things* 14). Both novels present metonymy as a trope of zoomorphic agency, working through a logic of accident and errancy—a rambunctious, doglike wandering—

that undermines the purported self-sovereignty of the human subject. *Oliver Twist* gives metonymy a complex avatar in the figure of Bulls-Eye, the dog that accompanies the nefarious Bill Sikes. There is a relationship of acknowledged co-constitution yet ceaseless conflict: Sikes relies on his dog to “own [him] afore company,” to generate his identity in the eyes of others, yet the dog seldom means what he wants him to mean, eventually becoming a signifier run amok that leads to his downfall. In *Shirley*, Shirley’s dreams of “sovereignty” are routinely undercut by the involvement of her dog Tartar—an involvement that eventually gives rise to the ontologically disturbing specter of rabies. But she eventually learns to accept a version of her own identity—and of his—that acknowledges their mutual existential interpenetration.

My dissertation then proceeds outward from the tight bonds of interspecies affection to the vast worlds of animal otherness that species categories struggled to contain. Chapter 3 offers a new account of Victorian nonsense, reading Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* and Charles Kingsley’s *The Water-Babies* as complex attempts to liberate animals from stable categories and the structure of allegory. First published in 1863, *The Water-Babies* has often been read as an early attempt to process *On the Origin of Species*, and the associated doctrine that ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny; the novel depicts a Dickensian chimney-sweep who devolves (or perhaps evolves) into the form of a tiny, aquatic humanoid. I read it, however, in a somewhat different context: as a critique of the representational logic of the Victorian aquarium, a perspectival technology that various writers and scientists—including Kingsley himself—had used to organize the ocean into a space of order, sense, and species differentiation throughout the 1850s. In a similar way, Carroll sets his satirical sights on the allegorical taxonomies that populated previous children’s literature, bringing his heroine face-to-face with strange, hybrid, and indignant animal figures that are detached from stable identities and meaning itself.

My final two chapters focus on texts that meditate on the precarious definition of the human species, which became a particularly vexed category in the wake of *Descent of Man*. In Chapter 4, I turn to Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*, a twelve-book Arthurian epic that uses the form of epic itself—an arch-humanist genre *par excellence*—to interrogate the limits of the human. Through the figure of Arthur, the poem holds onto an anthropocentric model of the universe structured around human exceptionalism—a vision of “man” as the center and *telos* of all created things. And yet, all around Arthur, it simultaneously puts forth a grim ontological and cosmological alternative. Man evolves into wolf-man, in a way that blurs the dividing line between human and animal; man loses his tools—including language—in a way that undermines prostheticity as an index of the human's distinction; the poem's universe, rather than being centered on man spatially and directed toward him temporally, pushes him to the ‘margins.’ The poem commits neither to humanism nor posthumanism, conveying only ambivalence: the human remains suspended on a narrow precipice between distinction and dissolution.

In Chapter 5, my study ends with *The Island of Doctor Moreau*, H.G. Wells' science-fiction nightmare about the porousness of the human-animal boundary. Wells was one of the Victorian period's most vociferous and confrontational species skeptics; in numerous scientific essays, he assailed both anthropocentrism in general and the forms of categorical thinking that it produced. In 1887, he published “The Rediscovery of the Unique,” an essay lambasting not only species categories but also the innate tendency of human language to lump things into groups—what he called “the fallacy of the common noun.” He wrote *Moreau* partly as an attempt to confront the public at large with a vision of the endless “plasticity” of all living things—including and especially the human. And yet, *Moreau* is just as ambivalent as the *Idylls*, and just as formally self-divided. In and through the inconsistent first-person narrative of its marooned

protagonist, Edward Prendick, the novella oscillates uneasily between a perspective that accepts the radical “plasticity” of all creatures, and a perspective that clings bitterly both to species categories and to the anthropocentrism that underwrites them. Like *Idylls*, *Moreau* becomes an object lesson in the difficulty of committing to a truly posthumanist, post-Darwinian epistemology—the difficulty, in other words, of abandoning species altogether.

Chapter 1:

“You See This Dog”: Muteness and Misapprehension in Victorian Dog Poetry

What is a dog? Many works of Victorian literature try to answer this question; many confront the truth that it is harder to answer than it seems. Thomas Hardy tries to answer it in his own way at the emotional climax of *Far from the Madding Crowd*, when Fanny Robin—the spurned working-class lover of one of Bathsheba Everdeen’s three suitors—collapses on the road to Casterbridge, and almost dies. Lying on the road, she sees the vague shape of a shadow coming toward her. Soon she realizes that a dog is licking her cheek, but when she opens her eyes, she has difficulty ascertaining what kind of dog it is:

He was a huge, heavy, and quiet creature, standing darkly against the low horizon, and at least two feet higher than the present position of her eyes. Whether Newfoundland, mastiff, bloodhound, or what not, it was impossible to say. He seemed to be of too strange and mysterious a nature to belong to any variety among those of popular nomenclature. Being thus assignable to no breed, he was the ideal embodiment of canine greatness—a generalization from what was common to all. Night, in its sad, solemn, and benevolent aspect, apart from its stealthy and cruel side, was personified in this form. Darkness endows the small and ordinary ones among mankind with poetical power, and even the suffering woman threw her idea into figure. (206)

In nineteenth-century Britain, the Newfoundland breed was synonymous with the idea of rescue. Numerous Edwin Landseer paintings depicted large, shaggy Newfs dredging young women from tempestuous seas; between 1803 and 1804, London’s Drury-Lane Theatre mounted a play that literally acted out this trope, featuring a real Newfoundland named Carlo that would dive into a tank of water and “save from death the lovely child of the Marquis of Calatrava,” exciting the ‘rapturous exclamations’ of the audience” (Diana Donald, *Picturing Animals in Britain* 136).¹

Yet Hardy makes it clear that the dog that rescues Fanny is “assignable to no breed,” and

¹ *Neptune; Or, the Autobiography of a Newfoundland Dog* (1869), a canine autobiography by the author of *Tuppy; Or the Autobiography of a Donkey*, reproduces this trope from the Newf’s perspective: “Desperately, madly, I struggled with the waters. Yes, oh yes, surely I am following in her track. Yes, now, again, I am nearer, nearer,--I can hear her voice of encouragement, I can hear her bidding me keep a good heart yet...” (111)

irreconcilable with “popular nomenclature”: he is an indeterminate mutt, vague and liminal not only in kind but in the basic contours of his form. Sight cannot place him, nor can it separate him fully from the shadows that fall on the road; if anything, only her sense of touch can arrive at a solid idea of what he is: “something touching her hand,” a “substance” composed of “softness” and “warmth” (206). He is so enveloping that he is almost atmospheric; he is a world to her—more than an identity, more than a tool—as they trudge slowly together toward town. But her mind tries, nonetheless, to give him form by identifying him as the embodiment of an abstract “figure”—first “canine greatness,” then Night itself. Even in the haze of her destitution, she feels impelled to exercise her “poetical power,” translating his earthy warmth into an embodiment of two separate, irreconcilable archetypes. Her body knows what he is, but her mind is restless to define him anyway—to make him into a trope.

Whether he intended to or not, Hardy narrativizes a tension that often pervades natural historical descriptions of dogs in the nineteenth century. On the one hand, they tend to admit that dogs are the most difficult creatures in the world to define, partly because of their morphological plasticity and partly because what makes them distinctively *dogs*—the ‘familiarity’ expressed by the species category *Canis familiaris*—is difficult to put into words. Where did the dog come from? Its origin is always murky: as the mid-century natural history columnist W.J. Broderip observed in 1839, “Your good cynogenealogist will trace out for you the pedigree of any particular race, and will be eloquent on King Charles’s breed of spaniels ... but it will be difficult to find one who will give you any authority for the existence of a primitive race of dogs, in the common acceptation of the term” (“Recreations in Natural History” 63). How are dogs different from wolves? We *know* that they are different from wolves, and yet what makes them different from wolves biologically is extremely difficult to ascertain. William Youatt’s *The Dog* (1845), at

the time a widely respected natural history and veterinary reference, echoes other dog books in citing a single, debatable point of distinction: “The eye of the dog of every country and species has a circular pupil, but the position or form of the pupil is oblique in the wolf” (3).² So why, then, does the dog behave in the way it does? “The dog is the only animal that is capable of disinterested affection,” proclaims Youatt:

He is the only one that regards the human being as his companion, and follows him as his friend; the only one that seems to possess a natural desire to be useful to him, or from a spontaneous impulse attaches himself to man ... Many an expressive action tells us how much he is pleased and thankful. He shares in our abundance, and he is content with the scantiest and most humble fare. He loves us while living, and has been known to pine away on the grave of his master. (2)

Youatt can only cite what “seems” to be a natural inclination, a “spontaneous impulse”; his language betrays its own basis in conjecture and in two forms of reading: the interpretation of “expressive actions” and the compilation of representative anecdotes. He certainly understands how dogs benefit the lives of humans; without a concept of co-evolution, he has a bit more difficulty explaining how humans benefit the lives of dogs—which is to say, why dogs do any of the things they do.

And yet, Youatt’s invocation of the dog as an eternal “he” that loves us unconditionally, that “shares in our abundance,” that lives to serve, reveals another side of these natural historical descriptions: their desire to elaborate an ontological or archetypal definition of the dog, over and against the vagueness and instability of the biological species. Natural historians like Youatt were confident that even though they did not understand how dogs came to be, or what made

² Such as Thomas Bell’s *A History of British Quadrupeds, Including the Cetacea* (1837).

dogs *dogs* in a biological sense, they knew what dogs *were*—and what they would always be to us. As Thomas Bewick put it in his *General History of Quadrupeds* (1790), a staple of popular natural history throughout the nineteenth century, “Of all animals, the Dog seems most susceptible to change, and most easily modified by difference of climate, food, and education; not only the figure of his body, but his faculties, habits, and dispositions, vary in a surprising manner: Nothing appears constant in them but their internal conformation, which is alike in all” (325). The dog is an inchoate mess of body types, plastic in the extreme. But that very plasticity is itself the expression of an unchanging inner constancy: the dog’s intrinsic essence as a servant and friend of man.

This definition of the capital-D Dog is, of course, an ancient idea, going back at least to the Dorian Gray-like fate of *The Odyssey*’s Argos. But in nineteenth century Britain it drew particular strength from dog poems, which were everywhere: disseminated in periodicals; inscribed on tombstones; exchanged in letters; recited in public; collected in anthologies. Their proliferation coincided with the rise of petkeeping as a consumer practice, most commonly among the bourgeoisie but in other segments of Victorian society as well.³ As dogs entered the home and became what Ivan Kreilkamp (borrowing a term from Lévi-Strauss) calls “metonymical human beings,” they became even more readily the subjects of lyric appreciation—including, to an increasing extent, lyric genres typically reserved for humans: elegy, ode, epitaph, love poem. In a strange but consistent way, however, these poetic figurations also tended to shun the domestic space from which they sprang; instead of dogs at home, they depicted heroic dogs, masculinized dogs, assisting their male masters—or saving helpless female

³ In *Beastly Possessions*, Sarah Amato convincingly shows that the British working classes participated in the culture of pet-ownership to a much higher degree than indicated by previous studies, which have tended to portray petkeeping as an almost exclusively bourgeois phenomenon.

figures—on the precipice between life and death. Wordsworth’s “Fidelity” recapitulates a common trope of the genre: in a mountainous “savage place,” a dog stands vigil over the body of its master, accompanying him even into the afterlife. In Byron’s “Inscription on the Monument of a Newfoundland Dog” (1808), an epitaph to his departed dog Boatswain that stands outside his estate at Newstead Abbey, the poet describes what being “A DOG” means:

Near this Spot
are deposited the Remains of one
who possessed Beauty without Vanity,
Strength without Insolence,
Courage without Ferocity,
and all the virtues of Man without his Vices.⁴

Byron’s inscription gives its reader very little of an impression of what Boatswain was like as an individual; *what* he was takes precedence over *who* he was. But individuality is not the inscription’s goal. Instead it elaborates an archetype concordant with the eternal “he” in Youatt: an image of the ideal Dog as faithful, courageous, strong, and (always implicitly) male.⁵

What is the dog? This chapter examines Victorian dog poems that arrive at a different kind of answer to this question, not only by trying to evoke the irreducible individuality of their creaturely subjects, but also by trying to capture some of the vagueness—the ontological liminality; the categorical confusion—that archetypal dog poetry was more determined to circumvent. In Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s Flush poems (published in the 1840s and 50s) and Michael Field’s *Whym Chow: Flame of Love* (published in 1914), the true nature of the dog is

⁴ A mausoleum larger, in fact, than the tomb of Byron himself.

⁵ Amato further discusses how dogs served as “models of masculinity” in *Beastly Possessions*, Chapter 2 (73-76).

forever outside the reach of poetic apprehension. There is no stable ur-Dog to which they can compare their companions; there is only *this* dog, as Barrett Browning's sonnet, "Flush or Faunus," states outright in its enigmatically deictic opening line: "You see this dog."⁶ Rather than focusing on the moral exemplarity of their subjects, they focus on the basic physical details of cohabitation and interspecies entanglement; they present their subjects as vivid presences and enveloping sources of affective energy, knowable—like the dog in *Madding Crowd*—through touch more than vision. And yet, these poems also ceaselessly and self-consciously stage their own inability to capture those presences, those relationships; they foreground their own mediation, as well as their own unfortunate tendency to transform the dog into an abstract allegory. For Barrett Browning, Flush is Pan, and Flush is Faunus: the sonnet ends with the establishment of an allegorical comparison. But the poem suggests that this is only a way of losing him, not finding him. In *Whym Chow*, a set of 30 outrageously ornate lyrics that memorialize the Fields' dead Chow dog, allegories run rampant: he is not just Christ but every person of the Trinity; he is Bacchus; he is fire. They construct a dizzyingly convoluted set of allegories to account for his presence in their lives—and more specifically, the way he formed one part of an *affective* Trinity between them, an identity-in-relationship. There too, however, the poets undermine their own representational apparatus and its various mechanisms of mausoleum-like encasement, wondering aloud: Will poetry ever allow us to meet this dog again?

If dog poems throughout the century concerned themselves with clarifying the moral essence of the Dog in general, the poems analyzed in this chapter do something very different: they express poetry's *inability* to capture the presence of a particular creature, and the nature of a human-dog relationship. Ironically, and in complex ways, they end up appropriating one of the

⁶ A line that would be strangely echoed by the opening line of Robert Browning's *The Ring and the Book*: "You see this ring."

only negative qualities consistently attributed to dogs in the nineteenth century: muteness. In his 1884 essay “The Character of Dogs,” Robert Louis Stevenson asserts that “the leading distinction between dog and man, after and perhaps before the different duration of their lives, is that one can speak and the other cannot. The absence of the power of speech confines the dog in the development of his intellect. It hinders him from many speculations, for words are the beginning of meta-physic” (300). Yet he also admits that “it is amazing how the use of language blunts the faculties of man,” a candid claim that Barrett Browning and the Fields echo throughout their self-undermining lyrics: Barrett Browning admits to “mus[ing] forgetful of his presence”; the Fields celebrate “the glory and the gold-furred state” of Whym Chow while admitting, in the same breath, that it “smote beyond the strength of any verse.”⁷ At the same time, these poems formulate a poetics of interspecies attachment and interactivity precisely *through* muteness—through a kind of authorial self-doubt that establishes canine nature as an impenetrable mystery, even an object of worship. They form a vivid countertradition to the confident, masculinist declarations of much Victorian dog poetry, modeling a form of lyric based instead on the erotics of interspecies cohabitation—on an irremediable condition of lack.

They get this sense of lack, or absence, from somewhere: as I argue in the next section, the loss of the dog—usually via sudden death of some kind—is a central trope in a surprisingly significant percentage of nineteenth century dog poetry, as it is in dog media today.⁸ In most of

⁷ Similar avowals of poetic incapability appear in Isa Blagden’s “To Dear Old Bushie. From One Who Loved Her,” a particularly overt example of homoerotic pet poetry analyzed by Sharon Marcus in *Between Women*: the poet addresses her dog by lamenting that “the solemn meaning of thine eyes” is “more clear than uttered speech” (Qtd. in Marcus 197-198).

⁸ In a January 2017 article for *The New Yorker*, Jia Tolentino locates the trope of canine death in a large swath of contemporary dog media, including the egregiously manipulative box-office sensation *A Dog’s Purpose*. “As a schmaltzy trope of mass cinema,” she writes, “the melodramatic dog death is right up there with the terminally ill child or the gratuitous sexual-abuse scene: unnervingly common; generally dismaying; apparently in no danger of going away.”

these poems, however, the loss of the dog serves to solidify the larger essence of Dog writ large through an implicit sacrificial logic: the individual dies for the sake of the type. Barrett Browning and the Fields retain some of the elegiac energy of this poetic model, but they also retrofit it to different ends, inverting its logic by making poetry the *mechanism* of loss rather than its potential redeemer. Their lyrics are deeply self-conscious of the grim truism that, in the words of Teresa Mangum, “With every attempt to memorialize an animal ... nineteenth-century pet owners simultaneously acknowledged and more deeply buried the silent beings on whom they increasingly depended for intimacy and a meaningful emotional life” (“Animal Angst” 31).⁹ They also express their own version of what Alice A. Kuzniar has called the “melancholia” of dog love: a mournful recognition, on the dog owner’s part, of “the inevitable disjointedness and nonsimultaneity between herself and the extimate species, extimacy being that which is exterior to one yet intimately proximate” (p.7-8). Barrett Browning’s Flush poems and *Whym Chow* establish language itself as the source of this “disjointedness and nonsimultaneity” between poet and creature. And yet, they confess to the inadequacy of what they attempt for a reason: to do justice to the indeterminacy of interspecies love as well as the unstable contours of dogs themselves. In *The Lives of Animals*, J.M. Coetzee’s novella, the fictional novelist Elizabeth Costello searches for a poetry that “does not try to find an idea in the animal, that is not about the animal, but is instead the record of an engagement with him” (51). Against the backdrop of a canine poetics centered on consolidating the “idea” of the dog, these poems search for something similar: they try to construct a lyric mode that might be relational rather than anthropocentric,

⁹ Along similar lines, Wordsworth himself, in his “Essay upon Epitaphs” (1810), explicitly objected to epitaphs for individual animals on the grounds that the animal “is incapable of anticipating the sorrow with which his surrounding associates shall bemoan his death, or pine for his; he cannot pre-conceive this regret, he can form no thought of it; and therefore cannot possibly have a desire to leave such regret or remembrance behind him” (Qtd. in Mangum 25).

expressing interspecies enmeshment, the dissolution of species boundaries, and being together in the world.

Dog Poetry and the Canine Ideal

In his preface to *The Dog in British Poetry* (1893), a lavish compendium of over 200 British dog poems from the middle ages to the nineteenth century, the editor Robert Maynard Leonard divides the history of the genre into three distinct waves. Before the eighteenth century, dog poems were about sport; they were narratives of the hunt, extolling the dog's virtues as an idealized athlete and assistant. "It is the 'hound' they celebrate"; they might "incidentally ... admit the animals' usefulness as a guardian of the sheepfold or of the dwelling-house," but they "consider a dog's prowess in the field to be its superlative merit" (viii). Later on, in the eighteenth century, they start shifting focus to domestic dogs: "we find the hound giving place to the lap-dog," especially in the works of Swift and John Gay (viii). These eighteenth century poems are still mostly satirical, however; in the nineteenth century, the third wave, they become serious. It is the "more modern poets" of his own era, according to Leonard, who have done "fitting honour to the dog" by earnestly and lovingly representing the human-dog relationship—"the dumb companionship of 'the friend of man'" (ix).

Leonard gives the genre a plausible trajectory: as dogs themselves moved from the realm of labor into the realm of leisure, and more implicitly from the realm of men into the realm of women, the genre moved from the exterior to the interior, from appreciation to attachment, from the ideal to the real. And yet, there is something about the dog poems of these "more modern poets" that resists this straightforward teleology. Their dominant mode is not erotic but elegiac, and although they do extol the virtues of the dog as a companion, rather than an athlete, they tend

to remain at an odd remove from the scene of companionship itself. Most of the poems are not ultimately about the presences of specific dogs or the textures of specific human-dog relationships; instead, they are geared toward defining the nature of the dog in general. Their more urgent project is a kind of hagiography, presenting individual dogs as martyrs for an abstract notion of Constancy embodied by the species as a whole. Leonard alludes to this when he points out that they tend to express a “belief . . . in canine immortality” (ix); what that means is that they have a distinct tendency to kill off their subjects.

Untimely death happens with great frequency throughout Leonard’s selections from the “modern” archive; in every case, the death of the individual works to consolidate the type. Many of these deaths are modeled after *The Odyssey*’s Argos: in Alexander Pope’s “Argus,” for instance, the dog’s sudden death cuts through the encrustations of time. Ulysses arrives as a figure marked by gradual, accumulative transformations, “changed as he was, with age, and toils, and cares,” abandoned one-by-one by “all his own domestic crew.” When the dog sees him, remembers him, and dies, it is a change that reveals perhaps the only thing that is changeless: canine (as opposed to human) nature. At the end of Caroline Bowles Southey’s “A Tale of the Reign of Terror,” Argos-like patience recurs against an explicitly modern historical backdrop: “One struggle, one convulsive start, / And there the face beloved lies— / Now be at peace, thou faithful heart!— / She licks the livid lips, and dies.” Byron’s “Abdiel” presents a version of Argos as well, depicting a dog defined both by his mimesis of human suffering and a life coterminous with his master’s: while other dogs on a stranded lifeboat devoured their masters to fend off starvation, Abdiel “himself sought out no food, / But with a piteous and perpetual moan, / And a quick desolate cry, licking the hand / Which answered not with a caress—he died.” The

trope of sudden canine death appears even in a tongue-in-cheek canine elegy like Matthew Arnold's "Kaiser Dead":

Thine eye was bright, thy coat it shone;
Thou hadst thine errands, off and on;
In joy thy last morn flew; anon,
A fit! All's over;
And thou art gone where Geist hath gone,
And Toss, and Rover.

Unlike the lofty elegiac appreciations by Byron, Southey, and others, Arnold's treatment of canine death is somewhat glib: he adds to the abruptness by evoking a quotidian, commodity-like multiplicity of other dogs with ordinary names ("Toss," "Rover," and the somewhat less ordinary "Geist") awaiting Kaiser in the afterlife. But the anti-individualism of the poem—like its explicit "confession" that Kaiser was "a mongrel thing"—serves to supplement, rather than undermine, its deeper goal: defining Kaiser as an exemplum of the dog in general as a "faithful friend," irrespective of identity or breed.¹⁰

Kuzniar maintains that sudden death is a trope of dog literature because only a moment of surprise, a rupture, can convey the loss of a daily enmeshment so difficult to describe. "It is clear," she writes, "that the myriad ways in which our daily lives are intertwined with the constant presence and care of the pet cause the attachment to be inadvertently close. As a

¹⁰ One notable genre that *resists* sudden canine death is the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century canine autobiography, which tends to end, like other animal autobiographies, with comfortable retirement. See, e.g., the quiet conclusion to Mrs. Neville Peel's "Autobiography of a Bull-dog" (1902): "The hearth-rug sees a great deal of Pincher and me in these days, but we think ourselves lucky in that we have our dear Lady Jane to comfort and console our declining years" (204). In these works, the polemics of Victorian anticruelty supersede the poetics of canine loss; these novels end this way precisely because *Black Beauty* ended this way in 1877, giving readers the cathartic and empathetic satisfaction of a dignified, languid postscript to a life of constant brutality.

consequence, the final separation comes as a shock, the acuteness of which we tend to disavow” (137-138). In these poems, however, the sudden loss of the dog plays a clear role in articulating something beyond the “constant presence and care of the pet” in question: the idea of constancy itself. Constancy is crystallized, made manifest, by loss; the poet gains a new or renewed appreciation of the dog’s constancy by experiencing its loss, just as he or she mourns its loss in an acute way precisely because of its constancy. A sudden death like Argos’s reveals a complete and quite literal overlap between canine life and canine service; we see that the dog exists to be constant precisely because it ceases to exist when its constancy is no longer needed. William Robert Spencer’s popular ballad “Beth Gêlert, or the Grave of the Greyhound” reveals the dog’s absence itself to have been an advanced form of constancy all along.¹¹ Gelert’s master, Llewellyn, is perplexed when his trusty hound fails to show up for the hunt: “That day Llewellyn little loved / The chase of hart or hare; / And scant and small the booty proved, / For Gelert was not there” (ll.25-28). As it turns out, Gelert was “not there” because he was fighting a wolf that had threatened his master’s child. Fickle and inconstant by comparison, Llewellyn fails to recognize this turn before it is too late; he mistakes his dog *for* the wolf and kills Gelert, to his infinite remorse.

Yet the sacrificial logic of these poems—their commitment to consolidating the type through the sacrifice of the individual—performs another function at the same time: it stabilizes the species identity of a creature that can be extremely plastic and indeterminate (as certain poems, like “Kaiser Dead,” explicitly admit). Just as much as their poetic counterparts, popular natural histories of the dog from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries use the trope

¹¹ British periodicals continued to print verse retellings of Gelert’s story throughout the century—even as late as 1898, when author J. Hudson included his own poem about Gelert in an essay for *The Westminster Review* that was otherwise devoted to reviewing *The Dog in British Poetry* (“A Few More Words on Dogs” 310).

of canine loss to lend definitiveness to their descriptions, as though absence could create solidity. At one point in “The Natural History of the Dog,” a segment of his 44-volume *Histoire Naturelle* (1749-1804) that was excerpted and republished in English, the Comte de Buffon attempts to define the dog by entertaining the idea of its absence: “We may know of what importance this species is in the order of nature, by supposing for an instant that it had never existed,” he writes (196). “How could man, without the help of the dog, conquer, tame, and reduce other animals to slavery? How could he even now discover, hunt after, and destroy wild and hurtful beasts?” (197).¹² In his *General History of Quadrupeds*, Bewick repeats exactly the same scenario. Precisely because to inquire after “the history of the Dog would be little less than to trace mankind back to their original state of simplicity and freedom,” he asks his readers to “consider for a moment the state of man without the aid of this useful domestic”:

With what arts shall he oppose the numerous host of foes that surround him on all sides, seeking every opportunity to encroach upon his possessions, to destroy his labours, or endanger his personal safety; or how shall he bring into subjection such as are necessary for his well-being? (324)

Bewick, like Buffon, attempts to define the dog as a creature of immense external plasticity and internal—even metaphysical—changelessness. It is striking that both he and Buffon default to a trope of imagined nonexistence to convey this idea, articulating the nature of the dog not through confident declarations but by opening a gap in which the reader must contemplate, and confront, its absence. These (literally) negative definitions betray the anxieties about kind that undergird them. What differentiates dogs from the myriad other species that “surround the human on all

¹² This Buffon quote is drawn from Walter Ruddiman’s 1769 translation, “Natural History of the Dog: From the French of M. Buffon.,” *The Weekly Magazine, Or, Edinburgh Amusement, 1768-1779* 3 (February 9, 1769): 196-197.

sides”? What ensures their place on the human side in this binaristic war? Somehow, canine nature, and especially canine agency—in this case, what the dog has done to make the human *human*—resist direct articulation. They can only be accounted for negatively, periphrastically, briefly.

In *The Order of Things*, Foucault argues that the rise of Linnaean taxonomy forced natural historians to confront a new gap between living creatures and the ideas they used to embody allegorically. He describes the eighteenth century as an era when “the whole of animal semantics has disappeared, like a dead and useless limb,” leaving natural historians to grapple with “the gap that is now opened up between things and words” (141). A version of this gap seems to motivate the definitional projects of dog discourses (and dog poetry) in this period: their bold and frequent attempts to reinscribe constancy at the core of canine being, to bind thing and word together once again, attest to an intellectual climate in which less and less could be known for certain about the intrinsic meanings or purposes of God’s creatures—especially a creature as strange, inexplicable, and close to the human as the seemingly ordinary dog. In *Romanticism and the Human Sciences*, Maureen McLane reads much of the literature of Romanticism as an “anthropological discourse,” defined by its “concern for and assertion of ‘the human’” as an ontological category (10). McLane cites William Godwin’s declaration that “Literature, taken in all its bearings, forms the grand line of demarcation between the human and the animal kingdom” (qtd. in McLane, p.10). She observes that it was even “more often through ‘poetry’ ...that the ambitions and nature of ‘man’ were specified,” first and foremost by providing readers with a prototype of ‘man’ himself: the Poet (17). *The Dog in British Poetry* is full of poems that show that this desire to use poetry as means of conveying species difference extended beyond the Romantics—and extended beyond the human. If Romantic poems were

constantly attempting to construct ‘man,’ dog poems were equally determined to construct a stable idea of the nature, purpose, and ontology of man’s best friend.

There is perhaps no clearer example than Wordsworth’s “Fidelity” (1807), one of the most famous Romantic dog lyrics. The poem begins by describing a scene of sensory and epistemological confusion: an unnamed Shepherd hears a “barking sound” in the Lake District wilderness and is unable to place its source. At first, species is ambiguous: the barking is “a cry as of a dog or fox”; the Shepherd sees only “a stirring in a brake of fern” (2, 7). Then, breed is ambiguous: “The Dog is not of mountain breed; / Its motions, too, are wild and shy; / With something, as the Shepherd thinks, / Unusual in its cry” (9-12). And yet, between these two ambiguities, and between the first two stanzas, something has already become perfectly clear: “a dog” has become “The Dog,” its transformation from lower-case semi-objecthood into upper-case individuality (and exemplarity) facilitated by a moment of eye contact. The rest of the poem is ostensibly devoted to describing the idiosyncratic behaviors of a dog whose behavior defies all reason. Inhabiting the Shepherd’s perplexity, the poet asks, “What is the creature doing here?” As he slowly realizes, the dog is standing guard over the body of a long-dead “Traveller,” lost among the icy crags. In breathless lines, the poet remarks on the “wonder” of this steadfast vigil:

But hear a wonder, for whose sake
This lamentable tale I tell!
A lasting monument of words
This wonder merits well.
The Dog, which still was hovering nigh,
Repeating the same timid cry,
This Dog, had been through three months’ space
A dweller in that savage place. (50-57)

The poet’s language in this stanza emphasizes particularity, repeating the word “wonder” twice and crystallizing the image of “This Dog”—only this dog—with a deictic phrase. He announces

the purpose of the poem: to erect “a lasting monument of words” for the “sake” of the dog in question, using poetry to preserve the memory of a specific dog.

But the “whose” in the line “for whose sake / This lamentable tale I tell!” admits a few ambiguities. First of all, as Keridiana Chez points out, one could read the poem as ultimately an effort to memorialize the human, extending and amplifying the dog’s labor as a literal grave-marker. “In this dark crag that threatens to swallow him whole, consigning his very existence to perpetual obscurity, the canine prosthesis establishes and maintains his connection to the human fold,” Chez writes; the poem, another prosthesis, completes the dog’s work, reconstructing a human figure almost lost to time (13-14). But the poet introduces another possibility at the end of the poem, one that seems to resist casting the dog purely as an instrument of human memory:

Yes, proof was plain that, since the day
When this ill-fated Traveller died,
The Dog had watched about the spot,
Or by his master’s side:
How nourished here through such long time
He knows, who gave that love sublime;
And gave that strength of feeling, great
Above all human estimate! (58-65)

Who is the “who” in “for whose sake / This lamentable tale I tell?” The same question could be asked of the “he” in “He knows, who gave that love sublime” (63). It could certainly refer to the dog in question, but it could also refer to the Creator (“above all human estimate”) who “gave” the dog “love sublime” and “strength of feeling” in the first place, in an originary act of special creation: God. The answer most concordant with the language of the poem as a whole—which shifts seamlessly between describing a specific, historically and materially situated canine and an allegorical avatar of canine-ness; between “Fidelity” as the name of one dog and “Fidelity” as the nature of *all* dogs—is that the pronoun “he” refers to both at the same time. Like other sacrificial dog poems, “Fidelity” describes a subtly Christlike figure, both in the sense that he

sacrifices himself to redeem a (literally) fallen human and in the sense that he has one paw in the terrestrial world and one paw in paradise; he embodies an ideal—even a principle of quasi-divine, more-than-human love—in fleshly form. The poem strives to articulate this ontology, rendering other forms of identity (breed identity; individual identity; even biological identity) irrelevant.

But other forms of identity are not irrelevant, of course: the archetype that “Fidelity” elaborates is as exclusionary as it is seemingly universal. The poem defines the ideal Dog in distinctly gendered terms: as a “he” who assists “his master” in defeating both the “savage” environment and—as in Buffon and Bewick’s scenarios of interspecies war—the indifferent or hostile forces of other animals; as a “he” whose heroism consists of steadfast stature, and is to be immortalized by a (suitably phallic) “monument of words.” Even as the poem almost seems to comment on the excessiveness of the dog’s affective energy, a “strength of feeling ... above all human estimate,” it channels that affect into the consolidation of an archetype defined by self-restraint and self-enclosure. Dog poetry in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was not only devoted to constructing a stable idea of the Dog; it was also determined to attach the canine archetype to an idealized masculinity, just as it attached dogs themselves to “solitary male characters—wanderers, hunters, shepherds, hikers, and poets especially” (Laura Brown, *Homeless Dogs* 77). In his *Cynographia Britannica* (1800), the naturalist Sydenham Edwards made the connection explicit: the dog is “not only the intelligent, courageous, and humble companion of man,” but also “a true type of his mind and disposition”—in other words, a protector of man because he is a version of man himself (4-5).

One might expect eighteenth-century “lap-dog poems”—the second wave of dog poems described by Leonard in his preface—to be different: after all, in focusing on the lap-dog, they

ostensibly celebrate a more feminized and domestic version of canine-human love. And yet, they, too, work in service of a masculinized canine ideal, not by extolling the dog's heroism but by doing precisely the opposite: satirizing its devolved and degraded antithesis. As Laura Brown observes in *Homeless Dogs and Melancholy Apes*, her study of animal literature in the eighteenth century, most lapdog poems were written by men, and most were written with a normative intent: to establish the bond between lady and lapdog as a perverted form of intimacy. Many of these poems are quasi-cuckold narratives in which a spurned husband or male lover condemns the dog as his rival, as in Henry Carey's "The Rival Lap-Dog" (1713):

Corinna, pray tell me,
When thus you repel me,
When humbly I sue for a Kiss,
 Why *Dony*, at pleasure,
 May kiss without measure,

And surfeit himself with the Bliss? (Qtd. in Brown 72)

As Brown points out, the lapdog in these poems is figured not only as "an inappropriate or perverse sexual partner for the woman," but also as "a metonym for female sexuality": the poems target the interspecies bond partly because it creates an erotic and affective feedback loop in which the male speaker has no role (72). If the saintly function of the dog in Wordsworth's "Fidelity" is to create a bond between people—the Shepherd, the lost Traveller, and ultimately the reader—the "vile, selfish lapdog" creates instead what Chez calls a "closed circuit," removing its mistress from the heteronormative economy of erotic affect (*Victorian Dogs, Victorian Men* 70). And yet, precisely because they work so diligently to satirize a debased and

abnormal kind of dog, the end product of these lapdog poems ends up being similar to the end product of “Fidelity”: a solidified notion of the canine ideal.

Even as late as 1896, the lap-dog appears in print as a negative image of the species’ nobler instantiations. In “Dandy Dogs,” an exposé for *The Strand Magazine* laden with pictures of pampered pooches in elaborate outfits, William G. FitzGerald creates an analogy: just as dandies represent a degenerated version of masculinity, dandy dogs represent a degenerated version of the Dog itself. He writes:

When you hear a man say he has “led the life of a dog,” it is pretty safe to assume he has not been dandled in the lap of luxury for some time anterior to his plaint. But, surely, after the publication of this article, the popular significance of the metaphor will lose its force—if, indeed, the meaning be not completely reversed, so that inclusion in Dandy Dog-dom will represent the Alpha and Omega of epicurean splendour. (538)

FitzGerald explicitly bemoans the way dandy dogs are threatening to decouple “dog” itself from a stable metaphoric meaning (never mind the fact that “leading the life of a dog” seems to mean something very different from leading a life of selfless constancy). But he also makes it clear that his project is to reestablish the integrity of the overall type by exposing a denatured and manifestly abnormal sub-type. Unlike the selfless heroes of earlier dog poems, the debased epicureans in FitzGerald’s article do not die. But they are nonetheless sacrificed in another version of the same dialectic: dandy dogs are condemned so that the capital-D ‘Dog’ may live.

The dog poems of Barrett Browning and Michael Field are informed by these earlier models in complex and sometimes counterintuitive ways. They borrow both their essential scenario and their focus on the immoderacy of interspecies affection—its pleasures; its frustrations; its ambiguities; its excesses—from earlier lapdog poetry, but they frame it as a

representational problem rather than a moral one. They derive their moments of sudden loss from the vast archive of canine hagiographies that hinge on sudden death, but the loss becomes figurative rather than literal: it becomes the loss of the dog in memory, in poetry, in art. They even borrow the idea of “canine immortality”—the idea of the dog as a quasi-divine presence, halfway between spirit and flesh—from poems like “Fidelity”: Flush and Whym Chow are both the recipients of poetic beatification. But they also import this spiritual focus into a scene quite remote from the “savage” wilderness of “Fidelity”: the very scene of domestic companionship that the lap-dog poem denigrates. Where they diverge from all these poetic models is in their approach to the larger project of canine definition, which they resist by framing the dog as a being whose essence cannot ever be fully articulated in human language. In their poems, the species identity of the Dog is not the payoff of poetic appreciation; it is, rather, a specious byproduct of the allegorical mind, an artifact of our inability to live with animal alterity without trying to make sense of it—domesticate it—through instruments of comparison and categorization.

**“Leaning from my Human”: Representation and Identification in Elizabeth Barrett
Browning’s Flush Poems**

In 1889, the anticruelty activist Frances Power Cobbe opened her own anthology of dog poetry, *The Friend of Man—and His Friends, the Poets*, with the overt claim that poetry’s power—its epistemological role, even—is to locate virtues within the dog that “men of Science” cannot recognize (10). “Blinded over their microscopes,” they see “only so much bone and tissue”; the Poets, by contrast, “behold in those humble forms, Courage, Patience, Faithfulness

unto death and after death” (10). To corroborate her theory of poetic perception, Cobbe invokes the opening lines of Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s sonnet “The Poet”: “The poet hath the child’s sight in his breast, / And sees all *new*. What oftenest he has viewed / He views with the first glory.” Barrett Browning’s sonnet is a good complement to Cobbe’s argument; it describes not only the freshness of poetic observation but also its ability to see things denuded of “week-day false conventions”—to see things for what they truly are at the core, “primal types” (ll.6-8). Cobbe suggests, via Barrett Browning, that the job of the dog poet is to see the “primal type” of the species in the actions of the individual.

The irony of this invocation is that the sonnet Barrett Browning actually wrote about her dog, published in the same 1850 collection as “The Poet,” is considerably less self-confident and more self-conscious about what the poet is able to see in her companion. It is indeed a poem of sight, but it is also a poem of “bearded vision,” filled with images of both blindness and amnesia:

You see this dog. It was but yesterday
 I mused forgetful of his presence here
 Till thought on thought drew downward tear on tear,
 When from the pillow, where wet-cheeked I lay,
 A head as hairy as Faunus, thrust its way
 Right sudden against my face,—two golden-clear
 Great eyes astonished mine,—a drooping ear
 Did flap me on either cheek to dry the spray!
 I started first, as some Arcadian,
 Amazed by goatly god in twilight grove;
 But, as the bearded vision closelier ran
 My tears off, I knew Flush, and rose above
 Surprise and sadness,—thanking the true PAN,
 Who, by low creatures, leads to heights of love.

The opening line announces that the sonnet will be a clear, confident representation, correcting for the “forgetfulness” she experienced “but yesterday” (1-2). As Brown points out, the poet places the dog “at a comfortable and familiar distance in the composition of the scene of the poem,”—in the frame, in focus, in the traditional position of a lyric portrait (66). But this optic is

quickly overturned, becoming only the first of three different and equally unsatisfactory poetic gazes. Like a child refusing to sit still for his school picture, Flush leaps out of the frame and comes too close, just after the first line establishes focus: she recollects his head “thrust[ing] its way / Right sudden against my face” (5-6). Her vision blurs, and everything else with it: suddenly, he is not a coherent form but a collection of body parts moving and acting independently (“a head”; “two golden-clear / Great eyes”; “a drooping ear”); suddenly, he intrudes upon the gaze of the poet with his own inscrutable and magnificent eyes; suddenly, there is movement—an entangling of bodies and affects—that she can barely contain in a grammar of broken phrases. This chaotic poetic frame conveys much more intimacy than the phrase “You see this dog,” with its implied positioning of the speaker at a David Attenborough-esque observational distance. And yet, paradoxically, it also heightens Flush’s alterity: the closer he is, the hairier and less human he seems.

The last gaze, after the sonnet’s *volta*, seems to bring resolution to the epistemological and optical confusion of the poem’s middle section. The poet is finally able to stabilize an image of Flush through the upward, or inward, gaze of allegorical comparison—an imaginative gaze that places him and her in another realm entirely, a “twilight grove” where her “Arcadian” meets his “goatly god” (10-11). The phrase “bearded vision” aptly encapsulates the ambiguities of the poem’s middle section, in which his hairy body envelops her and blinds her the “closelier” he gets, blurring the boundaries of species, anatomy, and even gender. But it could refer just as easily to the “bearded vision” of Pan that she arrives at: a “vision” in the imaginative sense, the conceptual sense, that dries her tears by lending ontological coherence both to Flush and to the entire situation. She renders him abstract, replacing physical dog with metaphysical god, physical intimacy with imagined twilight encounter. She *interprets* him, and comes to believe in

her interpretation: the comparison begins in the contingent grammar of metaphor (“A head *as hairy as Faunus*”), but it ends as a confident declaration of identity: “I knew Flush, and rose above / Surprise and sadness—thanking the true PAN, / Who, by low creatures, leads to heights of love” (12-14).

The “heights of love” here are indisputable, but the poem’s verticality at this stage (see also: “I rose above / Surprise and sadness”) also suggests a problem: her metaphorical flight has taken her far beyond the scene of interspecies entanglement that she struggled to fit into poetic language just a moment ago. The “Arcadian grove” is not the couch where Flush thrusts himself into her frame of mind; it is a place of abstraction and solipsistic intellection, removed from everything that she struggled to recollect in the first place. She “thank[s] the true PAN” because the mythic figure has provided her with an apparatus of conceptual stabilization, but the poem is shadowed by the implication that this comparison—which seems like *anagnorisis*—is a false one, an instinctual and habitual way to withdraw from him rather than communing with him. Even before they completely intermingle, her mind is already racing to compare his head to the hairy head of “Faunus”; her mind is reaching for something that might keep him in that more comfortable middle distance, where he can be apprehended, individuated, and ultimately differentiated from herself. The *volta* reestablishes distance, and is itself a mechanism of that distance. The poem as a whole—poetry itself—ends up recapitulating the problem that produces it in the first place: she “muse[s] forgetful of his presence” all over again, the verb “muse” cannily connoting both poetic inspiration and abstract thinking (2).¹³

¹³ The poem’s dramatization of the failure of the allegorizing intellect resonates with one of the meditations in Colin Dayan’s *With Dogs at the Edge of Life*:

Dogs take their breath at the limits of the mental and the physical. There they live out their lives suspended between themselves and their humans. Their knowing has everything to do with perception, an unprecedented attentiveness to the sensual world. They unleash intelligibility beyond the human world, beyond the resources of rational inquiry. (98)

In *Flush: A Biography*, Virginia Woolf narrates the scene that inspires “Flush or Faunus” and further punctures its mythological epiphany. She describes Barrett Browning’s inner monologue as a series of escalating rhetorical questions, as though inflating an elaborate thought bubble:

She was lying, thinking; she had forgotten Flush altogether, and her thoughts were so sad that the tears fell upon the pillow. Then suddenly a hairy head was pressed against her; large bright eyes shone in hers; and she started. Was it Flush, or was it Pan? Was she no longer an invalid in Wimpole Street, but a Greek nymph in some dim grove in Arcady? And did the bearded god himself press his lips to hers? For a moment she was transformed; she was a nymph and Flush was Pan. The sun burnt and love blazed. But suppose Flush had been able to speak—would he not have said something sensible about the potato disease in Ireland? (38)

If, as Colin Dayan asserts, dogs embody a mode of perception and a way of thinking “beyond the resources of rational inquiry,” this scene in Woolf’s novel vividly demonstrates what Dayan means (*With Dogs at the Edge of Life* 98). Woolf ties Barrett Browning’s forgetfulness of Flush directly—and grammatically—to her “thinking,” which occurs both before and after his “hairy head was pressed against her”; it seems clear that the moment of transformative communion (“the sun burnt and love blazed”) takes place almost entirely in her mind (38). What Woolf adds to the scene is the punchline about what *Flush* might be thinking, which could indeed be one of Barrett Browning’s musings, but also utterly undermines them. The “potato disease” line is withering for a number of reasons. It mocks the pretentiousness of Barrett Browning’s “twilight grove” encounter, implicitly comparing its bookish erudition against a real-world crisis. It mocks the rarefied self-enclosure of the relationship itself, a form of intimacy that removes her, and Flush, from concern for and affective engagement with the lives of others (here the passage seems to echo the idea, in lapdog poetry, that lapdogs create a “closed circuit” [Chez 70]). It underscores the asymmetries of the lyric situation: the fact that the poet is lavishing language upon a creature that does not have the same language (Woolf’s line anticipates Wittgenstein’s

famous dictum that “if a lion could speak, we could not understand him”); the fact that her mind cannot help but impose an elaborate conceptual and allegorical apparatus upon him that has nothing to do with his (unknowable) subjectivity.

Most of all, though, Woolf’s reimagining of the scene of the poem brings out another asymmetry: the way that Flush helps Barrett Browning stabilize *herself*—her own feelings; her own identity—but the relationship cannot seem to work the other way around. The process of identification is one-sided, almost inescapably instrumental. Mirroring is a recurrent trope in Woolf’s novel; at several points, Barrett Browning looks at Flush and sees an image of herself reflected back. But when it happens, it almost always shades into the realization of difference:

Heavy curls hung down on either side of Miss Barrett’s face; large bright eyes shone out; a large mouth smiled. Heavy ears hung down on either side of Flush’s face; his eyes, too, were large and bright: his mouth was wide. There was a likeness between them. As they gazed at each other each felt: Here am I—and then each felt: But how different! Hers was the pale worn face of an invalid, cut off from air, light, freedom. His was the warm ruddy face of a young animal; instinct with health and energy. Broken asunder, yet made in the same mould, could it be that each completed what was dormant in the other? She might have been—all that; and he—But no. Between them lay the widest gulf that can separate one being from another. She spoke. He was dumb. She was woman; he was dog. (22)

The process of identification in this passage is similar to the allegorical comparison Barrett Browning achieves in “Flush or Faunus”: gazing at him in the middle distance, she is able to make sense of him by imposing a combination of similitude and difference. As in the poem, apprehending Flush in this way brings her out of a depressive solipsism; it even allows her to reconstruct a differentiated, rather than enveloping, version of the self. But the “gulf” is disturbing, dissatisfying, and always brings with it the possibility of projection: Woolf uses a series of rhetorical questions, once again, to display the poet’s enclosure in a universe of abstraction that places categories *onto* the dog but does not actually commingle with his own

way of experiencing the world. Barrett Browning uses him to arrive at a more stable idea of who she is, but the process—like “Flush or Faunus”—is shadowed by its own artifice.

This scene in *Flush* reflects the facts of the dog’s life: the historical Flush was given to Barrett Browning by her close friend and fellow dog-lover Mary Russell Mitford, and was offered explicitly as a kind of service animal who could ameliorate her fragile emotional and physical condition. In January 1841, Elizabeth Barrett was bedridden and hopelessly despondent—stricken by a mysterious illness that would plague her for over a decade, and still reeling from the death of her brother a year earlier (*Shaggy Muses* 12-13). She wrote to Mitford feeling “bound, more than I ever remember having felt, in chains, heavy and cold enough to be iron—and which have indeed entered into the soul”—echoing the language of her own translation of *Prometheus Bound* (Qtd. in Adams 13). Mitford felt strongly that a dog—the son of her own dog, also named Flush—would offer the young poet consolation, in part by acting as a mediator of her affections. Barrett hesitated to receive the dog at first, but “open[ed] my arms to your Flush” when she realized he could be a conduit to Mitford herself: “I must love him, coming from *you*—pretty or not—ears or not. The love is a certainty whatever the beauty may be—and if I am to see in his eyes, as you say, your affectionate feelings towards me, why the beauty must be a certainty too” (*Elizabeth Barrett to Miss Mitford* 70).

In *Shaggy Muses*, Maureen B. Adams’ account of Flush’s life (as well as the lives of several other literary dogs), Adams recapitulates the narrative of Flush as an agent of self-recovery; in her view, Flush was exactly the childlike creature, full of basic physical needs and unconditional affection, that the poet needed to shake loose of her emotional dependencies and become an autonomous person. Adams cites another moment of mirroring as her central example. At one point, the poet placed a looking glass before the dog and watched him growl at

what he saw. She interpreted the anger as confused jealousy: he saw another dog and could not help “shivering with rage & barking & howling & gnashing his teeth at the brown dog in the glass” (Qtd. in Adams 22). Eventually, however, he came to accept his own reflection; “To Elizabeth,” Adams writes, “this meant he had followed the precept to ‘know thyself’ and in doing so had achieved self-acceptance: ‘For Flush ... has learnt by experience what that image means ... & now contemplates it, serene in natural philosophy.’” Hence the following pronouncement in one of her letters, which Adams sees as an encapsulation both of an essential likeness between lapdogs and women in Victorian England (even if it is a statement of mutual differentiation) and of Flush’s reconstructive effect: “Why, what is Flush, but a lapdog? And what am I, but a woman? I assure you we never take ourselves for anything greater” (Qtd. in Adams 22).

Flush may have given Elizabeth Barrett a stronger sense of personal identity, in Adams’ estimation, but the letters also suggest that she was frequently anxious about his species identity; calling Flush “but a lapdog” was not always something she felt comfortable doing (nor was, for that matter, calling herself “but a woman”). Anthropomorphism runs rampant in her letters, which attest to several experiments (some of them thought experiments) in which she aimed to humanize him, or at least to trouble the boundaries of his animality. In one letter, she describes a successful attempt to teach him math: “It is amusing to see him stir his little head at ‘two’ & then correct himself—and still more amusing to observe how, at every unqualified success, he turns round & looks at Arabel for applause” (Qtd. in Adams 19). In another letter, she describes a somewhat less successful attempt to teach him to read, apparently by having him lick her when the correct letter was called: “My brothers laughed the tears into their eyes ... & were of opinion that if anybody else heard it, it might be used as straightforward evidence— (against not Flushie

but me) of a ‘non-compos-mentis’ case” (Qtd. in Adams 19). In yet another letter to her friend, distant cousin, and literary advisor John Kenyon, she attempts to deduce the existence of Flush’s soul almost as if she were composing a mathematical proof. She describes how Flush was told, by her sister Arabel—in English—that he would not get any cake until he brought her slippers. Apparently he understood the situation, and ran to get the slippers right away. Ergo, the poet writes, “Of course he had his cake. And of course he has a soul ... and surely a very complete soul, as souls go, may be proved on him” (*The Brownings’ Correspondence* vol.5, 220). She supports this conclusion with a mounting array of supplementary evidence: her suspicion “that he *understood language*”; “his moral sense ... (knowledge of good & evil)”; “his sense of property & justice”; “his sense of ornament (say Beauty)”; and “his susceptibility of praise apart from love ... & love apart from praise.” Believing her philosophical verdict to be correct, she pats herself on the back: “If I leave off verse to write in prose, it shall be a dissertation on the Souls of Dogs.”

And yet, she never wrote that dissertation on the Souls of Dogs, and her tongue-in-cheek declaration of canine ensoulment is shadowed by a meaningful expression of doubt. “As to the fact of [Flush’s] soul,” the poet writes further on in the letter, “I have long had a strong opinion on it. The ‘grand peut-être,’ to which ‘without revelation’ the human argument is reduced, covers dog-nature with a sweep of its fringes.”¹⁴ Replacing mock-Cartesian rationalism with Rabelaisian agnosticism, she alludes to the Renaissance thinker’s famous last words: “I go to seek a Great Perhaps.” After all her attempts to locate a soul within Flush, she leaves the

¹⁴ Barrett Browning appears to have gotten the ‘without revelation’ line from the Rev. Joseph Spence’s famous 1820 collection of anecdotes and sayings among the literati of the eighteenth century, where it is attributed to Pope: “Some of Plato’s and Cicero’s reasoning on the immortality of the soul are very foolish; but the latter’s is less so than the former’s ... Without revelation, it is certainly a grand *peut-être*” (Joseph Spence, *Observations, Anecdotes, and Characters, of Books and Men. Arranged with Notes by E. Malone* 43).

existence of that soul uncertain, consigned to the realm of hypothesis and speculation. And it is this metaphysical uncertainty—a serious uncertainty, visible beneath layers of playfulness—that pervades her poems about Flush, which stage the pleasure of recollection (“I mused forgetful of his presence”) but also the pain of misidentification.

“To Flush, My Dog,” an earlier tribute to her companion published in her 1844 *Poems*,¹⁵ stages this oscillation between recollection and misidentification in a much longer format, spreading it over the course of 20 six-line stanzas that continually find him and lose him—conjure him and forget him. The poem begins in two ways. It is framed by a lighthearted footnote that identifies Flush’s origin, breed, and pedigree: “This dog was the gift of my dear and admired friend, Miss Mitford, and belongs to the beautiful race she has rendered celebrated among English and American readers. The Flushes have their laurels as well as the Caesars,—the chief difference (at least the very head and front of it) consisting, according to my perception, in the bald head.” Yet the poem itself begins with a stanza that does everything to resist the identificatory clarity of that footnote, proving once again that cynogenealogy does little to reveal the true nature of its subject:¹⁶

Loving friend, the gift of one

Who her own true faith has run

Through thy lower nature,

¹⁵ When a friend cautioned Barrett Browning to exclude the poem from her 1844 collection, she would have none of it: “Leave out Flush!!—Why for love’s sake I could not do it,” she wrote. “The public must have an introduction to Flushie” (*The Brownings’ Correspondence*, vol. 8, 84.). After the poem’s publication, *The Westminster Review* gave “To Flush, My Dog” the best (and probably only good) review it would get, which amounted to a single line: “Miss Barrett may share the honours with Landseer. Every verse in the above is a study for the painter” (Qtd. in *The Brownings’ Correspondence*, vol. 9, 376).

¹⁶ Woolf’s *Flush* reverses this effect by making footnotes a realm of subtext in which what cannot be identified is allowed to lurk: as Anna Snaith observes, “The footnote, like the servants’ quarters, denotes relegation, the excess of the text, but also the inevitability of the unsaid—there is always another layer of relegation, whether textual or otherwise” (Anna Snaith, “Of Fanciers, Footnotes, and Fascism: Virginia Woolf’s *Flush*,” *Modern Fiction Studies* 48, no. 3 (Fall 2002): 620.).

Be my benediction said

With my hand upon thy head,

Gentle fellow-creature! (ll.1-6)

Kevin A. Morrison has noted that the speaker of “To Flush” celebrates the unique presence of her companion by oscillating between “tropes of difference and otherness” (“Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s *Dog Days*” 93). We can see that here: within the first line, Flush is both subject and object, “friend” and “gift”; over the course of the stanza, he transforms mercurially from a being of “lower nature” into a “fellow-creature.” The shifting impression we get of the dog himself is matched by the ambiguities of Barrett Browning’s metaphor for her own poetic action: a “benediction” spoken with her hand upon his head. In both Catholic and Anglican ritual, a “benediction” is a blessing performed with and around the sacrament of Holy Communion¹⁷; it is what Eve Sedgwick would call a “peripformative,” gesturing toward and making a space for the occurrence of a sacred, powerful linguistic action.¹⁸ In this case, that action is transubstantiation, the Word made Flesh (or Flush), which means that the “benediction” metaphor invests the poem with several serious implications: the idea that it will bring forth the dog—even resurrect him—in fleshly reality; the idea that poetry itself, uttered with her “hand upon his head,” has something of the power of sacrament; the idea that he, like Christ, is a being whose presence in and through that sacrament is not just metaphoric. And precisely because the term bears all these valences, it contains also, inescapably, a shred of doubt: what if this poetic action is powerless with respect to the creature it concerns?

¹⁷ See M. Burbach and N. D. Mitchell, “Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament,” *New Catholic Encyclopedia* 2nd ed, vol. 2, 275.

¹⁸ See Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “Around the Performative: Peripformative Vicinities in Nineteenth-Century Narrative,” in *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*.

“Be my benediction said”: the line has the quality of an objectless metaphysical command, like ‘let there be light.’ But one could also read it as a command directed at the dog—as the appeal for an identification, an ontological equivalence, between dog and “benediction.” *Be* the dog that I describe in the following poem. *Be* the ideal that I set forth. *Be* the form I delineate in verse. After a description of Flush’s fur in the second stanza that continues in that grammatical vein (“Flow thy silken ears adown / Either side demurely” [8-9]), the poet spends the third and fourth stanzas describing two different forces that “kindle” him into blazing presence. One is the sun:

Darkly brown thy body is,
Till the sunshine, striking this,
Alchemize its dulness, —
When the sleek curls manifold
Flash all over into gold,
With a burnished fulness. (13-18)

The other is her “stroking hand”:

Underneath my stroking hand,
Startled eyes of hazel bland
Kindling, growing larger, —
Up thou leapest with a spring,
Full of prank and curvetting,
Leaping like a charger. (19-24)

Like the sun, her “stroking hand”—a gesture that requires physical contact, movement, presence—has the power to make him spring to life. This would be an entirely positive notion,

were it not shadowed by the implication that what the poet is doing now—trying to recreate the dog’s liveliness through linguistic representation—cannot achieve the same effect. Poetry is not petting, nor does it possess the alchemical power of sunlight; she can hope for neither kindling nor canine photosynthesis. The repeated references to the tactile reciprocity of their relationship, a relationship that exists largely in and through touch, only underscore the sense that this “benediction” of hers is thinly immaterial—an empty incantation, directed away from the being it concerns. And even in the “stroking hand” stanza, the poet implies that what seems truly reciprocal is only masturbatory.

This sense of Flush as a presence teetering always on the verge of absence reflects some of the facts of his life: He was taken multiple times by local dog-nappers who held him at ransom (after one of these incidents she remarked, with a mixture of joy and lingering grief, “and thus was Flushie lost and won”¹⁹). It also pervades her poems about him, both of which are defined by the rhythm of ‘catch and release’ that we see in the first two lines of “Flush or Faunus”: “You see this dog. It was but yesterday / I mused forgetful of his presence here...” In the fifth stanza of “To Flush,” the poet describes his leaping with a set of imperatives that seem either to celebrate something already occurring or demand something that isn’t occurring yet:

Leap! thy broad tail waves a light;

Leap! thy slender feet are bright,

Canopied in fringes.

Leap—those tasseled ears of thine

Flicker strangely, fair and fine,

¹⁹ *The Letters of Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, ed. Frederic George Kenyon (New York: Macmillan, 1898), 208. This letter was also accompanied by a sketch of Flush in the margins—a representation of the dog she “lost and won.”

Down their golden inches. (25-30)

The first two “Leaps” are confident; the third, considerably less so, both grammatically (the exclamation demoted to a dash) and in terms of its content: ecstatic conjurations of “light” and “brightness” are followed by the deflated observation that his ears “flicker strangely.” Half the stanza describes upward movement, but it ends by coming “down.” And in a way, the word “flicker” perfectly captures both the presence of the dog himself and the poem Barrett Browning has written about him. Flush “flickers” in her letters: he is there and then not there, known and then unknown, familiar and then unfamiliar, solid and then liquid. The poem she writes in tribute “flickers” as well, representing him and then failing to represent him, making and then unmaking (or realizing it cannot make) the dog it depicts.

After the invocatory “Leaps,” the speaker of “To Flush” tries her hand at something like a canine ballad, moving from lyric simultaneity to a retrospective list of noble behaviors that distinguished him from other, lesser dogs. Ironically, this ends up being a chronicle of inaction more than action, mostly describing how Flush would lie next to Barrett Browning while she was sick: “Other dogs in thymy dew / Tracked the hares and followed through / Sunny moor or meadow,” she writes; “This dog only, crept and crept / Next a languid cheek that slept, / Sharing in the shadow” (49-54). Nonetheless, it is a strikingly different kind of representation than what we find in the first few stanzas—different partly because it pitches Flush into biography well before Woolf had the idea to do so, and partly because it becomes a mediated representation: the poet moves from direct address to a documentary mode framed by the phrase, “But of *thee* it shall be said” (37). This section of the poem provides arguably the most canonical account of Flush’s life with Barrett Browning, in two senses: first, because it perfectly mimics the tropes and master-narratives of British dog poetry, describing Flush as a creature of intrinsic constancy

who waited and waited against the urges of his vivacious, “sportive” animality. For so long, this creature of “leaps” lay perfectly, unnaturally still, satisfied if so much as “a pale thin hand would glide / Down his dewlaps sloping” (68-69). It is also canonical because it is, in fact, the portrait of Flush that has tended to enter the imaginary of those who write about him: Kuzniar, Adams, and even Woolf all see this poem in terms of its middle part, as a narrative tribute to the efforts of a unique kind of service animal.²⁰ The fact that the narrative portion of the poem is self-consciously framed as such, and sandwiched between strange and complex modes of lyric address, has tended to go unnoticed.

The third movement of the poem tries something different yet again, something that returns to the spiritual energy of the first stanza: after doubling down on the “benediction” conceit, this time with more of a sense of finality (“With my hand upon his head, / Is my benediction said, / Therefore, and for ever” [82-84]), the poet tosses narrative aside in favor of something more like prayer. Turning toward an indeterminate future, the poet expresses the simple wish that Flush will always have his rest, that flies and cats and cologne will keep from bothering him, that he will have the life he deserves:

Blessings on thee, dog of mine,

Pretty collars make thee fine,

Sugared milk make fat thee !

Pleasures wag on in thy tail —

Hands of gentle motion fail

Nevermore, to pat thee ! (91-96)

²⁰ Adams: “The poem’s major theme is Elizabeth’s appreciation of Flush’s loyalty in her darkest moments” (*Shaggy Muses* 30).

The poem begins with her imploring him to leap into vivacious being. Here, instead, she implores the universe: “sugared milk make fat thee!”²¹ Despite its hortatory structure, this last part of the poem provides a surprising amount of information about his daily life—what he liked, what he disliked, some of his daily behaviors. It is, in its own way, a representation that pretends not to be a representation. At the same time, the turn to overt cosmic appeal is undeniably a turn away from representation, whether through direct address or third-person narration. In the end, her poetic attention concentrates on—or diffuses into—the world around the dog, which is arguably better equipped to do him justice.

Before and after the poem resolves—or dissolves—itsself in prayer, it briefly becomes anthropological, making statements that compare human and dog nature. Before the prayer, the poet maintains that because he loves her more than most dogs love their masters (“better than his kind will do / Often, man or woman”), the love she expresses in return should necessarily be ‘better’ than typical human love: “Give I back more love again / Than dogs often take of men,— / Leaning from my Human” (88-90). After the prayer, she wonders aloud whether she is mocking him with it (“Mock I thee, in wishing weal?”) and laments the idea that his love—his nature—is always going to be more straightforward than hers: “Tears are in my eyes to feel / Thou art made so straightly” (110-111). Earlier, the poet had used metaphors of “flickering” to describe both the paradoxical nature of the dog himself (constant, yet defined by sudden bursts of animation) and the poem written in tribute to him, which “flickers” in its representational capacities. Here, she transitions to metaphors of linearity—straightness vs. “leaning”—that seem equally self-conscious in a poem so long and meandering, a poem that circles around its subject. Just as she

²¹ What is notable about this line, apart from the fact that Flush seems to have subsisted almost entirely on dessert, is that it takes up—while revising—a common trope of earlier dog poetry: willful, self-imposed canine starvation.

must “[Lean] from my Human” to love him as greatly as he deserves, the poem must wander—must err, even—if it is to capture any sense of his straightness. “Blessing needs must straighten too,” she writes, suggesting that only the last part of her appreciation, the part that does not pretend to represent him but unselfishly “[wishes] him weal,” is truly like him—or rather, truly doglike (112).

Barrett Browning’s poem thus attempts to approximate canine nature in several complex ways, without ever defining it completely; her primary method involves using the texture and structure of the poem itself—in its flickering stops and starts, its successes and failures, as well as its meandering—to gesture toward an impossibly straightforward way of being that is its dialectical opposite. That way of being is unrepresentable, yet the vicissitudes of representation—a series of asymptotic attempts to “lean” toward it—can come close. The result is a poem that ends up being about much more than identification or mirroring: rather than confirming and recentering the human’s identity, the dog requires the human to wander beyond identity—to “lean” from humanness itself.

Dog and Dogma: *Whym Chow: Flame of Love*

Flush was never Robert Browning’s best friend. Woolf’s novel gleefully narrates the mutual jealousy and distrust of dog and poet, subtly echoing the eighteenth century lap-dog poems pitting an entrenched canine companion against an aggressive human suitor. Early in the couple’s courtship, Flush could not help but bite him: “His vanity was exacerbated. His jealousy was inflamed. ... At last his teeth met in the immaculate cloth of Mr. Browning’s trousers!” (*Flush* 63). Later on, after they decamped to Italy, Browning took perverse pleasure in

completely shaving Flush's proud but flea-ridden coat. And yet, like seemingly every other dog that belonged to a Victorian author, Flush played an important role as a "symbolic go-between" in their erotic correspondence and throughout their marriage.²² In the decades that followed the deaths of Barrett Browning and Flush, moreover, Browning became an outspoken member of the Victorian anticruelty movement and a prominent defender of the lives of dogs and cats, remarking in 1875 that "I would rather submit to the worst of deaths, as far as pain goes, than have a single dog or cat tortured on the pretence of sparing me a twinge or two."²³ One of the byproducts of his affiliation with the anticruelty movement is "Tray—A Hero," a dog poem published in *Dramatic Idyls* (1879) that resonates strikingly with Barrett Browning's works about Flush, celebrating canine nature while presenting it as a representational and epistemological problem. At the beginning of the poem, the unnamed (and presumably medieval) speaker asks three bards to "sing me a hero" and "quench my thirst / Of soul" (1-2). The first two get into a petty argument about a knight named Olaf; the third wins the contest easily by launching into the tale of "a mere instinctive dog" (19) who saves a beggar child who has fallen into a nearby stream—and dives once again to save the child's doll. The crowd finds Tray's behavior laughably inexplicable; as one onlooker puts it, "Reason reigns / In man alone" (33-34). One scientist, however, "prerogated / With reason, reason[s]" a way to explain it:

"John, go and catch—or, if needs be,

Purchase—that animal for me!

²² When Browning wrote a particularly bold letter to her, she would invoke Flush to conceal (while still communicating) her equally strong response; he, in turn, used the dog to reassure her that the public would see their relationship "with Flush's eyes." Later on, when Flush was dognapped once again, Browning advised her not to pay the ransom, to which she responded: "I am your Flush, & he is mine" (Qtd in Adams, *Shaggy Muses* 37).

²³ Qtd. in Rod Preece, *Awe for the Tiger, Love for the Lamb: A Chronicle of Sensibility to Animals* 322. Browning was, at one point, the vice president of the Victoria Street Society, the first antivivisection organization in the country (founded by Cobbe in 1875).

By vivisection, at expense
Of half-an-hour and eighteenpence,
How brain secretes dog's soul we'll see!" (41-45)

Although callous vivisectionists are its ostensible target, along with their insistence that all animal behavior is governed by “instinct,” this poem is not merely an attack on their deprived and mechanistic approach to gathering knowledge. Like “To Flush,” it is a poem about knowledge itself, a poem whose ostentatiously circumlocutive structure—a crowd of speakers standing and speaking *around* the dog’s unaccountable behavior—establishes the animal’s internal essence as an impenetrable lacuna. Ironically, “thirst” *for* “soul” is precisely the desire it dramatizes, visible above all in the rabid requests of the scientist most likely to dismiss that soul’s existence.

As Leonard noted in 1893, dog poets in this period were indeed obsessed with “canine immortality.” But it is no coincidence that this focus on “canine immortality” would emerge in the decades that canine mortality became a prominent issue. Some of the most well-known anticruelty activists defended their position on theological grounds, with arguments asserting the necessity of extending the circle of Christian sympathy—extending Christianity itself—to the lower beasts. As Cobbe would complain in her loftily titled treatise *The Hope of the Human Race*, “To this hour, in all Romish countries, the sneer, ‘You talk as if the brute were a Christian,’ or the simple statement, ‘Non è Cristiano,’ is understood to dispose finally of a remonstrance against overloading a horse, skinning a goat alive, or plucking the quills of a living fowl” (260). As her emphasis on “Romish countries” makes clear, moreover, the targets of anticruelty rhetoric were not just men of science: after Pope Pius IX refused a British request to open a branch of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals in Rome on the grounds

that it was “a theological error to suppose that man owes any duty to the animal” (Cobbe, *Life of Frances Cobbe* II.489), the Catholic Church became a particularly obstinate, entrenched *bête noire*.²⁴

Cobbe’s own dog poetry anthology demonstrates how a collection of attempts to define the moral or metaphysical essence of the dog—a collection of attempts to ‘ensoul’ the dog poetically—would have been aligned with the principles and goals of the anticruelty movement.²⁵ Such an anthology could correct for the soullessness of vivisectionists as well as “the disciples of Darwin”; it could also correct for the Catholic Church’s similarly Cartesian view of animal life. In her autobiography, Cobbe describes a conversation with Cardinal Henry Manning, a Catholic leader who actually supported her cause, on “the Catholic doctrine of the origin of Souls” (II.494). The Cardinal immediately responded “that each [Soul] is a distinct creation of God”, but could not locate these “Souls” in the bodies of animals (II.494). In Cobbe’s view, the canon of dog poetry, attesting to centuries of dog-worship, could do a much better job than even the most like-minded theologians at identifying the soul of canine kind—not the individual souls of dogs, but a species-soul or moral essence. And yet, the most complex work of dog poetry to emerge in the wake of anticruelty, and to emerge from authors who considered themselves antivivisectionists, is a collection of lyrics that soundly rejects both the opposition between Catholicism and anticruelty and the imperative to identify—i.e. differentiate—the souls of nonhuman creatures. Michael Field’s *Whym Chow: Flame of Love* explicitly maps the central

²⁴ For a rich account of the tensions and debates between the Catholic Church and British anticruelty, see M.A.R. Toker, “Cruelty to Animals and Theology,” *Humane Review* IV (April 1903). Annie Besant, another prominent anticruelty activist, uses the phrase *bête noire* to refer to the Catholic Church in her book *Vivisection* (8).

²⁵ Another collection born of this alignment is *Dogs and Their Doings*, an 1872 anthology of representative anecdotes edited by the Rev. Francis Orpen Morris—also the author of *Difficulties of Darwinism* (1869)—that is explicitly dedicated to the anticruelty movement.

tenets of Catholic theology onto both the dog itself and the human-canine relationship; it also resists the logic of definition at every turn.

Whym Chow is a strange book, made all the more strange by the story surrounding its publication. As is well known, ‘Michael Field’ was the *nom de plume* of the lesbian aunt/niece couple and decadent poets Katherine Bradley and Edith Cooper. The eponymous Chow that the collection celebrates—or rather, mourns—was a birthday gift from Bradley to Cooper on January 26, 1898, and was named after a family friend, Edward Whymper (Kuzniar 157). When the dog died in 1906,²⁶ the Fields were distraught; according to biographer Emma Donoghue, they believed that “the intensity of [Whym’s] love had caused his life to be ‘consumed’ after only eight years, and that he was now their ‘guardian angel’ or ‘spirit guide’” (122). One response to the dog’s death was *Whym Chow*, a collection of 30 lyrics that they composed shortly after but refrained from publishing until Katherine decided to put out a limited edition of 27 copies for their friends in 1914, a year after Edith had died of cancer—and only a few months before Katherine would die as well. The poems were bound in luxurious, red-gold terracotta suede that was apparently chosen to mimic the look and feel of the dog’s fur; Marion Thain has memorably called it “a kind of textual taxidermy.”²⁷

²⁶ Apparently he became morbidly ill on the same day he was given to Cooper, eight years later (January 26, 1906). Donoghue writes:

[Katherine] went home that night and found Whym Chow walking into walls. Eight years old, he was suddenly blind and in great pain, evidently ‘stricken of some awful brain disease.’ She and Edith nursed him round the clock, and wrote to [their friend and illustrator Charles] Ricketts of their terror. Two days later, they decided to have Whym put down. Katherine wanted it to be done with one clean bullet, but guns were forbidden in Richmond; after six hours of bungled efforts with sleeping draughts, he died. By terrible luck, it was just then that they received Ricketts’ answer to their last letter; he told them he was sick of their ‘morbid preoccupation’ with the petty illness of their spoiled pet. ‘Well may he be jealous,’ Edith raged; ‘Michael & I love Chow as we have loved no human being’” (*We Are Michael Field* 120).

²⁷ See Marion Thain, “*Michael Field*”: *Poetry, Aestheticism and the Fin de Siècle* 198.

They also responded to the dog's death by converting to Catholicism in 1907, which their shared journal narrates as an event directly precipitated by Whym Chow's "sacrifice." The journal describes how they met a priest in Edinburgh and spoke of their "joy in Benediction," to which he responded that "it was nothing beside the Mass"; how they started to read missals until it became a daily routine ("my natural food"); and how, finally, they went to Mass and found it to be a profoundly unshackling experience:

At last, on Dec. 2nd, I resolve—we resolve—our apprehension is made an act. We go together to Mass. On Saturday evening we had been as mad, and without hope, blaspheming our fellowship with reproaches—the very chaff of Hell. We went to Mass, and the prison walls of our life fell as we prostrated ourselves before the one perfect symbol, and all we love was with us, included and jubilant (*Works and Days* 271).²⁸

This moment of conversion is followed by a paragraph that names its two greatest catalysts, Sir James Frazer's *The Golden Bough* and Whym Chow:

Fraser's [sic] book prepared my mind for this pure subsuming of sacrificed divinities under the one divine sacrifice; that we should offer by them 'panem sanctum vitae aeternae et calicem salutatis perpetuae.' My little beloved, my little Chow, by his death, brought me to worship fully—because he brought me to realise the need of an act of Sacrifice in making the heart a Spirit, the will a creative sufficiency. (271-273)

Oscillating between first person ("I/me") and third person ("Michael"), singular and plural, the journal attests to the paradoxical and irreducible identity of the Fields themselves. But this selection also begins to show us what they saw in both Catholicism and Whym Chow—what they saw *overlapping* between dog and dogma, such that one could lead them to the other. They

²⁸ This entry is written by Edith.

celebrate the possibility of “all we love” being included in “the one perfect symbol”; they refer to the necessity of “subsuming sacrificed divinities under the one divine sacrifice.” The great theme of this account is the mysterious coexistence of multiplicity in unity, which is also the great theme of *Whym Chow*.

As the Fields’ interest in “Benediction”—elsewhere described as “the Bacchic joy of Benediction”—might suggest, many of the tropes and structures of Barrett Browning’s Flush poems make their way into *Whym Chow*. The poems emphasize the animation of the dog, presenting recurring images of leaping fur, spasmodic “joyance” (p.14),²⁹ and liquid gold. Lyric XXIV restages the scenario of “Flush or Faunus”—the human finds her face suddenly “pressed / In thy wondrous fur” (49)—and redefines it as a kind of “Confessional,” “not for penitence, for guilt; / But for happiness or jar” (47). Like “To Flush,” the collection ends in prayer, with the speaker directly asking “God of the Living Waters” to ensure that “my little Chow’s upwelling love” is “in liberal current ever” (58). And like both Flush poems, the collection begins in a mode of poetic self-effacement, even self-negation, lamenting an inexorable misfitting between its anthropomorphic language and its zoomorphic subject. “I CALL along the Halls of Suffering,” it begins, describing “grand vaults” the poet must “traverse” in order to “hear / The patter of thy feet, little Chow” (9). Yet that very disjunction between the loftiness of poetic discourse and the littleness of doghood leads to a moment of acknowledged misapprehension, of representational absence:

Forth, Forth! Away! He is not of these Halls—

No motion of him there. Whym Chow no sound:

²⁹ An archaic term Barrett Browning actually uses to describe Flush’s way of being in one of her letters (*The Brownings’ Correspondence* vol.5, 236).

His ruby head shall never strike their walls,

And nowhere by a cry shall he be found. (9)

“Do words say everything? Can words say anything? Do not words destroy the symbol that lies beyond the reach of words?” (*Flush* 37). So wonders the fictionalized Barrett Browning in Woolf’s *Flush*; so wonders the real Barrett Browning in her poems about him. So wonder the Fields as well, it seems, and perhaps for similar reasons: Whym Chow is acknowledged to be “beyond the reach” of poetic representation because his presence will always exceed it. They construct a lavish, encrusted mausoleum and announce its echoing vacancy. Even the materiality of the book itself calls attention to its own perverse, frozen approximation of the living, breathing creature.

The poets suggest the failure of their representational apparatus most vividly in Lyric XX, where they lament that Whym Chow is “doomed” to live on as a constellation among other celestial archetypes:

DOOMED little wanderer, doomed to move
As Lion or Bear in heaven above
O little star, our woe!...
Thou wert not of a god en-starred,
When on thee fell that fortune hard
To wander here as in the sky
Those shining beasts that no more die,
But in constellation spin.
Thou wert mortal to begin
An endless movement so! (38)

As the poets admit in the first line, these celestial archetypes “move”: they revolve around the earth in “endless movement,” shining down upon the human world. It would certainly seem to be a kind of honor for Whym Chow to be among “those shining Beasts that no more die,” as immutable and iconic as a Zodiac sign or a Jungian archetype. But that very immutability is framed by the poets as an unfortunate (and inexorable) fate: the movement of these figures is

stasis in comparison to the movement of Whym Chow during his life, which they figure constantly—here and in other lyrics—using the language of liquidity, embodiment, and warmth. Whym Chow was a flame-like presence; they want to stave off his transformation into a poetic and conceptual abstraction, a figure of thought rather than a figure of life. In the lyric, they imagine themselves literally holding him in “our arms” while his spirit tries to float away into the cosmos, “breaking through / Our protection from the great / Doom of thy unearthly fate” (38). The problem at the core of *Whym Chow* is that they find it difficult not to facilitate this ascension themselves, through the very act of writing about him. Like Barrett Browning, they cannot seem to resist transforming him into an elevated allegorical figure—sometimes even a similar one: just as their predecessor reached for Pan, they reach for Dionysus, a god who seems apt both in his boundary-crossings and his liquidity.³⁰ But these figurations are always haunted by their own abstraction, their own ways of extracting the dog from everything that made him special in the terrestrial world. The poets continually ask: How is what they’re doing different from turning him into a “constellation” after all?

And yet, *Whym Chow* does not just approach this problem of figuration through authorial self-effacement. The paradoxical project of the text is that it tries to avoid reducing Whym Chow to a constellation-like figure not just by questioning its own allegorical propensities, but also by extensively elaborating another form of allegory altogether: a sincere comparison between Whym Chow and the Holy Trinity. In *Whym Chow*, the essence of the dog defies poetic representation precisely because it is, in the most dogmatic (albeit blasphemous) sense, a Trinitarian paradox. This idea proceeds directly from the way the Fields perceived their relationship with Whym Chow when he was still alive. In *Works and Days*, Edith reports that

³⁰ Like Whym Chow, Dionysus in Euripides’ *The Bacchae* is a figure of fire, liquidity, and intercession.

“for years I have worshipped the Holy Trinity,” and she connects the concept to the dog explicitly when she avows that “closer than ever was this worship when Whymmie died” (271). The basis of this link becomes clear when she mentions that there are two Trinities: on the one hand, “the little earthly Trinity, Whym Chow, Hennie and Michael” (“Hennie” referring to Edith; “Michael” referring to Katherine); on the other hand, “the ineffable Divine Trinity—that symbol all creators must adore, who attain to its fastness of Life” (271). *Whym Chow* describes this “earthly Trinity” overtly in its expressions of triangulated (and interspecies) affection; it is a relationship in which the dog, mediating between the Father-like Katherine and the Son-like Edith, approximates something like the Holy Spirit. In a neo-Platonic way, their “earthly Trinity” constitutes a terrestrial, less-than-perfect version of the “Divine Trinity” and its ontological conflations: the metaphor bespeaks a desire for their three souls to be consubstantial. And yet, the metaphor does not just describe the relationship between the two humans and their dog; with even more frequency and fervor, the lyrics apply Trinitarian imagery to Whym Chow himself. The soul of the dog is not just a “Great Perhaps”; it is a sacred mystery.³¹

The fifth lyric, titled “Trinity,” makes Whym Chow’s Holy Spirit-like mediation abundantly clear:

I DID not love him for myself alone:
 I loved him that he loved my dearest love.
 O God, no blasphemy
 It is to feel we loved in trinity,
 To tell Thee that I loved him as Thy Dove
 Is loved, and is Thy own,
 That comforted the moan
 Of Thy Beloved, when earth could give no balm
 And in Thy Presence makes His tenderest calm.

So I possess this creature of Love’s flame,
 So loving what I love he lives from me;

³¹ The term “mystery” repeats throughout *Whym Chow*, recalling both Catholic theology and a famous phrase Darwin used to describe the origin of species: “that mystery of mysteries” (*On the Origin of Species* 11).

Not white, a thing of fire,
 Of seraph-plumèd limbs and one desire,
 That is my heart's own, and shall ever be:
 An animal—with aim
 Thy Dove avers the same...
 O symbol of our perfect union, strange
 Unconscious Bearer of Love's interchange. (15)

The dove; the flame; the idea that Whym Chow lives (or proceeds) “from” Katherine and Edith as the “unconscious” medium of their love for each other: the Holy Spirit references pile up in an ostentatious display of metaphoric identification. The speaker even goes so far as to argue that it is “no blasphemy” against God “to feel we loved in trinity.” There is the ever-so-subtle implication, however, that it might be a blasphemy against Whym Chow himself, precisely because of his animality. The poem gains an air of hesitance for the first time when it invokes the word “animal” and compares him to “Thy Dove,” a comparison that ends with an ellipsis and is interrupted by a dash. Suddenly, the speaker seems to be grappling with a problem: the dove, less a real animal than a metaphoric one, has intention (“with aim”); whether Whym Chow has intention is impossible to ascertain. The vocabulary of the last two lines shifts ever so slightly from telling a story of true identification (Whym Chow ‘is’ the Holy Spirit, the same way Flush ‘is’ Pan) to telling a story of projection, of naming that could be going against the indiscernible will of the dog. We see, held in apposition, the words “symbol,” “strange,” and “unconscious,” implying a lack of certainty.

“Trinity” begins by establishing him as the Holy Spirit; it ends by wondering whether he really *is* the Holy Spirit, which leads into the question that begins the (suggestively unnamed) lyric VI: “WHAT is the other name of Love? Has Love another name?” (16). As it turns out, Love (or Whym Chow) does, at least, have another possible Trinitarian identity: lyric VI stages a scenario that elevates him to the level of “Godhead” (16). Whym Chow approaches “his

Creator's feet above" and somehow fulfills a "grievous want" for joy and vivacity. The second stanza describes the Father's response without actually repeating it verbatim:

"Response, my Answer" was God's cry.

O gift of joy to hear

The Godhead's welcome clear.

As heart to heart the vast

Desires were gathered fast—

Love as the source of Love, Love the Reply. (16)

In Hebrew scripture, the name "Yahweh" is not a name but a placeholder for the unnameable.

The way the poet inserts "Response, my Answer" in place of God's response performs the same anti-identifying move: what God utters is akin, in its ineffability, to the identity of God himself.

And Whym Chow is akin to the Creator precisely because he, too, encapsulates this dual paradox, irreducible to language both in that his nature is unnameable and his "Responses" are not speech. The third stanza of the poem rhapsodizes about these "Responses":

Response! O little Love, O little Chow!

O Answer! What is Love's most answering bliss?

What is Love's happiness alert but this

To welcome? And thy rage of welcome how

Should words tell dim—

What some might call the dog's "muteness" becomes, in this equation, his most divine quality: the fact that he 'responds' not with "dim" words but with a booming "rage of welcome." In "The Animal that Therefore I Am," Derrida remarks that the way to get past a logocentric worldview that writes off the animal because it is linguistically impoverished—the kind of worldview that

has produced a term like “animal” in the first place, grouping together under a single name all creatures that are not man—“would not be a matter of ‘giving speech back’ to animals but perhaps of acceding to a thinking, however fabulous and chimerical it might be, that thinks the absence of the name and of the word otherwise, as something other than a privation” (126). In *Whym Chow*, “the absence of the name and of the word” is not only “something other than a privation,” but precisely what brings the dog close to the position of God Himself.

One could say that the Trinity of Whym Chow is determined by three M’s, all of which are qualities both animal and divine. He is like the Holy Spirit in his mediation; he is like the Father in his muteness. And he is like the Son in his *mortality*, as both the emphasis on his earthly “sacrifice” in their journal and the poems in *Whym Chow* attest. Lyric XIII (“My Cup”) describes how the dog “hast drunk the bitter cup,” a “sacramental” and sacrificial grail that kills him so that his spirit, and their love, might be eternally free (28).³² Lyric XVII (“Created”) depicts him as the exemplar of embodiment in general, demonstrating the fact that

all that is created bears

A limit scarcely to be borne,

Till out of it, though unawares,

A Spirit of new life is drawn (33)

Activists like Cobbe found dogmatic Catholicism (as well as high-church Anglicanism) irreconcilable with anticruelty largely because of its strict dualism of soul and body: if animals did not have souls, their suffering could not truly be considered suffering. As Gauri Viswanathan has noted, this “crisis of belief in Christianity” is what led several of the most famous anticruelty activists to seek systems of belief and moral reasoning—foremost among them, Theosophy—that

³² The Fields tried to euthanize him several times with sleeping draughts, ultimately to no avail.

flattened the distinction and focused on the body in pain (“Have Animals Souls?” 444). Here, at least, the Fields keep Catholic dualism alive, not only asserting that Whym Chow is a “Spirit” trapped within the limitations of an earthly body,³³ but comparing his suffering to the pain of Christ.

Lyric VII, however, which directly follows the poems that compare Whym Chow and Holy Spirit (V) and Whym Chow and Godhead (VI), is the poem that offers the most compellingly intricate identification between the dog and Jesus Christ—or, rather, a distinctly Christlike *humanity*. Linking back to VI, it begins in the space of God the Father, the void of creation: “It is so old and deep a thing, / The being fond of animals—so far / It goes back to when earth was just beginning” (18). Here, however, animals are depicted not as proxies (or interlocutors) for the Creator himself but as creations that emerge alongside man, filling a deep-seated “loneliness of soul” (18).³⁴ The last stanza explains why we must seek to place ourselves on their level, why theirs is a state we must emulate:

God in His spaces overhead
Seeks not the powers and angels for His heart:
From these in passion ever is He parted,
And with our mortal ignorance hath part.
Our wild, divining simpleness entrances,
And in the solace of our upward glances
The truth of His own mystery prevails.
So is it when the creatures of the Earth
What was and shall be in ourselves reveal
From eyes that pierce us not: where love avails
To grasp what apprehension in its dearth
Can never judge. Oh, as our God, to feel
A being from below reach where in vain
Those of a race more equal scarce attain:

³³ Which aligns them, in a way, with Anna Kingsford, “the leading antivivisectionist among the Theosophists,” who converted to Roman Catholicism before pursuing a more idiosyncratic mixture of occult belief systems (Viswanathan 444-445).

³⁴ In “Why Look at Animals?”, John Berger writes: “With their parallel lives, animals offer man a companionship which is different from any offered by human exchange. Different because it is a companionship offered to the loneliness of man as a species” (6).

In sacred revelation to be caught
By blessed eyes even yet with chaos fraught! (18-19)

In Lorenzo Monaco's 14th century painting "The Intercession of Christ and the Virgin," Christ appears as the fulcrum in a triangle of gazes: humans look to him; he looks up at God. Lyric VII of *Whym Chow* presents a similar configuration with different players: like Christ, the dog is an intercessor between humanity and divinity who bridges realms through eye contact. Man looks down at the animal. The animal, in its "divining simpleness," looks up—not into man ("from eyes that pierce us not"), but *at* a being that exceeds its "apprehension" and judgment. Thus, the poem invites us to live by the animal's example: to look up at God in the way that animals look up at us (and in a way that, furthermore, defies the downward and discriminatory logic of empiricism). It is in this way that their meekness, their mortality, "entrances" in two senses of the word, commanding our attention and offering a path to the divine.

Accounts of the nature or character of dogs from the mid-Victorian period often repeat the same phrase: "Man is the god of the dog."³⁵ One attributes it to Burns;³⁶ another attributes it to Bacon;³⁷ others leave it unattributed³⁸ in a way that suggests that it is a cliché of indeterminate origin (much like the dog itself). In this lyric, at least, the Fields seem to express the same basic analogy, aligning the human above the dog with the God above the human. But *Whym Chow* presents several challenges to this assumption—to any worldview, for that matter, that would place the dog definitively 'lower' than the human in a species hierarchy or chain of being. Even in the arrangement that implicitly places him below humans, *Whym Chow* is still more divine—

³⁵ "I have Own God called Master," claims the canine narrator in Rudyard Kipling's story "Thy Servant a Dog" (102).

³⁶ Youatt, *The Dog* 10.

³⁷ John Massie, "Dogs of Literature," *Temple Bar: A London Magazine for Town and Country Readers* 61 (April 1881), 476.

³⁸ Broderip, "Recreations" 60.

divine in the sense that Christ is divine, in the sense that he quite literally embodies a meekness and an orientation toward the heavens that can redeem humans if they emulate it. Furthermore, he is like God not only in that he is like Christ but in that he is like every other person of the Trinity, and like the Trinity itself in his simultaneous occupation of multiple ontological states. In their seamlessly interconnected form, the poems enact cycles of transfiguration: dog as mediator becomes dog as creator becomes dog as created thing. In the most complete and exuberant way possible, *Whym Chow* reverses the cliché: “Dog is the God of Man.”

Viewing the poems through her psychoanalytic lens, Kuzniar maintains that their stained-glass ornateness is an overcompensation for the dog’s loss. The loss of the dog is such an acute and jarring event, so difficult to translate into language, that it often leads to attempts at “resurrection in signs” (again, the Christ parallel is clear) (143). Even if “language is always haunted by its own uncertainties and imprecision, especially with regards to a species who does not share it,” Kuzniar writes, “at least in bringing a dead pet back to life through signs, language can seem to triumph” (143). In its linguistic exuberance and its constant attempts to make the dog ‘present’ to the reader, she sees *Whym Chow* as what Kristeva would call “a veritable *Verneinung* or negation of loss: I have not lost my pet, for it is recovered through poetry” (156). She is not wrong. But it would be one thing if the Fields had simply mined Catholicism for a suitably decadent aesthetic to apply to the vicissitudes of interspecies affection. It is entirely another matter that they seem to have found, in Catholicism, the right aesthetic as well as the right *ontology*—a concept of the being of God Himself that corresponds with their concept of Whym Chow (and vice versa).

Kuzniar aligns Kristeva’s *Verneinung* with another German coinage: Walter Benjamin’s *Überbenennung* or ‘over-naming.’ The tragedy of attempts to resurrect the lost pet through

language, she says, is often that this language “needlessly, superfluously, and disproportionately squanders itself . . . If nature is solemnly mute, then human speech immoderately babbles” (26). Yet in *Whym Chow*, ‘over-naming’ is not just a linguistic quality located on the surface of poetic form; it is a quality that speaks to the multifarious and metamorphic nature of the dog as the Fields conceive it, a nature defined by the simultaneous occupation of multiple modes of being. In Lyric XV, the speaker expresses a wish to be “present in life’s mystery,” and fulfills it with a stanza that encapsulates the “mystery” of Whym Chow’s “presence”:

O Now, Now!
Little Love, God’s Moment, bright,
Ever with us, yearning bright
In thine every leap of light,
In thy spring of instant glance,
Clear from ebb of circumstance,
Animate from birth to birth.
Of Life’s Moment new on earth.
Thou art here as sparkling sun
In thy presence, brightest One. (31)

Whym Chow is “One”; Whym Chow is also *many*, as the stanza suggests in several ways: with the word “sun,” which situates him in the clouds but also connotes the Son of Man; with the dual appellations “God’s Moment” and “Life’s Moment”; with the implication that he is a being situated both outside “the ebb of circumstance” and in the temporal world. “One” is the word that ends the stanza, but the predominant idea that runs through it is simultaneity—the momentariness of Whym Chow, the inapprehensible immediacy of his presence. It is in this way

that he is truly flamelike (or a “gemlike flame” à la Pater): because, like fire and God, he is an overabundant force whose flickering presentness cannot be grasped. It can only be looked at with wonder, with “eyes that pierce [it] not” (18). In some ways, the images of Whym Chow as a being both of multiplicity and of inapprehensible light recall the end of Dante’s *Paradiso*, when the pilgrim’s eyes drink in an “eternal Light” that is both the Trinity—“I saw three circles, of three colors and one circumference”—and the ceaseless movement of love itself (XXXIII.115).

Why render Whym Chow divine? Why exalt him to the point of unknowability? A cynical explanation would be that *Whym Chow* is the logical extension (or *reductio ad absurdum*) of bourgeois Victorian pet-worship. If, as Harriet Ritvo has argued in *The Animal Estate*, Victorian dog fanciers operated under the implicit assumption that “keeping a well-bred dog metonymically allied its owner with the upper ranges of society,” perhaps on some level the Fields transpose the same metonymic logic into a more religious key, sacralizing (or even sacrificing) the dog so as to bring themselves, by extension, closer to the divine. More likely, *Whym Chow* is rooted in another, more urgent metonymic association: the connection between anticruelty and feminism. Viswanathan and other scholars have described how the suffering of animals was aligned with the suffering of women (and the suffering of workers) in the rhetoric of activists like Cobbe, Annie Besant, and Anna Kingsford. They aligned animals and women not only because Victorian society made the metonymic connection *a priori* in several ways (the domesticated animal, and especially the lapdog, was also a denizen of the domestic sphere), but because the vivisected animal could serve as a more visceral, immediate, and galvanizing stand-in for the suffering of women—hence, Kingsford “cast women as horses being flogged and saw their condition grotesquely embodied in the figure of an animal bound to a table by straps, its flesh prey to the vivisector’s knife” (Viswanathan 446). More importantly, combatting the

suffering of animals demanded the exploration of belief systems (such as Theosophy) that dissolved species as well as gender hierarchies, allowing for “a blurring of sexual and other biological differences” (445).

Perhaps *Whym Chow* is born of the same impulse, an impulse to reconceive the animal in a way that necessarily entails reconceptions of gender, sexuality, religion, and other forms of difference. Derrida and Cary Wolfe, among others, have discussed how the differentiation of animals from humans—“the fundamental sacrifice of *nonhuman animals*”—undergirds all forms of differentiation *among* humans.³⁹ If *Whym Chow* does any kind of ideological work on humans’ behalf, it is to reverse that process by replacing one substitutionary “sacrifice” with another: Whym Chow “sacrificed,” rendered blissfully and divinely incoherent, not for our sins but for the rigidity of our selves. The book is not about a vivisected dog, but it is about a totemic dog whose irreducible nature—a nature that bursts through the boundaries of species categories; a nature that defies differentiation by embracing conflation—reflects back on, and perhaps gives its readers a way to rethink, the identity-in-relationship of its authors.⁴⁰

Then again, the paradox of *Whym Chow* is that it renders the dog divine while insisting, like Barrett Browning, on the failure of its representational mechanisms. Any argument that defines it in metaphoric or metonymic terms must grapple with the fact that it rejects its own capacity for metaphor or metonymy, even as it uses both in overabundance:

O Chow, the glory and the gold-furred state

That smote beyond the strength of any verse,

³⁹ Cary Wolfe, *Animal Rites: American Culture, the Discourse of Species, and Posthumanist Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 101. Wolfe goes on to note that the pet, as a “humanized animal,” is a creature “we exempt from the sacrificial regime” that only ends up reaffirming it. Precisely because it is the “sole exception” to the logic of absolute differentiation between animals and humans, it proves the rule (104).

⁴⁰ Which might explain Bradley’s decision to circulate the book among their friends after Cooper’s death and in anticipation of her own: Whym Chow (the “divine Trinity”) as a testament to Michael Field (the “earthly Trinity”).

And all its pride in gold, even to rehearse—
The state that surged around a daily chance,
If thy Beloved should enter: in thy Dance
A worship; in thy light, a universe. (17)

Whym Chow's "state" exceeds "the strength of any verse" because it is like a "dance"—because, like nothing less than the Trinity, he is one and many things at the same time. But this passage also depicts another dance, a dance of epistemological (as opposed to ontological) oscillation: the dance of the poet herself. It begins with "O Chow," the gesture of poetic identification *par excellence*. It moves, just as quickly, into a negation of poetry in general. But then, in response to the dog's own "surge" of activity, it stages (or "rehearses") a surge of signifiers: the words "dance," "worship," "light," "universe" explode around the ostensibly un-representable canine. This is the same dance rehearsed by "Flush or Faunus": a confident expression of lyric identification ("You see this dog"), followed by an expression of imaginative failure ("I mused forgetful of his presence"), followed by a surge of metaphor that implicitly admits its own uncertainty ("The true PAN"). This is also a dance that implies an epistemology, a way of relating to animals conceptually that sees their irreconcilability to human language—what Derrida calls "the absence of the name and of the word"—not as a problem, but as the occasion for an agonistic creative process that is also a form of worship, a poetics of flickering efficacy that follows their lead.

"Eros is lack," writes Anne Carson, because "its activation calls for three structural components—lover, beloved and that which comes between them," both in the sense of facilitation and obstruction (*Eros the Bittersweet* 16). In many ways, Whym Chow is "that which comes between" the Fields. He mediates; he completes their "earthly Trinity." The mystery of

his nature is something that obstructs, creating in their “perfect union” some of the friction (or what Carson calls “lack”) that makes it erotic in the first place (*Whym Chow* 15). Yet the erotics of *Whym Chow* lies not only in the way the dog “comes between” the Fields but in the way language “comes between” the poets and their subject, creating a different kind of “lack.” Lyric XXV repeats a simple, direct refrain:

I want you with your resolute, fine jaw
Snapped down to hold one love, one love no more,
Not mine, but hers we love: your glance, the spark
Prometheus stole as fire,
...
I want you, when to guard our door you rushed,
In whirlwind loyalty;
...
I want you with the gold-set, fearful stress
With which you lived to your one blessedness.
...
I want you in your thousand ways of love—
The rapture of your welcome (50-52)

“I want you,” the speaker repeats, and what she wants is not just the dog himself: she wants a poetry that might capture him in his manifold aspects, a poetry that is impossible to achieve. The repetition alone makes it clear that she finds herself mute (or as Kuzniar might say, “babbling”) before a creature whose muteness speaks volumes. And yet, just as imagined absence once assisted in the definition of the dog, representational absence—the “lack” that defines *Whym Chow*—assists here in the creation of a poetry that is both erotic and interspecific, that is erotic precisely in and through its interspecificity. Like Barrett Browning’s “benediction,” *Whym Chow* creates a space of reverence for the profound, almost divine unfamiliarity of *Canis familiaris*. It reminds us that *Canis familiaris* itself, like any name, is an erotic and poetic construct: based in faith, incomplete in its mediations, and metaphoric despite its desire to be otherwise.

Chapter 2:

To Err is Canine: The Zoopoetics of Metonymy in *Oliver Twist* and *Shirley*



Fig. 1: Edwin Landseer, *Her Majesty's Favorite Pets*, 1838

In 1837, a young and newly crowned Queen Victoria commissioned Edwin Landseer—by that point, already the most famous animal painter in Britain—to paint an official portrait of her pets. The result was a sumptuous production that pleased her, by all accounts: she called it “the most beautiful thing imaginable” when it was finished in April 1838 (Journal, 9 April 1838). Her high praise is not surprising, given the subject matter: she liked her pets, and like many of

her subjects, she liked Landseer's dignified, half-anthropomorphic, half-naturalistic approach to depicting them. Nonetheless, her comments invite a question, invited also by the animals' placement among sumptuous objects of interior décor: in what way are *they* to be taken as "beautiful things"? Are they self-enclosed aesthetic elements, beautiful in and of themselves, or are they beautiful in the way curtains or an ottoman might be beautiful, a gestural beauty connoting the prestige and good taste of their owner? Are they simply, unteleologically there, like Kantian art objects, or do they possess a teleology of some kind? To put the question another way: do they mean anything? And if so, how and what do they mean?

Her Majesty's Favorite Pets was produced at a moment in British history when it not only made sense to create a portrait of a British monarch's pets—plural—without the monarch, but was expected, familiar, and even culturally predetermined. Britain was crazy about pets in the 1830s and 40s; Britain was also crazy about representations of them, as the career of Landseer himself would demonstrate: by the 1840s, as Diana Donald observes, his paintings became "the Victorian public's favourite works of art," beloved and coveted (like dogs themselves) as both art objects and status symbols (*Picturing Animals in Britain, 1750-1850*, 128). It would have made sense for the young queen to showcase the pets that were coming with her as she moved into the recently completed Buckingham Palace, and for Landseer to foreground their domesticity by having them lounge in a sumptuous, warmly lit interior; although the practice of bourgeois petkeeping had been around in England for less than a century, at this point it was widely understood that pets were part of the home, honorary members of the family, part of the fabric of domestic space.

At the same time, Landseer's painting contains a powerful tension, an unanswered question, that emerged inexorably from the consolidation of pet fancy in this period: Are these

pets “subjects” in the sense of portraiture, or “objects” in the sense of property? We see the spaniel Dash, recumbent upon an ottoman; the Scottish deerhound Hector and the greyhound Nero, sitting erectly beside her; the parrot Lory in the foreground, looking away from the spectator and insouciantly cracking nuts. Landseer’s careful attention to conveying facial expressions and distinct attitudes, none of them exactly anthropomorphic, seems designed to lend each pet an aura of individual subjectivity, a quality of semi-personhood.¹ Lory in particular is her own being, dynamic, unwilling to participate in the decorum of court portraiture—more alive and independent than many of the human figures who adorn the walls of the National Portrait Gallery. And yet, the animals are placed among objects indisputably designed to reflect back on the status of the Queen herself,² and it would be foolish to ignore their potential metonymic function, connoting not just the Queen’s “good breeding”—these animals are all, clearly, purebreds—but her power over a wide and heterogeneous mix of peoples, places, and creatures. In them we can see an obedience that extends to the obedience of her subjects, brought tranquilly from the wild into the drawing-room of civilization; the extent of her reach, which travels even to the tropics from which Lory was plucked; the universality of her grasp. These are metonymic implications that solidify, if we pursue them, into a governing metaphor, and a metaphor of government.

Yet metonymy allows us to see other things. If we pursue the connotations of these animals in other directions, we can see them inscribed, for instance, with several major developments that had been adversely affecting the lives of nonhuman creatures in the decades

¹ As Donald notes, perhaps the most prominent effect of Landseer’s technique of situating animals *au naturel*, unaccompanied by humans, was that it seemed to generate “entirely new insights into the animal mind” (132).

² Curtains, connoting “rich,” are one of the first examples given by Elaine Freedgood of “limited or weak” metonymy in her introduction to *The Ideas in Things*: the kinds of metonyms that are “largely inconsequential in the rhetorical hierarchy of the text” because they “suggest, or reinforce, something we already know about the subjects who use them” (2).

leading up to Victoria's ascension. We might see them as exemplars of the relationship between breeding and mass production, purebreds made-to-order by practices increasingly inflected by the logic of the factory and the science of inherited traits. Dash lies atop an ottoman just like him; both furniture and dog are objects of design, contoured and crafted by the dictates of style. We might see them embodying not just the inclusivity of domestication but its exclusion and abjection of everything "wild," everything unassimilable to the British interior: even Hector and Nero, animals of sport with bellicose names, sitting inside rather than joining the chase. We might see them as objects of a paradoxical sentimentality that grants sympathy and public interest without granting freedom, independence, or dignity. We might see Lory as a product of the logic of empire in a different sense: a difficult exotic fetishized precisely because she is a difficult exotic, unassimilable to a Britishness aligned not only with "good breeding" but with species.

Which set of connotations do we choose to pursue? This chapter centers on the freedom of that choice, but also the strange and compelling possibility that it might not be a matter of free choice at all.

*

This chapter is about companion animals that appear in early Victorian novels—what they mean and, more importantly, how. As such, it attempts to enter a vibrant and notably recent conversation about how they work as figures both fictional and cultural. Ten years ago, Ivan Kreilkamp, writing about *Wuthering Heights*, made a bold claim that laid the groundwork for many of the critical revaluations that would come later: "the history of English domestic fiction is deeply bound up with that of the domestic animal"; we can only understand the evolution of these "two cultural forms" if we see that they "developed not just in parallel but in tandem" (87).

In his view, just as the discourse of sympathy shaped the novel's aesthetic and ethical commitments in the eighteenth century, the discourse of anticruelty had a profoundly transformative effect on novels after the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals was founded in 1824. The idea of animal cruelty created "at least three distinct subject positions" that the novel became deeply invested in depicting and, in a sense, helped solidify in the cultural imaginary: "the sadistic perpetrator of cruelty, the feeling witness, and the cruelly indifferent bystander or witness" (93). (We find all three in *Wuthering Heights*.) Since then, a number of critics have followed Kreilkamp in thinking about the narrative possibilities that domestic animals—be they suffering or well-cared-for—open up in this essentially domestic genre. Beryl Gray's *The Dog in the Dickensian Imagination* (2014) takes a semi-biographical approach, suggesting that Dickens's actual experiences with dogs informed his literary representations of them, giving him reason not only to see "each one as a distinct individual" (unlike cats, which he tended to "typify") (3), but also to explore their complex and inextricable effects on the social world and "characterizations of people," both diegetic and exegetic (8). Monica Flegel's *Pets and Domesticity in Victorian Literature and Culture* (2015) takes a semi-sociological approach, following recent conjunctions of animal studies and queer theory³ and arguing that pets in this period, as substitute children, romantic intermediaries, and non-normative companions, always threaten to disrupt the bourgeois family units they so frequently help bind together. In a later article, Kreilkamp refers to dogs as "the sub-proletariat of the novel,"⁴ and the coinage is

³ See, for example, the 2008 collection *Queering the Non/Human*, and Donna Haraway's observation therein that if "queering has the job of undoing 'normal' categories ... none is more critical than the human/nonhuman sorting operation" (Qtd. in Flegel 10).

⁴ Here Kreilkamp, writing on *Great Expectations*, engages with Alex Woloch's definition of minor characters as the "proletariat of the novel" in *The One vs. the Many*, arguing that animals bottom out the implicit hierarchy: "represented, but only in passing; given nicknames rather than true markers of identity; possessing no solid claim to recognition or memory on the part of the narrator or any other character" ("Dying Like a Dog in *Great Expectations*" 82).

suggestive of a trend that marks this recent scholarly shift (and perhaps literary animal studies more generally): for the most part, the conversation has been rightly and generatively focused on *status*—where animals rank and what roles they play in the novel or the family; what human roles they might stand in for; how, by their insertion into preexisting social and narratological units, they might dissolve old roles or suggest new ones.⁵ In this chapter, I aim to diverge by addressing referentiality—which means, among other things, interrogating the mechanisms of metaphoric and metonymic substitution that enable a term like “sub-proletariat of the novel” in the first place. After all, as I hope to show, for the animals that inhabit the pages of Victorian novels, status and referentiality tend to be complexly intertwined.

As Harriet Ritvo has observed in *The Animal Estate*, the story of domestication in the mid-Victorian period is largely a story about metonymy. The Queen would not have been alone in using a domestic animal (or several of them) as an implicit signifier of her own social status; by the 1830s, it had become commonplace for people across the socioeconomic spectrum to do the same thing in different ways. Competitive stockbreeders bred cattle to be staggeringly obese not because it produced better meat, but because the cow’s obesity, immortalized in portraiture, metonymically attested to the breeder’s economic prestige. Upper- and (especially) middle-class dog fanciers expended an inordinate amount of resources on their pets because they knew that “keeping a well-bred dog metonymically allied its owner with the upper ranges of society” (93). By the 1850s, dog fancy at its highest levels took on a distinctly *metaphoric* cast with the institutionalization of dog shows, which “projected an obsessively detailed vision of a stratified

⁵ Flegel writes extensively and suggestively about the non-reproductive social and existential categories that pets generate, some more acceptable—if the pet can substitute effectively for a child—than others: the spinster, the cat lady, the dog-owning bachelor, and so on. Representations of pets must be read, she insists, in the context of a “social construction of sexuality that ... inevitably perceives ‘families’ made up of a single human or a non-reproductive couple and their pets as a sign of social failure and deviant sexuality” (11).

order which sorted animals and, by implication, people into snug and appropriate niches” (93). Much like the recursive relationship between the concept of the “animal kingdom” and Queen Victoria’s actual kingdom, dog shows not only depended on a rigid class structure but retroactively attempted to justify it by locating class in “nature.” And yet, beyond these performative scenarios (and even, in many ways, within them), the everyday relationship between a dog-owner and his or her dog was often understood and articulated in metonymic terms: dogs were seen as living, moldable testaments to the qualities of their owners, from economic status⁶ to interior disposition.⁷ As late as 1896, the *Ladies’ Kennel Journal* published a popular photograph collection of “Notable Dogs of the Year and their Owners” that depended entirely on an implicit logic of metonymic transference. Dogs and owners appear interchangeably in the table of contents, which organizes both (as Ritvo has noted) by order of social rank (*The Animal Estate* 89); where dog and owner appear together, they are situated within the same frame or side-by-side, in arrangements that emphasize contiguity rather than similarity as such. Where dogs appear alone (as do yet another set of dogs belonging to Queen Victoria), the photographs rely on the spectator’s ability to see their absent owner reflected in them.

⁶ At the beginning of the twentieth century, Thorstein Veblen looked back on “the commercial value of canine monstrosities” among the Anglo-American upper classes as a distinct (if by no means obvious) example of “conspicuous consumption”: “Indirectly, through reflection upon their honorific expensiveness, a social worth is imputed to them; and so by an easy substitution of words and ideas, they come to be admired and reputed beautiful” (*Theory of the Leisure Class* 142). He goes on to observe that the connotations of pet ownership can be moral as well as economic—indeed, moral precisely through economics: “Since any attention bestowed upon these animals is in no sense gainful or useful, it is also reputable; and since the habit of giving them attention is consequently not deprecated, it may grow into a habitual attachment of great tenacity and of a most benevolent character” (142).

⁷ In “Why Look at Animals?”, John Berger makes the intriguingly counterintuitive claim that pets are more valuable as mirrors than as lamps, revealing more to their owners than to others: “The pet *completes* him, offering responses to aspects of his character which would otherwise remain unconfirmed ... The pet offers its owner a mirror to a part that is otherwise never reflected” (14). He does not fail to notice the inherent narcissism of this model, but Donna Haraway might offer a better summation of it: “If the idea that man makes himself by realizing his intentions in his tools, such as domestic animals (dogs) and computers (cyborgs), is evidence of a neurosis that I call humanist technophilic narcissism, then the superficially opposed idea that dogs restore human beings’ souls by their unconditional love might be the neurosis of caninophilic narcissism” (*The Companion Species Manifesto* 33).

This relational referentiality is a crucial component of literary depictions of pet-ownership from the early to mid-Victorian period; indeed, it is arguably the entire point. In *Jane Eyre*, Charlotte Brontë casts Mr. Rochester's dog Pilot—a huge, shaggy Newfoundland—as a creature who not only resembles him in certain ways (metaphorically) but also reveals things about him that we might not glean until later (metonymically). The narrator describes him as “a great dog, whose black and white colour ma[ke] him a distinct object against the trees... a lion-like creature with long hair and a huge head” (132). On the one hand, he possesses the “long hair,” “huge head,” and leonine features of Rochester himself. On the other hand, he is a creature of stark contrasts, domesticity and wildness, who attests to a dividedness in Rochester that is not yet entirely apparent. The lion metaphor, static and precise, seems almost designed to call attention to the dog's involvement in a referential process that exceeds the strict boundaries of metaphor—the dog's status as a larger and more dynamic kind of trope. Pilot is subordinate to Rochester, but he has a kind of narrative agency that the lion in “leonine” does not.⁸ He can shade and contour his master in ways that go beyond the typology of species and depend, in fact, on something almost antithetical: the idiosyncrasy or “distinctness” of the individual animal.

If animal metaphors depend on (and express) typicality, animal metonymies depend on (and promote) singularity. If animal metaphors depend on the invariability of species, animal metonymies depend on the variability of the individual—which was especially achievable with dogs because they were so morphologically and aesthetically moldable.⁹ (Darwin's formula for speciation applies just as well to signification: species that exhibit greater variability are always

⁸ *Jane Eyre* herself remarks upon an inscrutable, agency that seems to possess him: “[the dog] passed me, however, quietly enough; not staying to look up, with strange pretercanine eyes, in my face, as I half expected it would” (132).

⁹ Ritvo notes that popular natural histories throughout the first half of the 19th century had a marked tendency to treat this plasticity as one of the essential virtues of the species: “Even the dog's body proclaimed its profound subservience to human will. It was the most physically malleable of animals, the one whose shape and size changed most readily in response to the whims of breeders” (*The Animal Estate* 21).

more adaptable, not only to different environments but to metonymic structures.) If animal metaphors are more easily created with animals that are ‘far away’ socially, economically, and geographically (i.e. creatures more easily reducible to type, like the lion), animal metonymies thrive on closeness. If animal metaphors are more suited to genres that privilege typological hermeneutics, such as a Carlylean jeremiad¹⁰ or a lyric poem, animal metonymies would appear much more suited to realist fiction, where the animal—like the human—can appear as a contingent and relational individual rather than a transcendent absolute.

At the same time, even as it subsists on individuality and independence, metonymy is arguably a structure that denies animals those very qualities, relegating them to the level of an accessory or prosthesis. In *Victorian Dogs, Victorian Men*, Keridiana W. Chez views human-dog relationships in nineteenth-century Britain almost entirely through the lens of prosthesis, making a strong case that the Victorians viewed their dogs—sometimes consciously, sometimes unconsciously—as living accessories that could enhance their own capacity for moral feeling. Kreilkamp makes a very similar claim in his 2009 essay “Anthroprosthesis, or Prosthetic Dogs,” wherein he argues that the texts of the Victorian age—“a thoroughly prosthetic age,” in his estimation—contain plenty of examples of humans using animals as “tools” that simultaneously “extend the human and mark the human being’s difference” (37). As Kreilkamp suggests further in “Petted Things,” this prosthetic function tends to relegate dogs and other companion animals to an ambiguous space at the bottom of the narratological chain of being. On the one hand, they are what Lévi-Strauss has called “metonymical human beings,” endowed with almost-humanity by proxy: animals, or at least “certain privileged domesticated animals, are given names and

¹⁰ Such as the proverbial goose, for instance, that Carlyle describes in *Past and Present*, unable to move beyond the “chalk-circle” drawn around it—a creature that he uses to embody the stupidity of dogmatic thinking, and that is itself circumscribed semantically by the rigid logic of allegory (187).

invested with personality and individual identity” (82). On the other hand, “this status is unreliable and subject to sudden abrogation”—abrogation that can occur precisely through their metonymic function (82). Their roles in the narrative are often much more sophisticated than that of the average figurative or non-figurative object, yet they possess much less of a stable claim to being “characters” than even the most minor or “flat” human characters, in part precisely *because* they exist in prosthetic relation to a more fully-formed human, functioning as a tool—both within and outside the diegesis—of characterization. In *Bleak House*, both Esther Summerson and Lawrence Boythorn travel with caged birds that function as little more than psychological signifiers, living objective correlatives. “I had no companion left but my bird, and him I carried with me in his cage,” Esther tells us, and the line conveys her state of mind through the real, affective tether between Esther and her bird—so that they are, in a sense, interchangeable: the phrase can be read “with *me in his cage*”—just as much as it relies on the cultural denotations of birds (especially caged birds) in general (33). In a similar way, we learn much about the brash, boisterous Boythorn when we see the “very little canary” that travels with him, which he raves about as “one of the most astonishing birds that ever lived!” and which gives us, according to the narrator, “a good illustration of his character” (143). As a canary, it bears certain metaphoric connotations automatically; as a canary (literally) attached to Boythorn, it transfers those connotations to him. Its presence transforms him into a slightly more fully-fledged character, yet in doing so it becomes even less of a character (or pseudo-character) than it might have been otherwise: so thoroughly instrumentalized and accessorized, it loses not just a claim on humanness, but a claim on animality—even more elementally, animation. It becomes deader than any dead metaphor, for it could have been alive.

This chapter focuses on two examples of a very different kind of animal metonymy: a version of the trope that not only permits the referential animal a certain aliveness, but recasts metonymy itself as a form of aliveness embodying the movements and agencies of animals themselves. In the two novels I discuss, Charles Dickens's *Oliver Twist* and Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley*, dogs work like Rochester's Pilot to connote the character traits and psychological states of their owners. In *Oliver Twist*, Bill Sikes is quite conscious of the extent to which his dog Bull's-eye, a creature as aggressive as he is, "own[s]" him "afore company," generating a crucial part of his reputation (77); the eponymous hero of *Shirley* is less conscious of—but all the more affected by—the way her dog Tartar attests to her transgressive desires. And yet, both novels cast their central dogs not just as examples of the trope but as embodiments of its queer conceptual movements: itinerant, disobedient, barely-domesticated figures who reveal and revel in its slippages, compromising the very identities that they are assumed to reinforce.

In his classic 1977 essay "Why Look at Animals?", John Berger imagines a primeval world in which animals offered themselves as the first metaphors, as agents of conceptual stabilization: "Everywhere animals offered explanations, or more precisely, lent their name or character to a quality, which like all qualities, was, in its essence, mysterious" (8-9). In these novels, animals work as metonymies—elaborate, roving, dynamically shifting signifiers—precisely because concepts need to be destabilized: identity; humanity; the domestic itself. Both authors use the metonymic human-animal relationship, a form of companionship involving semiotic transference in both directions, as a vehicle for exploring slippages that trouble the human-animal binary, suggesting models of humanity and animality that are contiguous and relational (like metonymy itself) rather than self-contained and static. In *Oliver Twist*, metonymy, embodied by Bull's-eye, represents precisely that part of language and conscious life

that is most ‘animal’ of all: a restless, spontaneous, instinctual procedure, a “passion for *hunting something* deeply implanted in the human breast,” that conjures identities against the will of the identified and undermines the rule of law (59). In *Shirley*, Brontë casts metonymy as a trope that challenges the sovereignty and self-enclosure of the human just as much as rabies—and yet, at the same time, invites an alternate (and strikingly ecological) understanding. In both novels, metonymy becomes a vehicle for the suggestion of radical enmeshments and intertwinements that metaphor, by contrast, seeks to repress and disavow. It becomes the patron trope of animals. It becomes a way of making a mess.

The Animality of Metonymy

Like animals themselves, metonymy is a creature of quotidian familiarity, woven into the fabric of everyday language, that is extremely difficult to define precisely. Also like animals themselves, its resistance to precise definition is reflected in a long (and oddly similar) history of theoretical interest: first described by Aristotle;¹¹ re-described over centuries of successive compendia and schemata; returned to, in late twentieth-century theory, as though it had always been fundamentally overlooked. Most pre-structuralist definitions of metonymy do little to distinguish it from metaphor, partly because, as Jonathan Culler notes in “The Turns of Metaphor,” they tend to use “metaphor” and “trope” interchangeably. Metaphor is a species of trope; trope is a genus that encompasses both metaphor and metonymy, and many other figures

¹¹ Because Aristotle classified it simply as one of the four types of metaphor, Peter Koch notes that perhaps the earliest definition of metonymy as a separate kind of trope is found in the Latin *Rhetorica ad Herennium* of c.80 BCE, which describes “*Denominatio*” as “a trope that takes its expression from *near and close things* and by which we can comprehend a thing that is not denominated by its proper word” (Qtd. in Koch, *Frame and Contiguity* 140-141). And yet, he argues that this definition is still basically Aristotelian because it describes “an associative or cognitive element” defined in Aristotle’s *De Memoria et Reminiscentia*: “So we track down the sequence [of our ideas] by starting from the present moment or from something else and from something similar or opposite or *close* [to it]. That is the way remembering comes about” (Qtd. in Koch 141).

in which one thing stands in for another. But because metaphor, before the structuralists, traditionally enjoyed elevated status as the figure *par excellence* of both rhetoric and poetic discourse (“the figure of figures, a figure for figurality” itself [189]), metonymy was often relegated to a supporting role, defined as a form or subtype of metaphor in which the connection between tenor and vehicle was not original but *accidental*—based in the contingencies and details of real life rather than the imaginative associations, the synaptic lightning bolts, of an idiosyncratic rhetorical mind. Pre-structuralist definitions of metonymy tend to confine it to a lower position in an implicit hierarchy. Metaphors tell us something we do not already know; metonymies merely show us what we can already see. They “are interesting,” Culler says, “only when they resemble metaphors” (190).

It is therefore important to see the theoretical conversation that came later, in the five decades following the publication of Roman Jakobson’s 1956 essay “Two Types of Language and Two Types of Aphasic Disturbances,” as both a re-evaluation and a reassessment of an underrated trope. More recent theories of metonymy are almost always apologias at the same time; they come to us burdened (ironically) with a set of metaphors outlining its unacknowledged yet foundational significance, its status as literary-critical underdog. In the words of Hugh Bredin, author of one of several 1980s rescue efforts, metonymy has been misidentified by rhetoricians as barely more than “a raggle-taggle collection of those tropes for which we can find no other name,” yet it continues to reappear in taxonomies with cockroach-like tenacity: “Clearly, there is some deeply rooted intuition about figurative language which continues to generate the notion of metonymy with stubborn persistence” (47). It is no accident, I would wager, that Bredin’s language ascribes qualities to the trope that would also fit certain animals: the pack’s collectivity, its resistance to (human) identity, precise definition, and individual

differentiation; the cockroach's ineradicability and common, everyday subversion and invasion of domestic space, its status as inhuman thing swarming at the foundation of human edifices. If metaphor has traditionally served as "a figure for figurality," I want to suggest that metonymy by its very nature be thought of as a figure for animality, a kind of master-trope encompassing the dangers, ambiguities, and irreducible complexities of the human-animal relationship.

Jakobson's argument is less a theory of metonymy itself than a theory of metonymy's centrality, resituating the trope as one of the two basic operations of language and cognition. The argument is difficult to refute because it derives from scientific data: Jakobson spends most of the essay comparing two forms of aphasia, one a "similarity disorder" and the other a "contiguity disorder." The aphasic with a "similarity disorder" can speak relatively normally if, and only if, he is presented with a rich sense of context—either a situation to comment on or "scraps of words or sentences" that he can combine and rearrange. He fails, however, at verbal tasks that involve speaking proactively or originally, responding "neither to the cue of his interlocutor nor to the actual situation" (121). The aphasic with a "contiguity disorder," by contrast, displays an almost antithetical tendency: individual words come freely and organically, but the aphasic loses control over the arrangements or relationships between them; "the ties of grammatical coordination and subordination, whether concord or government, are dissolved" (126). A "contexture-deficient" aphasic can produce streams or "word heaps" of quasi-metaphoric substitutions— "*Spyglass for microscope or fire for gaslight*" (126)—but cannot generate grammatical context, or respond effectively to material context. As one might imagine, these problems of everyday language extend to figurative expression. "Metaphor is alien to the similarity disorder, and metonymy to the contiguity disorder," Jakobson writes (129).

Jakobson uses the distinction as the basis for a theory of language as well as a kind of taxonomy of literary discourse. Language in general, he says, proceeds through the (inter)operations of substitution and combination, metaphor and metonymy. But we can see how certain forms depend on one kind of trope over the other: “In Russian lyrical songs, for example, metaphoric constructions predominate, while in the heroic epics the metonymic way is preponderant” (130). Romantic and Symbolist poetry rely on metaphor, whereas prose—especially prose belonging to “the so-called ‘realistic’ trend”—is mostly metonymic:

Following the path of contiguous relationships, the realist author metonymically digresses from the plot to the atmosphere and from the characters to the setting in space and time. He is fond of synecdochic details. In the scene of Anna Karenina’s suicide Tolstoj’s artistic attention is focused on the heroine’s handbag; and in *War and Peace* the synecdoches “hair on the upper lip” and “bare shoulders” are used by the same writer to stand for the female characters to whom these features belong. (130)

Jakobson’s orientation is descriptive rather than prescriptive; he does not celebrate metaphor over metonymy, preferring instead to describe them as equal but opposite forces in a kind of perpetual, Manichean struggle. The prose examples he chooses, however, make it somewhat clear which trope would be “evil”—or at least “antihumanist”—if we were to map them onto a moral binary, perhaps adding one more piece of explanatory context to the traditional elevation of metaphor. Metonymy dehumanizes; it leads the reader from human to object, renders the human herself an object. It superimposes the background onto the foreground; it distracts, fragments, cuts away. Metaphor clarifies identity. Metonymy fragments it, revealing its contingency and vulnerability—the ease with which it can be dissolved into so many “adjuncts” and “attributes.”

In the decades since the publication of “Two Aspects of Language,” literary theorists have disputed several aspects of Jakobson’s account of metonymy, both as a definition of the trope in itself and as a description of its relation to metaphor. Fredric Jameson was perhaps the

first to question the logic of antithetical competition intrinsic to Jakobson's model, making the (classically poststructuralist) argument that because all language is indirection and substitution anyway, because "language can never really express any *thing*: only relationships ... or sheer absence," the difference between metaphor and metonymy is less important than their fundamental similarity (*The Prison-House of Language* 122). "In the long run," Jameson writes, "the concepts of metaphor and metonymy cannot be isolated from each other and undergo a ceaseless metamorphosis from the one into the other before our very eyes" (123). In a similar move toward a more 'cooperative' model of their interrelationship, other figures in the poststructuralist pantheon, such as Paul de Man and Umberto Eco, have taken Jakobson's analysis as an invitation to subvert the traditional hierarchy and establish metonymy as the basis for metaphor, or even as the basic ingredient of language itself. In Eco's view, even the strangest and most seemingly *sui generis* metaphor owes its existence to a "a multidimensional network of metonymies, each of which is explained by a cultural convention rather than by an original resemblance" (Qtd in Culler 201).

Theorists of the novel, meanwhile, have added to Jakobson's argument by suggesting that realist prose is propelled forward not by metonymy at the expense of metaphor, but by the two tropes feeding off each other.¹² Prose would not be *literary* prose if it were purely metonymic, merely recording literal connections that exist between things; it would be information. As David

¹² In a speech delivered after Jakobson's death, the anthropologist Edmund Ronald Leach insisted that his key innovation was to leave open the possibility of a "combinational semiotics" rather than a simple metaphor vs. metonymy polarity: "Roman is making the absolutely crucial point that although semiotic systems in general are bipolar, in that similarity and contiguity relationships are opposed, nevertheless in all practical cases both dimensions are present and this combination allows us, in effect, to say several things at once even when we are constrained by the apparent linearity of speech utterances" (n.p.). One theorist of the novel who took this idea to heart was Gérard Genette, who uses the example of Proust—wherein the metonymic procedure of involuntary memory gives rise to metaphoric flights of fancy—as evidence that "metaphor and metonymy support each other and interpenetrate one another" (Qtd. in Culler 193).

Lodge has observed, the principal of “nonlogical deletion”—a leap between contiguous things that feels arbitrary, motivated, idiosyncratic—is what makes any individual metonymy charged with significance, open to interpretation, figuratively potent (*The Modes of Modern Writing* 93). The “dogs, undistinguishable in mire” at the beginning of *Bleak House* are simultaneously metonymic adjuncts of the city that contains them and metaphoric embodiments of it. It is that metaphoric *telos* that makes the metonymy figurative in the first place: the way a statement of contiguity can resolve or transform into a statement of similarity precisely because of the “nonlogical” weirdness of the object that has been chosen. “Why dogs?” is the first question one might ask of this line (the same way one might ask, of that scene in *Anna Karenina*, “Why the handbag?”). “What do the city and its indistinguishable dogs have to do with each other?” is the question that implicitly follows.

But what might those dogs, in turn, have to do with metonymy itself? Theories of metonymy that have arisen more recently—in the wake of poststructuralism as well as postcolonialism, queer theory, thing theory, and animal studies—do more to answer that question, although I want to suggest that the connection has been implicit all along, at the level of connotation (which is fitting, given that metonymy works through connotation). Critics have differed greatly on what it is, how it works, and what it does in relation to metaphor. But the associations attached to it have remained remarkably consistent from theory to theory. Metonymy is the “accidental” (Culler); the unplanned; the “nonlogical” (Lodge). It is also the everyday, the mundane, the unremarkable—the prosaic, always verging on the “nonliterary” (Lodge). It embodies a relationship in the world that is entirely conventional; indeed, as Bredin observes, “it relies wholly upon those relations between objects that are *habitually* and *conventionally* known and accepted.” At the same time, it “neither states nor implies the

connection between the objects involved in it”; it refuses precise definition of itself or the kind of relationality it embodies (Bredin 57). It is the quintessential rhetorical underdog, perennially mistreated, even though it plays a fundamental role in the formation of both nonliterary and poetic discourse. In a similar way, it dwells at a level beneath and adjacent to the dramas of the human subject, even as it works tirelessly, invisibly, indirectly, to constitute that subject. It is the trope *par excellence* of a kind of minoriness that must be disavowed, lest it pollute the supremacy and structural integrity of the major. That pollution occurs in and through the errant logic of connotation, the way metonymy can spiral out into myriad unwanted, destabilizing associative directions.

At the beginning of *The Ideas in Things*, Elaine Freedgood follows Jane Gallop, Naomi Schor, Lee Edelman, and ultimately Lacan¹³ in casting metonymy as a disruptive trope, both feminine and queer, “a cagey and canny container of meaning that is always liable to spill its contents inopportunistically” (13). Returning to Jakobson’s emphasis on competition and antithesis, she argues that metaphor and metonymy work together only in that one works to contain the spillages of the other:

Edelman has characterized metonymy as the figure of queer desire, desire unbound and unclassified: its possibilities are inevitably reined in by metaphor, which halts “the arbitrary slippages characteristic of metonymy into units of ‘meaning’ that register as identities or representational presences.” Metaphor defines and stabilizes; metonymy keeps on going, in any and all directions. It threatens: to disrupt categories, to open up too many possibilities, to expose things hidden. (14)

Freedgood’s formulation resonates strikingly with D.A. Miller’s famous characterization of connotation as “the dominant signifying practice of homophobia”: “Pushing its way through the Text, it will exploit the remotest contacts, enter into the most shameless liaisons, betray all

¹³ For a longer discussion of how Lacan links metaphor to repression and metonymy to “the subject’s desire to escape the ‘censor,’” see Floyd Merrell, “Metaphor and Metonymy: A Key to Narrative Structure” (147).

canons of integrity—like an arriviste who hasn't arrived, it simply can't stop networking" ("Anal Rope" 125).¹⁴ And her methodology involves "networking" as well, pursuing metonymic objects into the historical, material, and political realities that they connect to by implication—realities that the text might prefer to repress. If one were to apply her hermeneutics of errancy to *Her Majesty's Favorite Pets*, the strongest metonymy in the painting would probably be the parrot Lory, silently but insistently attesting (like Freedgood's most compelling example, the mahogany in *Jane Eyre*) to the trade networks enabled by colonial domination, the aesthetics of exoticism, and the racial and political subtext of menageries. It is no coincidence that Lory is also the most purely 'animal' of all the animals in the painting: disorganized, unruly, unassimilable to anthropomorphic identification, irreverently cracking nuts. If metonymy is queer by virtue of its will to wander, its threat to the stability of categories, and its inscrutable, "unclassified" desires, one could also think of it as animal. It embodies everything about animals that always requires abjection and disavowal. And it seems to embody the paradoxical quality of companion animals especially, as creatures of queerness—categorical liminality; erotic ambiguity—employed, so often, to reinforce the social, economic, and heteronormative structure of domestic space.¹⁵ Just as metonymy is a constitutive yet disorderly component of realist prose, quotidian yet ineradicably wild, the metonymic animal both strengthens the home and makes it more fragile. Lory is a disruptive parrot, but he is disruptive all the more because he somehow needs to be there.

The first and most influential thinker to extend Jakobson's binary to animal representation was Claude Lévi-Strauss, who uses it in *The Savage Mind* to advance a revealing

¹⁴ And yet, Miller is both less emphatic than Freedgood about the limitlessness of connotation and less confident about its expository potential: after all, "to refuse the evidence for a merely connoted meaning is as simple—and as frequent—as uttering the words 'But isn't it just...?'" (124).

¹⁵ See Flegel, *Pets and Domesticity* 10.

theory of everyday animal nomenclature—the way certain domestic animals typically receive certain names. He observes that the difference between dog names and bird names in twentieth century Western society can be plotted on a kind of chiasmus. “Birds and dogs are relevant in connection with human society either because they suggest it by their own social life (which men look on as an imitation of theirs), or alternatively because, having no social life of their own, they form a part of ours,” he writes (207). Because “birds are *metaphorical human beings*,” because they have a society that reflects our own, we give birds names that are like ours—metonymical, in the sense that they are contiguous with “the preserve of ordinary human Christian names, of which they constitute a part” (207). Because dogs are “*metonymical human beings*,” already conjoined *to* our society rather than an image *of* it, we give them metaphorical names, even “stage names,” names “rarely borne by ordinary human beings” (see, for example, Dash) (207).¹⁶ The animals in *Her Majesty’s Favorite Pets* fit this schema to a tee, even if Lory the parrot (a species name) and Hector and Nero the hounds (human names) might seem at first to contradict it: “Lory” is a species name on the verge of being a proper name, homonymous with “Laurie,” and Hector and Nero are human names that refer indexically, unmistakably, to the heroism and power of classical figures (indeed, the point is that they *refer*, period).

¹⁶ In his book *Claude Lévi-Strauss*, published shortly after *The Savage Mind*, Leach objected vociferously to this formulation and its apparent Francocentrism: “These broad French generalizations do *not* hold up as soon as we cross the Straits of Dover! A great many English dogs have names *identical* with those of our human friends!” (91). Yet Lévi-Strauss is the first to advise us that “we need not in this work regard ourselves as bound by grammarians’ refinements” (*The Savage Mind* 205), and what may not have been true of mid-twentieth century British dogs (or what may have been true only in the spirit of the law, not the letter) was certainly true of their Victorian counterparts. Most of the names featured in the *Notable Dogs and Their Owners* collection of 1896 are, in fact, “stage names” in the most performative sense: Mrs. Harcourt-Clare’s Pomeranian “Chocolat”; Lady Granville Gordon’s Chow “Blue Blood”; Mrs. R. Peel Hewitt’s Dandie “Tartan Chief”; Mrs. Crossfield’s Newfoundland “Boodles, Esq.” and so on.

The significance of this chiasmus is twofold: on the one hand, it un-domesticates a form of linguistic domestication, demonstrating the ‘savage’ impulse behind a referential process—naming your pet—that we might assume to be a matter of conscious, original, premeditated choice, like metaphor. Lévi-Strauss’s larger structuralist project in *Le Pensée sauvage* is to demonstrate deeply-rooted homologies between the conceptual operations of Western reason and the operations of “the savage mind.” Just as he recasts the savage as the first and greatest scientist, “applying himself to the most difficult task, that of systematizing what is immediately presented to the senses” (11), he recasts the scientist as a self-disavowing savage. Forms of Western naming that would seem to dominate and marginalize the nonhuman—scientific classification, the everyday naming of animals, and personal identity—become, in his analysis, mere variations on totemism, ways of conceptually arranging ‘nature’ as a reference point for ‘culture.’ Metaphor and metonymy are different but complementary components to totemism; sometimes culture must be similar to nature, and sometimes it must be contiguous. But metonymy is arguably the totem animal of Lévi-Strauss’s overall methodology here, just as it emblemizes Freedgood’s. Looking closely at the names of animals reveals broader contiguities within *us*, between us and the ‘savage,’ that the self-differentiating logic of Western culture would prefer to leave hidden. Doing so also reveals “the hidden motives underlying ethnographic curiosity” more generally (209). “The fascination exercised over us by customs apparently far removed from ours, the contradictory feeling of proximity and strangeness with which they affect us,” he writes, “stem perhaps from the fact these customs are very much closer to our own than they appear and present us with an enigmatic image which needs deciphering” (209).

On the other hand, and in a similar way, Lévi-Strauss’s chiasmus demonstrates the importance—and the danger—of animal metonymy in connection to the articulation of the

human self, both at the level of the individual and at the level of the species. If dogs are “*metonymical human beings*” and birds are “*metaphorical human beings*,” why do we give the former metaphorical names and the latter metonymical names? Lévi-Strauss gives a curt but potent answer:

[Birds] are further removed than dogs from men in their anatomical structure, their physical structure and their mode of life, and human Christian names cannot be given to dogs without causing uneasiness or even mild offence. The explanation is already contained in what has just been said. (204)

He sees it as a truth so obvious it need not even be articulated: we intuitively perceive the closeness of dogs as an existential threat; therefore, we contain and delimit their ‘meaning’ through the imposition of metaphor. We ascribe to them a kind of dehumanizing indexicality, transforming them from human-like subjects into referential objects. The social logic of this mode of reference—and that, indeed, is one of the key payoffs of Lévi-Strauss’s analysis: the idea that pet-naming is always already a social act—becomes clear in a painting like *Her Majesty’s Favorite Pets*. The dogs in the painting, so much more anthropomorphic than the parrot, veer close to speaking multitudes about the human with whom they are associated. Metaphoric names keep them distant, flattened, pointed toward a single denotation rather than the endless sprawl of connotation: “Dash” pins Dash to sportiveness, rather than allowing him to resemble or embody the Queen. If metonymies often transform into metaphor, here we can see the danger of that transformation, and it is not simply a matter of the human not wanting to be ‘doglike.’ At the beginning of Disney’s *101 Dalmations*, Pongo looks out at the busy London street and sees pair after pair of human-dog twins, all the humans resembling their animals so completely that they inevitably appear as flat caricatures. One of the potential dehumanizations of animal metonymy—which can be reined in by the equally dehumanizing imposition of a metaphoric name upon the animal—is that it threatens to reduce *people* to *types*. It is almost as if

the animal can transmit its own minoriness through a kind of contagion. A dog fully ‘signifying’ its human implies that the human lacks complexity, interiority, individuality, and autonomy: the very same qualities established by a proper, un-metaphoric name.

But theories of metonymy itself—its queerness, its endless and desirous associative play—tell us more about why the closeness between animal and human might constitute an *ontological* (as opposed to merely existential) threat. Contiguity has the potential to beget not only a reductive implication of similarity, but a disastrous idea of contingency. A metonymic relationship between animal and human threatens always to dissolve the human—as both individual identity and species category—into an associative network rather than an autonomous unit. The trope threatens to reveal a set of disturbing propositions about the human subject who is no longer at the ‘center’ of the relationship it describes: the idea that that subject “has coevolved,” in the words of Cary Wolfe, not just with inhuman dogs but with “various forms of technicity and materiality ... that are radically ‘not-human’ and yet have nevertheless made the human what it is”; the idea that that subject is a being of contingency, vulnerability, and ecological dependence; most of all, the idea that language itself is an errant and untrustworthy prosthesis, equally able to capsize the identity it constitutes (Wolfe, *What is Posthumanism?* xxv). If metaphor is essentially anthropomorphic and anthropocentric, a trope of intelligent design that professes the sovereignty and (self-)control of the human subject, metonymy is the lizard-brain of language, essentially antihumanist in its willingness to profess—or rather, relentlessly imply—the opposite: an insatiable, instinctual wandering, a doglikeness, at the core of human thought.

And yet, to stop there would be to ignore one of the fundamental projects of literary animal studies, which is to read what Susan McHugh calls “literary animal agents” on their own

terms, independent of the human, rather than as reference points for the human subject that are either metaphoric (confirming it) or deconstructive (challenging it) (McHugh, “Literary Animal Agents” 489). In that regard, perhaps the greatest irony of animal-human metonymy is that it structures the animal as a reference point explicitly, yet through its very procedure suggests an alternative logic—in a sense, a zoopoetics—of accidental mutualism, invisible contingency, and ecological codependency. A painting like *Her Majesty’s Favorite Pets* seems uninterested in broaching any posthumanist (or, for that matter, antihumanist) possibilities; to think of the Queen as dependent on her pets in any way is to completely subvert the logic of (literal) sovereignty it conveys, which assumes that they, much like her subjects, are dependent on her. And yet, they do construct her in an idiosyncratic, accidental, and somewhat indescribable way; through their strange combination of prostheticity and independence, they can show us just how much the painting’s rhetoric of sovereignty is contingent not just on animals but on an animalistic—automatic, instinctual, habitual—rhetorical procedure. One could argue that metonymy gives *them* a kind of sovereign agency, even if it ostensibly transforms them into instruments of human identity; they can mean with a measure of self-determination and freedom denied to the animals that constitute metaphors, the lion in “leonine.” But I think it would be more in tune with the spirit (or rather, connotations) of the trope to say that metonymy’s more radically productive, posthumanist potential, especially when aligned with nonhuman creatures, lies in its ability to invite new notions of agency itself. As Vinciane Despret has noted, the concept of agency that critics have tended to use since the 1970s is not only “embedded in humanist and Christian versions of human exceptionalism” but often narrowly construed in terms of intentionality, premeditation, and reason (Despret, “From Secret Agents to Interagency” 30). Dickens and Brontë did not have access to the term “agency” in its recent sense, but they did have access to

human exceptionalism, and the multifarious and deeply (if inarticulately) influential ways in which animals were informing people's everyday lives gave them plenty of potential reasons to depict forms of interspecies interrelationship that not only question the human's self-enclosure but rethink the roles of animals as existential, rhetorical, and constitutive agents—as well as “literary agents” in a broader sense.

“Alone, or Rather With His Dog”: Bull's-eye's Metonymic Rebellion

Shortly after he bludgeons Nancy to death in *Oliver Twist's* most shocking moment, Bill Sikes flees the scene of the crime and wanders the outskirts of London until, driven by hunger, he decides to hide in a local pub. The pub is a place of dim light and anonymity, full of nameless “country labourers” who say nothing when he sits in the corner, and speak vaguely of “some old man who had been buried on the previous Sunday.” Sikes is as incognito as he could reasonably expect to be, hoping to shed his identity among the unidentified. Whether he is “alone,” however, the narrator treats as an oddly open question: “They made room for the stranger, but he sat down in the farthest corner, and ate and drank alone, or rather with his dog, to whom he cast a morsel of food from time to time” (325). As in almost every other scene that involves him, Sikes is accompanied here by Bull's-eye, a white dog of indeterminate breed who follows him everywhere and has a tendency to echo his physical and psychological attributes. For most of the novel, their companionship is treated by the narrator and other characters as a basic identifying feature of Sikes himself; the dog is “essential to the presentation of Bill Sikes,” as Beryl Gray puts it (102). But here, for the first time, his presence becomes a problem. The ambiguity of Sikes' solitude—is he really “alone” if he has the dog with him? does a dog count as another person?—bubbles to the surface in that hesitant self-correction on the narrator's part: “alone, or rather with his dog.” To the extent that the line is focalized on Sikes' consciousness (which other

parts of this sequence, drenched in paranoia, seem to be), it marks the beginning of his mulling over a problem of potential identification that he will have to resolve very soon. The dog, more than any bloodstained garment or murder weapon, can lead the police (or the people in pursuit) to his whereabouts. Hence, shortly after they dine together, he tries in vain to drown Bull's-eye—a scene immortalized in one of the most unsettling Cruikshank illustrations—and the dog runs off; shortly after that, as if in revenge, the dog returns to him with a mob in tow.

But the line “alone, or rather with his dog” embodies not just a problem of potential identification. It also embodies a problem of identity—one that Sikes experiences more explicitly, perhaps, but other characters experience as well. The novel often emphasizes the fact that Oliver's name is not completely his. It was “invented” by Mr. Bumble, who followed an arbitrary alphabetical naming scheme and never intended to create a signifier that matched the interiority or essence of the named (10). And yet, it is both a prophetic appellation and, as Mrs. Mann tells Mr. Bumble, a “literary” construct: as much as it identifies Oliver, it also invents him. In a similar way, Bill Sikes is not completely sovereign over the identity “Bill Sikes.”¹⁷ He “alone” does not inhabit or constitute it; it is not his and his alone. Just as his name literally shares several phonetic and alphabetic elements with “Bull's-eye,” his name as a social structure—an object of reputation, perception, recognition—is coextensive with the dog that follows him and “own[s] me afore company,” as he suggestively puts it during one of their many violent conflicts (77). Like the whiteness of Melville's whale, this white dog can stand in metaphorically for many things. What I want to suggest is that Bull's-eye functions as a potently metaphoric figure for the workings of metonymy in relation to identity: the way metonymy can

¹⁷ J. Hillis Miller explores the idea of naming as a “sovereign speech act” with power *over* the subject, capable of “making or remaking the one who is named,” in *Speech Acts in Literature* (207).

both create and erase personhood by making personhood, in effect, consubstantial, dependent on unruly nonhuman things and forces. Sikes' identity is articulated through metonymy; it is a rhetorical surface-effect composed from his material and signficatory relations with an animal who follows him and yet also, in a sense, "owns" him. He is never "alone" without his dog because he is never quite a person without his dog; if, as Ivan Kreilkamp has noted, the figure of the dog embodies lack of personhood in *Great Expectations*,¹⁸ here the figure of Bull's-eye embodies personhood's only constitutive element—a model of personhood in which identity is constituted chaotically, contingently, and above all animalistically by things outside the self.

Dickens created many canine characters throughout his career, some of them more like characters than others, but Bull's-eye is particularly suggestive for a few reasons. First of all, he was the first one: although he was not the first dog to enter Dickens's writing, he was the first to enter a Dickens novel, and he was definitely the first to possess a level of autonomy or agency approaching that of human characters. At the same time, he is also notable for his ostentatious *lack* of agency—a foregrounded minoriness that derives from his attachment to Sikes, and that seems to transfer to Sikes in turn. "His behaviour suggests that he is capable of being his own dog," as Gray points out, "but, as the story develops, his role and identity define themselves solely in relation to Sikes, and his name—which, memorable though it is, surprisingly appears on the page only four times in all—ceases to be used: he becomes simply 'his dog,' or 'the dog'" (102). Gray sees him as the product of a tragedy of metonymic transference: "We understand that, had Sikes been a benign gentleman, Bull's-eye would have been no less attached to him,

¹⁸ In "Dying like a Dog in *Great Expectations*," Kreilkamp sees the dog as a figure portending the possibility of both social and narratological erasure: "To be a dog in this novel is to lack a narrative, to fail to take hold within others' language and memories, to lose all solid form" (81). In a sense, the argument advances his previous argument about *Wuthering Heights* by suggesting that the pet itself—in its "tantalizingly incomplete identity" and ontological vulnerability—afforded Dickens a new subject-position to play with (81).

and would have been likely to evolve as a socially acceptable animal” (101). And yet, what is special about his enmeshment with Sikes is that it compromises individual sovereignty in both directions; if, on the one hand, it makes the dog incomplete without his master, it also makes the selfhood of Sikes contingent on animal participation. This enmeshment is doubly special because it is itself enmeshed in the novel’s social, legal, and ontological questions: How do names and other signs have power over the named? What creates identity? What constitutes humanity, in both the moral and ontological sense?

If *Oliver Twist* began as an outgrowth of *Sketches by Boz* (as J. Hillis Miller, Amanpal Garcha, and others have explored),¹⁹ its frequent and often complex deployments of metonymy, Bull’s-eye included, stem equally from what Dickens was trying to do in that collection. Some critics regard the *Sketches* as examples of an early, mimetic realism from which Dickens would eventually distance himself, as he settled into a more “metaphysical”—John R. Reed calls it “hyperrealist”—and metaphorical style better suited to his heightened sensibility (Reed, *Dickens’s Hyperrealism*). David Lodge, for instance, sees *Oliver Twist* as “a relatively immature piece of work” because its “fairy-tale-like plot” is constrained within an essentially metonymic style, geared toward “topographical specificity,” that the *Sketches* inaugurated; he sees it as a problem that “architectural details function as indices of (not metaphors for) desolation and neglect” (*The Modes of Modern Writing* 102). Other critics, by contrast, see the *Sketches* as early experiments in realist form that began a career-long streak of stretching and unbinding the limits of the genre; experiments that address, in embryo, certain structures and problems of language that Dickens would tackle more extensively in future novels, including the Victorian subject’s

¹⁹ See J. Hillis Miller, “The Fiction of Realism: *Sketches by Boz*, *Oliver Twist*, and Cruikshank’s Illustrations,” and Amanpal Garcha, *From Sketch to Novel: The Development of Victorian Fiction*.

reliance on metonymic objects as well as the reverse (think, for instance, of Krook's shop in *Bleak House*, filled to the rafters with knickknacks and documents that appear orphaned, devoid of meaning and purpose, without their owners). Whichever point of view one prefers, it is clear that the *Sketches* inaugurated an interest in metonymy that persisted throughout Dickens' career.

The *Sketches* not only use the trope in abundance but seem to establish it, self-consciously, as their basic constitutive element. Throughout them, Miller observes,

the speculative pedestrian is faced at first not with a continuous narrative of the lives of London's people, not with the subjective state of these people at the present moment, and not even with people seen from the outside as appearance or spectacle. What he sees at first are things, human artifacts, streets, buildings, vehicles, objects in a pawnbroker's shop, old clothes in Monmouth Street. These objects are signs, present evidence of something absent. Boz sets himself the task of inferring from these things the life that is lived among them. (Miller, "The Fiction of Realism" 10)

This process makes Boz functionally akin to several other observer-narrators that extrapolate larger, living realities from fragmentary evidence. He is "a detective or archaeologist" (12) as well as a Cuvierian paleontologist, conjuring forth a full-bodied dinosaur from a piece of bone; a Carlylean historian, conjuring the gestalt of the French Revolution from detritus.²⁰ And yet, two aspects of his technique make it strikingly different. First, his metonymic survey is geared toward explaining the present rather than resuscitating the past; its drive is to convey a sense of the interconnected realities of a space one can visit now, through a perspective one might not think, or have time, to adopt. Second, it breathes life not merely into the figures it can extrapolate from objects but into the objects themselves: metonymy becomes not just a vehicle of revival but a form of aliveness.

²⁰ John McAllister Ulrich explores the connection between Carlyle's historiography and "the spectacular, skeletal reconstructions" made famous by Cuvier and Richard Owen in "Thomas Carlyle, Richard Owen, and the Paleontological Articulation of the Past," ultimately suggesting that Carlyle—like Boz—is quite self-conscious about the fictionality of his own synecdochic enterprise (32).

Widely seen (by Gray and others) as the sketch from which Dickens extrapolated Sikes, “Meditations in Monmouth Street” is also the purest example in the collection of metonymy in action. Like the secondhand clothing one can find on Monmouth Street, the sketch inhabits two overlapping temporalities. It begins as an archaeology of the present, describing clothing merchants whose “countenances bear a thoughtful and dirty cast, certain indications of their love of traffic” (96), but it transforms quickly into a series of speculations on the lives and characters of those who might have worn the items on display:

We love to walk among these extensive groves of the illustrious dead, and to indulge in the speculations to which they give rise; now fitting a deceased coat, then a dead pair of trousers, and anon the mortal remains of a gaudy waistcoat, upon some being of our own conjuring up, and endeavouring, from the shape and fashion of the garment itself, to bring its former owner before our mind’s eye. We have gone on speculating in this way, until whole rows of coats have started from their pegs, and buttoned up, of their own accord, round the waists of imaginary wearers; lines of trousers have jumped down to meet them; waistcoats have almost burst with anxiety to put themselves on; and half an acre of shoes have suddenly found feet to fit them, and gone stumping down the street with a noise which has fairly awakened us from our pleasant revery, and driven us slowly away, with a bewildered stare, an object of astonishment to the good people of Monmouth-street, and of no slight suspicion to the policemen at the opposite street corner. (97-98)

Boz is self-conscious about his own metonymic “speculations” but equally conscious of a certain way in which they seem to get ahead of him, to take on a life of their own. As Miller notes, “the life which properly belonged to the wearers is transferred to the clothes,” and “it is soon described as proceeding without intervention by Boz,” a kind of “spectacle” unto itself (“The Fiction of Realism” 13). Dickens seems equally excited to highlight the ways in which this “life,” this errant agency, is disruptive to everyone involved: it proceeds through action verbs like “started,” “jumped,” “burst,” and “stumping”; it offends the propriety of the average pedestrian and the forces of the law; it “awakens.” With the insistent, bombastic force of cartoon

cymbals, it pairs together things which were not paired before—and perhaps were not intended to be.

Shortly after this moment in the text, Boz convinces himself that he can see the trajectory of an individual life in the range of outfits arrayed before him—a life that serves unmistakably as the prototype for Bill Sikes. The metonymic leaps become so complete, so assured, that the clothes themselves appear to act out each stage in the young man’s moral devolution, as he transforms from a bullying boy into “a stout, broad-shouldered, sturdy-chested man” who beats his wife and neglects his children every night (104). Gray has noted how so many of the objects and accessories described here conjure forth not just a generic ruffian but a proleptic vision of Sikes, Bull’s-eye included (*The Dog in the Dickensian Imagination* 102). As Boz insists, “we knew at once, as any body would, who glanced at that broad-skirted green coat, with the large metal buttons, that its wearer seldom walked forth without a dog at his heels, and some idle ruffian, the very counterpart of himself, at his side” (104). Yet the logic by which Boz infers the constant presence of a dog from this coat is intentionally left obscure; the inference seems simultaneously rooted in social stereotype—a preexisting prejudice “we” all share, that all such men travel with dogs and “idle ruffian” sidekicks in tow—and individual imagination. As Miller observes, “the metonymic associations which Boz makes are fancies rather than facts, impositions on the signs he sees of stock conventions, not mirroring but interpretations, which is to say lies” (35). What is clear is that the dog Boz imagines is an embodiment of precisely the metonymic energy that got ahead of him in the previous scene—only this time, he is not aware of it. He is not aware of its status as a constitutive figuration that proceeds from him yet exceeds his (self-)control. He is not aware of the potential ethical pitfalls of assembling the identity of another with such self-assurance, such certainty, from metonymic associations rooted in

prejudice and fancy (“No, we were right,” he insists to himself; “the more we looked, the more we were convinced of the accuracy of our previous impression. There was the man’s whole life written as legibly on those clothes, as if we had his autobiography engrossed on parchment before us” [99]). He is not aware of the extent to which his inference not only includes a dog but is essentially *doglike* in its paradoxical combination of prosthetic extension (like a helpful tool) and independent agency (like a separate being)—its disobedient obedience, its domesticated animality.

Just as the man works as a prototype for Sikes, this dog works as a prototype for Bull’s-eye. True, Bull’s-eye is a real dog in the world of *Oliver Twist* and not an imaginary extrapolation, but precisely in his substantiality he works even more complexly as an embodiment of metonymy’s unique forms of agency—its capabilities, flexibilities, and moral ambiguities. He appears at a moment in Dickens’ career when metonymy is beginning to transform from a relatively neutral documentary technique, a basic mechanism of realist discourse, into both a poetic figure (on the level of exegesis) and a social problem (on the level of diegesis). *Oliver Twist*, even more than the *Sketches*, depicts an urban world in which much hinges—Oliver’s fate included—on metonymic identification. The novel inherits and expands a particular aliveness to the way metonymy governs society without society’s full knowledge or permission, and seldom according to the interests of those it most affects.

The novel frequently uses metonymy as a technique of characterization, introducing its inhabitants to us by taking inventory of their clothes, accessories, body parts, etc. How do we know the Artful Dodger? By the flowing black coat that gives him “the airs and manners of a man,” despite his diminutive stature, and well before he introduces himself with any name; indeed, accessories do so much to define—more accurately, create—his outsize and explicitly

artificial persona that Master Bates later wonders how he could ever go to prison except “under a gold watch, chain, and seals, at the lowest” (and again, the odd preposition choice, “under,” seems to indicate a certain level of self-consciousness about metonymy’s power *over* social status) (295). How do we know Fagin, before he does anything to reveal his true character? Partly by the metonymic logic of physiognomy, certain traits revealed *a priori* by stereotypical ethnic features. But even before that, we get a sense of him through the metonymic intimations of the Dodger himself, “a peculiar pet and protégé of the elder gentleman.” Before Oliver even sees Fagin at all, he can tell that “Mr Dawkins’s appearance did not say a vast deal in favour of the comforts which his patron’s interest obtained for those whom he took under his protection” (48). How do we know Sikes? We see him first as a man “in a black velveteen coat, very soiled drab breeches, lace-up half-boots, and grey cotton stockings” (77). The second time we see him, we see the same items in a shorter list: “black velveteen coat” becomes simply “velveteen”; “very soiled drab breeches” become “drab shorts” (92)—the narrator condenses the sartorial signifiers into more potent and parsimonious versions of themselves, paving the way for future images of Sikes conjured forth simply from the words “velveteen” or “drab.”²¹

In *Oliver Twist*, ‘character’ never reveals itself without being telegraphed by things outside it. The narrator, like Boz, operates through inductive inference and a speculative certainty—a kind of certainty that subtly alters the nature of what we might otherwise call foreshadowing. When the narrator observes Sikes beating his dog in the way he will beat Nancy, the observation is less a product of retrospective omniscience than a product of *prospective* attention: he is seeing what is important, what is defining. The overactiveness of this attention

²¹ As we see in a late exchange between Fagin and Nancy: “Listen to me, you drab. Listen to me, who with six words, can strangle Sikes as surely as if I had his bull’s throat between my fingers now...” (167).

threatens to turn a figure like the Dodger into little more than a product of the metonymic imagination—“artful” in the sense of being an invention; “dodger” in the sense of being insubstantial, potentially erroneous.

Yet the more striking thing about this descriptive technique is that it involves the reader in an identificatory process the characters themselves already engage in routinely; we simply do what they do when they ‘read’ the metonymic signifiers of others whom they might or might not know. Fagin’s thieves are not the only ones who ‘case the joint’ before a heist: Mr. Bumble takes a full inventory of Mrs. Corney’s possessions—including a group of cats, which he judges “so very domestic” as though they were living monuments to her domesticity (149)—before attempting to woo her. “Mr. Bumble had re-counted the tea-spoons, re-weighed the sugar-tongs, made a closer inspection of the milk-pot, and ascertained to a nicety the exact condition of the furniture down to the very horse-hair seats of the chairs,” the narrator observes. “Thinking begets thinking; and, as there were no sounds of Mrs. Corney’s approach, it occurred to Mr. Bumble that it would be an innocent and virtuous way of spending time, if he were further to allay his curiosity by a cursory glance at the interior of Mrs. Corney’s chest of drawers” (173). As if to crystallize our sense that social mobility, for Bumble, is simply a matter of objects, the narrator later describes his post-nuptial professional transformation as little more than a change of clothes: “He still wore knee-breeches and dark cotton stockings on his nether limbs, but they were not the breeches. The coat was wide-skirted, and in that respect like the coat, but, oh, how different! The mighty cocked-hat was replaced by a modest round one. Mr. Bumble was no longer a beadle” (239). The description of Mr. Bumble’s new clothes is notable for its ironic inversions; at the same time that it highlights the insubstantiality of Bumble’s new identity, it imbues “the breeches” and “the coat” with rhetorical weight as though to remind us of the silent,

subtle ease with which metonymic items become vested with solidity, specificity, and indexical power. But it then prompts a meditation, significantly darker in tone, that recasts the case of Bumble as a socioeconomic principle, and Boz's exegetical method—which allows clothes to quite literally make the man—as an all-too-common diegetic fact:

There are some promotions in life which, independent of the more substantial rewards they offer, acquire peculiar value and dignity from the coats and waistcoats connected with them. A field-marshal has his uniform, a bishop his silk apron, a counsellor his silk gown, a beadle his cocked hat. Strip the bishop of his apron, or the beadle of his cocked hat and gold lace, what are they? Men,—mere men. Dignity, and even holiness too, sometimes, are more questions of coat and waistcoat than some people imagine. (239)

The narrator retains some confidence in humans possessing something underneath their layers of metonymic signifiers—if not identity, at least humanity, “Men,—mere men.” But he also redefines two intuitively *interior* qualities, qualities a nineteenth century reader might be tempted to define as the innermost aspects of ‘good character,’ as metonymic surface effects: “Dignity, and even holiness too.”

One distinct byproduct of the novel's metonymic self-consciousness, its interest in metonymy as a disturbingly powerful and semi-autonomous generator of identity, is a certain form of trope—call it the metonymic symbol. In a way that anticipates later Dickens, the novel often presents belabored, extended, memorable metaphors: the “streaky bacon” of its tragicomic form; the way a wounded and anxious Oliver looks like death not “as it shows in shroud and coffin, but in the guise it wears when life has just departed”; Mr. Brownlow's description of the marriage of Monks's mother and father as a “heavy chain,” a “clanking bond . . . of which nothing but death could break the rivets” (332). Even more frequently, however, and in a way that equally anticipates later Dickens, the narrative is punctuated by elaborate, self-consciously metonymic moments and figures—metonymies as textual events. One example occurs at the end of Fagin's final chapter, when we see through his eyes “a cluster of objects” that bespeak nothing

more or less than their dark function: “the black stage, the cross-beam, the rope, and all the hideous apparatus of death” (364).

Another one, equally high-contrast, is the figure of the “gentleman in the white waistcoat” who, early in the novel, serves on the parish board deciding Oliver’s fate and cruelly predicts that the boy “will come to be hung” (12). John R. Reed has discussed how this gentleman is not only a figure constituted by metonymy—like Melville’s White-Jacket, his identity seems to consist solely in the one garment, which parsimoniously indicates everything about him²²—but also a figure who embodies the narrator’s own powers of metonymic connection, which sometimes manifests as proleptic insight. The gentleman predicts Oliver’s fate purely by metonymic inference: Oliver is the kind of boy who looks like he will end up on the gallows. At which point the narrator butts in to say that he himself, by contrast, will make no such prediction: “I should perhaps mar the interest of this narrative (supposing it to possess any at all), if I ventured to hint, just yet, whether the life of Oliver Twist had this violent termination or no” (12). Yet the narrator then indulges in what Reed calls a “secret bit of metonymy” by observing, at the beginning of the next chapter, that Oliver, had he taken the gentleman’s “sage advice,” might have hanged himself with a handkerchief if he only had access to one. We do not necessarily know it yet, but throughout the novel, the handkerchief is a highly charged metonymic symbol, reappearing at various moments to mark the connections between wealth and crime, overworld and underworld. Like the clothes on Monmouth Street—and somewhat like Oliver himself, perhaps—handkerchiefs in *Oliver Twist* are always secondhand, re-purchased, in circulation: the narrator describes shops where hundreds of them are sold in

²² In a move that resembles Freedgood’s methodology, Reed pursues the waistcoat’s material history and cultural valences, reframing it as a complex signifier not only of wealth but of misplaced, self-indulgent care: a white waistcoat—like a purebred dog, perhaps—was a status-connoting object precisely because it had to be carefully maintained (61).

bunches, “for here reside the traders who purchase them from pickpockets” (162). Equally like the clothes, they work as a metaphor for the metonymic connections they embody—connections social, economic, and imaginative. In virtually the same breath that he distances himself from the gentleman in the white waistcoat, the narrator reveals his own tacit reliance on another metonymic garment—reveals, in a sense, the extent to which his own “narrative task” is functionally akin to the gentleman’s callous and automatic inference (Reed 55).

If the potential connectivity of garments like the waistcoat or handkerchief seems unlimited, it can also be imprisoning: more than a metaphoric chain, a metonymic handkerchief can be a tie that binds, connecting social realms or delimiting a person’s structural position in unwanted ways. This becomes particularly clear in the case of Sikes, who wears a “dirty belcher handkerchief round his neck” that always seems more of a burden than an asset, perhaps because it is listed among several other objects that seem to imprison him, encase him, in identifiability (77). His stockings, for example, are described as “enclos[ing] a very bulky pair of legs, with large swelling calves,—the kind of legs which in such costume always look in an unfinished and incomplete state without a set of fetters to garnish them” (77). The language of imprisonment and self-sabotage here echoes the description of Monks that Nancy gives to Mr. Brownlow, an image of a man who can be “known” despite himself by “lips ... often discoloured and disfigured with the marks of teeth,” and “a broad red mark, like a burn or a scald” that he wears “below his neckerchief” (315). Yet it also echoes the words that Nancy uses to describe her own situation vis-à-vis the ability of others to identify her: “I am chained to my old life. I loathe and hate it now, but I cannot leave it” (316). Dickens does not reserve metonymic imprisonment for morally reprehensible characters. Anyone can be trapped by their own signifiers, and if anything,

the condition is exacerbated by class: the poorer one is, the harder it becomes to escape and transcend the inferences of others.

At a climactic point in his relationship with Bull's-eye, however, Sikes' relationship with the handkerchief changes. He tries to *use* the handkerchief, laden with a stone, to drown the dog:

The animal came up from the very force of habit; but as Sikes stooped to attach the handkerchief to his throat, he uttered a low growl and started back. 'Come back,' said the robber, stamping on the ground. The dog wagged his tail, but moved not. Sikes made a running noose, and called him again. The dog advanced, retreated, paused an instant, turned and scoured away at his hardest speed. The man whistled again and again, and sat down and waited in the expectation that he would return. But no dog appeared, and he resumed his journey. (330)

This moment suggests two things about Bull's-eye, one on the level of diegetic plot and another on the level of exegetic narrative. To Sikes, the dog is a much more threatening identifier than any choking handkerchief or tight pair of stockings; precisely because of his aliveness, his autonomy, his potential for flight, he escapes this noose and generates the (literal) noose of Sikes' undoing. After he kills Nancy, Sikes realizes that the bloodstains are a problem and tries, in vain, to get rid of them: "He washed himself and rubbed his clothes; there were spots that would not be removed, but he cut the pieces out, and burnt them. How those stains were dispersed about the room!" (323). Yet the most dangerous index of who he is, where he is, and what he has done ends up being the figure who follows him out of the scene of the crime, ostensibly as his closest ally and accomplice: "The very feet of the dog were bloody." The dog, a cartographic wanderer, embodies the potential for a dispersal of information that he has no way of controlling; at every moment he threatens to "carry out new evidences of the crime into the streets" and lead any who might see him, read him, back to Sikes himself (324). His errancy must be suppressed.

At the same time, the abortive drowning signals the dog's superiority in a tropological competition: the dog is more of a threat to Sikes than any neck-constricting handkerchief, precisely because he embodies freedom rather than constraint. The dog, more than the handkerchief or the white waistcoat or "the apparatus of death," is a metonymy unbound, vested with circulative and associative power. The handkerchief is an instrument; the animal is not. The handkerchief, although constraining, is itself constrained by the limits of objecthood; the animal is more wildly and potently suggestive, more able to fulfill metonymy's potential. Dickens sets up this implicit comparison between animal and object several times in scenes between Sikes and Bull's-eye; indeed, one of the ways it becomes apparent is in a larger contrast between two different descriptions of Sikes himself.

One odd thing about *Oliver Twist*, explained partly but not wholly by the attention-managing strategies of serialized publication, is that the novel introduces Sikes to the reader two times in almost exactly the same way. The first time is in Chapter 13, when he barges into Fagin's hideout and the narrator takes time—with a much more deliberate rhythm—to describe him:

'Come in, you sneaking warmint; wot are you stopping outside for, as if you was ashamed of your master. Come in!' The man who growled out these words was a stoutly-built fellow of about five-and-forty in a black velveteen coat, very soiled drab breeches, lace-up half-boots, and grey cotton stockings, which enclosed a very bulky pair of legs, with large swelling calves,—the kind of legs which in some costume always look in an unfinished and incomplete state without a set of fetters to garnish them. He had a brown hat on his head, and a dirty belcher handkerchief round his neck, with the long frayed ends of which, he smeared the beer from his face as he spoke; disclosing when he had done so, a broad heavy countenance with a beard of three days' growth, and two scowling eyes, one of which displayed various parti-coloured symptoms of having been recently damaged by a blow. 'Come in, d'ye hear?' growled this engaging-looking ruffian. A white shaggy dog, with his face scratched and torn in twenty different places, skulked into the room. 'Why didn't you come in afore?' said the man. 'You're getting too proud to own me afore company, are you. Lie down!' This command was accompanied with a kick which sent the animal to the other end of the room. (77)

The second description happens two chapters (in the serialized version, one part) later. Sikes is waiting for Fagin in the back of a pub, and the narrator relays his identifying characteristics in essentially the same order. First comes the clothing: “a man in a velveteen coat, drab shorts, half-boots, and stockings”; then the dog, “white-coated, red-eyed” and displaying several telling injuries; then the abuse, “a kick and a curse bestowed upon the dog simultaneously” (92). In both descriptions, we see the clothing working efficiently and effectively as both a mechanism of identification (so that other characters can ‘know’ him) and a mechanism of characterization (so that we can ‘know’ him as well). As the narrator puts it in the second passage, “no experienced agent of police would have hesitated for one instant to recognise” the figure in the velveteen coat “as Mr. William Sikes”; nor would we (92). Both passages, however, present the dog as a signifier that is considerably less organized and more vexatious to all parties involved.

Bull’s-eye “discloses” truths about his master in several ways. He does so mimetically, by possessing a face full of injuries attesting to ceaseless “conflict” and engaging in some erratically violent behaviors that attest to similar “faults of temper.” He also does so passively, as a victim of abuse that anticipates the beating of Nancy. Yet he, unlike any of the other inanimate metonyms, does very different things in these two passages, in the process suggesting very different truths about his master. In the first he slinks away, implying Sikes’ ultimate superiority; in the second he fights back, initiating a violent quarrel that not only reduces Sikes to the level of a dog—as the frequent “growls” he utters do as well—but also establishes *him* as the dog’s dialectical and metonymic foil, rather than the inverse. “Dogs are not generally apt to revenge injuries inflicted upon them by their masters,” the narrator remarks, “but Mr Sikes’s dog, having faults of temper in common with his owner, and labouring perhaps, at this moment, under a powerful sense of injury, made no more ado but at once fixed his teeth in one of the half-boots”

(92). Sikes becomes the explanatory mechanism, the exterior element revealing things about a being whose interior condition can only be guessed at (“labouring *perhaps*”—the narrator almost always hedges his descriptions of animal cognition, as if to acknowledge that these descriptions are always themselves rooted in metonymic inference). And yet, lest we think that Sikes has complete control over the dog in the first scene, one difference suggests otherwise: in the first scene, his struggles with the dog—and all that they suggest—come both before and after the blazon that neatly subdivides and diagrams his appearance. The passage encloses examples of Elaine Freedgood’s “weak” metonymy,²³ a list of neatly indexical objects, in something messier. It encloses Sikes himself in a metonymic relationship that positions him structurally, ontologically, ‘after’ the animal²⁴: “You’re getting too proud to own me afore company, are you. Lie down!”

Throughout the back half of his plot arc, as he flees from the scene of the crime, Sikes is haunted by the animal that precedes him. Bull’s-eye seems to dwell even in the apparition of Nancy that consumes his imagination, “that morning’s ghastly figure following at his heels” (323). The apparition is unambiguously a revenant of his recent crime, but the narrator also allows it to merge in subtle ways with the dog that runs beside him. It moves *with* him, rather than running toward him; its haunting is less a matter of pursuit than of constant companionship,

²³ In her introduction to *The Ideas in Things*, Freedgood describes “limited or weak” metonymies as those that are “largely inconsequential in the rhetorical hierarchy of the text” because they “suggest, or reinforce, something we already know about the subjects who use them”—e.g. sumptuous curtains that simply mean “rich” (2).

²⁴ A formulation that resonates intriguingly with Derrida’s use of the term “following” to critique anthropocentrism in *The Animal that Therefore I Am*. As a way of thinking through the human’s silent dependence on animal others, Derrida broaches the possibility of replacing the phrase “I am” with the phrase “I am (following)” —or better yet, the question “Who is it that I am (following)?” (and it is significant that the verb “following” appears in parentheses in this translation, rendering the crucial, ongoing, constitutive activity of *being* peripheral, incidental). “In what sense of the neighbor,” Derrida asks, “should I say that I am close or near to the animal and that I am (following) it, and in what type or order of pressure? Being-with it in the sense of being-close-to-it? Being-alongside-it? Being-after-it? *Being-after-it* in the sense of the hunt, training, or taming, or *being-after-it* in the sense of a succession or inheritance? In all cases, if I am (following) *after* it, the animal therefore comes before me, earlier than me ... but also—something that philosophy perhaps forgets ... it can look at me. It has its point of view regarding me” (117).

less a matter of opposition than of adjacency. At the same time, in a way that echoes the role-reversal of that second introduction, the relationship between Sikes and ghost is one that much more clearly casts Sikes in the role of a *dog* running beside, behind, and around his spectral companion. The narrator lingers on the ghost's humanoid characteristics—"silent, erect, and still." Sikes, by contrast, moves animalistically, "dart[ing] onward—straight, headlong—dashing through brier and brake, and leaping gate and fence as madly as the dog who careered with loud and sounding bark before him" (328). His literal inhumanity in this scene works clearly as a metaphor for the moral inhumanity he gained with the murder of Nancy; that the apparition of her seems to possess a kind of bipedal rectitude only heightens the effect. But it is significant that the model of inhumanity he falls into—a "careering" mobility, cutting a restless path through the human boundaries of "gate and fence"—is doglike rather than monstrous, and domesticated rather than simply wild. Sikes becomes a version of the unruly force he once counted on to "own me afore company," to constitute his identity in public. Although he is the chief suspect and perpetrator, in this scene Dickens casts him paradoxically as an errant accessory. Bill Sikes' very body becomes, like the dog, an undesirably effective and autonomous index of "Bill Sikes" the identity, the structural position. Dickens presents referential self-annihilation as the ultimate punishment for the annihilation of another: everything that signaled "Sikes" to the world, including Sikes, becomes an existential threat to Sikes—precisely because it works independently and against his will, like Bull's-eye.

This idea clarifies some of the ambiguities of Sikes' famous death scene. Shortly after Bull's-eye runs away, the dog fulfills his role in Sikes' apprehension by leading an angry mob to the right place—not by following him, but by arriving three hours before him at the location

where he will inevitably go. The mob finds Sikes, chases him, and corners him on a rooftop, at which point the sudden appearance of “a dog” precipitates his self-destruction:

At that very instant the murderer, looking behind him on the roof, threw his arms above his head, and uttered a yell of terror.

‘The eyes again!’ he cried in an unearthly screech.

Staggering as if struck by lightning, he lost his balance and tumbled over the parapet; the noose was at his neck; it ran up with his weight tight as a bow-string, and swift as the arrow it speeds. He fell for five-and-thirty feet. There was a sudden jerk, a terrific convulsion of the limbs, and there he hung, with the open knife clenched in his stiffening hand.

The old chimney quivered with the shock, but stood it bravely. The murderer swung lifeless against the wall, and the boy, thrusting aside the dangling body which obscured his view, called to the people to come and take him out for God’s sake. A dog, which had lain concealed till now, ran backwards and forwards on the parapet with a dismal howl, and collecting himself for a spring, jumped for the dead man’s shoulders. Missing his aim, he fell into the ditch, turning completely over as he went, and striking his head against a stone, dashed out his brains. (347)

Does Sikes kill himself? Not exactly. Does the dog kill Sikes? Not exactly. But the narrator presents the connection *between* Sikes and Bull’s-eye as an attachment that undoes both of them; amidst so much imagery of the gallows and so many handkerchiefs around the neck, the rope tying them together is the one that hangs. And it hangs them because they both, seeing each other, quite literally jump to conclusions. In the case of the dog, the kinetic energy that we saw in Sikes’ “careering” ends up being his downfall: he runs from side to side, jumps headfirst “for the dead man’s shoulders,” leaps insistently toward the human he was attached to, only to miss on the way down. Sikes’ own death appears to be less a matter of animal instinct than simple accident. But the moment right before, the moment that sends him “staggering as if struck by lightning,” is imbued with another version of that canine energy: the “careering” of metonymy; the creative and destructive leaps of metonymic inference. “The eyes again!” he cries, and the narrator does not tell us whose eyes he sees. But we can tell whose eyes they are likely to be through our own metonymic recollection: the moment recalls the “widely-staring eyes” of the

apparition that follows him, which signify Nancy but also float around on their own, detached from her, becoming a hauntingly errant and open-ended signifier (“There were but two,” the narrator says, “but they were everywhere” [403]). In his last moment, Sikes thinks he sees those eyes in the eyes of the dog; he thinks he sees Nancy in a creature only remotely and imaginatively associated with Nancy. He conflates the dog with the murder to which it was a vague accessory; that murder with its victim; a pair of eyes to *her* eyes; her eyes to accusation. Both he and his dog make connective leaps which are themselves connected to each other. The dog’s leap literalizes and concretizes the leaps that occur in his head; it works as a final metaphor for metonymy’s power, which can so easily destroy the identity, the self, it constitutes.

Sikes’ death scene is significant not only because of its agential ambiguities—who is the prime mover behind this Rube Goldberg “apparatus of death”?—but because it mirrors an earlier “trial” in the novel adjudicated via extralegal means: the trial of Oliver. As he lies in bed in the house of the Maylies, recovering from an injury sustained during the botched heist with which he was unwittingly involved, a mini-drama plays out around him over the question of whether his hosts will be able to discern his good character. The key figure here is Doctor Losborne, who seems much more interested in rescuing Oliver’s identity, flickering at the edge of disrepute, than in reviving his broken body. The first thing he does upon visiting the boy is to make sure that the residents of the house can see how manifestly he lacks the appearance of a criminal: “in lieu of the dogged, black-visaged ruffian they had expected to behold, there lay a mere child, worn with pain and exhaustion and sunk into a deep sleep” (190). But something strange happens shortly after—strange at least in the context of a novel that seems otherwise committed to establishing clear physiognomic relationships between outer appearance and inner character: the doctor admits that “vice... takes up her abode in many temples, and who can say that a fair

outside shall not enshrine her?”, and determines that a verbal interview with Oliver will be a better way of determining whether “he is a real and thorough bad one” (193). This pseudo-trial to establish Oliver’s identity—“It’s a simple question of identity, you will observe”—contrasts with the pseudo-execution that destroys Sikes (195). In Oliver’s case, the doctor asks the ad-hoc jury to discard metonymy as a method of inferring Oliver’s character, confident that he possesses something beneath and beyond the reach of metonymic inference. In Sikes’ death scene, metonymy dismantles him autonomously, without the intervention of others, because it was all that he was made of in the first place. The most truly ‘good’ characters in the novel, Oliver and Nancy, are the ones who possess a moral and ontological center that rests securely beneath superficial metonymic identifiers. Oliver is still Oliver, even if “the only proofs of the boy’s identity”—the objects that corroborate his good name and social status, one of which is a locket that is itself connected metonymically to his mother—“lie at the bottom of the river” (272). The most truly ‘evil’ character in the novel is also the figure whose identity is most insecurely tied up in external assets, dependent on a network of signifiers that function like semi-autonomous prostheses. Oliver always survives and transcends metonymic pigeonholing, the kind of determinism spelled out for him by the gentleman in the white waistcoat.²⁵ Sikes cannot.

If the novel seems to be elaborating a theory of personhood through this contrast, whereby the people truly deserving of it are those who resist, rather than rely on, metonymic reading, it is also elaborating a theory of humanness and animality. Metonymy—one’s involvement in it, dependence on it—ends up functioning as an implicit barometer of the inhuman, as well as the inhumane. The relationship between Sikes and Bull’s-eye transforms

²⁵ As does Fagin, in a sense, when the novel famously allows us to inhabit his perspective in the second-to-last chapter: this audacious and unexpected exposure of his interiority establishes a ‘self’ for him beneath and beyond the accumulation of metonymic surface-effects.

both of them ontologically, or at least categorically. Metonymy transforms the animal into a kind of object, a signifying accessory, yet also gives the animal sovereignty over the human it signifies. The dog becomes responsible for the creation of the man. Meanwhile, metonymy transforms the human into a kind of “animal”—fugitive, instinctual, reactive. Early in the novel, Sikes cruelly remarks to Fagin that he wishes “you had been the dog, half a minute ago ... ‘Cause the government, as cares for the lives of such men as you ... lets a man kill his dog how he likes” (93). Sikes unwittingly articulates one of Derrida’s key insights in “Eating Well” and *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, which is that the category of the animal depends on the possibility of a “non-criminal putting to death” (“Eating Well” 278). Humans are murdered, animals are killed: their absolute otherness rests on that distinction. It is a testament to Dickens’ powers of irony as well as his continued interest in making Sikes the most truly “animal” character of all that Sikes’s “putting to death,” although resembling an execution, is distinctly “non-criminal”—and arguably caused by an animal.²⁶

I placed the word “animal” in quotes above because both the novel and at least one other text Dickens wrote contemporaneously suggest that he would have resisted a definition of the term that identified it purely (or even primarily) with nonhuman creatures, just as he seems to dislocate “humanity” from the mere fact of being human. As he struggled to keep up with a demanding contract with publisher Richard Bentley to oversee *Bentley’s Miscellany* and publish *Oliver Twist* at the same time, Dickens would occasionally fill the gaps between parts with stray pieces that attest revealingly to his mindset during the novel’s composition. The essay “Some Particulars Concerning a Lion” is one such piece, later collected in *The Mudfog Papers* and

²⁶ This deliberate inversion resembles the logic undergirding Patricia Highsmith’s darkly misanthropic short story collection *The Animal Lover’s Book of Beastly Murder* (1975): each story carefully engineers a scenario in which an animal—in almost all cases, a familiar, domesticated animal—murders (or rather, kills) a human with “non-criminal” impunity.

published alongside chapter viii of *Oliver Twist* in the May 1837 number of *Bentley's* (Clarendon Introduction xix). “We have a great respect for lions in the abstract,” it begins, listing off some of the moral qualities that “natural histories” and “old spelling-book(s)” seem inevitably to attach to them: “their bravery and generosity”; “that heroic self-denial and charming philanthropy, which prompts them never to eat people except when they are hungry” (515). As that sarcastic turn indicates clearly, however, the essay is less a celebration of the intrinsic virtues of lions than a rebuke against the all-too-common human tendency to reduce them—by “abstracting” them—to metaphors. The essay becomes a sort of catalogue of the offenses visited upon animals by metaphor itself. We forget their animality, to the point that a visit to the Zoological Gardens becomes an exercise in cognitive dissonance between anthropomorphic assumptions and perceived reality. We forget that they can possess individuality, that two animals can be different from each other according to internal disposition and external circumstance. Dickens anticipates John Berger’s claim that the animals in zoos are alienated from themselves, functionally and even ontologically not the same animal they might have been in the wild: “We make it a matter of distinct charge against the Zoological lion and his brethren at the fairs, that they are sleepy, dreamy, sluggish quadrupeds” [515]).

Above all, though, animal metaphors allow us to forget the animality in *humans*—as Dickens reminds us by taking the tired metaphor of the “literary lion” to an absurd extreme. He describes a dinner party, promising one such lion as its featured guest, as a kind of safari: “We went early, and posted ourself in an eligible part of the drawing-room, from whence we could hope to obtain a full view of the interesting animal” (516). He experiences neither shock nor disappointment when the lion finally shows up; instead, the metaphor continues to build on itself, observing further and further similarities between high society and popular zoology. A “keeper”

leads him around, “apply[ing] himself seriously to the task of bringing the lion out, and putting him through the whole of his manoeuvres” (517). Guests approach the lion with interest and exoticizing flattery; at the evening’s climax, the “keeper” gently teases him, “perform[ing] that very dangerous feat which is still done with some of the caravan lions, although in one instance it terminated fatally, of putting his head in the animal’s mouth, and placing himself entirely at its mercy” (518). What becomes clear over the course of the account is that these “biped lions”—and here the narrator assigns the term to everyone involved, and even humans more broadly—are more truly “lions” than any of “their four-footed namesakes”: the metaphor begins as a way of falsely anthropomorphizing animals and becomes, stretched and belabored, a way of accurately zoomorphizing humans (516). Dickens mocks the essentially anthropomorphic version of animality a social climber might want to gather onto himself. In the process, he reveals a more fundamentally animal animality at the core of the dinner party that its participants might want to forget (and that the trope “literary lion” is a way of forgetting): a den of grasping, feeding, interiorless surface-dwellers, instinctually—for metonymy is the instinct of the elite—reactive to the signifiers paraded before them.

In “Some Particulars Concerning a Lion,” Dickens reveals both a canny understanding of the limitations of animal metaphor and a desire to bend and twist one metaphor until it reveals an anthropological, even ontological, proposition: humans are more animal than animals, and to look at how they identify each other, how they use language to do so, might be the easiest way to tell. With Bull’s-eye, he unchains the dog from a similarly overdetermined metaphoricity—just as lion meant “brave,” “dog,” as poems and natural histories and popular anecdotes would constantly remind the public, meant fidelity, loyalty, unconditional love—and allows it to embody an even more dangerously commonplace trope governing the presumptions and

interactions of the social world. Bull's-eye's name suggests clean indexicality, the lineal movement of an arrow to its target; Sikes relies on him as a signifier in the hope that he will signify in that mode. As Claude Lévi-Strauss reminds us, however, the metaphoric names of dogs are perhaps established as a means of repressing their more complexly metonymic function, and Bull's-eye becomes, over the course of the novel, a striking vision of open-ended and errant signification—an identifier gone rogue. Like the “literary lion,” Bull's-eye not only embodies the signifying process which he is expected to perform, but interrogates it, shines a light on it, revealing a more fundamental contiguity between metonymy and animality, and (by further extension) between the animal and the human, than the human would like to admit.

Toward the beginning of the novel, Dickens' narrator famously animalizes both Oliver and the crowd pursuing him after an old man mistakes him for a criminal and yells “Stop thief!” Oliver himself, although “brought up by philosophers,” only now comes alarmingly face-to-face with “their beautiful axiom that self-preservation is the first law of nature” (58). At the same time, the crowd exhibits another “law of nature” as they trip over each other and “turn the corners, rousing up the dogs, and astonishing the fowls”:

‘Stop thief! Stop thief!’ There is a passion for *hunting something* deeply implanted in the human breast. One wretched, breathless child, panting with exhaustion, terror in his looks, agony in his eye, large drops of perspiration streaming down his face, strains every nerve to make head upon his pursuers; and as they follow on his track, and gain upon him every instant, they hail his decreasing strength with still louder shouts, and whoop and scream with joy... (59)

Dickens depicts the human as a creature of “hunting,” geared fundamentally toward rabid, frenzied pursuit—a form of pursuit more animal than animals, “rousing up the dogs, and astonishing the fowls” (59). It is a distinctly unconscious form of pursuit, opposed to the civilized proceedings of the market and the rational, upright comportment of everyday people: “the butcher throws down his tray, the baker his basket, the milkman his pail” (all, by the way,

metonymic formulations of profession and identity). It is also a distinctly *extralegal* form of pursuit, in which the guilty is identified and prosecuted through a ruthless, unchecked, and self-accumulating logic of collective presumption. This mob-scene foreshadows the mob that eventually pursues Sikes, a mob that we as readers might feel to be justified in their pursuit after witnessing the brutal murder of Nancy. But the form of pursuit we see in this early scene, this “passion for *hunting something*” that challenges the human-animal binary and “implants” animality in the human, is to Dickens simply a more overt instantiation of the restless hunting of the human mind, the restless faculty of metonymic pursuit at the base of conscious life that is perhaps the most animal thing about us. It creates entire lives from secondhand clothes, entire structures of power from white waistcoats, and entire selves—entire humanities—from objects and animals; it creates and creates with relentless abandon, beyond reason, human agency, and law. Bull’s-eye is its embodiment yet also a creature who strangely defies its logic, possessing, perhaps, a measure of that authenticity beyond metonymy that seems to be the novel’s ultimate measure of personhood. He is certainly more human than Sikes.

Tartar and the Fantasy of Sovereignty in Charlotte Brontë’s *Shirley*

Bull’s-eye has much in common with Tartar, the dog who accompanies and assists the bold heroine of Charlotte Brontë’s *Shirley*. Both are dogs of indeterminate breed and muscular appearance, the latter described as “a rather large, strong, fierce-looking dog, very ugly, being of a breed between mastiff and bull-dog”; both arrive in the text alongside—and ever-so-slightly before—their masters; both are “ugly” in a manner both aesthetic and environmental, brazenly testing the limits of their own inclusion in domestic space (191). When Tartar makes his entrance, he sniffs some fresh flowers scattered on the floor and, seeming “to scorn them as food,” tries to sit on them instead: “thinking their velvety petals might be convenient as litter, he

was turning round preparatory to depositing his tawny bulk upon them, when Miss Helstone and Miss Keeldar simultaneously stooped to the rescue” (191). Shortly after this moment, the narrator provides a capsule description of Shirley herself that connects dialectically and metonymically to Tartar’s seemingly inconsequential micro-performance of masculinized transgression:

Shirley Keeldar (she had no Christian name but Shirley: her parents, who had wished to have a son, finding that, after eight years of marriage, Providence had granted them only a daughter, bestowed on her the same masculine family cognomen they would have bestowed on a boy, if with a boy they had been blessed)—Shirley Keeldar was no ugly heiress: she was agreeable to the eye. Her height and shape were not unlike Miss Helstone’s: perhaps in stature she might have the advantage by an inch or two; she was gracefully made, and her face, too, possessed a charm as well described by the word grace as any other. It was pale naturally, but intelligent, and of varied expression. She was not a blonde, like Caroline: clear and dark were the characteristics of her aspect as to colour: her face and brow were clear, her eyes of the darkest grey: no green lights in them, — transparent, pure, neutral grey; and her hair of the darkest brown. Her features were distinguished; by which I do not mean that they were high, bony, and Roman, being indeed rather small and slightly marked than otherwise; but only that they were, to use a few French words, ‘fins, gracieux, spirituels:’ mobile they were and speaking; but their changes were not to be understood, nor their language interpreted all at once. She examined Caroline seriously, inclining her head a little to one side, with a thoughtful air. (191-192)

Brontë carefully submerges the comparison between Shirley and Tartar, the definition of the former through her connection to the latter, beneath the more explicit comparison between Shirley and Caroline Helstone. But the sentence “Shirley Keeldar was no ugly heiress” forges a link to the ugliness of the dog and a network of connotations attached to that ugliness, even if it ostensibly expresses the very opposite sentiment: there is contiguity between them, if not likeness. Both Tartar and Shirley are beings defined according to (and against) the expectations of the social world into which they have been placed; their very personalities, however unique, are triangulated by the spectator in connection to concepts such as breed (in Shirley’s case, ‘good breeding,’ which is just like dog breeding in bearing its own set of morphological requirements), “grace,” and “distinguished features.” The description is playful and deadly serious at the same

time in its assumption that a connotative, typological construct like “ugly heiress” not only means something but carries social weight. Both Shirley and Tartar are always already defined metonymically by the gazes of others. The novel presents the metonymic relationship between them, submerged yet ever-present, as a means of productive escape, perhaps, from the semiotic economies that might otherwise overdetermine who and what they are.

Tartar is like Bull’s-eye in being both a metonymic companion animal and a figure for metonymy itself; he is equally like Bull’s-eye in being a domestic animal that becomes a figure for the animality of the domestic, latent and repressed. Throughout the novel, the narrator seems entirely conscious of Shirley and Tartar’s textual and existential enmeshment, of the role the dog plays to inflect her, tellingly referring to him, for instance, as “the black-muzzled, tawny dog, a glimpse of which was seen in the chapter which first introduced its mistress to the reader” (261). What is much stranger about their relationship, however, perhaps even stranger than any human-dog interplay in *Oliver Twist*, is the extent to which he *infects* her, in a process yoked metaphorically to the threat of rabies, and yoked metonymically to a set of connotations that the threat of rabies unmistakably bore for an 1840s public. As Maggie Berg has recently observed, rabies in this novel represents as much a literal threat to Shirley’s person—though a threat discharged in time: eventually it is revealed that she never contracted it—as a “metaphorical disease” strikingly consonant with her queer desires, which Tartar himself often works to “articulate.”²⁷ I want to extend and complicate Berg’s observation by suggesting that rabies embodies a queerness that she and Tartar enact from the very beginning, although she herself

²⁷ Qtd. from “Queerness and the Threat of Rabies in Charlotte Brontë’s *Shirley*,” a talk delivered at the “Reading Animals” conference at the University of Sheffield (July 2014).

attempts to disavow it until the very end: a co-constructed identity as well as a co-constructed *humanity* that challenge her dreams of irreducible sovereignty.

The novel ends Shirley's plotline on a provocatively metaphoric note that has often led critics to see it as a "compromised feminist or lesbian novel" (as Berg puts it): Shirley agrees to marry Louis Moore, her French instructor, on the grounds that he—and not the more milquetoast Sir Philip—will be able to be her "master." Earlier in the novel, the narrator describes how Moore possesses an unusual ability to keep "the ruffianly Tartar" in check; the dog exhibits "a partiality for him ... so marked that sometimes, when Moore, summoned to a meal, entered the room and sat down unwelcomed, Tartar would rise from his lair at Shirley's feet, and betake himself to the taciturn tutor" (424-425). Shirley's announcement of her intentions toward Moore seems to hinge directly on that ability to tame the dog—and by extension (or by substitution), tame her:

Did I not say I prefer a *master*? One in whose presence I shall feel obliged and disposed to be good. One whose control my impatient temper must acknowledge. A man whose approbation can reward—whose displeasure punish me. A man I shall feel it impossible not to love, and very possible to fear. (516)

Critics have understandably tended to read this denouement as a retreat—on Shirley's part and on the novel's part—into the structures of heteronormative patriarchy. As Terry Castle has argued in *The Apparitional Lesbian*, for example, "the original female homosocial bond between Shirley Keeldar and Caroline Helstone ... is replaced at the end of the novel by not just one, but two interlocking male homosocial triangles, symbolized in the marriages of Robert with Caroline and of Robert's brother Louis with Shirley," meaning that "even Brontë, like other Victorian novelists, gives way in the end to the force of fictional and ideological convention" (73-74). One could also read the "master"/ "dog" exchange as a metaphoric construct designed to repress and disavow a more complexly metonymic relationality. The strict chiasmus of Shirley as Tartar,

Louis as ‘master’ simplifies and occludes the more asymmetrical networks of transference²⁸ between the three of them, turning the dog especially into a symbolic object (and a symbol for objecthood) rather than a dynamic agent.

And yet, the semantic stabilizations of this moment are eroded considerably by what we actually see of their relationship in the novel’s remaining pages, beginning with a chaotic exchange of amorous declarations that distorts Tartar’s semiotic function. Shirley begins by comparing *Louis* to Tartar: “you are my mastiff’s cousin: I think you as much like him as a man can be like a dog” (582). Louis responds by taking offense, describing at length the various ways in which Tartar functions as her subordinate—“you always call him to follow you: you call him sometimes with a whistle that you learned from me ... you suffer him to rest on your perfumed lap; you let him couch on the borders of your satin raiment”—and insisting that “it is dangerous to say I am like Tartar: it suggests to me a claim to be treated like Tartar” (582-583). And yet, over the course of the exchange—really, the negotiation—that follows, Shirley gradually moves him from a static relational model that establishes one as “master” and the other as “dog” (or, as she facetiously puts it, one as “master” and one as “penniless and friendless young orphan-girl” [583]) toward embracing a complexly dynamic relational model in which “sovereignty” is a shifting quality, able to be claimed, lost, and reclaimed by one or the other at any given time. As Louis himself protests, letting the roles transform mid-sentence, “But reply, Shirley, my pupil, my sovereign—reply” (585). It can be tempting to view this model—this very sentence—in terms of Hegel’s master/slave dialectic. Yet it is articulated, in the end, through an animal/human dialectic embodied by Tartar: through a concept of the domestic animal and its paradoxical

²⁸ A model resembling the asymmetrical procedures of Donna Haraway’s idealized notion of interspecies connection in *The Companion Species Manifesto*: “multiform, at stake, unfinished, consequential” (30).

sovereignty over the human that the novel has been building up since his first appearance. “I am glad I know my keeper, and am used to him. Only his voice will I follow; only his hand shall manage me; only at his feet will I repose,” Shirley declares (586). It becomes clear in this moment that the novel’s larger philosophical project concerns species as much as gender; indeed, it concerns the two in tandem. It takes a complex enough model of interspecies interaction and codependency, one that erodes species categories themselves, to rethink the kinds of gender categories that depend on species in the first place. Shirley’s plotline of self-actualization reaches a climax when she is able to articulate a concept of the domestic animal that defines, acts on, and chooses the human, through the slippages of contiguity rather than the fixities of similarity. As Louis puts it, in a moment of shared—and it must be shared—recognition, “Our lives are riveted; our lots intertwine” (585).

The key to this revelation is that it not only embodies a challenge to human sovereignty—a concept of the human based in assumptions of species self-mastery and self-enclosure; a concept that props up Louis Moore’s claims to being “master” over Tartar *or* Shirley—but emerges *through* a challenge to sovereignty as well. If both Bull’s-eye and Tartar have distinctly metaphoric names that seem to artificially constrain their semantic and suggestive potential, the name “Tartar” is notable nonetheless for its connotations of unstoppable Mongol-Turkic invasion, sweeping across kingdoms and dissolving the boundaries between them. This is, once again, a form of itinerant pursuit that resembles both metonymy (in what Dickens might call its restless “passion for *hunting something*”) and canine behavior. But it is also more forceful, more violent, in keeping with an overall tendency among all three of the Brontës to

emphasize both violence committed toward animals and violence committed by them.²⁹

Accounts of the lives of the Brontës, including Elizabeth Gaskell's biography of Charlotte, often focus on an anecdote about Emily and her dog Keeper, a mastiff mix who inspired the depiction of Tartar. Keeper was apparently an insouciant dog, prone to flagrantly disobeying a rule against napping in the sisters' beds. After seeing him do this one too many times, Emily "declared that, if he was found again transgressing, she herself, in defiance of warning and his well-known ferocity of nature, would beat him so severely that he would never offend again" (Gaskell, *Life of Charlotte Brontë* 205). And she kept her promise: when he did it again, she dragged him down the stairs by the neck and proceeded to beat him; "her bare clenched fist struck against his red fierce eyes, before he had time to make his spring, and, in the language of the turf, she 'punished him' till his eyes were swelled up, and the half-blind stupefied beast was led to his accustomed lair, to have his swollen head fomented and cared for by the very Emily herself" (205). Gaskell emphasizes not only the fury that completely overcomes Emily but the paradoxical oscillation between roles that the event generates: she is in one moment the dog's punisher, in the next his caretaker. She is in one moment more Keeper-like than Keeper himself; in the next, his "keeper" in an entirely different way.

Well before the novel broaches the literal question of whether Shirley has rabies, it presents a capsulized anecdote about her that resembles the Emily story and restages the three

²⁹ Kreilkamp goes into further detail on this point, suggesting that for the Brontës, "narrative and fiction itself raised the same questions of sympathy, antipathy, cruelty and scapegoating—and of the bounds of 'the human' as defined by and against the animal—that RSPCA narratives of animal cruelty posed" ("Petted Things" 93). One key piece of evidence he marshals is an 1842 school notebook that Charlotte Brontë seems to have used to think through *Jane Eyre*, describing the travails of "an ugly, ungainly, but passionately loyal dog named Clumsy" (90). Kreilkamp reads Clumsy as a prototype for Jane precisely because of his relationship to human mistreatment and rejection: "Tell how he grows ugly in growing up; ... Madam's disgust for him; the rebuffs he suffers ... Clumsy, for that is what she calls him now, banished to the yard; his degradation; detail his privations, the change in food and company" (Qtd. in Kreilkamp 90).

types of animal violence at its core: violence by animals, violence toward animals, and a violent invasion—a hostile takeover—of the human subject by its own latent animality. The story is relayed via the memory of Shirley’s servant Mrs. Gill, who recollects it after hearing her raise her voice in a certain way:

Her mistress had never called a servant in that voice, save once before, and that was when she had seen from the window Tartar in full tug with two carriers’ dogs, each of them a match for him in size, if not in courage, and their masters standing by, encouraging their animals, while hers was unbefriended: then, indeed, she had summoned John as if the Day of Judgment were at hand: nor had she waited for the said John’s coming, but had walked out into the lane bonnetless; and after informing the carriers that she held them far less of men than the three brutes whirling and worrying in the dust before them, had put her hands round the thick neck of the largest of the curs and given her whole strength to the essay of choking it from Tartar’s torn and bleeding eye, just above and below which organ the vengeful fangs were inserted. Five or six men were presently on the spot to help her, but she never thanked one of them: ‘They might have come before, if their will had been good,’ she said. She had not a word for anybody during the rest of the day; but sat near the hall fire till evening watching and tending Tartar, who lay all gory, stiff, and swelled, on a mat at her feet. (338-339)

Like the Emily anecdote, this story moves from savage choking to careful ministrations, depicting Shirley in the throes of brutality, even bestiality, and then almost immediately in the role of caretaker. Like so many of the dog anecdotes that pervaded British periodicals in the 1840s, which the Brontës avidly consumed,³⁰ the story is governed by an odd mix of narrative self-enclosure and metonymic openness: short but exemplary, geared toward definition, it ostensibly is there to stand in for, allow us to extrapolate, the broader contours of Shirley as character and perhaps even Shirley as ‘type.’ Yet the visual logic of the scene emphasizes chaos—“whirling and worrying”; a blending of body parts—rather than the kind of stasis that dog anecdotes would typically emphasize, as if to lend stability to the species category that was their *raison d’être* in

³⁰ The genre was a particularly popular feature of *Chambers’s Edinburgh Journal*, which the Brontës “read enthusiastically” in the 1840s (Kreilkamp, “Petted Things” 93). Kreilkamp introduces the intriguing possibility that the work of all three sisters—Emily particularly—“might be considered as influenced by—and even perhaps as instances of—such a new Victorian genre of dog or pet narrative” (93).

the first place. True, at the end of the scene, we see Shirley “watching” Tartar for hours, in much the same way an anecdotal dog might (in the manner of mid-nineteenth century Edinburgh hero Greyfriars Bobby, for instance) sit in the same spot for months or years. Yet the centerpiece of the scene is “bonnetless” disarray: animal and human tangled together in a frenzied web, like Dickens’ “dogs, indistinguishable in mire” or Tennyson’s even more primeval “Dragons of the prime / That tare each other in their slime” (*In Memoriam* LVI.22-23). If the dog anecdote was a species-stabilizing technology, this Shirley anecdote is notable for producing exactly the opposite effect: an unfixing of identities, a destabilization not only of species categories but of others that depend on them—gender (“bonnetless”); class (she fights; the workers look on); even humanity (“far less of men”).³¹ And the anecdote is all the more notable as a scene conjured by the free-associative daydreaming of someone else. Mrs. Gill’s mind jumps contiguously to a scene that is itself about contiguity between the human and the animal. A scene of canine-human entanglement defines Shirley in the metonymic imaginations of others—whether she would want it to or not.

The imagery of “whirling” here foreshadows a set of images that Louis Moore uses to describe his own feelings at the climax of their erotic negotiation, when the categories of “master” and “dog” have been unmoored from stable referents: “The world swims and changes

³¹ At several points throughout the novel, characters betray an interest in isolating what, if anything, lies at the core of human identity—what constitutes “the real human being below,” as Shirley puts it (588). Often the question takes on a literal (or rather, metaphoric) cast, becoming a matter of substance: Robert Moore remarks that the Reverend Helstone is “of true metal” (223); Shirley, speaking of Louis, remarks that “the basis of his character is not of eider down,” and that “I am of elastic materials, not soon crushed” (298); toward the end, Hiram Yorke, a minor character, exclaims to Robert Moore that “this is a queer world, and men are made of the queerest dregs that Chaos churned up in her ferment” (506). It is perhaps telling that these declarations move, over the course of the novel, along a spectrum from materiality to immateriality, eventually arriving at a definition of the human as a being of internal “chaos” rather than any discrete, identifiable element.

round me. The sun is a dizzying scarlet blaze; the sky a violet vortex whirling over me” (586). More intriguingly, though, this “whirling” also contrasts strikingly with the aesthetic template of Shirley’s own dreams of self-definition and self-actualization, staged at a few points throughout the novel, which center on the figure of Eve or the “First Woman.” She describes this figure for the first time in an exchange with Caroline about the nature of “Nature,” which takes on, in her imagination, a form akin to “what Eve was when she and Adam stood alone on earth” (303). Shirley’s Eve is not Milton’s Eve, seemingly defined by trickery and weakness in a masculinized poetic universe of angels in “battalions” and demons at war; she is an original and originary force akin to creation itself, a “woman-Titan” who gives the world its “daring”:

I saw—I now see—a woman-Titan: her robe of blue air spreads to the outskirts of the heath, where yonder flock is grazing; a veil white as an avalanche sweeps from her head to her feet, and arabesques of lightning flame on its borders. Under her breast I see her zone, purple like that horizon: through its blush shines the star of evening. Her steady eyes I cannot picture; they are clear—they are as deep as lakes ... Her forehead has the expanse of a cloud, and is paler than the early moon ... So kneeling, face to face she speaks with God. That Eve is Jehovah’s daughter, as Adam was his son. (304)

In its sweeping scope, encompassing every environment and feature of the landscape, Shirley’s vision of Eve stands in marked contrast to Caroline’s much humbler fantasy and “aspiration”: “a gentle human form—the form she ascribed to her own mother; unknown, unloved, but not unlonged-for” (305). And yet, the contrast raises a question: which vision, in the end, is more “human”? Shirley describes a figure that quite literally anthropomorphizes everything on the planet; every environment is a piece of Eve, made in her image, flesh of her flesh. Caroline describes a figure “unknown, unloved, but not unlonged-for”—a figure defined by attachments that can hardly be articulated except by a double-negative, by a vague sense of contingency and codependency. Shirley’s vision of Nature might encompass the nonhuman (“where yonder flock is grazing”), but it is explicitly anthropomorphic and anthropocentric. Even the very phrase

“yonder flock,” the only reference to nonhuman life in the entire sequence, domesticates animality itself and places it “yonder,” at an ontological distance. Caroline’s vision of Nature is explicitly defined in human terms, yet it seems paradoxically more ready (or at least willing) to admit ecological agency. To imagine an Eve “not unlonged-for,” defined by *being* “not unlonged-for,” is to formulate humanness itself (and by extension Nature, since this Eve is a figure of Nature) in terms of openness and indescribable attachments—“longings,” dependencies, contingencies, beneath the register of conscious understanding.

Shirley’s second dream of Eve, relayed to the reader through her French composition book, focuses less on her encompassment of the world and more on her primeval loneliness, even as she inhabits a world teeming with animals and plants and other varieties of nonhuman life:

All solitary, she has sprung up straight and graceful. Nature cast her features in a fine mould; they have matured in their pure, accurate first lines, unaltered by the shocks of disease. No fierce dry blast has dealt rudely with the surface of her frame; no burning sun has crisped or withered her tresses: her form gleams ivory-white through the trees; her hair flows plenteous, long, and glossy; her eyes not dazzled by vertical fires, beam in the shade large and open, and full and dewy: above those eyes, when the breeze bares her forehead, shines an expanse fair and ample,—a clear, candid page, whereon knowledge, should knowledge ever come, might write a golden record. You see in the desolate young savage nothing vicious or vacant; she haunts the woods harmless and thoughtful: though of what one so untaught can think, it is not easy to divine.

On the evening of one summer day, before the Flood, being utterly alone—for she had lost all trace of her tribe, who had wandered leagues away, she knew not where,—she went up from the vale, to watch Day take leave and Night arrive. (454)

The language here, Shirley’s language, emphasizes several things: radical solitude in a world already populated; integrity, irreducible “form” (“Nature cast her features in a fine mould”) impervious to the elements; verticality (“she has sprung up straight and graceful”; “her eyes not dazzled by vertical fires”); *tabula rasa* purity (“a clear, candid page, whereon knowledge, should knowledge ever come, might write a golden record”). If Caroline’s simple phrase “not unlonged-

for” implicitly transforms the primeval human figure into a kind of limitless rhizomatic or horizontal structure, a node defined and supported by a sprawling network of attachments largely invisible to it, Shirley’s second vision of Eve is even clearer than the first in conceptualizing something very different: the First Woman as perfect circle, radically self-enclosed, un beholden. This “desolate young savage,” hardly desolate at all, resembles no one if not Robinson Crusoe, “utterly alone” yet in every way self-determined. Shirley’s composition sharply answers Derrida’s assumption in *The Beast and the Sovereign* that “nothing equivalent or similar, analogous, was ever, to my knowledge (but I may be wrong) written about a woman alone: like an island in an island” (2). Indeed, Shirley describes Eve as a figure not only atomized but adrift, unmoored from life itself: “of all things, herself seemed to herself the centre,—a small, forgotten atom of life, a spark of soul, emitted inadvertent from the great creative source” (454). “I am alone,” declares Crusoe. Eve was “utterly alone,” declares Shirley—and so am I.

But if Shirley’s fantasy of solitude and self-mastery—which increasingly seems less like a dream and more like a nightmare—resembles *Robinson Crusoe*, it also brings the novel just as sharply into contact with the “problematic of sovereignty” that Derrida sees everywhere in Defoe’s text, and forms the subject of his seminars. Derrida’s larger project is to re-theorize the concept of sovereignty—which sits, always, at the base of concepts of the human—as a construct always already inflected (and infected) by its dialectical foil: the beasts, the teeming multitude. His argument takes on a distinctly ecological dimension in Volume II of the seminars, which take as their central preoccupation the relationship between solitude and “the world,” the environment shared yet also never shared by all living creatures. “Incontestably, animals and humans inhabit the same world,” he declares, “the same objective world even if they do not have the same experience of the objectivity of the object” (8). At the same time, “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” (8). He circles all the way back to the work of the Estonian biologist Jakob von Uexküll in arguing that all animals are, in fact, sovereigns of a kind because the phenomenological lifeworlds they inhabit—Uexküll called them *umwelten*³²—are bodied forth uniquely by their distinct cognitive capacities, sensory apparatuses, and biological needs. For this reason, “there is no world” that we share with them phenomenologically; “there are only islands” (9).

And yet, the key thing to understand about this archipelago of disconnected *umwelten* is that it means we are alone, “sovereign,” only in the sense that we are unable to fully recognize our contingent relationalities and our contiguities with other animals. Every lonely creature’s world is nonetheless informed and acted on by the worlds of others; the islands intersect, even if on the level of conscious apprehension they do not. Crusoe styles himself as the ultimate sovereign, the purest sovereign, a primeval king as unpolluted in his kingship as “King Adam or Emperor Noah” (as Rousseau would later compare him³³). Yet the novel, so often taken as a foundational tale of British self-sufficiency,³⁴ is profligate in its suggestions of a sovereignty

³² Uexküll explains his idea through a set of analogies: “Just as a gourmet picks only the raisins out of the cake, the tick only distinguishes butyric acid from among the things in its surroundings. We are not interested in what taste sensations the raisins produce in the gourmet but only in the fact that they become perception marks of his environment because they are of special biological significance for him; we also do not ask how the butyric acid tastes or smells to the tick, but rather, we only register the fact that butyric acid, as biologically significant, becomes a perception mark for the tick ... Every subject spins out, like the spider’s threads, its relations to certain qualities of things and weaves them into a solid web, which carries its existence” (53).

³³ Rousseau’s interest in Crusoe, elaborated in *The Social Contract*, stems from his being, like Adam, a sovereign in the truest (and paradoxically least political) sense: “one cannot disagree that Adam was the sovereign of the world, like Robinson of his island, so long as he was its only inhabitant, and what was convenient in this empire was that the monarch, assured of his throne, need fear neither rebellion, nor war, nor conspirators” (Qtd. in Derrida 47). He has absolute power, but this power means very little precisely because it depends on self-enclosure from all forms of interpenetration and sociality—all forms of politics itself.

³⁴ James Joyce read Crusoe as a distinctly nationalist figure, an avatar of Britishness and its (self-)dominating aspirations: “the true symbol of the British conquest is Robinson Crusoe ... who, cast away on a desert island, in his pocket a knife and a pipe, becomes an architect, a carpenter, a knifegrinder, an astronomer, a baker, a shipwright, a potter, a saddler, a farmer, a tailor, an umbrella-maker, and a clergyman ... The whole Anglo-Saxon spirit is in

indebted to and always already compromised by the very forms of beasthood that it positions itself against. In one way, Crusoe exhibits “a subjection or a blind, essentially blind, obedience” to the very project of asserting sovereignty; he finds himself consumed, paradoxically, by his “fear of being eaten” (85). Defoe describes a condition of cognitive self-enslavement that Dickens would appreciate: “But I was hurried on, and obey’d blindly the Dictates of my Fancy rather than my Reason...” (qtd. in Derrida 85). In another way, Crusoe quite literally relies on an animal to name him to himself: the parrot Poly, trained to say “*Robin Crusoe, Robin Crusoe,*” a “circular auto-appellation” that works (as Derrida observes) like a “*quasi-technical or prosthetic apparatus,*” yet is still always other to him, always animal, always a curious invader (86).

When Brontë’s novel introduces the possibility that Shirley has rabies, the stakes are not merely physical: on a figurative level, the disease poses a complex threat to the concept of human sovereignty that her dreams sketch in vivid color. As Ritvo and other historians of rabies tend to emphasize, the disease was an object of considerable public obsession and paranoia throughout the 19th century, yet the number of humans actually infected and killed by “hydrophobia” (the human version of it) each year—as Ritvo notes, “the average English citizen of the later 19th century was more than ten times as likely to be murdered”—indicate that it was considerably “more threatening as a metaphorical disease than as an actual one, and the attention it commanded may have been the result of its complex and sometimes conflicting rhetorical functions rather than of its potential impact on public health” (*The Animal Estate* 169-170). One such “conflicting rhetorical function” concerned gender. Rabies was often masculinized in public discourse, bearing connotations of “street life, cruelty to dogs”—also class-based valences—and

Crusoe: the manly independence; the unconscious cruelty; the persistence; the slow yet efficient intelligence; the sexual apathy; the practical, well-balanced religiousness; the calculating taciturnity” (Qtd. in Derrida 16).

an “aggressiveness and tenacity” quite consonant, ironically, with the essential Englishness of John Bull (Pemberton and Worboys, *Mad Dogs and Englishmen* 6). In the context of (upper-) middle-class petkeeping, however, it was also linked metonymically to the queerness or “immoderate love” of the lady-lapdog dyad, which male spectators had been viewing with suspicion ever since the invention of the lapdog in the eighteenth century. Ritvo cites several veterinary sources that tacitly (and sometimes not-so-tacitly) link the disease to masculinity as well as feminization—a thwarting of the male dog’s sexual drives when “habitually confined [and] richly fed” (qtd. in Ritvo 181). After Shirley admits to Louis Moore that she has been bitten by a dog and may be hydrophobic, Louis calls her “nervous and womanish,” and in a sense the line pursues these two connotative connections simultaneously (478). He voices a fear that the disease might make her *too* womanish, i.e. hysterical; at the same time, the statement stands as a defensive bulkhead against the even darker possibility that rabies might finally make her hyper-masculine.

But rabies was saddled with more than connotations of gender imbalance and category crossing. It was also a disease of latency, of corruption that might fester for months, invisibly, before bursting forth from the body. It was a disease with a prognosis like Tennyson’s “Kraken,” defined by long, imperceptible submergence and apocalyptic awakening. And yet, at the same time, “the carriers of infection, who should logically have been shunned, were cherished companions” (Ritvo 169). What made it a particularly nightmarish threat among the pet-owning elite was that it was a madness that could emerge spontaneously in animals that were honorary members of the family and “metonymical human beings”—a wildness, a bestiality, that could overtake the most domesticated creatures of all. If the disease threatened to disrupt categories, it did so by implying that they could never be fully self-enclosed; they were always open to

spontaneous reversion, invasion from within, *a priori* pollution by a form of bestial agency they had defined themselves against. The human could become animal at a moment's notice, losing all self-mastery and fulfilling a dormant potentiality; in the same way, the most pampered cocker spaniel could become a wild, frothing beast. Rabies represented a threat to precisely the kind of organismic and conceptual purity that defines Shirley's Eve, a figure enclosed by "pure, accurate first lines, unaltered by the shocks of disease" (454)—in contrast to Shirley herself, helplessly cauterizing the "little wound" that has already compromised the integrity of her body and mind (477). It was a "metaphorical disease" that was distinctly *about* metonymic transference, both in the sense that it always arrived with a network of unpleasant, repressed connotations—filth, decay, excessive sexuality, contact with the lower classes, "immoderate love"—and in the sense that its most disturbing agency of all involved exposing contiguities, forms of contact both literal and ontological, between categories otherwise understood to be mutually exclusive: the human's ineradicable animality; the pet's inseverable ties to beasthood.

It is tempting to read the rabies in *Shirley* as Ritvo reads it: a "convenient *deus ex machina*" that allowed Brontë to artificially "soften her prickly and unapproachable heroine" (169). But Brontë could have softened her in another way if softening her was the only point. The novel introduces Shirley's rabies scare directly after we read her composition about Eve; she and Louis discuss the disease not only as a matter of life and death but as a matter of solitude, a potentiality that brings her face-to-face with the prospect that she might "die alone" (478). True, they speak of solitude primarily in the romantic (or at least interpersonal) sense, and the most obvious corrective to this solitude is their eventual pairing—a dyad, a dialectic. But the novel seems interested in her self-enclosure or "unapproachability" not merely as a personal quality for Louis Moore to overcome, but as an ecological self-concept for Tartar and the forces of

doghood—rabies included—to overturn. All throughout the novel, Tartar informs her identity (as well as her characterization) indirectly and invisibly, articulating her transgressive desires partly through the very acts of disobedience—sitting on the flowers; barking at the curates—that she reflexively tries to stop. If “a lover feminine can say nothing,” as the narrator explains at one point, because “Nature would brand such demonstration as a rebellion against her instincts,” Tartar nonetheless helps Shirley say what she wants to say, precisely through the way he embodies another concept of terms like “nature” and “instinct” (101).³⁵ His very existence as an existential agent and adjunct challenges her assumptions of radical self-enclosure, both in the sense of personal reticence and unapproachability and in the sense of ontological singularity—indeed, it challenges her assumption that she is any kind of “master” over him. It seems almost too fitting that she comes to realize his metonymic role in her life, her dependency on him, after being exposed to a disease not only spread by dogs but essentially doglike in its infiltrations and implications, and used so often (as Pemberton and Worboys remind us) as “a resource for metaphorical reflection on the ‘self’” (7). “I never could correct that composition,” Shirley remarks, noting the way Moore’s “censor-pencil scored it with condemnatory lines, whose signification I strove vainly to fathom” (457). The novel is not exactly pro-rabies, but it seems strangely insistent nonetheless on using the disease as an implicit vehicle for the “correction” of her “composition”—which centers, after all, on the ‘composition’ of the human in a structural and ontological sense.³⁶ The correction comes not from Moore, nor even precisely from Tartar,

³⁵ In *Between Women*, Sharon Marcus explores another kind of non-heterosexual relationship that the novel uses to complicate this definition of “the constraints on women’s sexual initiative” that it sets up so emphatically: the friendship between Shirley and Caroline. “The novel proves,” Marcus writes, “that although ‘a lover feminine’ can say nothing on her own behalf, her female friend can say a great deal, since Shirley sets Robert’s eventual engagement to Caroline in motion by rejecting him as a suitor” (97).

³⁶ Moore himself admits, during one of their exchanges, that he wants to abandon an idea of “Liberty” and “Solitude” (both key components of sovereignty) to which his self-conception was once attracted: “[Liberty] is, I suspect, akin to that Solitude which I once wooed, and from which I now seek a divorce” (578).

but from a much vaguer, chaotically indeterminate sense of the interpenetration of human and animal that the specter of rabies uncovers: the animal's silent agencies within the human; the fundamental lack of self-enclosure that defines both.

Then again, to attribute any kind of instrumentality to the disease, narrative or philosophical, would be to redefine it in terms opposed to the model of agency it connotes. To call the rabies scare a *deus ex machina* makes a certain amount of sense, but doing so allows us to forget how, on the level of exegetical arrangement, it comes and goes through a logic of accident rather than hyper-artifice. The rabies scare is an odd, late-stage addition, seemingly apropos of nothing; the disease is brought up and then mostly forgotten for about 100 pages, and any suspense it might have generated is dispensed with when we learn matter-of-factly, at the beginning of Chapter XXXVI, that “hers was not a clear case of hydrophobia, there was no such disease” (572). What makes it narratively significant is precisely that, in appearing as a conspicuous *non-sequitur*, it invites interpretations and connotative attachments: like metonymy itself (and entirely unlike the allegories of Eve, which arrive freighted with a clear sense of indexicality, metaphoric purpose), it wanders into the narrative frame and invites us to pursue. Perhaps it compromises a certain kind of structural integrity. But *Shirley* is not exactly a novel known for its structural integrity.

If the power of rabies—the power of metonymy; the power of dogs—is to *remind*, the way the disease shows up so randomly, so accidentally, infecting narrative structure with the very logic of errancy and spontaneity that defines its epizootic procedure, might perhaps remind us of another comparison between animality and realist form. In 1872, G.H. Lewes wrote a critical appraisal of Dickens that lambasted him for failing to write characters animated by “the distinctive peculiarity of organic action, that of fluctuating spontaneity” (“Dickens in Relation to

Criticism,” 148-149). “When one thinks of Micawber always presenting himself in the same situation, moved with the same springs, and uttering the same sounds ... when one thinks of the ‘catchwords’ personified as characters,” Lewes insists, one does not think of spontaneity; one thinks instead of the mechanistic actions of a lobotomized frog:

Place one of these brainless frogs on his back and he will at once recover the sitting posture; draw a leg from under him, and he will draw it back again; tickle or prick him and he will push away the object, or take *one* hop out of the way; stroke his back, and he will utter *one* croak. All these things resemble the actions of the unmutated frog, but they differ in being *isolated* actions, and *always the same*: they are as uniform and calculable as the movements of a machine. The uninjured frog may or may not croak, may or may not hop away; the result is never calculable, and is rarely a single croak or a single hop. It is this complexity of the organism which Dickens wholly fails to conceive; his characters have nothing fluctuating and incalculable in them, even when they embody true observations; and very often they are creations so fantastic that one is at a loss to understand how he could, without hallucination, believe them to be like reality (149).

Lewes’s critique is retrospective and generational: from the vantage-point of a high realism informed aesthetically and philosophically by the grand inchoateness of evolutionary theory, by a more ecological understanding of the affinities and agencies among creatures found in Darwin and translated into form by George Eliot, he looks back on a creaky older prototype. Dickensian realism transforms “catchwords” into characters; it is artificial, all-too-intentional, pervaded at all levels by a purposefulness that belies the “fluctuating spontaneity” of animal life itself. And yet, in both *Oliver Twist* and *Shirley*, the metonymic animal inserts precisely that kind of energy into the diegetic relationships and exegetic structures that it helps constitute; metonymy itself, linking “catchwords” to characters, linking things to other things with irregularity and abandon, exposes something like the organicism of the “uninjured frog” in the basic procedures and movements of realist prose. The relationship between metonymy and animality in these novels asks us not only to rethink the mutually informing relationship between the novel and the pet, as Kreilkamp insists we do, but also to reconsider the zoomorphism undergirding a genre so easy to

align with anthropomorphism, anthropocentrism, and agency in a human sense. Lewes calls for a zoopoetics of realism without recognizing that realism itself had been, in a fundamental way, zoopoetic already: “uninjured frog” as well as itinerant dog.

Chapter 3:

Nonsense Animals: Species at Play in *The Water-Babies* and *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*

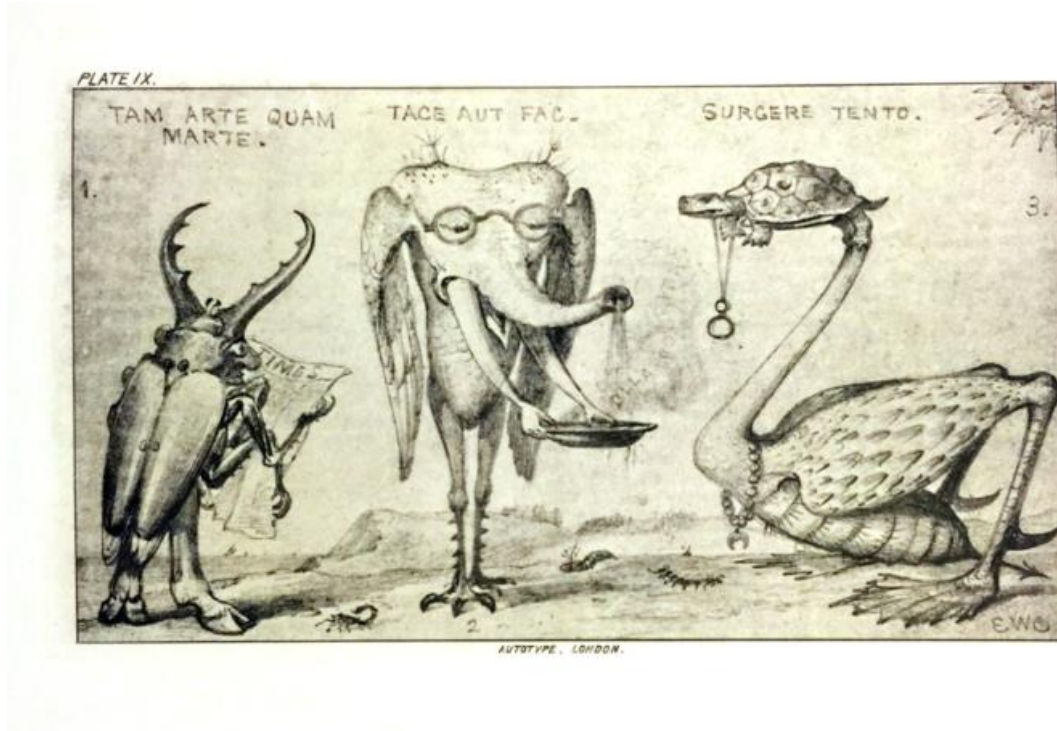


Fig. 2: A plate from Edward William Cooke's *Grottesque Animals* (1872).

In 1872, the British painter Edward William Cooke published *Grottesque Animals*,¹ an illustrated compendium of over fifty monstrous chimeras. The compendium includes an elephant-bird with glasses, a “swan-like goose” with a tortoise for a head, and a sea-horse with the snout of a pig and “the limbs of a Bird (species unknown)” (5). In the foreword to the book, Cooke explains the genesis of his creations: they came to him, he writes, after he attended a particularly vexatious meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science in Manchester, in 1864, and escaped to the sea-shore in Somerset. He spent his days cataloguing

¹ For a more detailed account of *Grottesque Animals*, see Rebecca Stott, “Through a Glass Darkly: Aquarium Colonies and Nineteenth-Century Narratives of Marine Monstrosity,” 320.

and illustrating fossils; he spent his nights inventing dream animals inspired by their strange yet pleasing forms, starting with the first creature in the collection: an ammonite with a beak. But the epigraph of the book tells a different story about their creation:

These oddities, from fancy drawn,
May surely raise the question,
Will DARWIN say—by *Chance* they're formed,
Or '*Natural Selection?*'

In private, Cooke called them his “Darwin Animals”; the subject of that meeting of the British Association was *On the Origin of Species*. And the epigraph clarifies, to some extent, what the phrase “Darwin Animals” means: the creatures in Cooke’s collection represent the *reductio ad absurdum* of Darwin’s argument about speciation, namely that the forms of species had not been fixed since the dawn of creation, but had emerged instead through a long, inchoate, seemingly random process. The book’s monsters are often accompanied by blurbs that attest to their self-determination and self-satisfaction: e.g. the description of the bird-elephant remarks that her legs have been “elongated and feathered” by “her own SELECTION” (9). Cooke’s aim, it seems, is to satirize the notion that animal morphology could be determined not by the judicious hand of the Creator, but by the nonsensical whims of animals themselves.

And yet, Cooke also reveals his enchantment with some of the implications of Darwin’s theory, and there is a way in which his nonsensical creatures perform important epistemological work on Darwin’s behalf. In his foreword, Cooke does not denigrate his hybrids; he celebrates the way they attest to larger structural affinities among seemingly heterogeneous creatures. “It constantly occurred to the Author,” he writes, “that the most diverse genera and species, when shuffled together, might again be united, like *dominoes*, with a kindred aptness, and, in some instances, even of gracefulness” (vi). The creatures stand with an unflappable independence. It is the lines of text surrounding them—Latin inscriptions; short descriptive blurbs packed densely

with arch pop-culture references—that feel like the real object of Cooke’s satire, both because they seem to beget the grotesques and because they seem unable to account for the grotesques. Above the image of one creature, a giant beetle with cow hooves reading a newspaper, the description reads, “The STAG-BEETLE, being a politician, studies ‘The Times,’ but from his BOVINE understanding he might be supposed to be reading the JOHN BULL” (9). The beetle literalizes the blurb, but the blurb itself is a ridiculous parody of natural-historical explanation, utterly unable to frame its subject except in reference to familiar human (and more specifically British) cultural touchstones. It purports to describe a type of creature, yet it can only do so in comparison to a type of Victorian—the “JOHN BULL”-reading lower classes. Each animal in the compendium calls attention not just to its own grotesqueness, but to the inadequacy of the frames that explain it, which seem to indulge indiscriminately in metaphor, analogy, and anthropomorphism. If they are truly meant to display the “grace” of structural affinities among different creatures, or indeed, the even more fundamentally Darwinian idea that all these creatures derive from the same progenitors, they only end up underscoring the epistemological obstacles that impede our appreciation. Their grotesqueness is the problem. They are constructed as though to expose all the mediating thoughts—including aesthetic appraisal, laughter, and especially the instinct to compare nature against culture—that prevent viewers from appreciating their beauty, or apprehending them on their own terms.

Why do animals figure so centrally in nonsense literature? Why might it make sense—and be more than mere coincidence—that the peak of nonsense as a popular literary genre coincided with the first wave of evolutionary theory’s cultural impact? It is of course tempting to say that the apparent affinity between nonsense and Darwin was little more than an accident of historical circumstance. The publication of the *Origin* was a seismic event in Victorian culture;

nonsense texts written in the 1850s and 60s—as the genre blossomed after Edward Lear’s pioneering collections of nonsense poetry—register its impact partly because they have a porous (and often satirical) relationship to their moment; they are of the world, despite aiming for a disorienting feeling of otherworldliness. Following the logic of *Grotesque Animals*, this chapter argues, on the contrary, that nonsense reached for Darwinian ideas not because it could satirize them, but because it could make sense of them—because it had the unique and paradoxical ability to entertain them in a serious way. More specifically, I argue that the discourse of nonsense possessed unique ways of confronting evolutionary theory’s challenges to what Charles Kingsley called “the dogma of the permanence of species,” both because it could display animals that flamboyantly exceeded familiar morphological and ontological parameters, and because it could deconstruct—render suspect—the taxonomical discourses on which it often subsisted. In her study *Nonsense: Aspects of Intertextuality in Folklore and Literature*, Susan Stewart observes that nonsense not only depends on common sense as an origin point and a dialectical foil, but can also work as an “aid to sense-making” (5). “Like its companion categories of Fate, Chance, Accident, Miscellaneous, and even *etc.*,” she writes, “it gives us a place to store any mysterious gaps in our systems of order” (5). In this chapter, with *Alice* and *The Water-Babies* as my key examples, I argue that nonsense literature offered a crucial place for Victorian culture to think through the queerness of species mutability and the limitations of familiar epistemic frames—including taxonomy and aquarium writing—that took species categories for granted.

At a glance, as a set of literary conventions, nonsense would seem to be a discourse ill-suited to capturing the vague, slippery boundaries between species. It is the opposite of “organic form”; it is artifice that calls attention to itself as artifice. As Hugh Haughton points out, nonsense is always much more orderly—“more shapely, more brazenly formalised and

patterned”—than its disorderly appearance might suggest (6). In *The Fields of Nonsense*, her classic work of nonsense theory, Elizabeth Sewell maintains that nonsense is orderly in precisely the way that games are; it creates a delimited space where words and concepts can be manipulated like game-pieces, according to highly prescribed—and artificial—rules of engagement. Indeed, Sewell defines it as a discourse of particularity that *resists* the terrifying prospects of vagueness or all-encompassing totality. Despite texts like *Alice* advertising themselves as dreamscapes, nonsense is nothing like dreams themselves; dreams engulf the dreamer in a feeling of “oneness [that] cannot be resolved into its component parts” (51), whereas nonsense breaks the world into highly manipulable “units of thought” (49). By that logic, it would make more sense if nonsense were *full* of species categories, utterly committed to them, rather than committed to the Darwinian nightmare of a gestating, boundary-less creaturely continuum.

And, of course, it is. In *The Philosophy of Nonsense*, Jean-Jacques Lecercle asserts not only that “nonsense texts inscribe the discourse of taxonomy in their own terms,” but also that “the discourse of natural history is present in the genre as a whole” (*The Philosophy of Nonsense* 202-203).² Nonsense texts ingest the logic of taxonomy with considerable frequency, often taking the form of mock-bestiaries that abuse the conventions of classification; indeed, as *Grotesque Animals* demonstrates, classification is one place where nonsense writers’ twin penchants for weird animals and Latin fortuitously intersect. Nonsense writers reach for this mode partly as a way of vicariously simulating the *frisson* of encounters with baffling creatures—what Kingsley described as the intoxicating “pleasure of finding new species”

² Lecercle goes so far as to claim that Darwin’s encounter with the guanacos, recorded in his *Voyage of the Beagle*, is a work of nonsense literature *avant la lettre*: “That they are curious is certain,” Darwin wrote; “for if a person lies on the ground and plays strange antics, such as throwing up his feet in the air, they will almost always approach by degrees to reconnoiter him” (qtd. in Lecercle 202).

(*Glaucus* 31). Throughout the nineteenth century, the development of the natural sciences and the expansion of empire brought a parade of animals into the public eye that seemed to challenge the formal boundaries set for them by the discourses of taxonomy (such as the baffling platypus). As Kingsley mentions explicitly in *The Water-Babies*, many of these creatures debuted in dramatic fashion in the *Illustrated News* (38).³ The many hybrids that appear in nonsense texts, sporting strange, pun-filled Latin binomials, attest to the increasing (and not unpleasant) appearance of problem animals in popular media. Nonsense animals also attest to an increasing public feeling that natural history itself was headed in the direction of nonsense—in large part because, as Gillian Beer observes, “Darwinian theory with its emphasis on random mutation rebuffed common sense and appearance” (127).

At the same time, when nonsense reaches for classification, it inevitably ends up exposing the ways in which classification is nonsensical—above all, by exposing that it is *common-sensical*. Nonsense constructs itself in relation to common sense, attempting to be everything that common sense is not. Common sense is indexical, contextual, and hierarchical; nonsense is flat and self-enclosed. Common sense trades in meaning-making procedures that point to something true about the wider world of reality; in the world of nonsense, semantic procedures point to nothing but themselves, *creating* a world apart rather than reifying a logically (and ontologically) prior order. Common sense is natural; it “has to do with the proper order of things, with what people know ‘instinctively’ to be right and assume to be intersubjectively held” (Stewart 17). Nonsense is unnatural: aesthetic, formalized, artificial, empty, manifestly a product of culture. Nonsense does everything it can to be ‘said,’ to call

³ “But surely if there were water-babies, somebody would have caught one at least?,” objects the narrator’s imagined interlocutor in *The Water-Babies*, insisting that water-babies cannot exist (38). “They would have put it into spirits, or into the *Illustrated News*, or perhaps cut it into two halves, poor dear little thing, and sent one to Professor Owen, and one to Professor Huxley, to see what they would each say about it” (38).

attention to itself as linguistic artifice. Common sense is the unsaid—that necessary category of rules and premises that can be submerged safely beneath, and as a pretext for, higher-order analytical claims. Precisely by inverting the structures of common sense, however, nonsense brings them into view and exposes their artificiality—their rootedness in subjectivity, ordinary life, the everyday negotiations of culture. Nonsense exposes the profound flimsiness of the epistemic forms that mediate and structure reality. When it takes the form of a satirical or inverted taxonomy, as it does in the case of *Grotesque Animals*, it inevitably destabilizes classification itself—the epistemic frame through which creaturely queerness is made sensical.

This chapter is about how such deconstruction takes place in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *The Water-Babies*, two nonsense texts written during an intellectual moment that demanded new, intense forms of suspicion toward the certitudes of taxonomy. But it is also about how both texts use the protocols of nonsense to place animals in a space *beyond* taxonomy—a space of imaginative play that embraces creaturely queerness. The animals in *Alice* and *The Water-Babies* have little in common besides being, more often than not, defamiliarized versions of familiar creatures. What they do have in common, however, is a distinctly palpable *freedom*, supported by the frame of nonsense: a freedom to slip between taxonomical categories (even categories as large as animal, vegetable, mineral, and human); a freedom to behave with inscrutable agency, irreducible to anthropomorphism; a freedom to use language in ways that challenge the anthropocentric assumption of muteness. In *Alice*, nonsense's logic of detachment permits animals to enter into new relations with language that overturn the structures (or strictures) of what Foucault termed “animal semantics”—the common-sensical premise that animals are not only bound to species, but bound to specific meanings. In *The Water-Babies*, nonsense's logic of decontextualization—its way of scrambling the reconcilability of its subjects

with larger conceptual and narrative ‘frames’—allows aquatic animals to escape the logic of the aquarium, a device that had been used (indeed, by Kingsley himself) to impose order, clarity, and species identities on the queer denizens of the ocean throughout the 1850s. Impelled by the challenges of their post-Darwinian intellectual moment, both authors use nonsense not only to critique existing epistemic structures, but also to imagine new ones that might better accommodate Darwin’s ideas about the mutability and self-determination of organic life.

In *Evolution and Imagination in Victorian Children’s Literature*, Jessica Straley points out that by the 1860s, the term nonsense “had long been one of the most useful and well-worn rhetorical tools of natural theology”—which is to say, in opposition to evolutionary theory (89). It continued to perform this function well after the publication of the *Origin*, in texts, such as Tom Hood’s *From Nowhere to the North Pole: A Noah’s Ark-Æological Narrative* (1875), that “use *Wonderland*-like nonsense to convey explicit morals about the sensibility of design” (89). Neither Carroll nor Kingsley is immune to nonsense’s paradoxical ability to strengthen some common-sense premises while destabilizing others; Kingsley, in particular, displays a profoundly ambivalent desire to use the form of *The Water-Babies* to solidify natural-theological certitudes that it otherwise disrupts. At the same time, in this chapter, my aim is to show how determinedly both authors reach for models of animal identity that are *insensible*, perhaps never rejecting the idea of a grand design, but thoroughly challenging the forms of *human* design that organize and mediate animal life. Both texts are structured around encounters between their protagonists (Tom the water-baby; Alice) and animals. Both texts go to great lengths, using the procedures of nonsense, to inject those encounters with alterity, ambiguity, and aliveness.

Nonsense in the Age of Fish Tanks: *The Water-Babies* and the Victorian Aquarium

“Would an aquarium be out of place in every American home, hospital, park—ay, and prison?”
- *The Amateur Aquarist*, 1894

At one point midway through *The Water-Babies*, Charles Kingsley’s evolutionary fable, a misguided scientist named Professor Ptthmlnsprts—that is, “Put them all in spirits”—does something that many Victorians did throughout the 1850s, Kingsley himself included: he dredges the shore for exotic specimens to put in tanks. Much to his surprise, in his net he finds none other than the book’s protagonist, Tom, a human boy who has transformed (or devolved) into a water-baby. “Why, it must be a Cephalopod!” the Professor cries, to which Tom responds, “No, I ain’t!” (87). Of course, he cannot hear Tom, and the discovery ends up being a liability; he has just assured a little girl named Ellie that water-babies do not exist. What to do? “He would have liked, of course, to have taken Tom home in a bucket,” Kingsley writes. “He would not have put him in spirits. Of course not. He would have kept him alive, and petted him, and written a book about him, and given him two long names, of which the first would have said a little about Tom, and the second all about himself.” And yet, he can only do the opposite. Rather than taking Tom home, he throws the specimen back, insisting once again that water-babies do not exist.

Who is Professor Ptthmlnsprts? As several critics have noted,⁴ he is most explicitly a composite of Thomas Henry Huxley and Richard Owen—Darwin’s “bulldog” on the one hand, Darwin’s fiercest opponent on the other. The linkage is made clear in a later illustration by Linley Sambourne, which depicts both Huxley and Owen staring at a water-baby in a glass container, as well as in the text itself, which depicts the Professor at the center of a debate about

⁴ See e.g. Michael Ruse, *Darwinism as Religion: What Literature Tells Us about Evolution* (Oxford University Press, 2016) and Nicolaas Rupke, *Richard Owen: Biology without Darwin* (University of Chicago Press, 2009).

the “hippopotamus major” that recalls the real-life debate between Owen and Huxley about the “hippocampus major,” supposedly the anatomical feature (according to Owen) that absolutely distinguished humans from other animals. The Professor combines Huxley’s materialism and Owen’s stubborn, arrogant adherence to his own anatomical theories.⁵

But it is possible to discern some notes of self-satire as well. Like Kingsley, and like Philip Henry Gosse, Kingsley’s old mentor and friend, the Professor is a marine zoologist who relies heavily on a relatively new technology: the aquarium. Indeed, he mimics the behavior of a whole class of 1850s aqua-evangelists, Kingsley included, who had spent the better part of the decade extolling the virtues of the technology. First, he travels to the shore to find specimens to put in tanks; then, at home, he studies these tanks, approaching the task of classification with particular zeal; finally, he commits their inhabitants to writing, using them to extrapolate a synecdochic understanding of the ocean world at large. Like any aquarist, he gets a little attached to the objects of his scrutiny, imposing some of the cultural logic of petkeeping onto his austere scientific pursuit. The narrator strings together “and” phrases in a string that sounds like a child begging for a dog: “He would have kept [Tom] alive, and petted him, and written a book about him...” (87). But these barbs are overshadowed by a more damning, and fundamentally epistemological, problem. Rather than altering his views after the potentially revelatory encounter with the water-baby, the Professor uses the editorial powers of the aquarium—its capacity to include as well as exclude; its function as a framing device—to confirm the taxonomic order with which he began. He puts in tanks only what he *wants* to put in tanks, creating edited simulacra of the ocean world that reify his assumptions about it, including

⁵ See, for instance, Huxley’s 1870 lecture “Has a Frog a Soul, and of What Nature Is That Soul, Supposing It to Exist?,” which recounts several vivisectionist experiments that attempted to locate the seat of a frog’s soul by amputating various parts of its body.

a set of epistemological categories otherwise challenged by the water-baby's evolutionary liminality.

As the real-world analogues to Professor Pthmlnsprts make clear, *The Water-Babies* is a children's book with a porous and complex relationship to the scientific developments of its time. In this section of the chapter, my aim is to elucidate the novel's relationship with one very important development in particular: the aquarium. Kingsley wrote *The Water-Babies* after a feverish decade of widespread scientific and popular interest in marine zoology, aided and abetted by advances in aquarium technology. He also wrote it in the wake of a large corpus of aquarium *writing* to which he himself contributed—principally with *Glaucus: Or, the Wonders of the Shore* (1855), which celebrated the technology and ended, like other aquarium books, by giving his (assumed to be middle-class) readers instructions for building and stocking their own tanks. Kingsley and other aquarium writers spent the 1850s billing it as a singular apparatus of sight *and* insight: a tool that could not only make the creatures of the ocean depths visible in a new way, but also spur contemplation by making the order of creation newly discernible. In his own aquarium writing, Kingsley celebrated the technology in similar terms—until he wrote *The Water-Babies*.

As I hope to show, the image of Professor Pthmlnsprts is part of the novel's larger critique of the aquarium in general, which had become a way to (literally and figuratively) domesticate the queerness of ocean life rather than confront it. As Judith Hamera points out, from its earliest prototypes, the aquarium was understood and promoted as a technology of spectacle that could bring the “queer alterities” of ocean life *into* the everyday lifeworld (*Parlor Ponds* 10). To its evangelists, “the underlying promise of the aquarium [was] the promise of theater itself: that presentational and representational elements can somehow combine to spawn a

brave new world of edification and enjoyment” (9). Aquarium writers like Kingsley understood this logic explicitly; indeed, they framed the aquarium as a corrective to the stultifying moral, social, and intellectual effects of middle-class domesticity—a way of confronting radical, humbling otherness, orders of existence beyond the clockwork regularity of city life. The paradox of the aquarium, however, was that it domesticated the ocean by bringing the ocean into the space of domesticity. That “brave new world” became linked to everyday life in both literal and figurative ways, brought under the safe conceptual rubrics of anthropomorphic (and more specifically, middle-class) experience even as it ostensibly presented intellectual challenges. The aquarium arrived after a long, centuries-old tradition of viewing the ocean as a fathomless void, an epistemological lacuna. Its appeal derived from that tradition of fear. Yet precisely because it allowed its inhabitants to live inside conceptual and narrative frames, the aquarium could tame the ocean by annexing it to the familiar world of culture—and the production of common sense.

I read *The Water-Babies* as a challenge to that assimilation: a tank full of nonsense that attempts to bring aquatic life back into the domain of nonsense, rather than letting it sit idly in the dim world of the drawing room that Kingsley so derided, even if he helped put it there. I read it as a novel that uses the strategies of literary nonsense—above all, its decontextualizing procedures—to recapture the “queer alterity” of aquatic life. Like other works of nonsense, the book presents its creatures within an elaborate, self-consciously delimited frame that severs its fictional diegesis from any stable sense of real-life context—what Susan Stewart calls the “everyday lifeworld” (24). Kingsley’s narrator insists that the whole thing is “a fairy tale, and only fun and pretense; and, therefore, you are not to believe a word of it, even if it is true” (190). By presenting its creatures within such a patently artificial frame, however, the novel calls attention to the artifice, and the ethical stakes, of the aquarium’s framing. Rather than projecting

contextuality, a synecdochic relationship to higher systems of order, the creatures in the novel resist contextualization, belonging only to their own world. Rather than conveying an illusion of perspicacity, the novel as a whole involves its reader in a *disorienting* feeling of ignorance, bringing its protagonist (and by extension its reader) face-to-face with forms of “queer alterity” that had been familiarized by the aquarium’s domesticating aesthetic logic. The novel critiques the aquarium by using nonsense to create its opposite: a possibility space detached from the domain of “sense”; a space in which animals are interrogatively inhuman; a space in which animals can escape categories; a space in which animals can be themselves.

*

In the wake of an 1845 tax repeal that allowed for the large-scale manufacture of plate glass, a solidifying upper-middle class increasingly accustomed to vacationing on the shore, an expanding railway system, and new advances in marine biology, the aquarium took Victorian Britain by storm in the 1850s, almost immediately after its invention.⁶ Like other crazes before it, including a brief national obsession with ferns, the craze was expectably short-lived. By 1860, the décor expert Shirley Hibberd—a leading aqua-evangelist—declared that it had “died out properly and completely,” leaving many “homes of taste” with fetid monuments to the sheer difficulty of keeping aquatic animals alive without artificial aeration or filtration (qtd. in Brunner, *The Ocean at Home* 58). While it lasted, however, it was a “mania” enjoyed at several levels of Victorian society, especially in urban centers. As described by one journalist in 1856,

⁶ It is difficult to trace the “invention” of the aquarium to one person, given that it was the culmination of several technological advances and experimental breakthroughs—including the “Wardian Case” developed by Nathaniel Bagshaw Ward, a Whitechapel surgeon and naturalist who developed a way to keep plants alive in airtight jars in the 1830s, and the work of Robert S. Warington, who developed the first salt-water tank (see Philip F. Rehbock, “The Victorian Aquarium in Ecological and Social Perspective”). In *Theatres of Glass*, however, Rebecca Stott makes a compelling case that the aquarium as such originated with Anna Thynne, an amateur marine zoologist who developed an elaborate, labor-intensive system to keep madrepores alive in her home in the late 1840s.

In London itself, the mania is raging just now at fever point... In West End squares, in trim suburban villas, in crowded city thoroughfares, in the demure houses of little, unfrequented back streets, and inside the flat, sill-less windows of wretched Spitalfields and Bethnal Green, everywhere you see the aquarium in one form or another..." (qtd. in Stott, "Through a Glass Darkly" 306).

Well-to-do amateur aquarists traveled in droves to seaside locales where they would "dredge" for exotic creatures to take home—and hopefully, like the good Professor, classify. Others traveled to the London "Aquarium Warehouse" of William Alford Lloyd, who boasted a selection of over 15,000 fresh and saltwater specimens and published a catalogue with a detachable questionnaire (Fig 3) asking prospective customers to specify the exact dimensions of the tank they desired, as well as the parlor—almost never the bedroom—into which it would be inserted. "In what *kind* of apartment or other place is the Tank to be put?" asks the questionnaire. "Supposing that it is intended to place the Tank near a window in the wall, what is the *aspect* of the window? Is it east, west, north, or south, or what combination of those directions? Are there windows in any two walls placed at right angles to each other?" Although the questions are ostensibly geared toward the health of the prospective customer's fragile aquatic specimens, they place this concern on equal footing with the customer's aesthetic "intentions," which were predictable enough to be presumptively "supposed." They make two things abundantly clear about the home aquarium in the 1850s: it was not only a mass-produced bourgeois commodity, but one expected to blend harmoniously with the room surrounding it.

THE FOLLOWING PRINTED FORM,

intended for the guidance of purchasers in the selection of Aquaria, is requested to be filled up, torn out, and returned to Mr. LLOYD, that he may advise accordingly. A rough plan, showing the position of windows and the direction of the sun upon them, as variously influenced, is desirable. See paragraph 9, page 13.

ANSWERS.

1. In what *kind* of apartment or other }
place is the Tank to be put ? }

2. How is the apartment *lighted* by }
windows ? }

Are the windows in the ceiling (i.e. }
a sky-light) or in the wall ? }

Are there windows in the opposite }
walls ? }

Are there windows in any two walls }
placed at right angles to each }
other ? }

3. Supposing that it is intended to place }
the Tank near a window in the }
wall, what is the *aspect* of the }
window ? Is it east, west, north }
or south, or what combination of }
those directions ? }

4. At what *distance*, in feet or inches, }
would it be convenient to have the }
Tank stand away from the win- }
dow ? }

Fig. 3: A questionnaire for prospective customers printed at the end of William Alford Lloyd's aquarium catalogue.

For the first half of the nineteenth century, both popular culture and scientific discourses regarded the ocean as a deep, dark, impenetrable lacuna, beyond the reach of empirical knowledge. As Philip Steinberg points out, the proponents of empire and global capital liked to maintain the fiction that it had nothing in it at all—that it was an “empty transportation *surface*, beyond the space of social relations” (*The Social Construction of the Ocean* 113). Other voices insisted that it had things in it, but confronted it with fear, as a container of the unimaginable. Edmund Burke’s *On the Sublime* described the ocean as “an object of no small terror”; even as late as 1866, Victor Hugo romantically asserted in *The Toilers of the Sea* that “to look into the depth of the sea is to behold the imagination of the Unknown” (qtd. in Casto, “Tales of the Sea” 62). Even Gosse, a marine zoologist, wrote that he “could scarcely look down into the abyss without a shuddering dread” (*The Aquarium* 125). Concomitant with this fear was an approach to ocean life informed heavily—much more than other forms of zoological understanding—by folklore and superstition. The ocean was “a cursed, dark world where terrifying monsters [lurk], devouring anything in sight” (Bernd Brunner, *The Ocean at Home* 12). As Harriet Ritvo notes in *The Platypus and the Mermaid*, it was the last uncharted realm that permitted Victorian culture—even scientific professionals—to entertain the possibility of mythic beasts. Perhaps no poem captures early-nineteenth century attitudes toward ocean life better than Tennyson’s “The Kraken,” which, as I have discussed in my introduction, uses form as well as content to express the alluring yet repulsive incomprehensibility of its subject.

These attitudes toward the ocean might explain why so many midcentury scientists devoted themselves to dredging and illuminating its mysteries in the decades that followed—especially Gosse, who was the most famous marine zoologist of his moment. The Kraken’s “shadowy sides” often seem to lurk in the background of Gosse’s books on ocean life. The

poem's elemental struggle between light and dark—the light of empiricist apprehension and divine manifestation versus the gloom of the Kraken's umbral mystery—reappears, for example, in a passage from *The Aquarium* describing a perilous array of ocean caves called Keeve's Hole, in Dorset. "The various effects of the light struggling with the gloom in these caves are the most picturesque imaginable," Gosse writes (125). Yet that very word, "picturesque," suggests a domestication of the struggle itself under the rubric of landscape painting—a domestication enabled by the aquarium, a framing device which was itself informed by the logic of landscape. Whereas Tennyson adopts an unconventional form—15 lines; an erratic rhyme scheme—to evoke the way the Kraken spills out of epistemological containers, Gosse's book both celebrates and constitutes an apparatus of sight that can finally encompass the Kraken-like contradictions of ocean creatures. He revels in the queerness of the creatures he describes, but the nature of the technology allows him to temper that alterity with an overriding sense of *contextuality*. The aquarium allows him to make sense of the strange by describing their agreeable, sensible existence within frames both literal and conceptual. It functions not so much to present nature but to *naturalize* nature, making the remotest otherworld a vehicle of meaning, a stable synecdoche.

Tennyson's Kraken is unknowable, borderline inconceivable, partly because of the "unnumbered polypi" that encrust its endless form. As Richard Maxwell points out, in 1830, the term "polyp" would have possessed ambiguities both historical and ontological—a byword for the unsettling liminalities of the ocean's problem-creatures ("Unnumbered Polypi" 10). In ancient Aristotelian natural history, the word referred to cephalopods like the Kraken itself. In the more "modern" tradition, however, it had become a word for a certain kind of zoophyte: self-dividing, nearly microscopic creatures straddling the line between animal and plant. The

“polypi” encrusting the Kraken enshroud its ontology with the vagueness of their own. In Gosse’s *The Aquarium*, however, “polypes” become nothing less than exemplars of order and clarity. In a particularly effusive passage, he describes the “polypes” he sees in a piece of coral as a harmonious “city,” reflecting the City of God:

There is a City hidden in heaven, but destined, by and by, to come down to earth; it rises street above street, and wall above wall, and battlement above battlement; its streets are of gold transparent as glass, its gates are of pearl, and its foundations and walls of crystal are garnished with precious stones. It is peopled by happy spirits in resurrection bodies, by star-crowned men who have washed their robes and made them white in the Blood of the Lamb,—*by none else*. Nay, the City is *composed of these*; it is made of *living stones*, built up one by one in slow and gradual progress, each with an individual consciousness, an individual life.

...

Is it fanciful to discern a faint shadow of these glories in a poor Polype? If it is, bear with the fancy, for it is not lost time to turn our thoughts heavenward for a moment, whatever be the occasion. When I look on the multitudes of Polypes inhabiting such a structure as I have alluded to, each bearing his starry crown, and all engaged in harmony, building up, wall by wall and cell by cell, an edifice whose walls are of crystalline clearness, often studded with what look like gems, and whose cells are closed with pearly doors; when I watch the building growing up into a City, a commonwealth, of myriad individuals; when I know that, besides the separate life of each, there is a common life, a bond of identity, that constitutes the vast assemblage but one Being—One though Many—I cannot help thinking of the heavenly City, the Jerusalem which is above. (118-119)

Whereas Tennyson’s poem casts its subject as a structureless mass, Gosse’s analogy casts these “Polypes” as icons of structure itself. All of them are clear, discernible “individuals” engaged in a common project that has a clear, discernible teleology. Socially, they are a perfect biopolitical community, a “commonwealth ... of myriad individuals.” Structurally, they are building the perfect shape: “an edifice” neatly arranged into “cells” and “walls” and “pearly doors.” Gosse presents an image pervaded by the language of clarity and light, rather than umbral confusion—a scene that is meant to be seen. He also presents an image that is synecdochic in multiple ways. The shape the polyps build is fractalized. Each individual is animated by the project of the community. The city of polyps stands in not only for the City of God, but for the larger order of

creation. Perhaps most notably, the “walls of crystalline clearness” resemble the aquarium that contains them.

This visual recursion is not accidental: Gosse’s entire project in *The Aquarium* is to use a framing device to reveal how the creatures of the ocean are always already framed. He describes the technology as nothing less than an instrument of Biblical hermeneutics and natural theology, a device for uncovering how even the most seemingly irreconcilable creatures are “earthly shadows of heavenly substance” (117). Explicitly, he locates this revelatory power in its optical function—the way it can make the meaning of ocean creatures apprehensible simply by bringing them into view: “But hereafter much may be plain and patent, that now we only guess at; and the curtain may be broadly lifted that now hangs thick and close over Creation, permitting but occasional rays to struggle beneath its fringes” (118). Implicitly, however, the power derives from the technology’s *aesthetic* function. By framing ocean creatures, by placing them within a curatorial design, the aquarium facilitates conceptualizing them as meaningful fragments of a larger whole; it makes them available for synecdochic extrapolation and allegorical interpretation. Much of the aquarium writing of the 1850s uses the technology for precisely this purpose, as a way of revealing how seemingly irreconcilable lifeforms participate in a larger order. In his own 1858 celebration of aquarium upkeep, the naturalist John Harper describes the Limpet, a particularly aquarium-friendly type of mollusk, in architectural language that recalls Gosse’s polyp-city: “Almost every part of the *construction* of this animal is calculated to excite our wonder. Who, for example, would suppose that the tongue of the Limpet was so ingeniously *framed*?” (*The Sea-Side and Aquarium* 21; my emphasis).

If the chief rhetorical function of the aquarium was to emphasize the *contextuality* of its inhabitants, their agreeable, sensible existence within frames both literal and conceptual, this

sense of context undoubtedly facilitated other forms of contextualization. Both Gosse and Harper use the technology to situate strange aquatic creatures within not only a divine order, but also a domestic one. As Hamera points out, the aquarium was a rectangular box containing unpredictable (i.e. ‘live’) visual stimuli; by default, the protocols for viewing it and interacting with it were informed by the logic of theatrical spectatorship.⁷ Even so, 1850s aquarium literature is rife with special attempts to narrativize the behaviors of tank-dwellers as the comic exploits of actors in pseudo-domestic comedies—or “tenants,” to use a common metaphor of the genre, in an infinite series of apartment stories. Both Gosse and Harper spend a disproportionate number of pages describing the lovably bizarre antics of crabs, which they narrate using a discourse of heavily ironized (yet still sincere) anthropomorphism, personification, and infantilization. Hermit crabs in particular seem to command their attention, not only because they are (by definition) frequently involved in domestic disputes of some kind, but also because their behaviors, framed by the aquarium’s proscenium, conform easily to the narrative structure of an event, scene, or anecdote. At one point, Harper describes, with great poignancy, what happens when a hermit crab dies—an event that feels more tragic than comic, but still utterly theatrical:

While the Hermit is in good health, he keeps a firm grip of his mansion with his hooky tail; but no sooner does he feel squeamish and poorly, than he loosens his hold and crawls outside the entrance door, there to die. . . . One can hardly conceive a more pitiable object than he presents when in this melancholy condition—so tame, so crest-fallen, so totally the reverse of the usual sharp, snappish, impudent style in which he conducts himself when at home and in good health. (105)

⁷ Hamera quotes a telling advertisement: “In history, in the drama, in painting, in sculpture, it is action-action! . . . It is action that renders the Aquarium the most attractive spot at the Zoological Gardens” (qtd. in Hamera 29). She goes on to describe aspects of the tank-viewing experience that drew on the logic of performance: “Theater trained middle-class viewers in the suspension of disbelief so crucial to sustaining the illusion of intimate contact with life beneath the waves, not just behind the glass. Looking head-on at or down on a proscenium stage directly paralleled the experience of viewing aquariums, particularly those with glass fronts and solid backs” (29).

Like Gosse, Harper lends order to the crab's existence partly by describing it as the denizen of bourgeois architecture—the dweller of a “mansion” with an “entrance door.” But he also casts it as the protagonist in a Trollopian tragedy of bourgeois misfortune: the crab, once “sharp, snappish” and “impudent,” is a fallen gentleman,⁸ reduced to squalor. In the next line, Harper reminds his readers to “be careful to nip him out of the tank as speedily as possible” lest his carcass “[breed] miasma and death to all around,” dispersing the theatrical diegesis and calling attention once again to the crab's embodied, object-like condition as kept specimen (105). Yet in the previous passage, the word “object”—in the phrase “One can hardly conceive a more pitiable object than he presents”—means something very different. The crab is the “object” of a spectatorial gaze, inciting laughter and pity, performing for an audience.

The aquarium permitted marine zoologists to apply an anthropomorphic model of agency and a bourgeois model of identity to even the most uncharismatic microfauna and invertebrates. One of the challenges presented by anemones and zoophytes to would-be observers—a challenge that created a need in the first place for long-term, self-sustaining artificial environments—was that they would move and act over the course of months rather than moments; they existed within a completely ahuman timescale.⁹ And yet, as aquarium writer Shirley Hibberd insisted,

Thus low in the scale as they are, they possess will, and a power of obeying it; they have their organs of locomotion, of attack, and defense; though naked, they are armed for combat on an equality with their enemies, and succumb at last to man—the universal destroyer and appropriator—who turns them to account as food, or treasures them as gems of beauty that gratify his eye. (*The Book of the Aquarium* 90)

⁸ In *Sea-Side Studies*, his 1858 book of marine zoology, G.H. Lewes echoes Harper's genteel characterization of the hermit crab (which he refers to as “Pagurus,” turning the species name into a kind of surname): “Now a gentleman so extremely pugnacious, troubled with so tender a back and continuation, would fare ill in this combative world, had he not some means of redressing the wrong done him at birth; accordingly he selects an empty shell of convenient size, into which he pops his tender tail ... and having thus secured his rear, he scuttles over the seabed, a grotesque but philosophic marauder” (50).

⁹ Thynne invented an aquarium prototype precisely because she needed a way to study the strange, asexual reproductive habits of madrepoes, which would take place over an extremely long period of time.

Within the frame of aquarium writing, which remediates that which is already mediated by the aquarium itself, the anemone becomes freshly animalized—so that it might be anthropomorphized; so that it might, in the end, be allegorized (Hibberd goes on to describe how the anemone’s sluggish will reveals the will of “the Almighty”). He acknowledges that these creatures inhabit a radically different kind of temporality, and even describes “man” in antihumanist, anti-anthropocentric terms, as “the universal destroyer and appropriator.” And yet, in his rhetoric, he inevitably drags these profoundly inhuman creatures into an anthropocentric timescale and an anthropomorphic mode of action. In the theater of the tank, everything becomes a player. Crabs become upright, pugnacious, or disgraced gentlemen; otherwise inexplicable behaviors like symbiosis become legible narrative events; even the most alien species, barely animate, become characters.

The aquarium presented these dynamic individuals, in turn, within the frames of two discernible and reassuringly harmonious social orders. On the one hand, they lent solidity to the grid of species categories. Aquarium writers frequently encountered organisms that not only slipped through the cracks of existing Linnaean classifications—even categories as fundamental as animal and plant—but also seemed to suggest that species boundaries were not fixed but mutable, ambiguous, and perennially shifting (an idea eventually expressed explicitly by Darwin in *The Origin*). The technology allowed aquarists to push back against these destabilizations in a few ways, first by casting classification as a crucial, and tacitly colonial, part of the hobby—“The truth is,” Kingsley writes in *Glaucus*, “the pleasure of finding new species is too great; it is morally dangerous; for it brings with it the temptation to look on the thing found as your own possession, all but your own creation” (31)—and second, by allowing aquarists to assemble simulacra of ocean ecologies that *fit* classificatory rubrics rather than challenging them.

Especially in the public aquarium, the horizontal movement of the eye, ranging across the grid of tanks, could travel swiftly and surely up and down the chain of being, surveying an image of creation organized according to Linnaean principles. “From the Worms to the Crustaceans (lobsters, crabs, shrimps, and prawns) is a very long stride, which oversteps many important animals in the scale of nature,” admits Lloyd, the aforementioned aquarium entrepreneur, in his *Hand-Book to the Crystal Palace Aquarium*—a paratext that is itself organized by genus (46). But it is a “stride” that underscores the aquarium’s ability to elide some of the more vexingly hybrid creatures it was ostensibly meant to display.

On the other hand, the aquarium displayed another order that was just as important as the order of species: the larger, harmonious interplay between the kingdoms of Animalia and Plantae. Aquarium technology emerged in the late 1840s after a decade of scientific conversation¹⁰ and practical breakthroughs¹¹ concerning the principle of “compensation”: the idea that oxygen-consuming animals and oxygen-producing plants sustain each other in perfect balance, both within the tank and within the world at large. The principle of “compensation” was so important to early theorists of the technology that an aquarium was not even considered an aquarium unless it could be self-sustaining. There were fish bowls in Britain before the advent of the aquarium, but they were not aquaria. There were also tanks requiring regular aeration by some sort of artificial means—e.g. Thynne’s madreporic tanks, which would be refreshed every

¹⁰ Jean Baptiste André Dumas and J.B. Boussingault’s influential study *The Chemical and Physiological Balance of Organic Nature* (1842) laid out the complementary features of animals and plants in stark terms, but P.F. Rehbock observes that the relevant theories of biochemical exchange had been around since at least 1804. Rehbock traces the principle of “compensation” all the way back to N.T. DeSaussure’s early-nineteenth-century research on photosynthesis. “It is curious,” he notes, “that the relevant chemical theory should have been available for so long before being applied to aquaria” (527). But it is explainable: the scientists interested in aquaria tended to be British naturalists, and British naturalists were much more interested in “the taxonomic and anatomic aspects of zoology and botany” than Continental chemists (528).

¹¹ The principle of compensation gained traction in the 1840s after the success of Nathaniel Bashaw Ward’s “Wardian Case”—a sealed glass box that could sustain plant life without introducing new water or oxygen.

day by a maidservant pouring the water back and forth into different jugs by the window. These were not true aquaria either. As Hibberd and others made clear, an aquarium was not an aquarium at all unless it was “balanced” (*The Book of the Aquarium* 7). “Formed on this plan,” and on this plan alone, it could be thought of as “an imitation of Nature on a small scale” (7).

In aquarium writing, this idea of “balanced dualism” fed directly into allegorical visions of a balanced society (Rehbock 529). In the second edition of his *Book of the Aquarium*, Hibberd described his own tank with a retrospective fondness, as though describing a successful social experiment:

The plants grew and increased by offsets, and at the same time exhaled sufficient oxygen to preserve the health and beauty of the fishes. The snails ate up the mucus, and bred rapidly: their eggs and young supplied the fishes with food. Thus the three tenants of the globe maintained each other as in any well-ordered human community (7).

Although Hibberd describes three factions, he still organizes them according to a dualistic scheme that aligns, notably, with two other cultural logics. In the interplay between plant/snail production (base) and fish consumption (superstructure), the tank tacitly echoes capitalism. In the interplay between plant/snail reproductivity and fish activity (plants and snails create a comfortable home and “breed rapidly,” supporting the more interesting, and individualized, lives of the fishes), it tacitly echoes heteronormativity—perhaps even the separation of spheres.

If, as Claude Lévi-Strauss argued, culture sustains itself by transforming “nature” into a metaphoric or metonymic reference point,¹² the Victorian home aquarium represents an especially overt example: a slice of the wild, alien ocean brought into domestic space and

¹² See *Totemism* and *The Savage Mind*, in which Lévi-Strauss elaborates his theory of totemism as a system of “relations, poised ideologically, between two series, one *natural*, the other *cultural*” (*Totemism* 16).

transformed subtly, but unmistakably, into an authorizing image of its surrounding context.¹³ In 1853, the official handbook to the Zoological Society of London's Fish House described the hobby as a whole with a telling phrase: aquarists are those who "endeavour to naturalise within their houses the various tenants of the sea" (26). Indeed, the logic worked both ways: not only did the domestic interior contextualize (and therefore 'naturalize') the aquarium's queer spectacles; its spectacles—domiciled crabs, industrious polyps, inscrutable yet secretly protagonistic anemones—contextualized and naturalized domestic life. It became, in other words, an impressively flexible technology of Lévi-Straussian totemism, able to confirm formations of personal, social, and religious identity by locating them in an aquatic world framed as alien, distant, and dialectically antipodal. The effect anticipates John Berger's description of what happens when paintings are reproduced on television (which is fitting, since the aquarium was a forerunner of the television): "The painting enters each viewer's house. There it is surrounded by his wallpaper, his furniture, his mementoes. It enters the atmosphere of his family. It becomes their talking point. It lends its meaning to their meaning" (*Ways of Seeing* 20).¹⁴ In *Glaucus*, Kingsley is excited to reveal that even barnacles have 'lives' that follow a middle-class script: "And this creature, rooted to one spot through life and death, was in its infancy a free swimming animal, hovering from place to place upon delicate ciliae, till, having sown its wild oats, it settled down in life, built itself a good stone house, and became a landowner" (117-118).

¹³ As the burgeoning aquarium industry led to a burgeoning aquarium *accessory* industry, the tank became not only a "rustic adornment for homes of taste" (as Hibberd described it) but also a "home of taste" in and of itself, stuffed with well-appointed bric-a-brac.

¹⁴ Wilkie Collins also comments on this effect in his 1862 novel *No Name*, when Magdalen, the novel's young protagonist, encounters an aquarium in the home of Mrs. Lecount. She is at first startled to find "slippery efts and slimy frogs" in any house, but they gradually become a metonymy that can explain and contextualize the peculiar agelessness of Lecount herself (111).

Within the moral project of Kingsley's book, however, this passage feels powerfully ironic. Like Gosse and other aqua-evangelists, Kingsley begins *Glaucus* by extolling the virtues of marine zoology—and aquarium upkeep—as a *cure* for the deleterious effects of bourgeois existence. He even begins the book by addressing an imaginary Londoner directly:

You are going down, perhaps, by railway, to pass your usual six weeks at some watering-place along the coast, and as you roll along think more than once, and that not over-cheerfully, of what you shall do when you get there. You are half-tired, half-ashamed, of making one more in the ignoble army of idlers ... You foreknow your doom by sad experience. A great deal of dressing, a lounge in the club-room, a stare out of the window with the telescope, and attempt to take a bad sketch, a walk up one parade and down another, interminable reading of the silliest of novels, over which you fall asleep on a bench in the sun, and probably have your umbrella stolen; a purposeless fine-weather sail in a yacht, accompanied by many ineffectual attempts to catch a mackerel, and the consumption of many cigars; while your boys deafen your ears, and endanger your personal safety, by blazing away at innocent gulls and Willocks, who go off to die slowly; a sport which you feel to be wanton, and cowardly, and cruel ... this is the life-in-death in which thousands spend the golden weeks of summer, and in which you confess with a sigh that you are going to spend them. ...

Why not, then, try to discover a few of the Wonders of the Shore? (*Glaucus* 1-3)

The panoramic, dioramic sequence resembles an aquarium for humans, showing us scenes not only of languid boredom but of 'typicality' in both senses, the quotidian and the easily classifiable. "A great deal of dressing, a lounge in the club room": activities appear object-like in themselves, consumed by object-like people. In a move that might seem counterintuitive, or at least ironic, he argues that the best way to cast off this overwhelming typicality is to turn one's attention to the magnificent atypicality of aquatic animals. They can cure nearly everything, not just urban ennui: effeminacy in men; excessive sexuality in women (he extolls the virtues of "the young London beauty" who keeps "her heart pure and her mind occupied in a boudoir full of shells and fossils, flowers and sea-weeds" [56]); atheism and agnosticism; the frivolity of popular entertainment (he constantly rails against "French novels" and the contemporary theater); the death of chivalry (for "the qualifications required for a perfect naturalist are as many

and as lofty as were required, by old chivalrous writers, for the perfect knight-errant of the Middle Ages” [43]); modernity itself.

In an advertising tone that would have been familiar to his target audience, Kingsley pitches “the Wonders of the Shore” as an antidote to the tedium of bourgeois domesticity partly on the basis that it could bring them face-to-face with creatures that spilled out of existing epistemological categories, requiring new ones (27). “There is a mysterious delight in the discovery of a new species,” he writes, “a thrill of emotion not unmixed with awe” (28). He casts this thrill in almost posthumanist terms that anticipate Eugene Thacker’s recent idea of the “planetary”: a philosophical framework that challenges anthropocentrism and embraces the a- or inhumanity of our surrounding world, the aspects of our world that are without us.¹⁵ In Kingsley’s view, “the discovery of a new species” produces a thrill comparable to the experience of those who have found flowers growing defiantly at the edge of snowbanks, far above the world of human affairs (28). We might feel, as they have felt,

a sense that they were, as it were, brought face to face with the creatures of another world; that Nature was independent of them, not merely they of her; that trees were not merely made to build their houses, or herbs to feed their cattle, as they looked on those wild gardens amid the wreaths of the untrodden snow, which had lifted their gay flowers to the sun year after year since the foundation of the world, taking no heed of man, and all the coil which he keeps in the valleys far below. (28-29)

Kingsley’s analogy establishes the conceptual stakes of coming “face to face” with the ocean’s weirdness. Just as these flowers reveal a larger context of ahumanity that surrounds and dwarfs the “coil”—a word likely meaning “noisy disturbance ... tumult, turmoil, bustle, stir,” per Johnson’s dictionary—of man below, the “Wonders of the Shore” can expose the insignificance

¹⁵ In his recent meditations on horror and philosophy, Thacker asks, “Would it be possible to shift our framework to something we can only call *cosmological*? Could such a cosmological view be understood not simply as the view from interstellar space, but as the view of the world-without-us, the Planetary view?” (*In the Dust of This Planet* 7).

of bourgeois life by demonstrating a surrounding context composed of independent—and far older, and far more complex—systems and forms of existence.

In *Glaucus*, at least, Kingsley does not seem too concerned that the logic of the aquarium counteracts this revelatory ambition, bringing the outer world *into* the “valley” of human affairs. Nor does he seem concerned that classifying these wondrous animals—coining a “new species”—might deplete their wonder. The book freely anthropomorphizes, allegorizes, and categorizes the exploits of ocean creatures it deems magnificently strange, in line with the norms of its genre. With a combination of fascination, disturbance, and awe, however, he grapples with one quality of ocean organisms that seems to defy all forms of contextualization: their capacity to be “ridiculous.” “There are animals,” he writes,

which seem made to be laughed at; by those at least who possess that most indefinable of faculties, the sense of the ridiculous. As long as man possesses muscles especially formed to enable him to laugh, we have no right to suppose (with some) that laughter is an accident of our fallen nature; or to find (with others) the primary cause of the ridiculous in the perception of unfitness or disharmony. And yet we shrink (whether rightly or wrongly, we can hardly tell) from attributing a sense of the ludicrous to the Creator of these forms. It may be a weakness on my part; at least I will hope it is a reverent one: but till we can find something corresponding to what we conceive of the Divine Mind in any class of phenomena, it is perhaps better not to talk about them at all, but observe a stoic ‘epoché,’ waiting for more light, and yet confessing that our own laughter is uncontrollable, and therefore we hope not unworthy of us, at many a strange creature and strange doing which we meet, from the highest ape to the lowest polype. (134-135)

Unlike other qualities and behaviors he perceives in the aquatic world, the “ridiculous” cannot be reconciled with a higher order. It seems to be natural because “man possesses muscles especially formed to enable him to laugh,” yet it is precisely the experience of unnaturalness. It seems plausibly divine in origin, and yet to say it is divine in origin is to suggest that the Creator laughs at his own creations (which is to suggest that they are imperfect after all). In other words, creaturely ridiculousness cannot be situated, either on the human side (laughter) or on the nonhuman side (the laughable), because it is by definition a feeling of decontextualization, a

“perception of unfitness or disharmony.” Given that revealing larger contexts is the entire project of his book, Kingsley must bury his head in the sand and become a “stoic ‘epoché,’”¹⁶ waiting for an explanation to reveal itself.

This moment reveals Kingsley’s subtle, self-conscious understanding of the final appeal of the aquarium (and by extension, the final project of aquarium writing): its ability to situate aquatic animals within the realm of sense and the procedures of sense-making. To bring the ocean into the home—by setting up a tank in the parlor or, at a larger scale, setting up a public aquarium in a municipality—was not just to bring it into the literal space of the quotidian, making it “a practice of everyday life” (Hamera 2); it was also to bring the ocean into the conceptual space of common sense. As Susan Stewart reminds us in *Nonsense*, “common sense” is not some *a priori* domain of discourse to which we can refer; instead, it is a sense of the “ordinary,” the “down-to-earth,” the “plain,” the natural, that takes shape in reference to everyday phenomenology—what we see in our spaces, throughout the day—and gives us a way to verify phenomena. It is, more precisely, a sense of contextuality: a sense that something belongs to ‘reality,’ that it can be reconciled with “our experience of the lifeworld” (8).¹⁷ Nonsense, by contrast, “becomes that which is irrelevant to context, that to which context is irrelevant” (5).

Aquarium writers flocked to the technology in part because it offered a canvas of ideological convenience,¹⁸ but the most powerful effect of the tank was both simpler and more

¹⁶ Used by the Skeptics as well as Edmund Husserl, “epoché” describes a moment when all propositions about the existence of an external world are suspended.

¹⁷ Stewart’s use of the term “lifeworld” echoes the biological phenomenology of Jakob von Uexküll, who argued in the 1930s that every animal projects forth a different lifeworld or *umwelt* based in its distinct sensory apparatuses and biological needs.

¹⁸ Stott observes resonances between aquarium literature and British colonial paternalism, especially after the Indian Mutiny of 1857 (“Through a Glass Darkly” 308). Several works of aquarium literature have a semi-facetious

complex than any encoded message it could relay: it made sense of the previously nonsensical. It made the denizens of the ocean available to mean something, period—whereas before, the ocean had been a lacuna, a vacuum, anathema to knowledge as well as reference. When Kingsley comes face to face with a feature of aquatic creation that seems to escape any efforts to frame it, he recognizes that it brings him to the conceptual limits of his project, which is to make the ocean make sense. What *The Water-Babies* reveals is that he became all the more interested in embracing the nonsensicality of aquatic life after a decade of positivist frenzy. The question that animates the novel is whether the realm of nonsense can be a better space to encounter sublime creaturely alterity than any theater of glass. *The Water-Babies* asks whether nonsense can turn the ocean into a space of strangeness once again.

*

The Water-Babies tells the story of Tom, a Dickensian chimney-sweep who transforms into a tiny humanoid amphibian after he runs away from town and submerges (or perhaps drowns) in a nearby river. Like any fable, it has a moral to convey—several morals, in fact, about the necessity of hard work, the deleteriousness of leisure, and the necessity of compassion toward beings lower in the evolutionary scale. But its primary moral is an argument for its own literary construction: it is a fanciful book that argues for the necessity of fancy. The last line of the novel places everything that comes before it squarely within the frame of nonsense: “But remember always, as I told you at first, that this is all a fairy tale, and only fun and pretense; and, therefore, you are not to believe a word of it, even if it is true” (190). In another context, this might feel like a deconstructive or destabilizing admission. It feels appropriate, however, at the

tendency to refer to aquarium inhabitants as “our prisoners” (see, e.g., the *Handbook to the Zoological Society of London Fish House* 15).

end of a “fairy tale” that repeatedly stages the power of imagination and the despicable folly of those who cannot imagine nonexistent things. One such figure is Professor Ptthmlnsprts, who goes to such great lengths to prove that absence of evidence is evidence of absence that he literally makes evidence of the water-baby—a challenge to the order of his reality—absent. As a consequence for his hubristic refusal to entertain the existence of fantastic beasts, the Professor is forced by an old fairy to believe in all of them at once: “*unicorns, fire-drakes, manticores, basilisks, amphisboenas, griffins, phoenixes, rocs, orcs, dog-headed men, three-headed dogs, [and] three-bodied geryons*” (90). Jessica Straley rightly points out, however, that “this punishment is a blessing according to the logic of the book, for it is the ability to believe in impossible things that finally makes us human” (*Evolution and Imagination* 81).

Critical interpretations of *The Water-Babies* tend to treat this moral argument for imagination as a feature independent of its interest in evolution, “bisect[ing] Kingsley’s fairy tale into nonsensical fantasy for children and evolutionary allegories for adults” (Straley 75). But to impose such a dividedness on the book is to ignore the fact that Kingsley understood and theorized imagination in explicitly evolutionary terms, as a crucial step in the development of the human species that needed to be recapitulated in the development of the individual child. He sounds this note even in *Glaucus*, where he pauses his marine investigations to articulate a familiar lament about the moral and intellectual degeneration of British children (and by extension, British people). “The education of our children is now more than ever a puzzling problem, if by education we mean the development of the whole humanity,” he writes (49). The problem is a problem of *genre*: “How to feed the imagination with wholesome food, and teach it to despise French novels, and that sugared slough of sentimental poetry, in comparison with which the old fairy-tales and ballads were manful and rational” (49). “French novels” and

“sentimental poetry” provide entertainment, but do not advance the crucial aesthetic ability to entertain the fantastical, which supplements the pursuit of rigorous empiricism rather than short-circuiting it. Indeed, Kingsley saw imagination as a crucial supplement to evolutionary theory in particular, since it could supply both the “missing links”¹⁹ not found in the fossil record (which vexed Darwin) and evidence of future transformations to come. As the narrator asks in *The Water-Babies*, echoing Tennyson’s hopefulness about “the crowning race” of future-humans in *In Memoriam*, “And may not man, the crown and flower of all things, undergo some change as much more wonderful than all the rest, as the Great Exhibition is more wonderful than a rabbit burrow?” (42).

But what does imagination entail? Is it only the ability to imagine new things, or might it also be a way of approaching old things? The form of Kingsley’s nonsensical text is not just devoted to portraying nonexistent creatures like fairies and water-babies. Much of it—indeed, the bulk of it, like *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*—portrays unsettling, defamiliarized versions of familiar animals: dragonflies, salmon, trout, lobsters, and other well-classified denizens of the British countryside. The animals it depicts are examples of creatures so thoroughly domesticated in a conceptual sense that they would not feature prominently in any aquarium worth its salt. They are not “wonders of the shore” like the polyps in Gosse’s celestial city, or the hermit crabs involved (until they die) in perpetual comedies of manners. Yet the distortions of literary nonsense make them wonderful in a different sense, corresponding to what Kingsley called “the ridiculous”: we find them doing strange things for strange reasons, flaunting their incoherence and their resistance to explanatory contexts. This effect is entirely purposeful; indeed, it reveals

¹⁹ As Straley points out, Kingsley defined imagination not only as the faculty that could allow humans to perceive the “missing link” (because myths and legends so often speak of “Fauns, Satyrs, Elves, Dwarfs,” etc.), but also as a kind of “missing link” in itself: a major step in our evolutionary past between empiricism and Christian belief (*Evolution and Imagination* 82).

the purpose of nonsense itself. Kingsley's narrator argues emphatically, in one of several successive thought experiments that refer obliquely to the recent history of paleontology, that if "no human being had ever seen or heard of an elephant," and an unknown traveler came to the scientific community telling tales of one, "people would surely have said, 'Nonsense; your elephant is contrary to nature'" (39). Throughout the nineteenth century, as Straley reminds us, "nonsense" was an epithet typically used in this way, to dismiss irreconcilable biological phenomena (89). *The Water-Babies* represents Kingsley's attempt to reclaim nonsense as legitimate epistemic category that can *support* evolutionary theory—precisely by housing the seemingly uncontextualizable. The frame of nonsense enables Tom to encounter creaturely queerness in a spirit of playful, curious acceptance. He encounters them as they are, without framing them, precisely because the novel takes place in an overwrought frame.

To enable these encounters, Kingsley employs a trick of the genre: like other contemporary practitioners of literary nonsense, he disrupts any coherent sense of space. Stewart reminds us, via Boris Uspensky, that any work of art transports its viewer to a different chronotope, "a special world with its own space and time" (Qtd. in Stewart 22). One thing that differentiates literary nonsense is that it does so self-consciously and frictionally, calling attention to the disjunctions between the real world and the virtual world as well as the reader's transition from one to the other. Like *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, *The Water-Babies* thematizes this transition by narrating the protagonist's gradual descent into a realm unmoored from the rules of time and space. The word "down" repeats several times as we follow Tom into the valley of Vendale, partly echoing the language of Kingsley's appeal to bourgeois Londoners in *Glaucus*: just as they go down to the shore, he must travel down and away from the metropol to encounter the enlivening oddities of the aquatic world. But it also echoes the ambiguous

verticality of “The Kraken”—maybe “a thousand feet down” (25), maybe “three hundred feet down” (26), somewhere beyond the reach of the penetrating light of reason—as well as Alice’s descent into Wonderland, traveling down for so long that she feels she must be “somewhere near the centre of the earth” (11). The text’s repetitious, circular directions compound to create a feeling of spatial disorientation in the reader that enables new forms of ontological ambiguity in the protagonist. By the time she reaches Wonderland, *Alice’s* body has become malleable, prompting her to wonder if she is even still herself. By the time he reaches the bottom of the valley, Tom straddles multiple lines: between human and animal; between land-creature and water-creature; even between living and dead (“Of course, he is drowned,” insists Gillian Beer in *Darwin’s Plots*; in the text, his mortality is much less defined [126]). Yet the more powerful transformation [or destabilization] effected by his descent into nonsense-space is epistemological, not ontological: the deeper he descends, the less he finds himself faced with a vision of nature mastered and mediated by culture.

The novel begins in a human world that subsists on the objectification, instrumentalization, and stable categorization of animals. The narrator remarks that Harthover House, the grand estate where Tom works as a chimney-sweep, is surrounded by “a park full of deer, which Tom believed to be monsters who were in the habit of eating children; with miles of game preserves, in which Mr. Grimes and the collier-lads poached at times,” and “with a noble salmon river, in which Mr. Grimes and his friends would have liked to poach” (3). These are the first animals that appear in the novel: animals as flattened objects of the human mind, inciting either fear (Tom regards the deer as monsters) or appropriative desire (Mr. Grimes and his friends “would have liked to poach” the salmon) or nonchalant disregard (the anonymous “game,” which the men “poached at times”). The narrator implies that Tom’s ignorant fear is

preferable to their casual sense of ownership; he, at least, regards the deer as *other* beings rather than lower beings.

Hunting and poaching are not the only processes that domesticate the nonhuman world in *The Water-Babies*' opening scenes, however. The narrator pithily observes that “a keeper is only a poacher turned outside in, and a poacher a keeper turned inside out,” and language, too, can be a tool for “keeping” organisms confined (9). At one point, Tom tumbles into the thickness of a forest, snagging himself on “birches” that “birched him as soundly as if he had been a nobleman at Eton” and “lawyers” that “tripped him up, and tore his shins as if they had sharks’ teeth—which lawyers are likely enough to have” (18). According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, “lawyers” was, in fact, a word one could use in 1862 for long brambles, albeit an exotic one. In the context of a description of the wood otherwise teeming with specific vegetative detail, however (e.g. “rhododendrons” and “hassock grass”), it trips the reader up as well. It works not only to rupture the verisimilitude of the diegesis, but also to suggest that this dark, menacing wood is pre-domesticated no matter how dark and menacing it seems. Like the denizens of home and public aquaria, the brambles seamlessly transform into stock characters, residents of bourgeois society, anthropomorphized and narrativized through metaphor. This forest is a space of primeval strangeness edited to contain an image of the bourgeois public encountering it. But “lawyers” is not a metaphor deliberately constructed by the narrator, as we see through its juxtaposition with “as if they had sharks’ teeth,” a deliberate simile. It is a name that happens to be metaphoric *a priori*; by using it casually (yet jarringly), the narrator calls attention to the metaphoricity of naming in general—the analogical nature of even the most basic natural description. The forest full of “lawyers” invites us to see how even the wildest spaces Tom moves through are “kept” in the imagination by obscured logics of containment and editorial

effort, even if they are not “kept” explicitly like gardens or game preserves. The narrator himself is an agent of that keeping: simply by using language, he displays a constant, almost restless drive to put things in analogical categories.

Somewhat ironically, the master of the house, Sir John, presents a potential ability to regard animals with a sense of respect and reverence toward their evolutionary complexity. At least he seems fascinated with the organic form of the house itself. The narrator observes that Harthover “had been built at ninety different times, and in nineteen different styles, and looked as if somebody had built a whole street of houses of every imaginable shape, and then stirred them together with a spoon” (10). The architectural blend seems palimpsestic at first, presenting overlapping layers of human history in the manner of Blackwater Park in *The Woman in White*. But the narrator goes on to compound this sense of morphological disarray with a series of metaphors that make the building into an evolutionary figure. Sir John appreciates that “the house looked like a real live house, that had a history, and had grown and grown as the world grew”—unlike other, lesser minds who might prefer “some spick and span new Gothic or Elizabethan thing, which looked as if it had been all spawned in a night, as mushrooms are” (11). The comparison is clearly meant to evoke the tension between evolutionist theories of species, which held that species are mutable and have been transforming since the dawn of life, and ‘fixist’ theories of species, which held that all species “spawned” instantly, fully formed, in one act of Creation. (Gosse infamously clung to the ‘fixist’ model.) In a letter to Darwin shortly before the *Origin of Species* was published, Kingsley described how much the book helped him “[learn] to disbelieve the dogma of the permanence of species,” and “[learn] see that it is [a] noble ... conception of Deity, to believe that He created primal forms capable of self development” (Darwin, *Letters* II 287). Sir John’s preference for the ramshackle house (versus

the easily typified “Gothic or Elizabethan thing”) attests to Kingsley’s affinity for the epistemologically messier theory of the two. The critics lambast the house for having “no unity in it”; Sir John, like Kingsley, sees beauty in its *disunity*—its accretive growth over time (11).

And yet, the narrator casts Sir John as perhaps the most ignorant human in the whole town, precisely because he can appreciate such chimeric complexity in his house without being able to conceptualize it in a being like Tom. After Tom becomes a water-baby and sloughs off his old human “shell,” Sir John finds the husk he has left behind and cannot fathom that Tom is still alive in another form. “But good Sir John did not understand all this, not being a fellow of the Linnaean Society,” the narrator observes, “and he took it into his head that Tom was drowned” (43). The invocation of the Linnaean Society as an absent authority, in a line that seems to inhabit John’s mind via free indirect discourse, only underscores the fact that the Linnaean Society *could not be* an authority on Tom’s metamorphosis. Tom has transcended the boundaries of species. The problem, represented by Sir John, is that the boundaries of species are interwoven into the fabric of culture. They form an inextricable part of what Stewart might call the everyday business of sense-making.

What the novel dramatizes, then, is Tom’s descent into a lower world not only detached from sense, but also detached from “the Linnaean Society”—a metonymy for a whole host of epistemological structures that filter human apprehension of the nonhuman world like a screen door (or, in the case of the aquarium, a distorting plane of glass). Gillian Beer has argued that Tom’s descent signals Kingsley’s desire to approach the natural world with youthful innocence, “the transforming eye of childhood to which everything is equally miraculous and unsurprising” (125). “In *The Water-Babies*,” she continues, “the scientist-giant longs for one hour as a baby again but with full consciousness, because he would know everything then and be at rest” (125).

But the “scientist-giant” also understands that the chief obstacle to reclaiming such an innocence is not any form of content knowledge, any body of scientific facts. It is, rather, science itself: the project of epistemic mastery, which the novel identifies as a problem of space.

Tom knows nothing about anything, but even *he* perceives the world as a collection of spaces that can be conquered and colonized by knowledge. Just before he descends into the waterworld that transforms him into a water-baby and transforms the novel, more fully, into nonsense, he climbs to a mountaintop and sees the world spread out before him in neatly stylized chunks:

And in a minute more, when he looked round, he stopped again, and said, ‘Why, what a big place the world is!’ And so it was; for, from the top of the mountain, he could see—what could he not see? Behind him, far below, was Harthover, and the dark woods, and the shining salmon river; and on his left, far below, was the town, and the smoking chimneys of the collieries; and far, far away, the river widened to the shining sea; and little white specks, which were ships, lay on its bosom. Before him lay, spread out like a map, great plains, and farms, and villages, amid dark knots of trees. They all seemed at his very feet; but he had sense to see that they were long miles away. (22)

As Hamera points out, the aquarium borrowed the aesthetic logic of landscape painting²⁰ as well as panorama; as a world that could be viewed *in toto*, it inevitably facilitated a sensation of omniscience (*Parlor Ponds* 28). Perhaps even more than the home aquarium, the *public* aquarium offered the experience of seeing all of creation from the depths to the surface, from the lowest to the highest complexity, from one end of the earth to the other, from the beginning of time to the current day, creating an effect tantamount to John Berger’s famous definition of perspective: “The visible world is arranged for the spectator as the universe was once thought to be arranged for God” (*Ways of Seeing* 16). The landscape around Tom presents an organized,

²⁰ “But we want something more” than simply a glass box stocked with animals and plants, asserts the official *Handbook to the Zoological Society of London Fish House*: “We want to see everything in the aquarium under the best possible light, not necessarily in a blaze of sunshine, but with the illumination so managed, that whilst the animals are well shown, there may be plenty of shade behind to relieve their various forms, and to produce something like a picture” (14).

stylized surface; it is anthropomorphic (“lay on its bosom”) and literally anthropocentric, centered on and proceeding outward from the human spectator. The world appears as a “map” of itself, pre-framed, pre-shaped by an explanatory apparatus. He celebrates how “big” it is, but everything within it appears tangible, consumable, appropriable; “they all seemed at his very feet.” The narrator then makes it clear, however, that Tom is not meant to inhabit this perspectival position. He feels detached from what he sees; he feels drawn implacably to a space he *cannot* see, “hundreds of feet below him,” in a stream within a “deep, deep green and rocky valley” (22). The place is called Vendale; it is a place of spatial disharmony that precisely inverts the summit’s picturesque aesthetic order. It is also a place where Tom, himself rendered strange, can see through “the transforming eye of childhood”—rather than the categorizing eye of adulthood—once again.²¹

Like the ascending walls of Gosse’s polyp-city, Vendale is a delimited, contained space, bounded on all sides, “walled up to heaven” (25). Yet it is defined by every form of vagueness that defines the caves in Tennyson’s “Kraken”: unlocatable except by accident²²; unfathomable in its depths; filled with “unnumbered” creatures of indeterminate species gestating and becoming. Any boundaries that surround it work paradoxically to highlight the boundarylessness of what it contains. As Tom travels further into Vendale, he loses a panoramic perspective rather than gaining one; when he reaches the bottom, he becomes “so little that everything looked a

²¹ This idea has a Wordsworthian quality, and indeed the whole descent sequence echoes *The Excursion*. In Book II, the poem’s narrator, accompanied by the Wanderer, rises to a summit at which he experiences “the majesty of distance” (II.93). Shortly after, however, he realizes that the summit is a barren place, as devoid of life as it is apparently replete with clarity; the way to truth lies in a valley “beneath our feet, a little lowly vale” (II.328).

²² The narrator provides directions that make it clear that wandering is the only way to get there: “The name of the place is Vendale; and if you want to see it for yourself, you must go up into the High Craven, and search from Bolland Forest north by Ingleborough, to the Nine Standards and Cross Fell; and if you have not found it, you must turn south, and search the Lake Mountains, down to Scaw Fell and the sea; and then if you have not found it, you must go northward again by merry Carlisle...” (25)

hundred times as big to him as it does to you, just as things do to a minnow” (49). Vendale gives him an optical reorientation toward the denizens of the deep that is the precise opposite of an ascent into empiricist, panoptical clarity; he ends up feeling small, ignorant, and decentered rather than large, perspicacious, and solidified. The narrator cheekily remarks at one point that what occurs within Vendale is “true, orthodox, rational, philosophical, logical, irrefragable, inductive, deductive, seductive, productive, salutary, nominalistic, realistic, comfortable, and on-all-accounts-to-be-received” (47). But even that impressive list of synonyms for sense-making only underscores the fact that it is a place where sense must be checked at the door. Vendale is a place for that which “cannot exist,” yet does; for that which is “contrary to nature” according to the estimations of men giving “popular lectures” and “pointing at a few big ugly pictures on the wall,” yet carries on (38). It is a place of nonsense. In many ways, however, nonsense is exactly what permits it to entertain the Darwinian queerness of its inhabitants—and the Darwinian queerness of Tom himself.

For a while, Tom approaches the creatures he finds in a spirit of destruction and domination still left over from his time among humans. But he is now in a world where the creatures fight back against his appropriative endeavors, his efforts both to apprehend and to understand. He finds “water-flowers” and tries to “pick them,” only to make them “[draw] themselves in and [turn] into knots of jelly” (49). They turn out to be zoophytes, animals “all alive and busy, just as Tom was,” but their aliveness is revealed precisely by his inability to apprehend them. In a similar way, he finds “a pool full of little trout” and immediately begins “tormenting them, and trying to catch them” (51). They, too, “[slip] through his fingers” and completely subvert his attempts at mastery. A gigantic trout “ten times as big as he was” flops into view, knocking the wind out of him and leading to a moment of silent, fearful, mutual

apprehension: “I don’t know which was the more frightened of the two,” the narrator observes (51). Kingsley presents these moments ostensibly as lessons against the uncivilized (or unevolved) cruelty of young boys in particular, who are “very fond of hunting and tormenting creatures for mere sport” (50). Yet the sins of boys are not far from the sins of scientists in *The Water-Babies*, and the narrator makes it clear that, for these creatures, physical freedom and epistemological freedom are intertwined, just as “poaching” and “keeping” are two sides of the same coin. Tom can only realize his affinity for the “water-flowers” after they escape his grasp; he can only realize the sublime *alterity* of the trout after he faces a version that dwarfs him, unable to be physically objectified.

Tom’s attempts to appropriate other creatures culminate in his encounter with a dragonfly, which he does not try to catch but tries, instead, to write off as an aesthetic aberration. He berates the creature, calling it “an ugly fellow to be sure” and “making faces” at it “like a very rude boy” (51). In response, it grabs him with its pincers and simply says, “I want to be quiet. I want to split” (52). And then it does:

“Why do you want to split?” said Tom.

“Because my brothers and sisters have all split, and turned into beautiful creatures with wings; and I want to split too. Don’t speak to me. I am sure I shall split. I will split!”

Tom stood still, and watched him. And he swelled himself, and puffed, and stretched himself out stiff, and at last—crack, puff, bang—he opened all down his back, and then up to the top of his head.

And out of his inside came the most slender, elegant, soft creature, as soft and smooth as Tom: but very pale and weak, like a little child who has been ill a long time in a dark room. It moved its legs very feebly; and looked about it half ashamed, like a girl when she goes for the first time into a ballroom.

...

Tom was so astonished that he never said a word: but he stared with all his eyes (52)

The scene reads like many of the encounters between human and nonhuman in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*: a bitter exchange—bitterness seemingly apropos of nothing—in which the animal indignantly explains its own ahuman, rationally irrational logic. Inversions abound: the dragonfly casts its own position as common sense, self-explanatory, even while it defies common sense from a human point of view; in adulthood, it becomes a child; in masculine self-actualization (“and he swelled himself”), it becomes hyper-feminine. Above all, though, it presents a scrambled version of the logic of spectatorship through which Tom initially apprehended the dragonfly. Tom’s abusive aesthetic assessment of the creature crumbles in the face of the dragonfly’s own inscrutable, autotelic *aestheticism*: it wants to split because it wants to split, because others have split, because splitting is “beautiful.” He realizes that the dragonfly has its own way of seeing itself. This realization allows him, for a moment, to see beyond his own ineluctable modality of the visible, to see “with all his eyes” (52).

That the narrator describes the dragonfly in gendered, anthropomorphic, and theatrical language—“like a girl when she goes for the first time into a ballroom”—would seem to contradict the idea that Tom has completely sloughed off the filtering lenses he brought with him from the human world. In this moment, however, there is a big difference between Tom’s way of seeing and the narrator’s way of seeing. The two perspectives are aligned at the beginning of the scene, when both Tom and the narrator both deem the creature “ugly” (in a line that shades into free indirect discourse, the narrator calls it “a very ugly dirty creature”) (51). After the creature splits, however, Tom’s silent, wide-eyed astonishment starkly contrasts the narrator’s verbose, somewhat clumsy attempts to characterize the dragonfly, which depend on anthropomorphism, allegory, analogy, and other instruments of comparison. The narrator describes the creature using a palette of techniques found everywhere in aquarium writing, which transforms its subjects into

spectacles. Tom simply *looks*, transfixed not by the dragonfly's resemblance to anything else, but by its pursuit of an utterly idiosyncratic aesthetic principle. The frame of nonsense rebukes the narrator's aesthetic anthropocentrism, permitting the animal to have a way of seeing and a sense of beauty that are all its own.

Two nonsensical aspects of the dragonfly character, its distorted size in relation to Tom and its human speech, enable him to apprehend that the dragonfly has desires that are obdurately nonhuman. "I want to split," the dragonfly insists. The desire quite literally rejects a human model of selfhood predicated on the integrity of the body. It corresponds, however, with an idea propounded by the narrator elsewhere, "that your soul makes your body, just as a snail makes his shell" (48). Kingsley seems to define all organisms as continually self-determining "autopoietic" systems, to borrow a term from systems theory. Yet the dragonfly proves that different organisms have vastly different ways of determining themselves. Tom must face the fact that its "self" takes shape through a process that differs profoundly from the way his self takes shape; the dragonfly self-actualizes through sudden self-destruction rather than gradual growth. It has a way of being in the world that is neither reducible to the human nor merely machinelike.

When he meets and befriends an old lobster, Tom is faced once again with a creature whose drives approach the purity, and the inscrutability, of tautology. The lobster seems relatable at first; he becomes Tom's "playfellow" mostly because, like the hermit crabs in aquarium books, he is easy to anthropomorphize, performing actions that resemble genteel human behavior (80). "Tom delighted in watching him hold on to the seaweed with his knobbed claw, while he cut up salads with his jagged one, and then put them into his mouth, after smelling them, like a monkey," the narrator notes; "like a monkey" is not exactly "like a human," but for Tom's purposes the resemblance represents an oasis of similarity in a desert of the strange (80). In the

next paragraph, however, he “astonishe[s]” Tom by gracefully rocketing backwards with his tail and using the “sixth sense” in his feelers, demonstrating capabilities that suggest not only his unreachable otherness, but even the possibility of superiority: “[he] peeped out and twiddled his whiskers, as much as to say, ‘You couldn’t do that’” (80). Like the dragonfly’s splitting, his sudden backward leaps, enabled by different sensory wetware, attest to a mode of life—a mode of self-determination; even an *umwelt*—unavailable to Tom. He ends up proving the narrator’s previous assertion that “all the ingenious men, and all the scientific men, and all the fanciful men, in the world, with all the old German boggy-painters into the bargain, could never invent, if all their wits were boiled into one, anything so curious, and so ridiculous, as a lobster” (80). The lobster is “ridiculous,” irreconcilable not only with the categories of science but even with the aesthetic sensibility of the “old German boggy-painters”—likely a reference to the medieval and Renaissance tradition that Bakhtin called “grotesque realism,” which *embraced* the fluidity of creaturely forms.²³ Only the frame of nonsense, it seems, can make the lobster make sense.

Tom’s interactions with the lobster are notably interrupted by the long, digressive episode with Professor Ptthmlnsprts, in which a group of fairies (and the narrator) bemoan and punish the Professor’s lack of imagination. This interpolation is not random, however, even if it might feel random: upon returning to his lobster friend, Tom is forced to grapple with a monomaniacal desire—on the part of the creature—that tests his imaginative capacities. When a “wicked otter” appears, threatening Tom, the lobster comes to his rescue, tearing at the otter with his claws until it dies. But then he refuses to let go, no matter how much Tom protests; even as they float up with the otter’s corpse toward the surface, where a fisherman is dredging, the lobster refuses to

²³ See Stott, “Through a Glass Darkly” for a discussion of the Bakhtinian concept of “grotesque realism” in relation to nineteenth-century narratives of marine monstrosity (312).

let go. He refuses to let go even when his claw becomes detached, prompting the narrator to explain his behavior by deferring to ethnicity:

But he left his knobbed claw behind him; for it never came into his stupid head to let go after all, so he just shook his claw off as the easier method. It was something of a bull, that; but you must know the lobster was an Irish lobster, and was hatched off Island Magee at the mouth of Belfast Lough. (101)

Once again, the narrator adopts an anthropomorphic explanatory apparatus, framing the lobster's behavior within a larger order of ethnic norms that extend, apparently, across species and under the sea. Tom, however, takes a different approach, inductive rather than deductive: "Tom asked the lobster why he never thought of letting go" (101).

This moment reveals a tension between two competing desires that runs through the entire novel: to frame, or not to frame? Throughout the novel, Kingsley expresses a desire to understand animal behavior within human moral, social, and cultural frameworks, using words like "stupid," categories like "Irish," and the idea of evolution as an intrinsically moral imperative. Indeed, the last sequences of the novel use evolutionary allegories to propound the necessity of self-improvement in aggressively didactic fashion, describing a tribe of "Doasyoulikes" who devolve into gorillas because they refuse to rise out of a lifestyle of constant self-indulgence (a tale that echoes the parable of the Dead Sea Apes in Carlyle's *Past and Present*) (131).²⁴ As Will Abberley points out, Kingsley "never gave up his search for moral meaning in nature, since its presumed existence was fundamental to his authority as a parson-naturalist devoted to interpreting nature and scripture side by side" ("Animal Cunning" 36). Part of Kingsley's intellectual project in *The Water-Babies* is to decipher the Book of Nature under

²⁴ As James Eli Adams has noted, Kingsley was obsessed with the morally deleterious possibility of "perpetual saturnalia," personified racially by lazy residents of the tropics (such as the Trinidadian laborers he describes in his travelogue *At Last*) and allegorically by Tennyson's "The Lotos-Eaters" (*Dandies and Desert Saints* 113).

the *cover* of nonsense, deriving moral meanings and typological significances that feel truer because the novel admits nature's apparent absurdity, rather than delivering an edited version.

And yet, Abberley follows John Hawley in characterizing Kingsley as a figure who became more and more resigned to the Book of Nature's apparent inscrutability in the 1860s—the possibility that “the material universe was, perhaps, not an anthropocentric text but a nexus of mindless, mechanistic processes” (51). In 1863, Huxley wrote a letter to Kingsley admitting that there might be an “impassable gulf between the anthropomorphism (however refined) of theology and the passionless impersonality of the unknown and unknowable which science shows everywhere underlying the thin veil of phenomena” (Qtd. in Abberley 51). Kingsley never gave up his conviction that the Book of Nature could be read, but he undoubtedly became warier and warier of human attempts to make it legible—which included the various forms of aesthetic and conceptual domestication involved in aquarium-keeping. The novel's constant project—inherited by *Alice in Wonderland*—of allowing nonhuman characters to desire and self-determine in an obdurately nonhuman way short-circuits any claim they might have to being credible moral avatars. They are irrational, indignant, inaccessible, capricious, often cruel. They do things without cause; want things without purpose. “They do no good,” remarks the narrator, “any more than some thousands of their betters” (189). Nor are they able to form the picture of a moral community, unlike the industrious “polypes” of Gosse's *City of God*.

And yet, because the frame of nonsense permits animals to inhabit a liminal zone of intentionality—we do not know why they do things; we simply know that they do things for their own reasons—it can also maintain the idea that they are not merely machines. Nonsense permits the animal mind to be illogical. Illogicality makes it inaccessible, but still a freely functioning mind. Nonsense is integral to the form of *The Water-Babies*, and the aquarium anathema to it,

because excessive interpretation strips animals of the very aliveness that makes them beguiling—the very inscrutability that makes us want to interpret them in the first place. Abberley’s suggestion that Tom himself works as a kind of “aquarium-keeper” because he intervenes in the lives of the aquatic creatures he encounters—e.g. the lobster—rings true, but is complicated by references to the destructiveness of the hobby peppered throughout the novel. In one explicit critique, the narrator compares “young ladies” who might be inclined to “keep [water-babies] in aquariums” to “the ladies at Pompeii (as you may see by the paintings) [who] used to keep Cupids in cages,” starving them and “let[ting] them die of dirt and neglect” (83). This reference to the motif of the “Cupid seller,” discovered on Pompeiian frescoes and frequently reproduced in the eighteenth century,²⁵ hints at an analogy: just as the keepers of Cupids place the figure of desire itself within a confining, suffocating cage, the keepers of aquaria misshape the desires of their charges. Indeed, they forget that their charges might have desires. Kingsley begins one of the novel’s rambling, amorphous central chapters with an epigraph from Wordsworth’s “The Tables Turned”:

Sweet is the lore which Nature brings;
Our meddling intellect
Misshapes the beauteous forms of things:
We murder to dissect.

If “death and visibility go together” in “The Kraken,” visibility creates death in the aquarium—or at least a death-in-life (Maxwell, “Unnumbered Polypi” 14).

The novel thus finds an interspecies ethic within formalized, stylized epistemological disarray, positioning the defamiliarizing effects of nonsense as an antidote to the destructive effects of spectatorship. At the end of the novel, in the clearly demarcated “Moral” section,

²⁵ See, for instance, Joseph-Marie Vien’s painting *The Cupid Seller* (1763).

Kingsley enjoins his young readers “never to throw stones at [efts in ponds], or catch them with crooked pins, or put them into vivariums with sticklebacks, that the sticklebacks may prick them in their poor little stomachs, and make them jump out of the glass into somebody’s workbox, and so come to a bad end” (189). Putting efts “into vivariums with sticklebacks” is not just a matter of catching them; it is also a matter of *watching* them. We must leave them alone, Kingsley insists, not only because physical intervention stunts their evolution into higher forms—“For perhaps ... they will turn into water-babies again, and, perhaps, after that into land-babies; and after that, perhaps, into grown men”—but because aesthetic intervention strips them of an alterity that lets them be themselves, and feeds the imagination²⁶ (189). In many ways, Kingsley anticipates Berger’s argument that postindustrial technologies of animal exhibition—primarily the zoo, but the aquarium also—have contributed to the marginalization of “real” animals by replacing them with simulacra, and to the corrosion of human thinking *about* animals, or with animals, by replacing eye contact with spectatorship. As Una Chaudhuri points out, the title of Berger’s essay is something of a misnomer: “What Berger bemoans about modernity’s animal practices is that they substitute looking at for being with, installing a regime of alienated visuality where once there was embodied co-presence” (“Ocean Oriented Ontologies” 3). Kingsley seems quite alive, in *The Water-Babies*, to the ways in which the aquarium contributed

²⁶ According to his biographer Susan Chitty, much of the rhetoric of filth and “dirtiness” that repeats throughout the novel can be traced to Kingsley’s personal obsession with cleanliness, which he often deployed in allegories of class injustice. In a sermon to the Kirkdale Ragged School, he wrote, with heavy irony, “Capital is accumulated more rapidly by wasting a certain amount of human life ... by producing and throwing away a regular per-centage of human soot—of that thinking and acting dirt which lies about, and alas! breeds and perpetuates itself, in foul alleys and low public houses and all and any of the dark places of the earth” (qtd. in Chitty, *The Beast and the Monk* 216). The epistemological critique in *The Water-Babies* works just as well as a critique of class: the same systems, structures of thought, that deny animals agencies of their own deny the lower classes—who are often animalized—an ability to be “thinking and acting.”

to a system in which “all animals”—not just fish—“appear like fish seen through the plate glass of an aquarium” (“Why Look at Animals?” 16).

Yet *The Water-Babies* is ultimately less concerned with the aquarium itself than with a set of broader desires it artificially fulfilled: to know the sea completely; to read her inhabitants clearly; to bring them into the domestic order; to bring them into the frame of sense. In its resistance—or at least its ambivalence—toward all of these impulses, the novel anticipates present-day concerns, arising at the meeting-point between animal studies and the field of inquiry known as “thalassology,” about the ethical ramifications of trying to apprehend the sea. The aquarium marked a dramatic step in a project of epistemic mastery, rooted in a long tradition of fear, that reaches into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, coalescing in James Cameron’s quixotic attempts to plumb the Mariana Trench. Other voices, however, have stressed the importance of recalling what Cannon Schmitt has called its “inhuman facticity”—its “literalness, its alienness to human plans”—and its ultimate unknowability, not just because the assumption of epistemic mastery underwrites widespread practices of exploitation, but because the ocean may be the last bastion of alterity itself in an anthropocentric world (“On the Sea” 22-23). Cannon Schmitt asks: “What theoretical or methodological adjustments would enable us to see the sea?” Kingsley asks: What epistemological or aesthetic adjustments would enable us to see the *creatures* of the sea?

Movable Types: *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and the Prison of Species

Just how Darwinian is *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*? Or perhaps the better question would be: Just how is *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* Darwinian? Critics going all the way back to William Empson have catalogued a wide variety of evolutionary themes, images, and ideas in Lewis Carroll's *Alice* books, making it easy to assume that they are very Darwinian indeed. The books are full of predation (for example, the unrepentant Walrus), extinction (for example, the Dodo), and chaotic contests among different species (for example, the Caucus-Race).²⁷ These examples emphasize creaturely plasticity, plunging Alice herself down a rabbit hole of ontological destabilization and bodily metamorphosis that resembles the journey into the primordial origins of life. Like Darwin himself, moreover, Carroll frequently challenges the idea of species as fixed, immutable types,²⁸ either by presenting creatures that exceed or fall between traditional categories (like the pig-baby) or by subverting and satirizing the process of classification. As Alice says in *Through the Looking-Glass*, right before a typically bizarre exchange with a fawn about the protocols of nomenclature, "This must be the wood ... where things have no names. I wonder what'll become of my name when I go in?" (152).

And yet, for just as long, critics have struggled to ascertain whether the books *endorse* the evolutionary ideas they clearly entertain. As Empson memorably put it in 1935, "The first Neanderthal skull was found in 1856. *The Origin of Species* (1859) came out six years before *Wonderland*, three before its conception, and was very much in the air, a pervading bad smell. It

²⁷ For a useful overview of Darwinian readings of Carroll, see Jessica Straley, *Evolution and Imagination in Victorian Children's Literature* ch.3 (86-87).

²⁸ In Chapter XIV of *On the Origin of Species*, Darwin makes this point explicitly: "On the view that species are only strongly marked and permanent varieties, and that each species first existed as a variety, we can see why it is that no line of demarcation can be drawn between species, commonly supposed to have been produced by special acts of creation, and varieties which are acknowledged to have been produced by secondary laws" (410).

is hard to say how far Dodgson under cover of nonsense was using ideas of which his set disapproved” (254). Akira Mizuta Lippit observes that the books seem to “signal the author’s resistance to evolution at the same time that they try to think through some of its implications” (*Electric Animal* 137). Jessica Straley concurs, writing “That Carroll toys with Darwinian figures and themes is undeniable,” but “their effect is ultimately more ambiguous than elucidating” (*Evolution and Imagination in Victorian Children’s Literature* 87). She provides an account of Carroll’s ambivalence: he admitted that evolutionary theory “destabilized the natural order, even our sense of self,” but felt at the same time that “it offered no methods by which to manage the disturbance that it created” (87). Nonsense might have offered him a way to “manage” that “disturbance” on his end—a way to make sense of evolutionary theory’s more destabilizing implications by translating them into games, into absurdity, into permissible illogicality. At the same time, nonsense also gave him plausible deniability, since it launches the reader into a rarefied realm of wordplay explicitly detached from the order of reality. Perhaps Wonderland and the Looking-Glass World are Darwinian places. But they are also nonsense-places—which is to say, detached from the real.

In this section of the chapter, I want to argue that it is precisely this nonsense-logic of detachment that makes the *Alice* books both pro-Darwinian and, more radically, post-Darwinian. Nonsense subsists on detachment in two ways. On one level, the discourse detaches itself from the context of the ‘real,’ the domain of sense-making, creating a self-enclosed virtual world governed by artificial, and often seemingly arbitrary, rules. On another level, the ludic structure of nonsense makes everything within it—every component part—detachable and rearrangeable in new ways, as Elizabeth Sewell and other theorists of nonsense emphasize: words and things become like game-pieces, brought into relationships that playfully go beyond (and often subvert)

the linkages of ordinary semantic reference. Hence the appeal of *Alice* to theorists of structural and poststructural linguistics (Wittgenstein's "language game," de Saussure, Derrida, etc.); as Carroll himself put it, "No word has a meaning inseparably attached to it; a word means what the speaker intends by it, and what the hearer understands by it, and that is all" (qtd. in Lerer 193). In the *Alice* books, however, the same process can apply both to words and to animals, and to the two in relation to each other. Nonsense's logic of detachment produces relationships between animals, names, and meanings—between animal figures and linguistic structures—that feel discordant, artificial, a little bit unsettling; as Lippit notes, "Carroll's literary assemblage of animals, space, language, and childhood brings together the elements of the human world but in an entirely other configuration" (137). With the exception of the Jabberwock, almost all the animals in *Alice* are real, familiar animals, but they are defamiliarized, unmoored from their traditional associations. Almost all of them display some sort of disjunction—perhaps foremost among them, the Cheshire Cat: "Well! I've often seen a cat without a grin," Alice thinks to herself, "but a grin without a cat! It's the most curious thing I ever saw in all my life!" (59).

Yet these forms of detachment are also exactly what make the animals in *Wonderland*—the Cheshire Cat, the Caterpillar, the Mock Turtle and the Gryphon, etc.—into complex, idiosyncratic, and often enigmatic figures rather than flatly allegorical types. Inherent signification cannot be taken for granted with them. They fail to signify what they usually signify; they fail to *be* signified by the usual anthropocentric processes of naming. They find themselves detached, most of all, from the broadly Aesopian categories that they still inhabited in other discourses, especially the historically intertwined discourses of children's literature and natural history. In the process, they model a new conceptual environment better suited to the uncertainties and ambiguities of a Darwinian ecology—a rhetorical system in which

configurations between animals, identities, and referents are never stable and subject to constant revision and rearrangement; a Darwinian “language game” in which names and meanings are as shifting, agonistic, unfixed, and unfinished as the creatures traditionally attached to them.

In *The Order of Things*, Foucault asserts that by the time the age of Linnaean classification dawned in the eighteenth century, “The whole of animal semantics has disappeared, like a dead and useless limb. The words that had been interwoven in the very being of the beast have been unraveled and removed: and the living being, in its anatomy, its form, its habits, its birth and death, appears as though stripped naked” (141). Perhaps this amputation was true in theory, in the realm of high taxonomy, but in practice, Victorian culture—up to and throughout the height of Darwin’s cultural impact—still invested meaning in a set of stable, allegorical animal categories rooted in a much older conceptual tradition, corroborated by popular natural history, and widely circulated in children’s compendia.

Species categories were an integral part of children’s literature before the 1850s, in part because they were considered a useful tool of moral instruction and in part because some of the most prominent authors and illustrators of children’s literature were also naturalists themselves. Chapbooks containing reprints of Aesopian fables or stories of animals exemplifying their essential traits²⁹ formed a huge part of an early nineteenth-century child’s literary diet, as did illustrated collections of iconic creatures with titles like *Sixteen Beasts, for the Amusement of Children* (c. 1824) or *A Pretty Book of Pictures for Little Masters and Misses: Or, Tommy Trip’s History of Beasts and Birds* (1779).³⁰ *Aesop’s Fables* was republished in several popular new

²⁹ Including “dog anecdotes” exalting the heroism and loyalty of dogs in general and specific breeds in particular—see Chapter 1.

³⁰ In his 1693 treatise on education, John Locke laid the pedagogical and philosophical foundation for this practice: “And therefore I think, as soon as [the child] begins to spell, as many pictures of animals should be got him as can be found, with the printed names to them, which at the same time will invite him to read, and afford him matter of enquiry and knowledge” (Locke, *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* par. 156).

editions throughout the century, including one edition illustrated by John Tenniel in 1847, and was republished in even greater frequency after the publication of *On the Origin of Species*. The amateur naturalist Thomas Bewick, who also produced a version of *Aesop* in 1818, started out as an illustrator of children's books before graduating to wide-ranging (and wildly popular) natural-historical projects for all ages such as his *General History of Quadrupeds* (1790). In 1882, his biographer David Croal Thomson rightly credited him with "introducing rational and pleasing" designs—i.e. more anatomical realism—to "fables and story-books," giving children's literature a dose of zoological rigor (30).³¹ At the same time, he gave zoology a dose of children's literature. As Harriet Ritvo has noted, Bewick and other writers like him did much to crystallize the moral essences of various animals in the nineteenth-century imaginary,³² presenting tales of loyal dogs, noble lions, and vile pigs that not only retained the logic of his previous genre (as well as older bestiaries), but also reinforced the pedagogical legitimacy of compendia for children that came after him.

Dodgson was deeply familiar with these kinds of texts and the categories they contained; as Rose Lovell-Smith points out, *Alice's Adventures Under Ground*, which is almost entirely about "Alice's encounters with *animals*," suggests that his whole project began as a "fanciful and nonsensical perversion of an illustrated natural history" (29). I read the *Alice* books—pervaded as they already are by the threat of decapitation—as "perversion[s] of an illustrated natural history" that pervert their reference point by completing the amputation of "animal semantics" Foucault refers to, severing species from stable, referential meanings and animals from names.

³¹ Tenniel was also praised for exactly this quality: a zoological realism he brought to *Aesop* as well as *Alice*, which features many of the same animals—the rabbit, the mouse, the lion, etc. See Rose Lovell-Smith, "The Animals of Wonderland."

³² See Ritvo's introduction to *The Animal Estate*.

Carroll's books are not the only works of nonsense literature that employ the logic of detachment in this way. Edward Lear's poem "Twenty-Six Nonsense Rhymes With their Pictures" looks very similar to an abecedary, one of the most common forms through which animals were (and still are) introduced to children and organized into discrete, indivisible conceptual units.³³ But the poem subverts creaturely categories by detaching each creature from any stable quality to which it might refer:

The Comfortable Confidential Cow,
who sate in her Red Morocco Armchair and
toasted her own Bread at the parlour Fire.

The Dolomphious Duck,
who caught spotted frogs for her dinner
with a Runcible Spoon.

The Enthusiastic Elephant,
who ferried himself across the water with the
Kitchen Poker and a New pair of Ear-rings. (*Chatto Book of Nonsense Poetry* 252)

Lear's nonsense poem flips the usual procedure by which abecedaries are generated. Rather than using animals to create an alphabet, the poet uses the alphabet to create animals, synthesizing nonsensical creatures from the language games of alliteration and alphabetization. At the same time, these highly synthetic creatures gain something from that highly synthetic process. In more traditional children's bestiaries like *Sixteen Beasts*, illustrations work in the service of iconicity, contouring the archetypal forms of creatures like Cow, Duck, and Elephant. In Lear's poem, the illustrations promote an antithetical effect: heterogeneity, even a kind of individualism. The animals possess and exemplify different adjectival qualities, but some of these qualities are devoid of meaning ("dolomphious"), and all of them emerge from unclassifiable *individual*

³³ Tobias Menely offers a compelling insight about the way children's compendia mimic the original scene of category-creation—Adam's naming of the animals in Genesis: "Books for young children teach animal names by relating them to the signature vocalization of the species: the *woof* or *meow*, *bah* or *neigh*. Thus they revise the hexameral tradition of Adam's naming by fiat by linking the word with a creaturely voice that precedes it" (19).

behavior rather than any kind of categorical essence. Each stanza describes an animal with wildly different, idiosyncratic intentions, possessed of independence, a sense of propriety, and an inscrutable interiority. The cow is “confidential”—its mind is closed off. The elephant is “enthusiastic” for reasons unclear to anyone except itself.

Yet the forms of detachment that define—or resist defining—animals in Carroll’s books do not respond only to the taxonomical thinking embedded in previous children’s literature. They also respond to post-Darwinian anxieties about the locus and integrity of animal identity, both at the level of the individual and at the level of species. In 1870, T.H. Huxley, a figure known for his vigorous promotion of evolutionary theory, delivered a paper at the Metaphysical Society titled “Has a Frog a Soul, and of What Nature Is That Soul, Supposing It to Exist?”³⁴ The paper recounts several experiments that attempted to locate the seat of a frog’s soul by amputating various parts of its body. One would assume that the soul resides in the animal’s head. Yet a decapitated frog body, so long as it is possessed of a spinal cord, will still react to external stimuli with a discernable degree of intention, using its limbs to fend off irritants or to avoid pain—even if “the separated head and trunk” were to be “sent a hundred miles in opposite directions.” Where, then, does the frog’s soul reside? Is it in the brain, in the spinal column, or extended across every element of the frog’s anatomy, so that it cannot be located at all? Huxley’s line of questioning was not exactly new; he references debates about the nature of animal consciousness going back to Descartes. But the question gained new urgency³⁵ in the wake of Darwinian theory, which transformed both the “frames” of individual animals and the frames of

³⁴ For more discussion of the recurrent figure of the amputated frog in mid-Victorian scientific discourse, see Paul S. White, “The Experimental Animal in Victorian Britain” (in *Thinking with Animals: New Perspectives on Anthropomorphism*, ed. Lorraine Daston and Gregg Mitman).

³⁵ This post-Darwinian anxiety about where to locate the ‘essence’ or ‘soul’ of the creature would later be taken up by the proponents of vivisection, who would divide and detach animals in a quixotic quest for coherence (see Chapter 1).

species into gestating forms with blurry boundaries. Just as ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny, the blurriness of the frog's individual identity recapitulates the blurriness of its species identity: at what point does a frog cease to be a frog?

Like Huxley's frog, the creatures in the *Alice* books explicitly confound the ways in which identity—the seat of the self—can be located in morphology. Alice herself experiences this problem at the beginning of *Wonderland*, when she begins to wonder who “she” is—or where the seat of *her* “soul” still lies—after several episodes of bodily metamorphosis. She brings her conundrum to the Caterpillar, whose sharp retorts do nothing to assuage her anxieties about being unable to “explain myself” (41). “Being so many different sizes in a day is very confusing,” says Alice, and the Caterpillar responds:

“It isn't,” said the Caterpillar.

“Well, perhaps you haven't found it so yet,” said Alice; “but when you have to turn into a chrysalis—you will some day, you know—and then after that into a butterfly, I should think you'll feel it a little queer, won't you?”

“Not a bit,” said the Caterpillar. (41)

As Straley notes, authors of Victorian children's books became interested in Darwinian theory in part because its discussions of development resonated with the developing bodies—and volatile selves—of their readers.³⁶ The Caterpillar is a case in point: though he seems singularly unhelpful to Alice, he firmly asserts the necessity of dislodging identity from morphological coherence—the necessity even of locating it *in* change rather than in stasis. Yet his “advice” does not exactly give her a linguistic system that can do so. It is in the books' scenes of classification that such a system begins to take shape—in particular, in their scenes of *misclassification*.

³⁶ They pursued this connection in large part because of the recapitulation thesis, which “engendered new anxieties about childhood development” since it meant that children were reenacting the lowest stages of civilization and, more broadly, organic life (Straley 6). As Gillian Beer puts it in *Darwin's Plots*: “The blurring of the distinction between ontogeny—individual development—and phylogeny—species development—in the single term ‘evolution’ proved to be one of the most fruitful disturbances of meaning in the literature of the ensuing hundred years” (Qtd. in Straley 5).

In an early scene in *Wonderland*, one of the books' most explicit parodies of classification, Alice, sporting a grossly elongated neck, is accosted by a mother Pigeon who identifies her as an egg-stealing serpent. It cries "Serpent!"; she protests: "'I—I'm a little girl,' said Alice, rather doubtfully" (47). But her doubt signals that her assumptions about classification—which she, in accordance with the Linnaean system, pins to anatomy—are no longer verifiable in *Wonderland*. What "kind" she is "matters a good deal to *me*," she says, but it matters not to the Pigeon, who maintains that little girls are also "a kind of serpent" because they eat eggs, and then dismisses "kind" more generally as a way of evaluating other beings: "What does it matter to me whether you're a little girl or a serpent?" (47). As Lovell-Smith observes, the scene seems to contain Darwin's entire thesis in microcosm: Alice's neck implies "changes in the bodily form of species" over time; the subject of predation "evok[es]"—as it does elsewhere in the books—"the competitive struggle to survive"; and even the fact that the Pigeon is classifying Alice suggests a decentering of the human, a "dislodging of humanity from its confident 'overseeing' of nature" (28). The Pigeon—already a creature pegged metonymically to Darwin's careful observational methodology—takes Alice's place as *Homo taxonomicus*.

Yet this subversion of categorization in general occurs alongside—and works most effectively through—a more implicit, intertextual subversion of the "serpent" category in particular. Lovell-Smith describes how the motif of the "egg-thief" serpent, nefariously creeping up on a nest protected by a mother bird, was a frequent touchstone of both illustrated and written natural histories throughout the first half of the nineteenth century. John Audubon's widely influential *Birds of America*, for example, includes a famous—and highly allegorical—plate that depicts a rattlesnake climbing a tree toward a nest, rebuffed by mocking-birds flapping their wings and pecking at its face; in *Alice*, the Pigeon accosts Alice by "[flying] into her face, and ...

beating her violently with its wings” (29). The scene thus challenges an old, common trope of natural history by presenting it satirically and inverting its moral logic: Alice is the victim, not the enemy, and the crime is not egg-stealing but a form of misidentification based, arguably, in the prevalence of that trope in the first place (making the Pigeon, unlike other *Wonderland* animals, oddly complicit in the reification of a dubious natural-historical category that applies to it). But the scene also critiques its reference point on a more fundamentally linguistic level, exposing an animal category that has irretrievably slipped from name into metaphor. In the 1860s, the term ‘serpent’ was still widely used in natural history discourse as a term synonymous with ‘snake’—as an ostensibly neutral, scientific identifier (Lovell-Smith 38). Yet it could never be truly neutral: it was freighted with connotations that were religious (the Fall of Man), moral (Satanic dissembling), and gendered (a phallic force that could invade and threaten “home and motherhood... the mid-Victorian cult of a domestic refuge under female religious and moral guidance”), and accounts of serpents were suffused with all three (Lovell-Smith 35). In the exchange between Alice and the Pigeon, these connotative functions of the term ‘serpent’ completely overtake and supplant its denotative function; connotation *becomes* denotation, and the act of classification itself—practiced by the Pigeon, which is also inextricably tied to wider contexts—becomes cultural and intertextual rather than scientific and indexical.

But the function of this scene is not just to deconstruct the term ‘serpent’ by exposing its allegorical dimensions and the impossibility that it could ever be scientific, objective, or neutral. The exchange also paves the way for the next chapter, in which assigning a name to a creature suspended not only between scientific categories (denotations) but also between cultural categories (connotations) is the central problem Alice must solve for herself. This happens a few times in the *Alice* books: a scene that represents an established way of arranging animals and

language—or of arranging animals *with* language—is followed by a broadly Darwinian situation that tests its limits; an old answer is followed by a new, more pressing question. In “Pig and Pepper,” Alice regains her role as *Homo taxonomicus* when the Duchess presents her with the pig-baby, a “queer-shaped little creature”³⁷ swaddled in blankets (55). This creature challenges her taxonomical abilities on multiple levels, first by presenting an elastic, indeterminate morphology—it “held out its arms and legs in all directions, ‘just like a star-fish’” and “kept doubling itself up and straightening itself out again”—and then by seeming to present pig features and baby features in equal measure:

The baby grunted again, and Alice looked very anxiously into its face to see what was the matter with it. There could be no doubt that it had a *very* turn-up nose, much more like a snout than a real nose: also its eyes were getting extremely small for a baby: altogether Alice did not like the look of the thing at all. “But perhaps it was only sobbing,” she thought, and looked into its eyes again, to see if there were any tears.

No, there were no tears. “If you’re going to turn into a pig, my dear,” said Alice, seriously, “I’ll have nothing more to do with you. Mind now!” The poor little thing sobbed again (or grunted, it was impossible to say which), and they went on for some while in silence.

Alice was just beginning to think to herself, “Now, what am I going to do with this creature, when I get it home?” when it grunted again, so violently, that she looked down into its face in some alarm. This time there could be *no* mistake about it: it was neither more nor less than a pig, and she felt that it would be quite absurd for her to carry it any further. (55)

Alice is as “anxious” here as she was “doubtful” in her encounter with the Pigeon. Her anxiety arises, however, from a conflict between the indeterminacies of nature and the strict determinacies of culture. The problem is that nature is fluid, while culture is binary—or, to put it

³⁷ In the wake of Jacques Derrida’s deconstruction of the inherently exclusionary and binary term “animal” in *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, the word “creature” has enjoyed something of a theoretical resurgence. In *The Accommodated Animal*, Laurie Shannon discusses the inclusivity of the term in early modern discourses that stressed cross-species fellowship: “Creatureliness, then, unifies the living artifacts of Creation in a shared status that is, at once, both contingent and stakeholding—the classic ambivalence inherent in the structure of the political subject as such” (41). Menely, in a similar vein, synthesizes several different thinkers (including Walter Benjamin, Julia Reinhard Lupton, and Anat Pick) who have argued that the term “fissures the border, otherwise so assiduously guarded, that divides the human from the animal,” emphasizing instead a vulnerability or dependency shared across species (*The Animal Claim* 14).

another way, the creature is fluid and the names are binary. The creature's morphology is not only indeterminate but diachronic. Its form is in constant flux, turning from baby into pig and back again; features such as its eyes (which "were getting extremely small") explicitly change over time; the text even implies that it continues morphing for the long "while" they regard each other "in silence." But Alice must choose whether to designate it a baby or a pig—a binary choice that purports to identify its essence but only truly determines its *context*, i.e. whether it belongs in the "home" (or in swaddling clothes, or in the human world as a whole).

That sense of context is as much a matter of the creature's physical belonging as it is a matter of its cultural and intertextual resonance. As Ritvo has noted in *The Animal Estate*, the pig fared no better than the serpent in the Victorian cultural imaginary, for reasons similarly involving its perceived threat to the order of domestic life: "Sows were accused of devouring their own young, which in turn scarcely recognized their mothers" (21). Part of Alice's anxiety seems to stem from the fact that she understands the metaphoric and metonymic stakes of her classificatory decision. Throughout her purposely dilated deliberation, the pig-baby is suspended not just between categories but also between iconicities: she must choose whether to make it a signifier of perfect innocence—embedded in a network of associations that includes the Baby Jesus, just as the serpent connects to Satan—or a signifier of vice. She looks "into its eyes again," looking for reasons not to opt for the latter, until she cannot ignore the pig-baby's pigness.

Yet the discourse of nonsense enables her to do an end-run around this grim classificatory choice between two culturally freighted categories of being: rather than calling the creature a pig *or* a baby, she determines that "it was neither more nor less than a pig" (55). The construction is absurd because it transforms an ostensibly qualitative identity into a quantitative measure. In

doing so, however, it corrects for some of the absurdities of Alice’s linguistic and conceptual dilemma. She restructures ‘pig’ as a category that isn’t immutable, but subject to variation and slippage in ways that match the shifting morphology of the pig-baby itself. Moreover, by redefining how the term ‘pig’ works as an identifier, she detaches it from its usual mode of reference, which is complexly connotative *because* it is indexically denotative.³⁸ The pig’s negative connotations depend on the stability and exclusivity of ‘pig’ as an identity—in particular, its distinction from the human. By identifying this creature as “neither more nor less than a pig,” Alice severs the term from its typological function, creating a new kind of species designation and gesturing toward a linguistic system that accounts for Darwin’s “subtle variations” rather than automatically throwing odd forms of life into deterministic semantic boxes.³⁹ Perhaps this is a nonsensical way of naming things that could not work in the real world. But the pig “trot[s] away quietly into the wood” in a way that suggests an escape from two equal but opposite manmade prisons—happy, or at least free, to be itself (55).

In an essay informed by Bruno Latour’s actor-network theory, Michael Parrish-Lee reads the *Alice* books as texts that challenge the idea of fixed identities in general. Especially through their constant emphasis on eating and food, the books “[develop] a model of being in which identity is less a fixed essence than a position on a food chain that varies through association and diet”; animals, humans, objects, and food constantly change places with one another, transforming the order of things (“Eating Things” 503). The pig-baby certainly seems to be one such networked being: its nature—what it is—is not established *a priori*, but emerges through

³⁸ As Gilles Deleuze cryptically declares in his own treatise on Carroll’s nonsense, denotation itself bears the connotation of consumability in the *Alice* books: “Everything denoted or capable of denotation is, in principle, consumable and penetrable” (*The Logic of Sense* 26).

³⁹ In *Studies in Animal Life*, G.H. Lewes argues for the necessity of a more “natural method” of classification in a post-Darwinian context—one that “[takes] into consideration not one character, but all the essential characters” of an organism (90).

relationality, interactivity, context. But I would submit that the *Alice* books experiment with this logic of decentralization not just on the level of ontology but on the level of epistemology: they direct their energies not just toward elaborating a different “model of being,” but also toward elaborating a model of classification to match, one in which species is also relational, subject to change, and based in immediate ecological context rather than a static grid of intrinsic types. The new rules of speciation—in which what something *is* is “not based on a recallable . . . selfhood or body of knowledge” but by “participating in the assembling and reassembling of a diverse network of actors”—also apply to species identification: Alice arrives at a more networked, contextual, relative way of naming the pig, befitting its networked, contextual, constantly shifting pigness (500). To put it another way, because nonsense severs itself both from ordinary logics of reference and from established cultural norms, the new rules of being in Wonderland also apply to naming—so that Wonderland becomes Edenic, or at least a lot like the wood in *Looking-Glass* “where things have no names,” because it allows even the most familiar and deeply allegorical animals to be named anew.⁴⁰

Alice experiences her own version of identificatory nakedness early in *Wonderland*, when she finds herself asking: “Who in the world am I?” (17-18). It is a testament to Carroll’s interest in models of identity “not based on a recallable human selfhood or body of knowledge” that all she can recall (aside from facts and figures drilled into her by rote memorization in the Victorian classroom⁴¹) is a garbled parody of a nursery rhyme about an animal—a parody that

⁴⁰ This effect is comparable to the Edenic erasure of identities produced—according to Walter Benjamin—by the animal stories of Kafka. Menely glosses Benjamin’s argument: “Like Adam, the reader of Kafka’s parables encounters the animals still unnamed, so that when, in the course of the tale, the creatures are finally identified according to the accepted nomenclature, the reader’s experience is one of radical defamiliarization” (*The Animal Claim* 127). The difference, in *Alice*, is that the name of the creature appears explicitly, but the animal’s detachment from the usual *meanings* of that name creates a defamiliarization and demands that it be named anew, according to the manner of being or “character” it actually presents.

⁴¹ The overly didactic Victorian education system was a critical target of Carroll as well as Kingsley.

replaces one logic of species, in which animals can be defined by ‘recalling’ moral and allegorical types, with another.⁴² She means to repeat an early eighteenth-century nursery rhyme by Isaac Watts, still widely memorized by children in the 1850s and 60s⁴³:

*How doth the little busy Bee
Improve each shining Hour,
And gather Honey all the Day
From ev’ry op’ning Flow’r!*

*How skillfully she builds her Cell!
How neat she spreads the Wax;
And labours hard to store it well
With the sweet Food she makes.*

*In works of labour or of skill,
I would be busy too;
For Satan finds some mischief still
For idle hands to do.*

What she spits out instead is a perverse, pseudo-Darwinian inversion:

*How doth the little crocodile
Improve his shining tail,
And pour the waters of the Nile
On every golden scale!*

*How cheerfully he seems to grin,
How neatly spreads his claws,
And welcomes little fishes in,
With gently smiling jaws! (19)*

As several scholars have noted,⁴⁴ the crocodile rhyme is a parody of the bee rhyme that presents a much darker picture of animal activity. In place of the bee’s happy industriousness, Alice’s poem presents the crocodile’s happy voraciousness. In place of the bee’s teleological labor,

⁴² In his introduction to *Alice*, Hugh Haughton writes, “Maps, pictures, labels, words: Alice’s free fall takes her through the models of linguistic order she has learned at home and in the school-room” (lvii). Aesopian categories are “models of linguistic order” as well, just as foundational as facts and figures.

⁴³ Haughton identifies the source in the notes to his edition of *Alice*: the rhyme ‘Against Idleness and Mischief,’ from *Divine Songs Attempted in Easy Language for the Use of Children* (1715) by Isaac Watts (302).

⁴⁴ See, e.g., Straley, who reads the scene as a moment in which “It is the promise of parody, not the destructiveness of Darwinism, that *Wonderland* teaches”—in other words, the scene draws our attention to “the attenuated relationship between textual allusion and extra-textual referent” (87).

building something outside itself (“improv[ing] each shining Hour”), Alice’s rhyme presents the crocodile’s naked self-interest (“improv[ing] his shining tail”). In place of the bee’s manifest domestication, the crocodile cheerfully flouts its wildness. More important, though, is the crocodile’s refusal to be domesticated in a rhetorical sense. In place of the bee’s semantic, allegorical, and educational function, its function as a moral avatar (as well as a synecdochic image of the Creator’s own labor), the crocodile is both amoral and meaningless. Alice cannot base her own identity on its example because it disrupts exemplarity itself—hence the absence of the third stanza, which would have struck readers who familiar with the original poem.

She does not seem to mind, however, and the crocodile seems thrilled: just as the pig-baby episode ends by allegorizing the creature’s freedom from allegory, Alice’s rhyme presents the crocodile as a creature in reverie while—and arguably because—it does not have to mean. The bee’s happiness is exemplary, instructive; it is part of the ‘work’ he does referentially, as an icon of industriousness. The crocodile’s happiness is on the other side of an epistemological divide—he only “seems” happy to the poem’s outside observer—and described in the service of no meaning in particular; it is arbitrary and autotelic. He is happy for no good reason—happy while unwedded to reference. The bee is put to work by the rhyme in which it appears, performing the labor of embodying a moral concept. The crocodile, by contrast, is at leisure both literally and rhetorically—precisely because he is so literal within a rhetorical medium. The entire parody works so well because he resides within the structure of a didactic poem but blissfully refuses to abide by its rules. And within that refusal, he gains a perverse kind of freedom, a freedom both with and within language enjoyed by many other animals throughout the *Alice* books. Parodies are always intertextual, yet the crucial irony of this parody is that its intertextuality allows the animal involved to cease being intertextual—to be something other

than a creature defined in relation to an agreed-upon cultural category. The bee is a servant of allegory. The crocodile, detached from allegory, gets to be no more or less than a crocodile.

In the episode in which Alice meets the Gryphon and the Mock Turtle, later on in *Wonderland*, the logic of parody not only gives the nonhuman creatures a kind of rhetorical freedom; it also gives them the freedom to be rhetorical—to *participate* in the book's decentralized processes of naming and categorization. Both figures are in themselves parodies of species identities produced by the matrices of culture rather than found in the entanglements of nature. In pre-seventeenth-century bestiaries, the Gryphon is a mythical chimera listed and described among the real, familiar creatures of the world; here, Carroll acknowledges that tradition by making it a creature of pure textuality, a signifier without a signified, a species without a reference-point. A sly parenthetical tells the reader, "(If you don't know what a Gryphon is, look at the picture)"; in truth, it does not have an existence *beyond* pictures, beyond representations (81). The Mock Turtle also emerges by inverting the usual linguistic order so that, instead of the representation following the real thing, the real thing follows the representation. But in this case the real thing is derived from multiple levels of representation: the creature is a parody of a soup that is itself an imitation of another soup.⁴⁵ More importantly, like Alice, who is a kind of Mock Serpent, and like the pig-baby, which is a kind of Mock Pig, the Mock Turtle is a parodic version of 'Turtle' as a category that exposes how much the idea of the turtle is based in human cultural practices and networks of association—and how detached it is from the lives of turtles themselves.

Just as the pig-baby conundrum follows the Pigeon's classificatory certitudes, moreover, the appearance of these embodied notional creatures—words made flesh; names made real—

⁴⁵ Mock turtle soup was a cheap imitation of real turtle soup, or soup using actual turtle, that typically included unsavory parts of land animals (e.g. a calf's foot).

directly follows a long conversation between Alice and the Duchess in which the latter speaks of animals (or thinks *with* animals) exclusively through tired allegorical tropes. She is platitudinous in general, always searching for a “moral” or a meaning in her immediate environment: “‘How fond she is of finding morals in things!’ Alice thought to herself” (79). It is no surprise, then, that her explanatory method—which resembles a hyperactive natural theologian⁴⁶ as much as it resembles the didacticisms of previous children’s literature—cannot process animals except as the vehicles of clichés. Alice is carrying a flamingo, and the Duchess almost goes out of her way to organize its meaning:

“I dare say you’re wondering why I don’t put my arm round your waist,” the Duchess said, after a pause: “the reason is, that I’m doubtful about the temper of your flamingo. Shall I try the experiment?”

“He might bite,” Alice cautiously replied, not feeling at all anxious to have the experiment tried.

“Very true,” said the Duchess: “flamingos and mustard both bite. And the moral of that is—‘Birds of a feather flock together.’”

“Only mustard isn’t a bird,” Alice remarked.

“Right, as usual,” said the Duchess: “what a clear way you have of putting things!”

“It’s a mineral, I *think*,” said Alice. (79-80)

The exchange creates a contrast between two ways of reading the object of the classificatory gaze. Alice regards the flamingo inductively and doubtfully: she makes inferences about its behavior (“‘He might bite,’ Alice cautiously replied”) and only tentatively organizes what she sees—the flamingo and the mustard—into the three broader Aristotelian categories of pre-eighteenth-century taxonomy: animal, vegetable, and “mineral.”⁴⁷ The Duchess, by contrast, stands apart from the flamingo and immediately, definitively abstracts it into the exemplar of a

⁴⁶ P.H. Gosse, for instance, finds lessons of the Gospels in even the feeding habits of aquatic microorganisms: “This arrangement—which is very common in the lowest forms of animal life, where food is brought by constant ciliary currents,—reminds me of the Gospel net, mentioned by our Lord, which is ‘cast into the sea, and gathers of every kind; which, when it is full, they draw to shore, and sit down, and gather the good into vessels, but cast the bad away’ [Matt. Xiii 47, 48]” (*The Aquarium* 43).

⁴⁷ For a detailed discussion of how these categories were destabilized by natural scientists in the eighteenth century, see Susannah Gibson, *Animal, Vegetable, Mineral?* (Oxford University Press, 2015).

pre-existing moral idea, one that ends up flattening its specificity and categorizing it simply as a “bird.” She performs a similar rhetorical move with pigs a few lines later, not only reducing them to type but robbing them of subjectivity: “I’ve a right to think,” says Alice (80). “Just about as much right,” replies the Duchess, “as pigs have to fly” (80).

In the scene that follows, the Gryphon and the Mock Turtle, by contrast, display more subjectivity than almost any other nonhuman creatures in the book. Indeed, they display it by revealing that they possess precisely what Alice lacks when she finds herself unable to remember who she is: identities based “on a recallable human selfhood or body of knowledge” (Parrish-Lee 500). They tell their “histories,”⁴⁸ and the Mock Turtle describes their education in a “school in the sea”—an education that resembles, and of course parodies, Alice’s own (83). It quickly becomes apparent, however, that the source of these animals’ appearance of subjectivity—what makes them seem alive, present, and free-thinking—is not their educational background but their agency with and over language. Both creatures create numerous puns (“‘That’s the reason they’re called lessons,’ the Gryphon remarked: ‘because they lessen from day to day’ [85]); both frequently interrupt Alice and assert linguistic authority (“‘Hold your tongue!’ added the Gryphon, before Alice could speak again” [83]). The Turtle even admits that they named—or classified—their master in an explicitly relational way: “We called him Tortoise because he taught us” (83).

Above all, they seem to subvert a familiar power differential between animals and humans that Ritvo articulates succinctly: “If the power of discourse lies in its inevitable restructuring and re-creation of reality, the ability of human beings to offer counterinterpretations

⁴⁸ The histories they tell resonate, moreover, with the mouse’s “tale” earlier in *Wonderland*—an autobiography that is zoopoetic not only because it is spoken by the animal, but also because it conforms to creaturely morphology, following the form of the mouse’s tail (28).

places inevitable limits on the exercise of that power. Animals, however, never talk back” (*The Animal Estate* 5). These animals *do* talk back—most of all, by engaging in ‘back talk.’ Like many other creatures throughout the books—Alice, at one point, muses to herself, “I wish the creatures wouldn’t be so easily offended!” (46)—the Gryphon and the Mock Turtle have a bad affect; they are indignant, angry, mean-spirited. But bad affect is an important component to the books’ subversive, persistent project of creating new arrangements between animals and language and entertaining decentered models of species identification. ‘Back talk’ is a way of asserting subjectivity familiar to children—a way of demanding selfhood, demanding equality, demanding exchange.⁴⁹ In the *Alice* books, animals do something very similar, loudly rejecting the strictures of an arrangement in which they do not talk at all, and have no part in the process by which they are named—the process by which they are given signifiers, and the process by which they become signifiers. In *Through the Looking-Glass*, before she enters the wood where things have no names, a gnat asks Alice, “What’s the use of their having names . . . if they won’t answer to them?” (149). The Gryphon and the Mock Turtle sequence entertains a model of naming that might solve that conundrum: one in which animals can talk back against the names they bear, offering “counterinterpretations” of the reality those names produce.⁵⁰

It is, of course, difficult to imagine this process occurring in the real world. But nonsense enables it, and enables it, in this scene, against a seaside backdrop that evokes exactly the kind of real-world environment that necessitated better, post-Darwinian ways of translating the complex

⁴⁹ In a sense, ‘back talk’ also allows them to assert political stakeholderhood. As Shannon notes, “Normal definitions of politics reject the (fabulous, chimerical) *non*-sense of animal membership and make animals their first, often implicit, exclusion”—and do so via the boundary between language-having humans and language-lacking animals (*The Accommodated Animal* 53-54). Wonderland is a realm where the “non-sense of animal membership” is not so nonsensical.

⁵⁰ In his essay “On Language as Such and On the Language of Man,” Walter Benjamin imagines the original scene of Adamic naming as reciprocal, mutually consensual: “God gives each beast in turn a sign, whereupon they step before man to be named. In an almost sublime way, the linguistic community of mute creation with God is thus conveyed in the image of the sign” (70).

web of life into language. The seaside setting of Alice's exchange with the Gryphon and the Mock Turtle unmistakably evokes "the scene of much Victorian natural history investigation and collecting," as Lovell-Smith observes, where beings appear so "layered one above the other, so intricately confused together *as creations of the other*, that the effect is one of mutual ambiguity" (43). It also evokes the representational challenges such a setting—teeming with barnacles, invertebrates, microorganisms, and other life forms teetering on the edge between animal, mineral, and plant—created for natural historical writers in the 1850s and 60s. In *Sea-side Studies*, G.H. Lewes tries to describe the infinite multiplicity of seaside life but ultimately acknowledges that his powers of description can only go so far; only with a microscope can one "[reveal] something of the great drama which is incessantly enacted in every drop of water, on every inch of earth" (58).⁵¹ In *The Water-Babies*, Kingsley discards even that ability to pierce through the water's surface, preferring to keep the water a space of unseen and unknowable disorder, irreconcilable with sense.⁵² Carroll presents images that capture the chaos of ocean life—images that also resonate with Darwin's "tangled bank"⁵³—throughout the *Alice* books. And yet, the Gryphon and the Mock Turtle embody something different: a linguistic system better suited, perhaps, to the ambiguities of the oceanic world they inhabit. In and through their exchange, the discourse of nonsense displays its own capacity to be a kind of *rhetorical* seaside,

⁵¹ Shannon provides a resonant quote from the early modern scientist Robert Hooke: "Mechanical helps for the Senses [enable] us, *with the great Conqueror*, to be affected that we have not yet overcome one World when there are so many others to be discovered" (qtd. in *Accommodated Animal* 27).

⁵² Like *The Water-Babies*, *Through the Looking-Glass* contains a scene in which Alice ascends a hill and experiences a false sense of perspicacity that the novel quickly undermines: 'I should see the garden far better,' said Alice to herself, 'if I could get to the top of that hill: and here's a path that leads straight to it—at least, no, it doesn't do *that* ... but I suppose it will at last. But how curiously it twists! It's more like a corkscrew than a path!'" (135).

⁵³ Darwin's "tangled bank" occurs on the last page of the *Origin*, encapsulating a complex, interconnected, constantly gestating natural ecology: "It is interesting to contemplate a tangled bank, clothed with many plants of many kinds, with birds singing on the bushes, with various insects flitting about, and with worms crawling through the damp earth, and to reflect that these elaborately constructed forms, so different from each other, and dependent upon each other in so complex a manner, have all been produced by laws acting around us" (427).

in which creatures and names—creatures and meanings—continually create each other, and the power *to* name is displaced from the human spectator.

The penultimate chapter of *Through the Looking-Glass* returns Alice to the real world by establishing an animal's identity. She shakes and shakes the Red Queen, who dwindles down in size until, finally, she realizes: “—and it really *was* a kitten, after all” (235). Animal categories structure the world of sense. So, too, does the hierarchical arrangement between animals and language that places them below linguistic production of any kind, which we see at the end of *Wonderland*:

...and all would change to dull reality ... and the sneeze of the baby, the shriek of the Gryphon, and all the other queer noises, would change (she knew) to the confused clamour of the busy farm-yard—while the lowing of the cattle in the distance would take the place of the Mock Turtle's heavy sobs. (110)

Faced with “dull reality,” a world in which animals simply make their characteristic noises, Alice finds herself dreaming of the less ordinary soundscape she has left behind, with the “queer noises” of the pig-baby, the Gryphon, the Mock Turtle, and others. What these creatures have in common, however, are not “noises” but something more akin to voices⁵⁴—indignant voices that insist on a different linguistic system better suited to post-Darwinian ambiguities of being, knowing, and naming. Through these voices, the *Alice* books present reconfiguring the relationship between animals and language as a moral imperative—perhaps the only clear ‘moral’ they offer. “Dull reality” is the world where animals speak only the “morals” that

⁵⁴ In that regard, the books' representational project bears some similarity to the project of eighteenth-century sensibility that Menely describes in *The Animal Claim*, arguing that the poets of sensibility attempted not only to respond to “the creaturely voice” but also to amplify it in the literal sense of “advocacy” (“speaking-for”). “What distinguishes the poets of sensibility,” Menely writes, “is the manner in which they also took on the vocation of representing animal voice in an emerging public sphere and of thereby speaking for animals in a specifically political sense” (16). The animals in *Alice* might not have a voice beyond Wonderland. Within Wonderland, however, they are political actors—due in no small part to the reconfigurations of language that enable them to speak.

culture—like the Duchess—attaches to them; the world in which their meanings come from above and cannot change. Wonderland is the place where they can speak before being spoken for.

Chapter 4:

The Beast with the Broken Lance: Humanism and Posthumanism in Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*

In *The Earth After Us*, a work of speculative geology that attempts to imagine what the posthuman world will look like, Jan Zalasiewicz admits that “it is hard, as humans, to get a proper perspective on the human race” (1). In the wake of *Descent of Man*, late-Victorian intellectuals found themselves confronting a version of this problem: the difficulty of getting a perspective on the human species. On the one hand, Darwin’s work required recognizing the human as a species in the first place: as an accretion of biological development with an origin and an endpoint not coextensive with the origin and endpoint of the universe; as a type of being tending toward its own eventual extinction; as a sub-type of primate. On the other hand, Darwin’s work required recognizing the human *not even* as a species: as a “variety” among others, constantly (if slowly) changing, never fully delimited, and different from other animals in virtually all respects as a matter of degree rather than kind. Perhaps the most fundamental conceptual challenge imposed by the nineteenth century’s broader destabilization of species categories was that it thrust the category of the “human” into an ontological and semantic crisis. Late-Victorian intellectuals were left with a hugely vexed relationship not just to what Thomas Huxley, in his 1863 essay *Man’s Place in Nature*, called “the question of questions for mankind”—“the ascertainment of the place which Man occupies in nature and of his relations to the universe of things”—but also to the very term “mankind” itself (77).

How did late-Victorian literary authors register the destabilization—and potential dissolution—of the “human” as a privileged, ontologically distinct category of being? In one scholarly narrative, they approached this problem by leveraging the imaginative affordances of

fiction and poetry to achieve a non- or anti-anthropocentric perspective: a scale beyond the human that might reveal the human's insignificance, fragility, and enmeshment with other forms of life. In the essay "Fin du Globe," Benjamin Morgan observes how pervasively decadent writers—writers within an aesthetic movement often "associated," ironically, "with a rejection of nature in favor of artifice"—attempted to adopt a "distant scalar perspective from which the planet or the species" could be "envisioned in their totality" (618). These are the wide vistas of last-man novels such as M.P. Shiel's *The Purple Cloud*; of speculative fiction such as *The Time Machine*; even of William Morris' early science fiction, which John Plotz has recently analyzed as explorations of a "world without us."¹ In decadent fictions, taking on a planetary point of view necessarily entails envisioning the human species in its totality—as a species, with the flexible boundaries of any species; it also entails seeing the species in relation to its eventual, inexorable end.

In another scholarly narrative, other varieties of late-nineteenth century fiction—particularly ape fiction and monster fiction—approached the contingency of the human not by looking outward but by looking inward: by figuring a latent or atavistic animality *within* the human that punctures any self-conceptions based on absolute difference. As Virginia Richter points out in her wide-ranging study *Literature after Darwin*, many late-nineteenth century fictions are stalked by the specter of reversion. In *Descent of Man*, Darwin had merely described it as the irregular, and probably rare, possibility that "certain muscles" or other left-behind features might "suddenly reappear after an interval of many thousand generations" (264). But because even the possibility of reversion offered an unequivocal challenge to progressivist narratives of human evolution and the broader assumption of absolute human distinction, it

¹ John Plotz, "World Without Us: The Problem of the Nonhuman in the Fantasy of William Morris" (Lecture delivered at Columbia University Nineteenth Century Colloquium, 10 Feb 2017).

became a common trope of what Richter calls “anthropological anxiety” (11). In Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*, Jonathan Harker sees the erudite cosmopolitan slithering down the walls of his castle and asks, “What manner of man is this, or what manner of creature is it in the semblance of man?” (39). Objects in mirror are closer than they appear: Dracula’s transformations clearly figure the prospect of a latent, atavistic animality residing inside the human and being able to subsume (or consume) it from within, rendering humanness itself a thin image, a “semblance,” rather than a concrete biological and ontological reality. Such figurations would eventually resonate with the psychoanalytic trope that an animalistic caveman resides within the unconscious.²

Both perspectival shifts are broadly posthumanist in their philosophical orientation: the first attempts to adopt an anti-anthropocentric view of the world itself as a world that does not need us, a world that does not revolve around us; the second figures the human being as always already less-than-human, or more-than-human, dramatizing the brittleness of humanist ontologies going back to Descartes. Yet both techniques of perspective are also plagued by the very problem *of* perspective that Zalasiewicz outlined so epigrammatically: how can one view the human from a human point of view? How would it be possible to decenter the human from a perspective that is inescapably anthropocentric? This is the broader problem of posthumanism in general according to some of its most committed philosophical adherents: the idea that, in Cary Wolfe’s words, “the nature of thought itself must change if it is to be posthumanist” (*What is Posthumanism?* xvi). Indeed, as Christopher Peterson has pointed out in his recent book *Monkey Trouble*, it may be yet another kind of species-narcissism to assume that we have such tremendous faculties of reason, introspection, and imagination that we can perch above ourselves

² See e.g. the psychoanalyst William J. Fielding’s *The Caveman Within Us: His Peculiarities and Powers; How We Can Enlist his Aid for Health and Efficiency* (1922).

and see the fragility of our self-conceptions in utter clarity. “Such a power,” Peterson writes, “risks becoming yet another self-accredited capacity thanks to which the human reaffirms its sovereignty through its supposed erasure” (12).

This chapter and the next one both center on late-Victorian texts that take a third approach to the destabilization of man, attempting to get around the problem of posthumanism precisely by depicting it. Alfred Tennyson’s *Idylls of the King* (1885) and H.G. Wells’ *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (1896) both meditate on the post-Darwinian decentering of the human, and on the inability of humans to face that decentering in a sustained or complete way. Both texts embrace posthumanist ideas inconsistently, vacillating erratically between the absence and presence—the existence and nonexistence—of ‘man’ as an ontological category. They open out onto new vistas that show the human in brutal clarity: as a species among others; a variety among others; a thing “made exclusively of inhumanities” (in the words of Deleuze and Guattari) with bestial origins and bestial ends (*A Thousand Plateaus* 190). Yet they also retreat inexorably into humanist certainties; at a diegetic level, moreover, they depict these certainties exerting a pull on their protagonists.

This ambivalent approach to posthumanism is culturally and philosophically resonant in several ways. In the context of more contemporary posthumanist philosophy, it captures something like the idea that the human itself is a dialectical construct, assembled through constant attempts to abject various forms of inhumanity (including, of course, the animal) that simultaneously overwhelm and interpenetrate it. In different ways, both *Idylls* and *Moreau* display the animal as “that from which the human tentatively and precariously emerges; ... that inhuman destination to which the human always tends,” in the words of Elizabeth Grosz (2). In both texts, the animal “surrounds the human at both ends: it is the origin and the end of

humanity” (12). But the ambivalence of these texts also captures the ambivalence of the late-Victorian intellectual climate that Tennyson and Wells were both responding to, in which attempts to acknowledge the precarity of man had a tendency to be chased and diluted by interpretations of evolutionary theory that reified human supremacy in one form or another. One such interpretation was the progressivism exemplified by Herbert Spencer, who held that all things—especially the human—were tending toward conditions of ever greater complexity. Wells dismissed this view as “excelsior biology,” calling it a “popular and poetic creation” (“Zoological Retrogression” 247); he was much more interested in stories about the evolution of the human that traced a more zigzag (rather than upward) trajectory. But he had a lot more trouble dismissing another progressivist view that emerged after *On the Origin of Species* and *Descent of Man*: a neo-Lamarckian school of thought that attempted to define humans once again as the willful agents of our own teleological advancement.³ In some ways, Tennyson had already crystallized this idea in *In Memoriam*, where he imagined man’s potential evolution toward the ideal figure of Arthur Hallam; he remained attracted to it throughout the rest of his career. Willful progressivism is a crucial and never-quite-abandoned component to the definition of the human that *Idylls* places under siege.

And yet, *Idylls* and *Moreau* are also very different texts with very different projects, rooted not only in the circumstances surrounding their respective publications, but also in the affordances and expectations of their respective genres. *Idylls* is a twelve-book Arthurian epic, written by the Poet Laureate over five decades and published in its final form in 1886, at the end of his career; *Moreau* is the second and most controversial of Wells’ “scientific romances,” published when he was 30. The former is retrospective and anachronistic, written in a genre

³ Peter J. Bowler analyzes what he calls “the eclipse of Darwinism”—the widespread wave of neo-Lamarckian thinking that emerged after the *Origin* and *Descent*—in *Evolution: The History of an Idea* (258-265).

steeped in poetic tradition; the latter is prospective and futuristic, written in a genre whose conventions were only just taking shape. And yet, the retrospection of *Idylls* might be its most powerfully subversive quality, since it enables Tennyson to destabilize not just the human but the *humanities*—the genres of human exceptionalism and human self-construction into which he self-consciously inserts his own poem of human dissolution (and dissoluteness). Grosz asks: “What would a humanities, a knowledge of and for the human, look like if it placed the animal in its rightful place, not only before the human but also within and after the human?” (13). Tennyson answers this question by destabilizing the human in and through the form of a humanist genre *par excellence*.

“Man” is a central term in *Idylls of the King*, as it is in other epic narratives: in Homer (see the opening injunction of *The Odyssey*: “Tell me, muse, of the *man* of many ways”); in Arthurian legend, where Arthur himself is always the human prototype; in nineteenth century reappropriations of epic form, which tried in their own ways to depict idealized human heroes in an era when, as Herbert F. Tucker points out, “the definition of the human” was increasingly an open question (*Epic* 26).⁴ But the poem’s project is not to construct the human; its project is to *deconstruct* the human, questioning humanness itself as a condition of ontological exception. Throughout the poem, Arthur is forced to confront the society around him both “reel[ing] back

⁴ In *Epic: Britain’s Heroic Muse, 1790-1910*, Tucker’s expansive survey of nineteenth century appropriations of epic form, Tucker’s working definition of epic mostly treats it as a technology of articulating social or political identity. He describes two functions, however, that allow epic to construct an idea of the human more generally. First there is its “affiliative” function, i.e. its ability to construct a sense of unanimity, which can sometimes “intend an auditory that is at least a congregation wide, and that sometimes, like Milton’s extends to all humankind” (26). In another way, epics construct the human by presenting “superhuman” figures, which became a vexed aspect of their representational apparatus in the age of Darwin: “The superhuman agents that strafe and stalk major verse narrative during the nineteenth century represent one of epic’s great open questions: the definition of the human when, grown heroic, humanity learns the hard way where its limits are and how far it may prove possible to budge them. Especially during Victorian years the commanding interest taken by science in this question of human definition, and the permeation of ordinary life by an industrial machinery, production, and regimen, laid a premium on epic’s longstanding imaginative acquaintance with occult, purposeful force” (26-27).

into the beast” and also revealing that it was always already bestial to begin with (“The Passing of Arthur” 25-26). He maintains a belief in man’s ascendancy and centrality to which the poem itself, in some ways, clings. But the poem also devotes its epic form to challenging this belief in several interconnected ways; every feature that makes it epic in scope—its mythic sweep; its massive allegories; its timescale that extends from primeval beginnings to posthuman ends—decenters the figure of man rather than rendering him larger-than-life. If epic is anthropocentric, Tennyson’s version is anthropo-centrifugal. The poem asks a series of questions that reveal the problem of species to be just as much a problem of genre: Can the humanities represent a posthumanist world? What genres are even available to construct that world—to construct a vision of the human that is less-than-human after all? As I will argue in the next section, these questions were at the core of Tennyson’s self-consciously anachronistic project from the very beginning.

Epic in the Age of the Mastodon

In “The Epic,” the poem that frames Tennyson’s 1842 “Morte d’Arthur,” the fictional poet Everard Hall justifies burning his twelve-book Arthurian epic by invoking another extinct, prehistoric creature:

Why take the style of those heroic times?
For nature brings not back the Mastodon,
Nor we those times; and why should any man
Remodel models? (35–38).⁵

⁵ All Tennyson poems quoted from *The Poems of Tennyson: In Three Volumes*, ed. Christopher Ricks (New York: Longman, 1987).

The poet is, of course, an avatar for Tennyson himself, and the analogy he makes between “those heroic times” and “the Mastodon” tells us a few important things about *Idylls of the King*, the twelve-book opus that would evolve out of “Morte d’Arthur” over the course of several decades. It tells us first that Tennyson was worried about genre, about the anachronism of writing an Arthurian epic for a Victorian public—an anxiety that still plagued him in 1858, when he wrote a letter urging his publishers to “disabuse your own minds and those of others, as far as you can, of the fancy that I am about an Epic of King Arthur. I should be crazed to attempt such a thing in the heart of the 19th century.” But it also tells us, more compellingly, that he was worried about the Mastodon, and what it represents metonymically—about the potential futility of writing in a genre that asserts an anthropocentric cosmology when paleontology, evolutionary theory, and other scientific discourses were busy revealing just how far the universe extended beyond the scope of the human. Arthurian legend assumes a Christian time-scale, beginning with Creation and ending with the Last Judgment; man is always present, and prehistory—with which *Idylls* begins—is simply the chaotic time before Arthur’s reign. As John D. Rosenberg points out, however, *Idylls* “was written during a period when . . . geology and then evolution pushed back the origins of things from the imagined instant of Creation to unimaginably remote beginnings; and the imminent Last Day opened out upon eonian cycles of days without end” (*The Fall of Camelot* 35). The Mastodon reference suggests that Tennyson was less anxious about the anachronism of the poem’s style than about the obsolescence of its worldview. Why should he “remodel” an “old model” of the universe when a new model looms so monstrously large? The interlineal juxtaposition between capital-M “Mastodon” and lower-case “man” implies an even more pointed and destabilizing question: Why write in a form that celebrates human achievement when discoveries like the Mastodon have rendered the human so seemingly insignificant?

And yet, Tennyson did not end up burning his twelve-book epic; he completed it, and completed it with a capstone, moreover, that suggests that this tension between cosmological “models”—and by extension, models of Man—was something that dynamized his poetic project rather than endangering it. In 1891, half a dozen years after *Idylls* was published in its final, twelve-book form, the poet added one last line to the epilogue that recalls—without quite resolving—the “man” vs. “Mastodon” conflict he expressed in 1842. Feeling, as his son reports, “that perhaps he had not made the real humanity of the King sufficiently clear,” Tennyson inserted a new formulation to describe Arthur once and for all: “Ideal manhood closed in real man” (“To the Queen” 38). What is “ideal manhood,” what is “real man,” and how might the relationship between the two of them constitute a “clear” picture of the King’s humanity—or humanity in general? The rest of the poem furnishes several possible answers: in a moral sense, Arthur is the figure of “ideal manhood” because he is the one man of unyielding principle surrounded by so many figures—both within and outside the Round Table—of criminality and corruption; in a more dualistic sense, the poem suggests that the “enclosure” is happening within Arthur, with the “ideal manhood” of his immortal soul trapped within the “real man” of his body. And yet, the appeal that occurs right before Tennyson’s final addition juxtaposes “Soul” not with body, but with “Sense”: “Accept this old imperfect tale,” the poet enjoins the queen, “New-old, and shadowing Sense at war with Soul” (36–37). “Ideal manhood closed in real man” is the formulation that follows from an uneven war between “Sense” and “Soul”: from an uneven war between the realism of reason and the idealism of faith. I want to suggest that the meaning of the phrase “Ideal manhood closed in real man,” a phrase that speaks to the philosophical inquiry of *Idylls* as a whole, is both moral and ontological: what the poem figures above all is one “model”

of the human, one idea of the nature and place of man, being enclosed—overtaken, overshadowed—by another.

Tennyson's cosmological ambivalence—what critics, adopting his own terminology, have called his 'two voices,' describing his struggles to reconcile Christian theology and the disquieting implications of contemporary science—runs through several of his poems, especially those written during and after the period in which he was composing the *Idylls. In Memoriam* is arguably the most famous example of this divided sensibility. Throughout the poem, Tennyson recognizes that humanity is overshadowed by the sheer scope of deep time; he accepts the word of scientists who “say, / The solid earth whereon we tread / In tracts of fluent heat began, / And grew to seeming-random forms,” presenting a model that literally destabilizes the ground beneath his feet (CXVIII:7–10). In light of the singularity of Arthur Hallam, however, he refuses to accept the idea that man himself might also be a “random form”; as in “The Making of Man,” he proposes a model of human spiritual growth that borrows from evolutionary theory while refusing to embrace the full measure of its debasing implications. Each new human, he asserts, speaking specifically of his sister's coming child but also generally of the species, will be “a closer link / Betwixt us and the crowning race,” a race “under whose command / Is Earth and Earth's, and in their hand / Is Nature like an open book” (Epilogue 127–132). Unlike “The Making of Man,” this is not a searching, isolated set of questions (“Where is one that, born of woman, altogether can escape / From the lower world within him, moods of tiger, or of ape?” [1-2]), but a proposition arrived at after many stanzas of rumination; the statement rings with greater certainty. At the same time, however, it is dependent on an image of coronation, of man eventually becoming the “crowning race,” that contains a seed of doubt. A crown is never intrinsically invested with supremacy; it is only a symbol of supremacy whose meaning is

determined by the wearer. Man's ascendancy seems undeniable at the end of *In Memoriam*, yet the concluding image seems to imply that that supremacy is at least partly a man-made artifice.

In *Idylls*, Tennyson reintroduces this teleological model of human development—this idea that man is always progressing toward “ideal manhood”—with an important twist: the poet does not assert it himself but places it within the diegesis, as the theory of evolution propounded and represented by Arthur. The “four great zones of sculpture” in his hall express it visually:

And in the lowest beasts are slaying men,
And in the second men are slaying beasts,
And on the third are warriors, perfect men,
And on the fourth are men with growing wings,
And over all one statue in the mould
Of Arthur, made by Merlin, with a crown,
And peak'd wings pointed to the Northern Star. (HG.234–240)

Arthur's teleological model resembles the model at the end of *In Memoriam* in more than one respect. Man's development is linear and self-willed, with each new iteration bringing him closer to perfection and further from the beasts; the “mould” of Arthur himself does triple duty as an image of man's position over Nature, his harmonious relationship with the cosmos, and his ultimate likeness to God. As J. Douglas Sparer points out, the statues suggest that Arthur has cast himself in the not-so-humble role of an intelligent designer, a macroscopic caretaker responsible for the “spiritual evolution” of his knights (“Arthur's Vast Design” 120)

Because *Idylls* attaches this cosmology to Arthur, however, thus “enclosing” it, the poem can do much more than *In Memoriam* to challenge, complicate, and destabilize the humanist position with a disquieting alternative.⁶ In Arthur's worldview, man is ontologically distinct from

⁶ That it is both a Christian cosmology and a humanistic cosmology might seem like a contradiction in terms. In his study of “religious humanism” in Victorian novels and cultural criticism, U.C. Knoepfelmacher insists, however, that by the time *Idylls* was published in full, the two philosophical positions had come to overlap. Far from being antithetical to Christian theology, humanist discourse increasingly became a vessel—in some ways, a last hope—for the preservation of Christian ideas: “What had begun as a disparagement of the old religion two decades before, ended in the 1870's and 1880's as a conservative clinging to its remains” (U.C. Knoepfelmacher, *Religious Humanism and the Victorian Novel* [Princeton: Princeton UP, 1970]: 7).

the beasts; as is clear in the frieze, the two categories are both separate and pitted against each other. This idea is persistently destabilized, however, by images of ‘reversion’ that imply that man and beast are actually indistinguishable. Camelot begins as a bastion of humanity clearly defined against the bestiality of the aboriginal wastes. By the time Arthur passes, that line has blurred: he can only lament that “all my realm / Reels back into the beast, and is no more” (PA.25–26). Arthur’s sculptures also attest to the idea that tool use is a large part of what makes the human distinct from the lower animals—the notion, in other words, that Arthur would not be King Arthur without his “crown.” Yet on this point too, the poem marshals images that seem to offer up a contradictory view: images of broken tools, malfunctioning prostheses, and artifacts that are not there for the sake of man but perpetually beyond his reach (extending and complicating the crown motif). Most crucially, the sculptures suggest that the order of creation is arrayed around man and that time is directed toward him. Yet the very form of the poem seems to deny this view; it is composed of circles and cycles that constantly push Arthur and everything he represents to the margin.

In *In Memoriam*, the unstable trappings of kingship haunt the ontology of man; man is “crowned” over the rest of creation, yet coronation itself is an unstable index of power. In *Idylls of the King*, the opposite is true: Arthur is definitely king, but it is the unstable ontology of man—the ability of the human to be less-than-human; the ability of ‘man’ itself to be a meaningless term—that haunts and threatens the legitimacy of his kingship. Rosenberg notes that Tennyson always intended *Idylls* to be a “gloomy sequel to its too sanguine predecessor” (Rosenberg 9). If the earlier work is essentially optimistic in its approach to the cosmological conundrum, the later work counters by being mercilessly dialectical—“showing,” in the poet’s own words, “that all the arguments are about as good on one side as the other” (Qtd. by Ricks in

Poems II, 312). As critics have pointed out, the poem is littered with binaries: Rosenberg observes “Manichean struggle[s] between powers of light and darkness, order and disorder, humanity and bestiality” (*The Fall of Camelot* 66); W. David Shaw, in an explicitly “dialectical reading,” finds philosophical struggles between “empiricism and idealism,” “skepticism and credulity,” “sensuality and stoical repression,” and “atheism and mysticism” across different pairs of idylls, proposing that the poem’s unity derives from its persistent duality (“*Idylls of the King: A Dialectical Reading*” 175). Yet all of these agonisms are undergirded by an even more fundamental conflict at the heart of the poem: a war between the idea of ‘man’ and the prospect of the dissolution of ‘man,’ the human, as a category. “New-old” in more than just style, the poem expresses both a conflict between cosmologies and a conflict between ontologies.

In a sense, the dialectic of ‘Man’ that plays out beneath the surface of *Idylls* makes the surface itself into a site of ambiguity and oscillation. Akin to what Isobel Armstrong calls a Victorian ‘double poem,’ the text can be read “quite literally” as “two concurrent poems in the same words,” simultaneously supporting a humanist cosmology in which man is supreme and a posthumanist cosmology in which ‘Man’ is meaningless (*Victorian Poetry* 11). The poem describes Camelot’s keystone as “lined / And rippled like an ever-fleeting wave” (GL.210–211). The image evokes the double-consciousness of another epic hero: Aeneas in Book VIII of the *Aeneid*, who “wavers on a giant tide of troubles,” his “racing mind” like “the quivering light of water in bronze basins” (*Aeneid* VIII.24–29). This time, however, the wavering is extrapolated to the architecture of the world, such that the poem itself seems to flicker mirage-like between two different conceptions of the order of things. And yet, perhaps the most challenging feature of this dialectic as it plays out—the feature that makes *Idylls* stand above all of Tennyson’s other attempts to address the conflict between Christian humanism and Darwinism—is that it is not

perfectly balanced. The ‘model’ of this war between worldviews is not a two-way battle, but a siege: “ideal manhood” is “closed in real man”; one position, the humanist position, is surrounded on all sides. Just as posthumanism is itself, as Cary Wolfe observes, a discourse that “comes both before and after humanism”—a discourse that surrounds humanism, circumscribes it, by destabilizing its basic premises philosophically and “naming” its approaching obsolescence historically, the posthumanist cosmology suggested by *Idylls* is one that threatens to enclose and indeed foreclose its antithesis (*What is Posthumanism?* xxv). On the level of plot, *Idylls* depicts Arthur’s lonely struggle to retain his kingdom in the face of innumerable corruptions. On a more philosophical level, it depicts a similarly overwhelming siege: the “ideal” of man’s ontological and cosmological kingship eroded almost completely by a wave of “reality” impossible to ignore. Straddling the line between old and new, humanism and posthumanism, the poem embodies not only the antagonism of a hermeneutic shift, but the doomed complacency with which one side—Arthur’s side, and perhaps Tennyson’s side—faces down its own passing into irrelevance.

Rising and Reversion

Idylls of the King was published between 1859 and 1885; *On the Origin of Species* was published in 1859 and *Descent of Man* was published in 1871. Tennyson thus worked on the poem through the height of Darwin’s career and cultural influence, both of which he followed with a troubled intensity.⁷ True to the preoccupations of its author, *Idylls* is suffused to the core

⁷ Hallam Tennyson reports that his father received an early copy of *Origin* in November 1859, which he read with “intense interest” (*Memoir* I.443). Later on, as he was writing “The Holy Grail,” he would ask Darwin explicitly if “your theory of Evolution does not make against Christianity”—to which Darwin gave the (probably unsatisfactory) reply, “No, certainly not” (II.57).

with evolutionary theory and some of its more disturbing implications. The poem begins with evolution and ends with devolution, tracing what Edward Engelberg calls a “beast-man-beast cycle” (“The Beast Image in Tennyson’s *Idylls of the King*” 292). On the one hand, it would seem to concur with Darwin when it suggests that “man,” the middle figure, is a biological derivation and an ontological fiction—that man is both descended from the beast and only ever a beast; that for these reasons he may (and probably will) become a beast again when “aeon after aeon” has passed. On the other hand, the poem seems much less interested in recapitulating Darwinism itself than in exploring what Richter calls “anthropological anxiety”—the way it works as an existential threat (*Literature After Darwin* 7). Man-beasts abound in the world of Tennyson’s Camelot, but they are not quite—or at least not only—proof of the beast in man. Rather, they are sites of an “active struggle” between man and his own beasthood—a struggle in which, paradoxically, reversion tends to occur through the very mechanisms of self-definition that humans use to separate themselves from animal life.

In “Locksley Hall Sixty Years After,” the gloomy 1886 sequel to “Locksley Hall,” Tennyson puts the question of reversion into specific language: “Have we risen from out the beast, then back into the beast again?” (148). Strangely and tellingly, however, he does not use the word ‘fall’ to characterize the second half of the cycle. He implies that if humanity has reverted to bestiality, we have done so through precisely the same ‘rise’—the same will to progress—that we used to delimit ourselves initially. The same idea appears in the beginning of “The Coming of Arthur,” when the narrator explains the provenance of the grotesque beastmen who roam the pre-Arthurian wilds:

And thus the land of Cameliard was waste,
Thick with wet woods, and many a beast therein,
And none or few to scare or chase the beast;
So that wild dog, and wolf and boar and bear

Came night and day, and rooted in the fields,
And wallow'd in the gardens of the King.
And ever and anon the wolf would steal
The children and devour, but now and then,
Her own brood lost or dead, lent her fierce teat
To human sucklings; and the children, housed
In her foul den, there at their meat would growl,
And mock their foster-mother on four feet,
Till, straighten'd, they grew up to wolf-like men,
Worse than the wolves. (CA.20–33)

It is tempting to say that the she-wolf is responsible for the beastliness of her human brood, but the passage does not describe their reversion as an involuntary or passive “fall.” Rather, the narrator casts the reversion as a ‘rise’—and a “reel back into the beast,” moreover, in which man is himself responsible. The ease with which the she-wolf replaces her children with humans suggests that from her perspective, all creatures are of the same order—all creatures are among the rank-less plurality of “wild dog, and wolf and boar and bear” (CA.23). To the beast-*man*, however, such a state of affairs is inherently unsatisfactory; his fall into a condition even “worse than the wolves” involves “mocking” the she-wolf for her “four feet” and “straightening” himself into bipedal erectness. He abjects the bestiality from which he has emerged with a false gesture of self-differentiation—a gesture that, perversely, allows bestiality to claim him all the more.

It is important that the myth of the “wolf-like men” darkly mirrors the myth of the founding of Rome. If on one level the story implies that the beastmen’s devolution is accomplished through a process of *evolution* or self-distinction, its intertextual resonances suggest further that the rise of Western civilization—which *Idylls*, as an Arthurian epic, is ostensibly tracing in one form or another—has a bestial underside. The idea recalls Walter Benjamin’s famous dictum that “there is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism” (*Illuminations* 256). If anything, however, Tennyson’s version

would have an even sharper bite: “There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of *bestiality*.” We see this idea play out in the rise of the “wolf-like men” as well as nearly every description of pre-Arthurian ‘civilization,’ where “the lords” continually fight “like wild beasts among themselves” (CA.225). More disturbingly, we see it play out in, after, and through the rise of Arthur himself.

At the outset of the poem King Leodogran, finding himself caught “between the man and beast” both tactically (i.e., between the savage horde and his treacherous brother Uriel) and ontologically, makes two pleas (CA.45). One is rhetorical and retrospective: he “groan[s] for the Roman legions here again, / And Caesar’s eagle,” conjuring an image of Rome as a teeming plurality marching under the banner of an animalized version of its Emperor (CA.33–34). The other is an actual cry for help: he calls for Arthur, the warrior-king who promises to “lift” Guinevere, and indeed human society more generally, “from this land of beasts” once and for all (CA.79). Arthur does so, slaying the beastmen and clearing the forest which had been their spawning ground—an act that also implies clearing an ontological space for man as a distinct, non-forest-dwelling entity. And yet, even this paragon of not-beasthood, this king who succeeds at “mak[ing] the world Other,” is haunted from the very beginning by the specter of an origin in animality (CA.471–472). Speculations that the king is “baseborn” run rampant, and they do not necessarily entail a definition of “baseborn” that is based in class (CA.237). By Bedivere’s account, Arthur was the child of a brutal rape committed by Uther; as a secret heir, he had to be “holden far apart” by Merlin because the kingdom’s lords, all “wild beasts,” “surely would have torn the child / Piecemeal among them” (CA.216–217). Nearly every element of the origin story of the “wolf-like men”—kidnapping; the threat of a violent devouring; an abjection *from* (“far apart” from) the beast-world; a ‘rise’ into humanity through foster-care—is present in this origin

story of Arthur, with two differences: it takes place at the highest levels of civilization, and there are no wolves.

At no particular moment does Arthur ‘turn’ bestial; instead, reversion for him is the ever-present possibility of confirming bestial origin. This is the brutal fact that the collective discourse about him tends to shroud in mist and myth; it is the same truth that the “wolf-like men” seek to abject from themselves. For other characters, however, the beast within comes out in distinct moments of transformation, moments cast as unavoidable revelations of the true self. When Enid is held hostage at the hall of Earl Doorm, for the longest time we perceive her as an Apollonian contrast to the Dionysian revelry. They are a teeming mass of beastmen “growling” like dogs (GE.558) and—in what may be the poem’s most palpably grotesque simile—“feeding like horses when you hear them feed” (GE.605). She, by contrast, is individuated, keeping her calm, refusing the multiple forms of “flesh” that Doorm proffers repeatedly—as the sensory verbs indicate, an observer rather than a participant (GE.602). When Doorm’s threats turn to violence, however, she exposes the animal within:

Then Enid, in her utter helplessness,
And since she thought, “He had not dared to do it,
Except he surely knew my lord was dead,”
Sent forth a sudden sharp and bitter cry,
As of a wild thing taken in the trap,
Which sees the trapper coming thro’ the wood. (GE.718–723)

What is striking about the shriek is the ambiguity of the state from which it erupts. She cries out of “utter helplessness,” out of a material, bodily state that is indeed akin to that of “a wild thing taken in the trap.” But the cry is also the conclusion of a fully-formed “thought”—an act of reason, a logical connection. “In her utter helplessness, / *And* since she thought” (emphasis mine): the revelatory cry erupts from (and therefore reveals) not just bestiality, but a *conjunction* of bestiality and humanity that involves rational consciousness.

This form of reversion—not a reversion of the character into animality, but a revelation of the character as human/animal, a beast *with* language—happens also to Lynette. It is precisely when she becomes most like a “linnet,” when she bursts into birdsong, that she becomes most like a poet—indeed, a pastoral poet who sings *to* birds using apostrophe: “O birds, that warble to the morning sky, / O birds that warble as the day goes by, / Sing sweetly” (GL.1033–1035). She imagines Gareth objecting that her song—her imitation—gives the birds too much credit, because they are not poets but merely future meals, “for the spit, / Larding and basting” (1056–1057). But she is secure in the knowledge that their music is akin to hers, that they sing to the sun just as she does. Against the objector’s assertions of difference and dominance (“these be for the snare”; “these be for the spit”), she professes likeness: the idea that bird and human are ontologically and even cosmologically (i.e., with respect to the sun) aligned. When she “mocks” them, it is not in the spirit of the “wolf-like men,” who use imitation to set the animal apart from themselves. Rather, she does so in a spirit of identification and mutual elevation.

Though the women in the *Idylls* experience several different kinds of reversion, these reversions are never as destructive, never as destabilizing, as the reversions of their male counterparts. This may be because they are never revelations of hypocrisy; it is the men, not the women, who seem to try always and everywhere to deny the beast within themselves, unwittingly proving the link between male insecurity and species insecurity in the conjoined ideology Derrida has called “carnophallogocentrism.”⁸ Consider Geraint, Enid’s (not entirely effective) knight in shining armor. He is similar to Earl Limours, another one of Enid’s suitors, in that he always tries to “keep a touch of sweet civility / Here in the heart of waste and

⁸ Derrida elaborates this concept in the interview “Eating Well,” where he insists that Western metaphysics rests on an idea of the human subject that is not only language-based but defined by “carnivorous virality”—a form of masculinity that depends on the sacrifice (“noncriminal putting to death”) of animals (278, 280).

wilderness” (GE.312–313). Indeed, his main way of asserting ‘civility’ seems to be the orderly method by which he dispatches beastmen:

Then Enid waited pale and sorrowful,
And down upon him bare the bandit three.
And at the midmost charging, Prince Geraint
Drave the long spear a cubit thro’ his breast
And out beyond; and then against his brace
Of comrades, each of whom had broken on him
A lance that splinter’d like an icicle,
Swung from his brand a windy buffet out
Once, twice, to right, to left, and stunn’d the twain
Or slew them, and dismounting like a man
That skins the wild beast after slaying him,
Stript from the three dead wolves of woman born
The three gay suits of armour which they wore,
And let the bodies lie, but bound the suits
Of armour on their horses, each on each,
And tied the bridle-reins of all the three
Together, and said to her, ‘Drive them on
Before you;’ and she drove them thro’ the waste. (GE.83–100)

This is not a battle: Geraint “slays” the bandits as if he were hunting game, and not even particularly dangerous game. He plans the assault, kills them methodically, skins them in a manner commensurate to their bestiality—“three dead wolves of woman born,” none worthy of a name—and does the same thing when he encounters another triplet of bandits around 50 lines later. Tennyson uses the word “cubit” as if to place the scene in ancient and storied company: it recalls *The Iliad*, in which cubits precisely define the lengths of spears; it recalls the story of Noah, in which cubits define the dimensions of the ark that quite literally contains and orders the nonhuman world; it recalls, once again, the specter of Rome, another great civilization that used the cubit itself as a tool of domination. The almost obsessive attention to tools, technicity, and measurements within the hunting scene also resonates with the big game narratives that dominated men’s periodicals during the nineteenth century, which often, as Harriet Ritvo observes in *The Animal Estate*, presented a “precise anatomical and ballistic analysis of how the

kill was accomplished” in order to glorify the hunter and objectify the hunted (265). The scene’s precise detail and documentary detachment compound the sense that it is a testament to Geraint’s ontological displacement from the creatures he slays. We see two kinds of rhetoric working overtime to establish his not-beasthood: the manner in which he performs the kills and the manner in which the narrator recounts them.

But the visibility of this rhetorical work gives rise to a destabilizing corollary: It is *only* through rhetoric that Geraint’s not-beasthood can be established, and rhetoric can backfire. When Geraint fights off the second round of beastmen, the poem’s language is not quite as keen to place him definitively above their ontological station. His lance breaks; “a little in the late encounter strain’d,” it fails to perform the same kind of quick, surgical, “civilized” work (GE.158). We see him let loose a “terrible war-cry” that “confounds” his foes, as if they were recognizing not a silent superior but one of themselves (GE.169–170). In the end, he wins, Enid does the same cleanup routine she did before, and the narrator recounts it in almost identical language. But there is one change: “drove them thro’ the waste” becomes “drove them thro’ the wood” (GE.185). The “waste,” that term used so often to designate the space of the not-man, is no longer part of the rhetoric of their journey, as if at this point they have been—Geraint, more specifically, has been—demoted from ‘outsider’ status to something closer to ‘resident.’ The language of the poem threatens to negate the ontological distinction it once worked to confirm. By even making that threat, by even *implying* that man, like “the waste,” is a category built on language alone, it succeeds in making the negation.

Reversion in *Idylls* is not physical metamorphosis; instead, it is the ontological revelation—sometimes a threat, sometimes not—that man is animal first, animal always, and animal also. It is also, perhaps most troublingly, a force of linguistic deconstruction. In the case

of Geraint, reversion means revision: if the first hunting scene establishes hunting itself as a rhetoric of self-definition, the second corrodes its terms, its rhetorical process, to the point of meaninglessness. Reversion is the revelation that man becomes “man” not through any form of biological evolution but through deeply contingent, concerted, and erasable forms of mythmaking—origin stories; war stories; progressivist narratives of man’s “rise”—that the form of epic (or in this case, anti-epic) is perhaps uniquely suited to displaying and deconstructing. What reversion reveals most of all, to return to the primordial scene of the “wolf-like men,” is that human self-assertion is only ever a kind of self-“mockery”—a twisted, artificial rhetoric of self-alienation.

Language and Other Broken Tools

At one point in “The Holy Grail,” Percivale, the narrator, looks back wistfully on a great tournament: “So many lances broken – never yet / Had Camelot seen the like, since Arthur came” (HG.331–332). On the one hand, we can take him at his word; that tournament probably marked a new peak in the number of broken lances witnessed by the realm. On the other hand, his statement seems ironic given that the poem is littered with broken lances—as well as broken swords, shields, helms, and other malfunctioning tools of war and peace. Geraint’s first clash with the three beastmen results in three lances “splinter’d like icicle[s]”; his second rendezvous results in his own lance “[breaking] short” and rolling with the impaled enemy down a hill (GE.89, 160). In an almost identical vision, Elaine imagines Lancelot nearly killed by an enemy’s thrust, were it not that “God / Broke the strong lance, and roll’d his enemy down” (LE.24–25). Later on, in the actual tournament he fights with her favor, Lancelot is not so lucky: “and the head / Pierced thro’ his side, and there snapt, and remain’d” (LE.487–488). Balin has what may be the most embarrassing lance-breaking moment of them all: in the blind rage of his charge toward the castle of Pellam, he “burst his lance against a forest bough, / Dishorsed himself, and rose again, and fled” (BB.324–325).

Percivale’s phrase, “since Arthur came,” is a direct echo of the line that imputes Arthur as the catalyst of man’s development at the beginning of the poem: “The beast was ever more and more, / But man was less and less, till Arthur came” (CA.11–12). Thus, the motif of the broken lances is bound up with the ever-present question of whether man has risen above the beasts or not; they signify erectile dysfunction in an evolutionary sense. Balin at his most bestial, consumed by a “chain’d rage,” loses both the prosthesis that extends his abilities beyond brute

strength as well as his literal position of elevation—and control—over the animal. In other words, when he is “dishorsed,” he is also “unmanned.” The event would seem to imply, moreover, that the distinction is as fragile as the lance itself. In *What is Posthumanism?*, Cary Wolfe asserts that a posthumanist discourse is one that steps back from “the human” to consider how its definition depends on various inhumanities; it involves acknowledging that the human is “fundamentally a prosthetic creature that has coevolved with various forms of technicity and materiality, forms that are radically ‘not-human’ and yet have nevertheless made the human what it is” (Wolfe, p. xxv). Carlyle’s Professor Teufelsdröckh expresses something like this idea in *Sartor Resartus*: he triumphantly proclaims that “Man is a Tool-using Animal,” capable of taming all the elements—“he kneads glowing iron, as if it were soft paste; seas are his smooth highway”—but also admits quietly, in a quick aside, that “without Tools he is nothing” (33). *Idylls* is even more deeply conscious of this double-edged definitional process, depicting the human as a tool-user whose identity depends precariously on the tools he uses. If the ontological boundary between humans and animals is constantly a site of “active struggle” throughout the poem, the indexical relationship between humans and tools is equally fraught. Even the most sacred aids to human ascendancy, like Excalibur, threaten to deny what they confirm.

In *Descent of Man*, Darwin was intent on destabilizing the idea that humans are the only species capable of using tools with reason:

The promptings of reason, after very short experience, are well shewn by the following actions of American monkeys, which stand low in their order. Rengger, a most careful observer, states that when he first gave eggs to his monkeys in Paraguay, they smashed them, and thus lost much of their contents; afterwards they gently hit one end against some hard body, and picked off the bits of shell with their fingers. After cutting themselves only once with any sharp tool, they would not touch it again, or would handle it with the greatest caution. (74)

Darwin's portrayal of primate tool use, via the Swiss naturalist Johann Rudolph Rengger, emphasizes not just the monkeys' ability to use tools, but also their ability to learn how to use tools more effectively: after cutting themselves "only once with any sharp tool, they would not touch it again, or would handle it with the greatest caution." By contrast, if an ethologist were to note the sheer repetition of instances of botched technicity in the *Idylls*, he would have to assume that *homo sapiens* is a species that cannot learn, or a species of devolutionary self-sabotage. Taken individually, the broken lance is a symbol of individual impotence; taken collectively, in an anthropological manner that Tennyson's wide-angle epic almost seems to invite, it represents nothing less than the continual debasement of the human species in and through one of its ostensibly defining features.

Of course, not every object in the *Idylls* is involved in this collective wreckage. Set against the common flimsiness of standard-issue gear, the poem displays the singular power of relics: Excalibur, the Holy Grail, Arthur's crown, Merlin's book. At first glance, these objects would seem to confirm notions of human ascendancy that their lesser brethren threaten to deny. After Arthur finds the crown on the skeleton of an ancient king, he sets it on his head and a voice speaks to him: "Lo, thou likewise shalt be King" (LE.55). The object seems to confirm his elevation above other men, functioning as a stable index of his supremacy. And yet, the scene also works to challenge that implication. For one thing, Arthur "heard" these "murmurs," but Tennyson gives no indication that they came from the crown itself. The message, moreover, is not at all a confirmation that Arthur (and by extension, man) is unique in the grand scheme of natural history. "Thou *likewise* shalt be King," it says, widening the scope of the proclamation to include other figures from other eons—figures just as prone, as Arthur can see, to fratricide and

self-sabotage.⁹ In the essays “On Extinction” and “The Rate of Change in Species,” both published not long after *Idylls*, Wells argued that “the long roll of paleontology” should be viewed not as a record of the triumph of human evolution—or, for that matter, human knowledge—over the great beasts of the primeval past, but as a graveyard of deposed kings with “index fingers ... pointing into unfathomable darkness, and saying only one thing clearly, the word ‘Extinction’” (170). The bones of great dinosaurs in particular—*Pterodactyl*, *Allosaurus*—should be taken as warnings that dominant, complex animals are eventually overthrown by their own inability to adapt to changing circumstances: “The kingdom of life is the very reverse of hereditary. The dominant animal spends its inheritance in reigning. Its reign may be brief or long, but, brief or long, at the end of it, awaiting it, is the absolute certainty of death” (“The Rate of Change in Species” 130). Arthur is not a paleontologist in this scene; he is, at best, a self-interested archaeologist. But the scene works well as an allegory of a certain kind of historical consciousness embedded in the approach to the fossil record that Wells was arguing against: an anthropocentrism that can only see the human triumphing over, and authorized by, all that has come before. What should be an ill omen becomes an auspicious invitation; what should be a *memento mori* becomes just another technology of human self-regard.

The ancient crown ironizes Arthur in another way, too: through its ancientness. In order to define man’s prostheticity as a key condition that separates him from every other creature, the prostheses themselves would need to be not only cooperative (in the sense that they extend man’s level and range of operation), but also coevolved. Yet the most important objects in Camelot have not coevolved with man at all; they pre-date, post-date, and otherwise transcend the Arthurian age. It is tempting to think of Excalibur as Arthur’s exclusive property, but

⁹ The message bears a resemblance to an equally problematic proclamation spoken by the Third Witch in *Macbeth*: “Thou shalt be king hereafter!” (I.3.50).

Tennyson emphasizes that the sword is not something the king can ever be said to “own”; instead, it is an instrument only borrowed from the indeterminate past. Bellicent tells the story of how the king obtained the sword from “the bosom of the lake,” but quickly found it to be engraved with contradictory messages:

On one side,
Graven in the oldest tongue of all this world,
“Take me,” but turn the blade and ye shall see,
And written in the speech ye speak yourself,
“Cast me away!” (CA.300–304)

What the latter message foretells, of course, is that Arthur will eventually have to cast the sword back into the lake, which he commands Bedivere to do before he dies. But the combination of the two messages, one written for the eyes of Arthur and another written in an ancient tongue, suggests much more about the place of the king in Tennyson’s imagined cosmology. Like the crown, it implies that there were and will be other Arthurs—that Arthur himself is not ontologically unique but, rather, one in a long series of analogous kings throughout history. It also circumscribes Arthur’s reign, predetermining the self-negating cyclicity of Camelot: it foretells that the civilization it will be used to build will eventually be destroyed. “Sad was Arthur’s face” when he took the sword, Bellicent observes, and not necessarily because of the solemnity of the occasion (306). The sword is inscribed with both his significance and his insignificance. In itself, it functions as the site of an antinomy in which he is and is not confirmed to be unique and central to “all this world.”

The text on Excalibur’s hilt points to the most frequently undermined (and self-undermining) human prosthesis in the whole poem: language itself. Early on in “The Coming of Arthur,” the king contends that “Man’s word is God in man,” defining language as an extension of God that resides within the human (CA.132). The world and the poem around him attest to a

disturbing inversion of that claim, defining language as an extension of man that is both imperfect and uncontrollably external—figuring communication itself as a faculty of “estranging prostheticity and exteriority” (Wolfe, *What is Posthumanism?* 118). As James Eli Adams has pointed out, *Idylls* is attuned to Victorian ideas about publicity which saw rumor—especially scandalous or slanderous rumor—as something that could eventually become autonomous and self-perpetuating (“Harlots and Base Interpreters” 421). By this model, language is not merely a means by which a human agent can extend his or her communicative capabilities; it can also divorce itself from the human altogether, becoming a cloud of discourse without clear origin. It can become, in other words, a kind of prosthesis gone rogue, a means of amplification that makes clear that it is not entirely, never just, a tool that can be possessed and controlled. One example of this form of language is yet another object that does not originate with man: Merlin’s spellbook. Paying ample attention to its materiality, he describes it to Vivien:

O ay, it is but twenty pages long,
But every page having an ample marge,
And every marge enclosing in the midst
A square of text that looks a little blot,
The text no larger than the limbs of fleas;
And every square of text an awful charm,
Writ in a language that has long gone by.
So long, that mountains have arisen since
With cities on their flanks – thou read the book!
And every margin scribbled, crost, and cramm’d
With comment, densest condensation, hard
To mind and eye; but the long sleepless nights
Of my long life have made it easy to me.
And none can read the text, not even I;
And none can read the comment but myself;
And in the comment did I find the charm. (MV.664–681)

Merlin acknowledges the book as a linguistic prosthesis with the “limbs” metaphor and with the more general notion that it is a book of charms, a book that can extend the abilities of man via incantation. And yet, he can only remark wistfully upon the fact that the text is *not* a set of

“limbs” for man—that it is in many ways a thing whose existence extends far beyond his individual use. Merlin can only make use of the parts of it that postdate its original creation—the translations, the commentary, the swirling sea of marginalia that circumscribes each page. In the center, it is essentially obdurate matter, unreadable and unusable. At the core, this putatively “instrumental” form of language is profoundly resistant to its own instrumentality. It is there for Merlin’s mastery, yet it also eludes his grasp. And its simultaneous presentation of “primary text” and “secondary text” suggests a corresponding dual—or dialectical—view of its user. On the one hand, language gives man power, and even signals his “primacy”; on the other hand, language can transcend him, subordinate him, and reveal the frailty of his dependency—signaling only the “secondariness” of the one it would seem to exalt.

Anthropo-centrifugal Cycles

“Merlin and Vivien” is, roughly speaking, the central book of the *Idylls*. The central image of “Merlin and Vivien” is the image of Merlin’s book. At the center of the image of Merlin’s book is a lacuna: a textual space which the human mind cannot penetrate, and in which the presence of the human is no longer felt. This multilayered concentric design suggests that Merlin’s book is an analogue of the poem itself. The book is so old, Merlin says, that “mountains have arisen since / With cities on their flanks” (MV.671–672). The phrase creates an analogy: just as Merlin’s book presents palimpsestic marginalia “scribbled, crost, and cramm’d” around an absent, illegible center, *Idylls* presents human civilization as a contingent, fragile graft upon the eternal and ahuman order of nature. Like the book, moreover, the poem evokes two different timescales simultaneously, one humanistic and one geologic: the time of “cities” and the time of

“mountains”; the time of myth—which seems so much larger than human time in older epics that go back to the creation of the world, yet appears all-too-human in scope here—and the utterly unfathomable time of the Mastodon. But the concentric analogy between Merlin’s book and the *Idylls* also tells us something new about the way Tennyson plots his cosmological dialectic on the level of form. The poem seems to suggest that Arthur’s worldview is its philosophical center, its “default,” besieged by an invasive force of post-Darwinian skepticism that threatens to circumscribe and overwhelm it. Yet Merlin’s book is at its core a text that pushes the human away—at its core, a text that denies his attempt to occupy the center. If not exactly non-anthropocentric, it is definitely anthro-centrifugal—and so, too, is the *Idylls*. Arthur’s model insists on the centrality of man; the poem’s structure insists on forcing him *and* his model into a position of marginality.

The opening idyll is highly Arthur-centric; it introduces him as hero and places him in the middle of various surrounding contexts. The opening passage begins by sketching the political situation into which he arrives historically (Leodogran and the warring kings), continues with a description of the land of “waste” into which he arrives physically, and only then produces a capsule version of Arthur’s narrative:

And after these King Arthur for a space,
And thro’ the puissance of his Table Round,
Drew all their petty princedoms under him,
Their king and head, and made a realm, and reign’d. (CA.16–19)

In other words, the poem begins by arranging things before, and around, Arthur and the project of Camelot; it begins by placing Arthur in the “space” at the center of its focus and its world. And yet, Arthur is not really situated at the center of the poem as a whole, just as he does not sit in the center of the Round Table; as Jerome Buckley notes, “his major role” throughout the poem “is essentially recessive” (*Tennyson: The Growth of a Poet* 177). “The Coming of Arthur” and

“The Passing of Arthur” center on him, but the middle ten idylls barely include him; by the time we reach “Merlin and Vivien,” he is only present as the lingering trace of a conception of “ideal manhood” that Vivien can rebuke: “This Arthur pure! / Great Nature thro’ the flesh herself hath made / Gives him the lie!” (48–50). In a sense, the Arthurlessness of “Merlin and Vivien” suggests a model that is very different from “ideal manhood closed in real man”: at the poem’s actual center, “ideal manhood” is not *enclosed* but *foreclosed*, denied any kind of purchase.

Arthur does gradually move back into the spotlight from “Lancelot and Elaine” onward, but even as the poem closes in on his individual fall, it insists almost ruthlessly on exposing him to mechanisms of decentering displacement. In “The Coming of Arthur,” Tennyson sketches Arthur’s first triumphant battle—a battle in which Great Names are listed, and defeated, with commensurate dignity; a battle in which everything is halted, contained, by the King’s authority; a battle characterized by a literally picturesque sense of order (“and like a painted battle the war stood / Silenced, the living quiet as the dead” [CA.120–123]). At the end of “The Last Tournament,” the poet produces another battle-sketch that precisely negates the original: Arthur’s forces assault the hall of the Red Knight, and we see a sloppy, brutal, bestial ransacking in which every enemy is killed, none are named, and “the pavement” is “stream’d with massacre” (LT.461, 476). “And in the heart of Arthur joy was lord,” the narrator tells us after the first battle (CA.261); “But in the heart of Arthur pain was lord,” the narrator tells us here (LT.486). But the scene’s most striking feature is its re-positioning of Arthur himself. He is no longer a participant, but an observer; having “deign’d not use of word or sword,” he can only see, hear, and reckon with the evidence before him (457). The episode’s structure forces him to adopt a debasingly anthropological perspective. There is no way for him to circumvent the idea

that his men have regressed to beasts, and were beasts all along; he can only stand at the periphery and watch this “wave” of brutal fact welling up from the center.

Spatially, the poem manifests a non-anthropocentric cosmology by constantly presenting circles in which Arthur is not in the middle; temporally, it does the same by presenting cycles to which Arthur is not the end. Rosenberg observes that one of the effects produced by Tennyson “borrowing his time-scale from Darwin” is a drastic temporal enlargement of the narrative that the poem seems to trace: “If, in Rossetti’s phrase, the sonnet is a ‘moment’s monument,’ then the traditional novel is the chronicle of a generation, and the *Idylls* of a whole civilization” (Rosenberg 34)—or, in the poet’s own words, “a whole cycle of generations” (*Memoir* II: 127). But the poem’s Darwinian undertones minimize this timeframe at the same time; even the largest units of human history—“a whole civilization” or “a whole cycle of generations”—appear both finite and repeatable in the context of geological history. The poem seems to chart an entire Age of Man, but this age is not the *telos* of “this poor earth’s pale history”; it is merely a natural-historical episode. Nor does it even seem to be an Anthropocene that leaves any kind of permanent mark. At first, Arthur’s campaign to dispel the beast and build Camelot makes a visible change to the landscape: he “fell’d / The forest, letting in the sun, and made / Broad pathways for the hunter and the knight” (CA.59–61). By the time he himself falls, however, the forest has become overgrown again, and the “mist” that was its key feature—a mist of erasure that always threatens to blur the distinctions between man and beast, civilization and nature, time and timelessness—has returned. In another universe, artifacts left behind could be used to express the linear progression of human history; they need only be marked as things that belong to the past. In Tennyson’s Camelot, however, relics are not ancient, but perennial; Excalibur and the crown belong to every Arthur, past and present, which implies that every iteration of

civilization is essentially the same. The poem's version of human history, its "cycle of generations," seems not only non-teleological but willfully anti-teleological, as if the very fabric of its time were designed to be a rebuke of Arthur's time.

To return again to the homology between *Idylls* and Merlin's book, one of the most disturbing implications of the poem's persistently non-anthropocentric orientations is that it, too, threatens to be a "prosthesis gone rogue": a malfunctioning instrument of human self-definition, reprogrammed to undermine rather than support the category of "man." The poem can seem ruthlessly antihumanist at times, committed not only to interrogating various ideologies of human supremacy, but also to revealing how those ideologies are always already imbued with the mechanisms of their own destruction. In the 1891 epilogue, addressed "To the Queen," the poet seems to express anxiety about this self-undermining quality on a political level. As if to echo the anxious question with which he began the whole project ("Why take the style of those heroic times? / For nature brings not back the Mastodon, / Nor we those times"), he asks whether this epic has even performed the function of epic: is this "the voice of Britain," he wonders aloud, "or a sinking land, / Some third-rate isle half-lost among her seas?" (24–25).¹⁰ On the one hand, it is true that *Idylls* is not a very effective work of national mythmaking. Rather than solidifying British identity, Tennyson's ironic appropriations of the Arthurian legend render Britishness as an inchoate, fragile quality, always on the verge of degeneration, always on the verge of becoming its opposite. On the other hand, this troubling of national identity depends

¹⁰ Tennyson would have understood this to be the function of epic according to Tucker, who notes that theories of epic have remained remarkably unchanged for the last two hundred years precisely because theorists of epic have considered themselves 'modern' for two hundred years—which is to say, unable to produce epic themselves (*Epic* 14). Victorians defined epic as the "articulation of a collective identity that links origins to destinies by way of heroic values in imagined actions"; they thought of themselves as unable to produce that voice of unanimity and "consensus" because of the inherent heterogeneities of industrial modernity. And yet, this also provided a reason to *turn* to epic, even ambivalently: "To narrate the tale of the tribe," Tucker writes, "is at once to receive an order, to describe an order, and to issue an order, in a powerful gyrostabilized loop that, if we may judge from the recent history of epic theory, sheds a portion of steadying influence on all who move within its orbit" (14).

largely on the poem's troubling of the human. As posthumanists have maintained since long before posthumanism was defined as such, destabilizing the most fundamental form of difference—human vs. animal—can be a way to destabilize other forms of difference that it undergirds. Whereas an Arthurian epic might try to secure national identity by giving it the heft of species identity—by tracing something like Britishness back to the origin of life itself, to the elemental conflicts of a primeval world—*Idylls*' disruption of species identity limits its ability to construct national identity. It cannot be the “voice of Britain” because it depicts the human as a “sinking” creature, “half-lost” among the hordes.

But the prefix “half” in that line is also crucial: it suggests that the poem's destructive—or deconstructive—project is never quite fulfilled. With his retrospective rhetorical question, Tennyson reminds us that the poem is never fully committed to expressing one or another cosmological order; its form is persistently dialectical, always open to the “or” that lies between worlds. Seeing his realm “reel'd back into the beast,” Arthur himself comes to the conclusion that “the old order changeth, yielding place to new”—that his model has been rendered obsolete (PA.408). But he does not say that it has been eradicated permanently. He only says that it has “yielded place,” yielded prominence, as if to imply—as the cyclicity of the poem also implies—that it may return. The poem's dialectic puts a tremendous amount of pressure on Arthur's model, but it does not stamp out that model entirely. Indeed, it challenges the objective reality of both worldviews precisely by presenting them as “models”: Tennyson's original question (“why should any man / Remodel models?”) invites us to see the conflict not necessarily as a clash between worlds, but as a clash between highly stylized dioramas. In an essay delivered at the Metaphysical Society, a prominent interdisciplinary salon (Tennyson was a founding member) that spent the years between 1869 to 1880 trying to resolve the conflicts

between Christian theology and Darwinism before ultimately deeming the two sides irreconcilable, the poet's friend Henry Sidgwick made a similar epistemological point.¹¹ "All the conclusions of exactest science can have no more than a hypothetical validity," Sidgwick argued; those conclusions are never statements of reality, but "intuitions" based in sensory experience ("Verification of Beliefs" 9). Tennyson presents a version of this idea by making the poem itself into a clash between representations rather than realities: on the one hand, Arthur's deeply ideological frieze; on the other hand, the poem's own equally stylized representation of man's contingency, precarity, bestiality. "Ideal manhood closed in real man" starts to seem like a meaningless phrase when one considers that both conceptions of man in the poem are always already "ideal," always already theoretical. The new conception may have more evidentiary heft, but it is still—as Arthur's squire says of Camelot itself in *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*—"only a model."

Arthur's worldview, his version of man, is still alive as a hermeneutic possibility by the poem's end. After the king has died and been set loose on a funeral barge, Bedivere climbs a mountain to witness his fade away:

Thereat once more he moved about, and clomb
Ev'n to the highest he could climb, and saw,
Straining his eyes beneath an arch of hand,
Or thought he saw, the speck that bare the King,
Down that long water opening on the deep
Somewhere far off, pass on and on, and go
From less to less and vanish into light.
And the new sun rose bringing the new year. (PA.462–469)

The ending sequence resonates uncannily with one of Tennyson's last poems, "By an Evolutionist," in which the poet describes having "climb'd to the snows of Age" and reaching a

¹¹ For an overview of the Metaphysical Society's history and purpose, see Alan Willard Brown, *The Metaphysical Society: Victorian Minds in Crisis, 1869-1880*.

point of ontological clarity: gazing at the past, he sees his bestial self; glimpsing the future, he sees a path to “a height that is higher” (17–20). The *Idylls* version is darker, more “straining,” more troublingly ambiguous. In its “agonized uncertainty,” however, it is much more complete. Bedivere sees Arthur finally becoming “less and less,” in a phrase that recalls the narrator’s original description of the aboriginal wastes (“Wherein the beast was ever more and more, / But man was less and less”). He sees the king as a “speck” overshadowed by the sheer scale of Nature; he can barely even distinguish the form that may or may not be Arthur as it “passes” into cosmological insignificance. The idea of man’s ultimate singularity vanishes into the vastness of cosmic chaos; a “new sun” rises, foreshadowing the inevitability of an age without humans at all. But the ending leaves open another perceptual and conceptual possibility: seeing the king “vanish into light”—“into light,” not just out of view—Bedivere could just as well consider it an image of spiritual transmutation, of the king dissolving into apotheosis, posthuman in a different sense. He could just as well be seeing a new ‘son’ born, Christ-like, in the “new sun” that rises, “bringing the new year.” Tennyson leaves the ending open to a humanist reading—a Christian reading—even when it seems to depict the disappearance of the human; like Bedivere, we can only squint at the king and all he stands for, wondering if his passage (in this passage) is an end or a new beginning. This double perspective is hard-won: Bedivere achieves it by climbing to the mountaintop. It is, perhaps, the point of ‘rising’ in the first place.

Chapter 5:

Insensible Gradations: Perspectival Plasticity in *The Island of Doctor Moreau*

Like *Idylls of the King*, *The Island of Doctor Moreau* announces its investment in the question of the human—Huxley’s “question of questions”—partly through its title. Both texts center on ambiguous sovereigns, paternalistic kings of debased kingdoms who not only embody an ideal notion of the human (as rational; as supreme over bestial hordes; as *self*-sovereign), but also attempt to craft that ideal in the bodies of their subjects.¹ Both texts use the question of whether the authority of these figures over human nature is real or imagined to dramatize the larger question of whether the human itself is real or imagined. When Prendick first sees Moreau, he notices right away how imperiously the Doctor “look[s] down at the staghound that [sits] between his knees” (17).² Yet he also notices an “odd drooping of the skin,” a “fall of his heavy mouth at the corners” (17), that seems to resemble the pronounced, “prognathous” jaws of the Beast Folk (54). The Doctor displays symptoms of the disease of ontological slippage that seems to claim every other character. Every human in the novel—Montgomery, Moreau’s alcoholic sidekick; Prendick, the marooned narrator; even the belligerent ship captain who picks him up—behaves, at various points, like an animal; nearly every animal appears and acts uncannily human.

And yet, *Moreau* represents the destabilization of the human in a way that is very different from Tennyson’s poem, owing partly to its genre (a science fiction novella rather than an Arthurian epic) but also to the kind of story it tells. Whereas *Idylls* depicts the human

¹ Derrida discusses *Crusoe* as a figure of human sovereignty at length in his *Beast and the Sovereign* seminars, partly in response to Rousseau, who describes him as an “Adam sovereign of the world”—a figure who returns to a condition of pre-political dominion over nature (47).

² All *Moreau* passages quoted from *The Island of Doctor Moreau: A Variorum Text*, ed. Robert M. Philmus, which uses the first American edition (Stone and Kimball).

dissolving on an expansive and ceaselessly reiterative scale, the scale of civilization itself, *Moreau* depicts the same process within spaces of isolation, both literal and psychological. The novella's species-less world, its posthumanist world, is a *Tempest*-like island, and it comes to life not in the spatialized architectonics of an anxious poet, but in the perspectival shifts of an unreliable narrator. Like Robinson Crusoe, Prendick is in some ways a potential figure of human sovereignty himself: he tries, at least, to use his wits and his senses (particularly eyesight) to establish his own identity against the human-animal hybrids that populate the Doctor's domain. But his mind also struggles to hold onto the term "human" while it undergoes a crisis of seemingly endless semantic drift. By the middle of the novel, Prendick's categories have become so scrambled that he cannot help but see humanity *as* animality, and vice versa: seeing a creature's face "distorted with terror," distorted into the most abjectly "animal" form, he admits nonetheless that "I realised again the fact of its humanity" (62). He returns to London and sees human pedestrians as a teeming mass of creaturely instinct, their species identities not secure but perpetually on the verge of becoming something else.

Several scholars have noted *Moreau's* confrontationally deconstructive approach to the categories of human and animal, variously reaching the conclusion that—as John Huntington puts it—"throughout the novel the activity of distinguishing between human and beast is mirrored by the activity of bridging that carefully defined boundary" (*The Logic of Fantasy* 65).³ Indeed, it often seems to be not just an expression of what Richter calls "anthropological anxiety," but a withering satire of human attempts to mollify that anxiety through self-definition. In *Literature After Darwin*, Richter observes that "positive definitions of the human"—i.e. "a being endowed with reason, a being with an immortal soul, a being capable of speech"—tend to

³ See Carrie Rohman, *Stalking the Subject* 63; Seth Lerer, *Children's Literature* 183; and Rebecca Stott, "Through a Glass Darkly" 321.

require support from negative ones, i.e. “the delimitation against groups identified as non-human or less-than-human” (8).⁴ In various ways, *Moreau* targets both forms of definition at once. The novel is strung with moments in which Wells invokes a seemingly reliable positive index of humanity (speech, tool use, etc.), only to undermine it by showing how well it applies to one of Moreau’s monstrous hybrids. The Beast Folk possess language (“He was a man, then ... for he could talk” [35]); they “build houses”; they practice primitive versions of law, ethics, and culture. They trouble the boundary of humanness not just by straddling it but by policing it themselves, as when the ape-man uses Prendick’s hand—the measure of all things; a classic index both literal and figurative—to determine that he is “a man ... a man, a five-man, like me” (37).⁵ They have sharp teeth, too much fur, and mangled limbs, but they seem to possess the most human quality of all—anthropocentrism—in abundance.

In equal measure, the novel sets its satirical sights on *negative* definitions of humanity by presenting the Law of the Beast Folk, a dark parody of the Decalogue—Moreau himself calls it “a kind of mockery of rational life”—that establishes humanity as an exceedingly brittle dialectical construct (51). After Prendick flees from Moreau’s vile laboratory, thinking that Moreau is in the business of animalizing humans, he finds himself in the makeshift village of the Beast Folk, Moreau’s experiments, who are actually humanized animals. They gather around him and recite their Law, a set of prescriptions designed to prevent them—to borrow Tennyson’s phrase—from “reeling back into the beast” again:

⁴ Richter includes Wells’ novel as a prominent member of the cohort of late-19th and early-20th century texts that explicitly address “anthropological anxiety,” arguing that “the novel should not be read only as a satire on science or on religion,” but “as an example of a post-Darwinian negative anthropology in which the fear that humans are really animals is, in the end, not alleviated but confirmed” (100).

⁵ In *Ciferae*, Tom Tyler discusses the long philosophical tradition of viewing the hand as both “the measure of all things” and “the essential difference between humanity and animality”: “Humans alone are able to point toward things, to point at thing, or perhaps better, to point *out* things, since pointing is a matter of a disclosive assimilation of the unconcealed. Man points to what is, Heidegger says, and ‘his essential nature lies in being such a pointer’” (18).

Not to go on all-fours; *that* is the Law. Are we not Men?

Not to suck up Drink; *that* is the Law. Are we not Men?

Not to eat Flesh or Fish; *that* is the Law. Are we not Men?

Not to claw Bark of Trees; *that* is the Law. Are we not Men?

Not to chase other Men; *that* is the Law. Are we not Men? (*The Island of Doctor Moreau* 38)

The ironies of the Law are numerous. First of all, humans often do all the things that the law prohibits: “suck up Drink”; “eat Flesh or Fish”; “chase other Men,” etc.⁶ Second, the tortuous, self-flagellating, repetitious quality of the prescriptions only underscores their ineffectuality. Each rule foreshadows—and in a sense, ensures—its eventual transgression, since reciting the Law functions as the only barrier to breaking the Law. As Carrie Rohman further observes, the scene can be read as “a conspicuous instance of the ‘productive reiteration’ of hegemonic norms that Judith Butler theorizes,” since the Beast Folk “must continually remind themselves of their putative humanity” (*Stalking the Subject* 73). The deictic phrase “*that* is the Law” emphasizes the ever-present problem of the Law’s location, its coextensiveness with their makeshift human culture and with the limited power of Moreau himself; it does not originate in any transcendental ‘outside’ but in the materiality of the present.⁷ Likewise, the novel implies, negative definitions of humanity proclaimed by humans—“we are not *them*”—are all-too-human in origin, and all too feeble in their attempts to delimit the human as an ontological unit.

⁶ In many ways, the specter of Oscar Wilde’s sodomy trial hangs over the ironies and hypocrisies of Moreau’s regime. See Ivan Cañadas, “Going Wilde: Prendick, Montgomery and Late-Victorian Homosexuality in *The Island of Doctor Moreau*.”

⁷ In this way it echoes the law of the *Ipecacuanha*, which resides solely within the person of its degenerate captain: “I’m the law here, I tell you—the law and the prophets” (11).

And yet, one of the most persistently peculiar things about *The Island of Doctor Moreau* is its tendency to insist simultaneously on the transcendental stability of the very categories it destabilizes. The Law is a prominent example. On the one hand, by allowing the Beast Folk to maintain something like a contingent, artificial humanity, and by satirizing the brittleness of definitions of humanity in general, the Law suggests that the ontological boundary between humans and animals is porous and indeterminate. “Are we not Men?” is exactly the question that this scene seems to raise: why aren’t they “Men”? What constitutes “Men” as a category? Have they not earned the right to be called “Men” precisely by demonstrating an extremely humanlike anxiety about maintaining ontological difference? On the other hand, this destabilization of the boundary between “Men” and animals is only temporary. The Beast Folk reel back inexorably and unmistakably into beasts; the categories that they unsettle in the short term are in fact reified—proven to be real, proven to be operative—in the long term. Their humanity is contingent because their mutability is contingent; they are not, in the end, as plastic as Doctor Moreau imagines them to be. And the difference between their essential animality and Prendick’s essential humanness is revealed all the more, somehow, by their inadequate attempts to establish humanness. The duality of this scene reflects larger reversals throughout the text: oscillations between the transgression of biological categories and the reestablishment—the reification—of ontological ones.

Such reversals tell us very little about what the Beast Folk actually are, or what Wells himself thinks they are. They tell us many things, however, about Edward Prendick, whose unreliable narrative is our only window into the island and its malformed inhabitants. Above all, the reversals tell us that he is an equivocating and incomplete posthumanist. Throughout the novel, we follow his mind as it adapts to a posthumanist perspective, developing ways of

recognizing the liminality of the Beast Folk, their irreconcilability with species categories, and his own kinship with them. His modes of perception and his mechanisms of moral adjudication—his sense and sensibility—change as he is exposed to the island’s version of Darwin’s “tangled bank.” And yet, the novel also depicts his perspectival reversion, just as it depicts the biological reversion of the Beast Folk. In tenuous and unsustainable ways, he witnesses and accepts the world of infinite plasticity and variability he encounters, but to keep his sanity, he inevitably recovers and reimposes an anthropocentric grid of categories. He cannot help but reimpose archetypes onto an island of a hundred hybrids; he cannot help but reimagine the biological monsters he encounters as evidence for—rather than challenges to—a more essential, ontological, even proto-theological human difference located not in the body but in the soul. Wells stages the oscillation between these two perspectives to depict, through narrative, the conceptual difficulty of a species-less, posthumanist, and post-Darwinian conceptual framework.

Scholars of Wells such as Darko Suvin, John Huntington, Robert Philmus, and, most recently, Sarah Cole have emphasized his interest in staging frictional conflicts between diametrically (or dialectically) opposed viewpoints.⁸ In a letter from March 1894, Wells himself admitted to pursuing a “stereoscopic quality” in his writing, which at the time would have implied a desire to create both conflicts and composites: as Robert Philmus observes, “The

⁸ In *H.G. Wells: Early Writings in Science and Science Fiction*, Philmus addresses Wells’ “stereoscopic quality” and provides a useful survey of others who do so, including Suvin (in *The Metamorphoses of Science Fiction* 216-18); Huntington (in *The Logic of Fantasy: H.G. Wells and Science Fiction* 21); and Wells’ own illegitimate son Anthony West (in “H.G. Wells” 13). Sarah Cole has also recently added to this conversation in presentations excerpted from her forthcoming book *The Wells Era*, arguing that *The Time Machine* (to name just one example) offers a “disruptive showcase of clashing temporal scales” (“The Wells Era”). Also in this vein, in *Literature After Darwin*, Richter suggests that *Moreau* is a complexly “dialectical” text that “interrogates not only the propositions, procedures and ethics of contemporary science, but also the very conditions of representation” (99). On the one hand, we view (through Prendick) a morally reprehensible scientific process; on the other hand, by presenting Prendick as a thoroughly “ambivalent” and unreliable source, it demands that we inhabit another perspective that allows us to question our ways of seeing that process.

Wellsian meaning of the adjective becomes understandable when we recall that a stereoscope is an optical device (rather in vogue in the latter half of the nineteenth century) which produces a single, three-dimensional image from two photographs taken at slightly different angles” (*H.G. Wells: Early Writings in Science and Science Fiction* xlvi). Yet the composite image of the human species that *Moreau* produces is deeply vexatious and untenable, both to its narrator and to its reader. The novel reveals “Man” to be an elaborate fiction of ontological difference, but also depicts the basic inescapability of the human as a viewpoint and reference point, *especially* for a human being confronted with the horrifying indeterminacies of a post-Darwinian world.

In Wells’ 1887 essay “A Talk with Gryllotalpa,” the narrator describes an image from an illustrated edition of *Pilgrim’s Progress* that depicts a pair of tiny humans dwarfed by an incalculably large sky—a Tennysonian image of vastness. His friend Gryllotalpa (whose name means “mole cricket”) finds the image pleasing; he is an ardent posthumanist who seems to enjoy “talking about, what he called, the ‘infinitesimal littleness of men’”: “Man is less than an iota in the infinite universe. He is a Link in an Infinite Chain of Causation and a Factor in a Limitless Sum” (20). The capitalizations imply that the ideas he spouts are not new or radical but thoroughly in circulation, even commodified (indeed, the narrator remarks that “some of [these matters] I fancied he had talked about before to me”) (19). Wells makes him the avatar of a kind of dime-store, trendy posthumanism that would not have been difficult to encounter in the 1880s and 1890s. The narrator challenges Gryllotalpa, however, with a simple question: “To whom is he thus?” (20). “It seems,” he adds, “that you must have a very extensive mind; for, as for me, I can conceive only of man as altogether the biggest thing in my world” (20). Gryllotalpa invokes the perspectival capabilities of various physical and biological sciences, including “descriptive astronomy” and “speculative chemistry.” But the narrator’s central point remains, by the end of

the essay, unchallenged: even those that “dabble” in these new perspectival technologies are still approaching the question of the human from an inescapably human point of view. And because of that, their flights of fancy will always be grounded in—and eventually revert to—an idea of human supremacy. Sure enough, *Gryllotalpa* illustrates this principle himself: his view of “the infinitesimal littleness of men” is only tenable because it is buttressed by a belief in “the onward progress of the race as revealed to us by evolution” (19).

I read *Moreau* as a sequel of sorts to “*Gryllotalpa*,” one that explores the conflict between posthumanism and anthropocentrism even more extensively by rendering it in the form of a unitary narrative—a self-divided narrative—rather than a philosophical dialogue. As I will explore in the next section, the novel expresses the necessity of posthumanism in ways that go beyond “*Gryllotalpa*,” aligning with the broader argument of Wells’ nonfiction science essays in the late 1880s and early 1890s. Following the logic of his anti-anthropocentric polemics and jeremiads, it dramatizes our need to understand the human species *as* a species, contingent and mutable, in order to come to terms with evolution and, even more importantly, to ensure our continued evolution—our continued survival. And yet, *Prendick*’s ambivalent, equivocal narrative simultaneously suggests the intractability of anthropocentrism, to which he regresses at various points throughout his mind-expanding journey. Like “*Gryllotalpa*,” the novel suggests that the only potentially workable approach to posthumanism is a bifocal one that acknowledges the incompatibility—as well as the necessary juxtaposition—of a posthumanist viewpoint and human subjectivity. If man is insignificant, if the category of the human has no ontological or epistemological solidity, if he is not different from the animals around him, still, one must ask: “To whom is he thus?”

Species Plasticity, Mental Plasticity, Genre Plasticity

Etiologies of *The Island of Doctor Moreau* tend to begin with Wells' education: in the late 1880s, when he was a student at the Normal School of Science in London, he took a course in evolutionary biology with Thomas Henry Huxley that sparked his interest in the plasticity of organisms. But the novel also owes something to another course he took during his time there: a course in geology taught by the far less famous scientist John Wesley Judd. Wells hated Judd; in his *Experiment in Autobiography*, he describes the geologist as "a slow, conscientious lecturer with a large face, small pale blue eyes, a habit of washing his hands with invisible water as he talked, and a flat assuaging voice" (183). He found Judd's approach to the science of geology tiresomely taxonomical: in retrospect, he describes being faced with minerals that seemed to contain "the history and understanding of the Earth as a whole," and being asked not to interpret them but to classify them (186). Still, something about the course, and about Judd, stuck with him in a way that the *Autobiography* belies.

In 1891, not long after he flunked out of the Normal School, he published an essay called "The Rediscovery of the Unique" in the *Fortnightly Review*—an "ill-written but ingenious paper" (in his words) outlining an idea he would later deem one of the most important fixtures of his early thought (179). The argument was brash and straightforward: drawing on the post-Darwinian destabilization of species categories and recent developments in atomic theory, Wells asserted not just that "no two animals ... are alike," but that every single phenomenon in existence was irreducibly individual (23). "*All being is unique*, or, nothing is strictly like anything else," he argued, describing categories and other "common nouns" as mere projections of the human mind designed to make sense of a universe of endless variability (24). It was in some ways a remarkable extrapolation of Darwinian theory, anticipating Gilles Deleuze's

assertion that “Darwin’s great novelty . . . was that of inaugurating the thought of individual difference” (qtd. in Grosz, *The Nick of Time* 17). To buttress his claim, however, Wells invoked not Huxley, nor Darwin, but a far less familiar figure from his own past: John Wesley Judd. “It is the constant refrain in the teaching of one of the most eminent of living geologists,” Wells wrote, “that everything passes into everything else by ‘insensible gradations.’ He holds up to his students a picture of the universe not unlike a water-colour sketch that has fallen into a water-butt and ‘run’” (24-25). In the *Autobiography*, Judd appears as a category-obsessed pedant; in the essay, Wells holds him up as nothing less than a prophet of the fallacy of categories. “Insensible gradations” was originally Darwin’s phrase; in Chapter 6 of *On the Origin of Species*, he asked, “Firstly, why, if species have descended from other species by insensibly fine gradations, do we not everywhere see innumerable transitional forms? Why is not all nature in confusion instead of the species being, as we see them, well defined?” (158). But it is strange, and perhaps telling, that Wells did not attribute the phrase to Darwin. Something about the phrase coming from the mouth of a geologist—a dealer in solidities, apparent immutabilities—appealed to him even more.

“The Rediscovery of the Unique” is not just an ontological essay about the individuality of things; it is also an epistemological essay about the need for a new language—even a new kind of literature—that might account for that individuality. Wells admits in the first line that its original title was “The Fallacy of the Common Noun.” What would a literature without common nouns look like? Perhaps something like *The Island of Doctor Moreau*, which was written in the wake of “The Rediscovery” and in many ways seems designed to present a vision of the world Wells described: a world of constant change and endless differentiation, never adequately encompassed by the human propensity to categorize. Thanks to innovations in the science and art

of vivisection, Moreau is able to practice a radically accelerated version of artificial selection, creating a dizzying array of new forms within a single lifespan. His darkest achievement is a “Thing” so abject, so monstrously liminal and idiosyncratic, that it exceeds even the otherwise capacious category of animals: “It wasn’t finished. It was purely an experiment. It was a limbless thing, with a horrible face, that writhed along the ground in a serpentine fashion” (50). The novel is filled with categoryless creatures representable only through careful attention to morphological and behavioral peculiarities, and it features a narrator whose documentary eye is often forced to record individuals rather than grouping them by likeness.

And yet, even this description of the “Thing” relies on a categorical and metaphorical descriptor, “serpentine,” and “The Rediscovery of the Unique” is also a highly pessimistic essay. Wells argues for the necessity of a categoryless language, but also admits that it might be, in the end, impossible. Like other late-nineteenth century thinkers, Wells describes this current problem by tracing its etiology in a primeval environment. Primitive man began with a few decently specific proper nouns, but first started going astray when he felt compelled to universalize the features of his experience. Soon,

he exhausted his primitive stock of grunts, weird mouthings, and snorts; his phonetic, in fact his general, memory was weak, and his capacity of differentiation therefore slight; he was in consequence obliged to slur over uniqueness, and lump similar-looking things together under what was, for practical purposes, the same sound. Then followed the easy step of muddling repeated substantives into dual and plural forms. And then, out of a jumble of broken-down substantives and demonstratives grew up the numbers—grew and blossomed like a grove of mental upas trees.

They stupefy people. When we teach a child to count, we poison its mind almost irrevocably. (26)

By treating category-based language as a gradual evolutionary adaptation, Wells affirms its historicity and contingency. We once needed categories to survive—to create communities in a hostile environment that might have otherwise reduced us to atomized individuals; therefore, we

invented them. We no longer need them now. “We are on the eve of man’s final emancipation from rigid reasonableness, from the last trace of the trim clockwork thought of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries,” he proclaims (29-30). Yet the invocation of primitive man simultaneously conveys the opposite effect: a sense of the long entrenchment—the hopeless intractability—of the linguistic forms he despises. Language is both plastic and static; the human is both infinitely adaptable and stubbornly stuck in its ways. Wells’ invocation of primitive man in “The Rediscovery” reveals the nature and the stakes of this linguistic problem: the human’s attachment to categories—especially the category *of* the human—represents nothing less than a product of human evolution that is preventing the human from evolving further.

Wells was a dogged utopian throughout his life and career, committed to imagining better futures for the human species. But the other side of his utopianism was his anti-anthropocentrism: he was never fond of what he called “Excelsior biology” (progressivist narratives of human evolution), and many of his works of nonfiction science journalism were attempts to unseat assumptions of “Man’s permanence or permanent ascendancy” by describing the likely reasons for our eventual extinction (“Zoological Retrogression” 253). In “The Rate of Change in Species” (1894), Wells pegged our extinction directly to our biological rigidity. The “mutability” of a “species”—a quality he also referred to as “plasticity of species,” and held in high esteem—is what determines its longevity and eventual supremacy (129). “The true heirs of the future,” he wrote, “are the small, fecund, and precocious creatures; those obscure, innumerable plastic species that die in myriads and yet do not diminish, that change this way or that as the pressure of necessity guides” (131). “Large predominant species” like the human, by contrast, are slow to adapt and therefore doomed; we have “purchased the lordship of the present at the price of the remote future” (131). This conception of the human as a rigid creature,

physically unchanged since the Paleolithic period, was not uncommon at the time Wells was writing: as John McNabb points out, Wells was immersed in a conversation about human origins that tended to portray our species as a physically static entity (“The Beast Within: Human Evolution in the 1890s” 389). But he was also interested in the cost of that rigidity: an eventual surrender to the hordes of humble microfauna that change by the second.

His views on species change continued to metamorphose, however, and he began to make use of another idea in circulation within late-nineteenth century biological and archaeological discourses: the argument that “the main thrust of evolution in man had shifted from the physical to the mental” (McNabb 394). This is the subject of “Human Evolution, an Artificial Process” (1896), an essay published the same year as *Moreau*. In it, Wells asserted that although “it appears to me impossible to believe that man has undergone anything but an infinitesimal alteration in his intrinsic nature since the age of unpolished stone,” cultural evolution has stepped in to fill the gap: the evolution of civilization itself can be taken as evidence that humans are physically static, but mentally malleable (214). The most recent chapter of our natural history is entirely a story about moral habits and culturally-determined strictures arising “to keep the round Palaeolithic savage in the square hole of the civilised state” (217). “Sin,” he added, “is the conflict of the two factors—as I have tried to convey in my *Island of Dr. Moreau*” (217). He made this overall argument in a curious tone of sanguinity, as though it were no small consolation to think that the human species is plastic after all; “this view reconciles a scientific faith in evolution with optimism” (218). The reference to *Moreau*, however, undercuts the essay’s triumphalist narrative—as does the intrinsically violent metaphor of a “round Palaeolithic savage” being jammed into “the square hole of the civilised state.” How plastic *is*

the human mind? Are our minds as plastic as we think they are? Or are they as rigid as our “round Paleolithic” bodies?

These are the implicit questions behind “The Limits of Individual Plasticity” (1895), the essay most often and obviously paired with *Moreau* in both contemporary and later criticism: although it does indeed make a more substantial version of the ontological argument that Moreau himself makes in Chapter 14 of the novel (“Doctor Moreau Explains”), asserting the limitless plasticity of living things, it also makes an implicit *epistemological* argument about the “limits” to our apprehension of the view it expresses. Wells usually starts his essays with a withering critique of some sort of stable intellectual context. In this case, the context is a widespread belief in natal fatalism: a tendency to assume “that a living thing is at the utmost nothing more than the complete realization of its birth possibilities,” confusing “heredity” with “theological predestination” (36). Against this view, he puts forward the possibility that “a living thing might be taken in hand and so moulded and modified that at best it would retain scarcely anything of its inherent form and disposition,” citing evidence not just from modern animal transplants but also from history (“those abominable medieval practitioners who made dwarfs and show monsters”) and from literature (“Victor Hugo gives us an account of them, dark and stormy, after his wont, in *L’Homme qui rit*”) (36-38). He locates his own argument in the evidence of multiple fields of human inquiry; he defines the counterargument—that organisms are fixed according to their type—as a nebulous article of faith. But it is not just faith; it is dogma, and his essay constantly underscores its dogmatism. At the end, he asks merely that the plasticity of organisms “merit a place in our minds among the things that may some day be”: the ostentatious timidity of this request underscores his sense of the intransigence of the prevailing view.

Wells' adaptation of this essay in *The Island of Doctor Moreau's* Chapter 14 seems equally designed to emphasize the epistemological difficulty of the "possibility" he asks his reader to imagine. Wells appended a note to the first two editions of the novel—the first London edition, published by William Heinemann in April 1896, and the first New York edition, notably subtitled "A Possibility," and published in August of that year—explicitly stating that he had borrowed Doctor Moreau's explanation from his own nonfiction journalism:

NOTE.—The substance of the chapter entitled "Dr. Moreau Explains," which contains the essential idea of the story, appeared as a middle article in the *Saturday Review* in January 1895. This is the only portion of this story that has been previously published, and it has been entirely recast to adapt it to the narrative form. Strange as it may seem to the unscientific reader, there can be no denying that, whatever amount of credibility attaches to the detail of this story, the manufacture of monsters—and perhaps even of *quasi*-human monsters—is within the possibilities of vivisection. (88)⁹

The genre plasticity, so to speak, of "Doctor Moreau Explains," the porous and bidirectional border it shares with Wells' nonfiction, is important to note not just because it challenges epistemic boundaries, but also because it cuts through the novel's layers of discursive unreliability.¹⁰ From the beginning, *The Island of Doctor Moreau* invites readers to cast doubt on Prendick as a narrator; it also invites us to cast doubt on Moreau as a scientist. In the note itself, Wells acknowledges these layers of unreliability by observing that readers might not be inclined to attach "credibility ... to the detail of the story." On the one hand, Wells' attempt to add an aura of facticity to the novel's central narrative conceit is a typical strategy of genre fiction going

⁹ In fact, the relationship between Moreau's excursus and Wells' science journalism was even more porous and bidirectional; as Robert Philmus points out, the "Plasticity" article emerged from the first draft of Moreau, and the second part of the Doctor's argument—namely, that the future evolution of the human species requires overcoming pain—clearly shares concepts and language with another Wells essay, "The Province of Pain" (published in *Science and Art* in February, 1894) (Philmus, Introduction to Variorum Edition xxvi).

¹⁰ In *The Great Derangement*, Amitav Ghosh discusses how science fiction's traditionally lesser status as a genre (i.e. its status as genre fiction) is partly a result of its blurring of epistemic boundaries, which disrupts ongoing processes of discursive "partitioning" and "purification" (concepts he borrows from Bruno Latour) that are "intended to ensure that Nature is consigned entirely to the sciences, remaining forever off limits to Culture" (79). "This entails the marking off and suppression of hybrids," he writes, "and that, of course, is exactly the story of the branding of science fiction, as a genre *separate* from the literary mainstream" (79).

all the way back to Daniel Defoe.¹¹ On the other hand, Wells' implicit contract with the reader is considerably more vexatious than the contracts required by, for example, a Haggard adventure novel. He not only acknowledges the ease with which one can discredit Moreau, but even builds layers of unreliability into the novel that can be used to discredit Moreau: the novel is at once a representation and a potential instrument of the stable intellectual context—a species-based, anthropocentric worldview—that Wells had sought to disrupt in “The Limits of Individual Plasticity.” And yet, he asks the reader nonetheless to entertain the possibility of Moreau's ontology. He asks the reader to encounter *The Island of Doctor Moreau* both as science fiction and as a potential source of scientific fact. In a later preface to a 1920 edition of *War of the Worlds*, Wells would remark that his own science-fiction stories presented “the valid realization of some disregarded possibility in such a way as to comment on the false securities and fatuous self-satisfaction of everyday life” (“An Experiment in Illustration” lix). *Moreau*, because of its relationship to “validity,” is an even more confrontational case in point. Accepting the liminality of the novel is required if one is to truly accept the liminality of its monsters.

Early critics rebuked this challenge: the novel was met with a “chorus of denunciations” that seized largely—and perhaps predictably—upon the note (Philmus 44). Some attacked the novel's scientific validity; others read the note as a mischievous attempt at shock value; both rhetorical maneuvers were alike in allowing the novel to retreat back into the comfortable species category of pure fiction. One reviewer, however, seemed to recognize Wells' larger epistemological project: “The real value for literary purposes of this ghastly conception depends on the power of the author to make his readers realise the half-way stages between the brute and

¹¹ See Christopher Flint, *The Appearance of Print in Eighteenth-Century Fiction*: “From Defoe (and Behn before him) to Richardson and Sterne, this meshing of public expression and private intercourse, of apparent facticity and published fiction, becomes a driving force in imaginative prose” (29)

the rational creature, with which he has to deal” (47). “Deal” is a suggestive and well-chosen verb. It connotes negotiation; it also connotes agonism—in this case, the agonism of Wells himself, but also the agonism of Wells’ readers and, indeed, of Prendick, as he struggles to accept the liminality of the creatures he encounters. The agonism of having to “deal” with a spectrum of beings that seems to contain limitless “half-way stages between the brute and the rational creature” is exactly what the novel narrates through Prendick. This agonism is also what the novel invites its reader to participate in through genre plasticity—through irruptions that force us to “deal with” the novel itself without defaulting to the rules of encountering fiction.

Throughout Wells’ writings, he makes it clear that mental “plasticity” is the only saving grace of the human species, the only thing keeping us from degeneration or extinction. Yet he also puts forward a recursive corollary: the key obstacle to mental plasticity is, in fact, our unwillingness or inability to acknowledge species plasticity. By remaining trapped within a delusional anthropocentrism and a category-based epistemology, we will never be able to recognize both our own transformations—progressive or regressive—and the transformations of other species around us, which might end up becoming the species that overtake us. The human stands, for Wells, on a precipice both perspectival and ontological. We are caught between viewpoints, one of which shows how contingent and mutable we are, the other of which proclaims our permanence, stability, and supremacy. Not coming to terms with that first perspective is precisely what will prevent us from adapting to a changing world: species plasticity is at once the chief object, the largest obstacle, and the all-important payoff of mental plasticity. This may be why Judd, not Darwin, is the patron saint of “The Rediscovery of the Unique.” Both were interested in finding “insensible gradations,” as opposed to stable categories, in the physical world, but Judd—as a geologist and, in Wells’ memory, a pedantic categorizer

himself—was all the more the embodiment of the “insensibility” of those “gradations.” To Wells, Judd’s key insight was not simply that the material world rejects the categories we project onto it, but also that—in a more temporal rather than spatial sense—the most apparently static physical forms, on which we cathect our hopes and dreams about the stability of things in general, are mutable after all. Judd embodied the difficulty of apprehending “gradations” and the necessity of “dealing” with them, against seemingly overwhelming evidence to the contrary. As I will explore in the next section, *Moreau* both represents this problem and invites its reader *into* this problem at multiple different and intersecting scales. The insensibility of gradations is the engine behind Prendick’s own perspectival oscillations. His agonistic, self-conflicted narrative is a story of mental plasticity that explores how difficult it truly is for the human mind to maintain plasticity without, in the end, regressing.

Inhuman Sense and Interspecies Sensibility

The deeply confrontational nature of *The Island of Doctor Moreau*—indeed, the way it stages intellectual confrontation internally and externally, with its narrator and its reader—is at least partly attributable to its genre: studies of Wells’ early scientific romances are consistent in arguing that they hinge on bringing the world of everyday experience into jarring contact with an otherworld of frightening plausibility. In *The Logic of Fantasy*, John Huntington suggests that “the coexistence of opposites” is not just “a fundamental structural element in all of Wells’s early fiction” but also the main aesthetic payoff; the “fascination of the story” consists precisely in “the juxtaposition itself, the superimposition of one world on the other” (21-22). In his landmark study *The Metamorphoses of Science Fiction*, Darko Suvin develops this point further by pinning the persistent two-world structure of Wells’ early fiction to a rhetorical and political

project. For Suvin, Wells' "basic situation is that of a destructive newness encroaching upon the tranquility of the Victorian environment": he stages a confrontation between an echt-Victorian setting, a "bourgeois idyll" ("the cozy study of *The Time Machine*, the old antiquity shop of 'The Crystal Egg,' or the small towns and villages of southern England in *The War of the Worlds* and *The First Men in the Moon*") and some sort of "novum" that is both horrifying and plausible (and more horrifying because it *is* plausible) (208, 217). Suvin suggests, however, that Wells leaves the novum "at arm's length": "his satisfaction at the destruction of the false bourgeois idyll is matched by his horror at the alien forces destroying it" (217).

In *The Time Machine*, the "novum" or otherworld is disturbing because it represents not just the destruction of the "bourgeois idyll," but also its ultimate fulfillment. The Eloi and the Morlocks, the two diametrically opposed humanoids that the Time Traveller encounters in the year 802,701, are species categories that have evolved from contemporary social classes. The wispy Eloi are a reification of the contemporary leisure class; the subterranean Morlocks are a reification of the contemporary working class; both represent the inevitable future of the "bourgeois idyll" and its social logic, which already seems to privilege professional identity—characters are known by their jobs: The Provincial Mayor, the Psychologist, the Medical Man, the Time Traveller himself—as though it were tantamount to species difference. The Time Traveller's tale confronts both the audience within the novel and the audience outside the novel (for whom the bourgeois figures are surrogates) with a "widening" of perspective: "it seemed clear as daylight to me," he remarks, "that the gradual widening of the present merely temporary and social difference between the Capitalist and the Labourer, was the key to the whole position" (75).

Yet the novel ends on a note of perspectival limitation. The Time Traveller has departed—and with him, any possible “nova” that might lend explanatory (or destabilizing) context to the near-term conditions of the human species. Solipsism takes over again, but also a strange form of comfort, for ignorance is bliss:

One cannot choose but wonder. Will he ever return? It may be that he swept back into the past, and fell among the blood-drinking, hairy savages of the Age of Unpolished Stone; into the abysses of the Cretaceous Sea; or among the grotesque saurians, the huge reptilian brutes of the Jurassic times. ... Or did he go forward, into one of the nearer ages, in which men are still men, but with the riddles of our own time answered and its wearisome problems solved? Into the manhood of the race: for I, for my own part, cannot think that these latter days of weak experiment, fragmentary theory, and mutual discord are indeed man's culminating time! I say, for my own part. He, I know—for the question had been discussed among us long before the Time Machine was made—thought but cheerlessly of the Advancement of Mankind, and saw in the growing pile of civilization only a foolish heaping that must inevitably fall back upon and destroy its makers in the end. If that is so, it remains for us to live as though it were not so. But to me the future is still black and blank—is a vast ignorance, lit at a few casual places by the memory of his story. And I have by me, for my comfort, two strange white flowers—shrivelled now, and brown and flat and brittle—to witness that even when mind and strength had gone, gratitude and a mutual tenderness still lived on in the heart of man. (87)

As though the narrator were sobering up, coming down from a transcendental high, the passage gradually narrows from possibility to actuality; from the optic of science fiction to the optic of realism; from the massively macroscopic vistas that the Time Traveller can access, to the world of concrete, empirical presence—“two strange white flowers”—that the narrator has at his immediate disposal. In this frame, the story of the human species cannot be viewed as anything but an upward trajectory; the human species itself cannot be viewed as anything but fixed, both biologically and ontologically: “men are still men.” But the novum recedes from view, as though its coexistence with the “bourgeois idyll” were necessarily untenable, and the narrator feels not despair but comfort at the “vast ignorance” of his own point of view. His perspective has been destabilized by the Time Traveller’s story, but it also remains structurally intact. It is simply flanked by chasms of darkness: the remote past and remote future, equally unfathomable.

The Island of Doctor Moreau does not end with the banishment of the novum; it ends, rather, with insanity. Prendick returns to London and sees animality everywhere—in “prowling women” who “mew after me”; in “furtive, craving men” who “glance jealously at me”; in “some library,” where “the intent faces over the books seemed but patient creatures waiting for prey” (87). He expresses a palpable desire to reject the new and self-destructive way of seeing humans that he was forced to adopt by his own narrative. But he fails to do so, and it is that failure that reveals *Moreau*’s fundamental divergence from the “two-world” formula of *The Time Machine*. *The Time Machine* is structured by a kind of genre physics that keeps the “bourgeois idyll” and the novum separate while placing them in dialectical confrontation; in *Moreau*, the worlds are one and the same. *The Time Machine*’s novum retains plausible deniability, the otherworldliness of fiction itself; in *Moreau*, the otherworld is simply another way of looking at this world, through the lens of biological variability and plasticity that Wells himself promoted in his nonfiction essays. *The Time Machine*’s two narrators—the unnamed professional and the Time Traveller himself—allow the two worlds to meet without interpenetrating; *Moreau* has one narrator, Prendick, and the novel stages an oscillation between perspectives *within* his point of view rather than through his encounter with an interlocutor. The novum cannot recede; instead, it must become a permanent part of the self. *Moreau* ends with only a tenuous form of perspectival reversion—indeed, a kind of insanity, rather than *The Time Machine*’s clean return to ignorance—because it is, at its core, an uneasy adaptation narrative.

In *Evolution and Imagination in Victorian Children’s Literature*, Jessica Straley argues that “the theory of recapitulation provided the nineteenth century with its most grandiose *Bildungsroman*”: stories of the cultivation of the individual became synecdochic reflections of the cultivation of the species (10). *Moreau* is structured by a version of this homology: in

addition to being a castaway narrative, it is a novel of education in which the intellectual growth of its protagonist and narrator resembles an evolutionary process.¹² Like *Jane Eyre*, Prendick narrates his own story from a position of retrospection, keen to describe his rougher earlier impressions of the island in ways that foreshadow conceptual and perspectival awakenings still to come. In the first pages of the novel, he describes his early impressions of Montgomery, the Beast Folk, and the island as marked by revulsion but also a “growing curiosity,” signaling that they will metamorphose over time (11). He apprehends everything at first through the clunky, totalizing hermeneutic of “strangeness”: “the strangeness of him was shaping itself in my mind,” he writes of Montgomery (12). Yet that phrase describes the feeling of “strangeness” itself as an evolving mental entity, subject to revision; not long after, he observes again that although “at first everything was so strange about me,” he would later learn to discern “the relative strangeness of this or that thing” (20). Like the Beast Folk, his mental categories undergo a transformation from stable epistemological units (“strangeness”) into a confusing spectrum of discrete variations (“the relative strangeness of this or that thing”). Of course, this transformation also happens precisely *because* of the Beast Folk. His education narrative is not just evolutionary in form; it is also galvanized by his encounters with evolutionary specimens. At their most assimilable or apprehensible, they allow him to develop new habits of mind: modes of sense and sensibility that even start to resemble the posthumanist intellectual formations required to maintain a post-Darwinian view of the human and the nonhuman. At their least assimilable, they produce stasis and confusion, a kind of intellectual trauma that can only result in his reversion to anthropocentric, category-based ways of seeing. Whereas a typical *bildungsroman* traces the

¹² In “Human Evolution: An Artificial Process,” Wells defined “education”—“the careful and systematic manufacture of the artificial factor in man”—as no less than the chief mechanism of evolution itself in our latter days as a species, after our biological forms had become more-or-less fixed (217).

gradual solidification of an individuated bourgeois subject, *Moreau* traces the subject's fitful, uneven dissolution into a "tangled bank" of uncategorizable lives. Adapting to the world of the Beast Folk necessarily entails the destabilization of the human "I".

The novel registers his mental growth most pervasively through the destabilization of the human *eye*: through the operations of the senses, charting his development from primarily sight-based ways of apprehending the world—ways that invariably mediate it—to other modalities less ineluctably wedded to the visible. At the beginning of the novel, Prendick is lost at sea, having barely survived the shipwreck of the *Lady Vain* and the cannibalism of his colleagues. He gets picked up by the *Ipecacuanha*, the ship carrying Montgomery and Moreau's next batch of animals, and as soon as he wakes up, he struggles to use his eyes to apprehend exactly what happened to him. At first, they seem to do the trick: "My eye caught my hand, thin so that it looked like a dirty skin-purse full of loose bones, and all the business of the boat came back to me," he writes (6). Sight is briefly a vehicle of memory, as well as self-estrangement. Yet the early pages of the novel are full of moments in which his sight is unable to produce any stable understanding of the present or future. He stares at Montgomery and finds vacant "watery grey eyes, oddly void of expression" (6). He stares at the ship's crew—a small cadre of Beast Folk—and immediately registers them as "misshapen" humans: "He was, I could see, a misshapen man, short, broad, and clumsy, with a crooked back, a hairy neck, and a head sunk between his shoulders" (8). Sight establishes his presumption that they are animalized humans rather than humanized animals, which will mislead him for many chapters until Moreau directly tells him the unsettling truth.

Prendick is a Crusoe figure in these early pages, attempting to use sight—in the absence of any other tools—to survey his environment and categorize its dangers (the first problem

Crusoe faces is the night, because it might bring with it “wild Creatures” he cannot see [61]). But the problem with sight on *this* island is not simply that it is unreliable, but that it lends itself to the construction of anthropocentric dichotomies, foremost among them between categorizing self and categorizable other. When Prendick reaches the island, he takes a closer look at the Beast Folk assisting Moreau (the “Evil-Looking Boatmen,” according to the chapter title) and tries to make sense of them visually:

I saw only their faces, yet there was something in their faces—I knew not what—that gave me a queer spasm of disgust. I looked steadily at them, and the impression did not pass, though I failed to see what had occasioned it. They seemed to me then to be brown men; but their limbs were oddly swathed in some thin, dirty, white stuff down even to the fingers and feet: I have never seen men so wrapped up before, and women so only in the East. They wore turbans, too, and thereunder peered out their elfin faces at me—faces with protruding lower jaws and bright eyes. They had lank black hair, almost like horsehair, and seemed as they sat to exceed in stature any race of men I have seen ... As I stared at them, they met my gaze; and then first one and then another turned away from my direct stare, and looked at me in an odd, furtive manner. (17)

Prendick’s investigation is highly deductive, even if it purports to be inductive: rather than attending to the particulars of the creatures’ anatomy and then considering what they might suggest, his steady “gaze” is a series of attempts to reconcile their visual features with existing categories of being that are separate from his own. It is clearly a colonialist gaze: as Tim Youngs has pointed out, Wells sometimes “comes close to constructing a critical allegory of colonialism” when he depicts Prendick’s struggle (and failure) to insert the Beast Folk into comfortable racial categories (“The Plasticity of Living Forms” 97-98). He *wants* to be able to call them “savages,” or turban-wearing Orientals, or another “race of men.” Likewise, he is all-too-willing to regard Moreau favorably and dismiss his immorality, even after hearing his vile plans, when he looks upon the butcher and sees “a white-faced, white haired man” (51).¹³

¹³ In original draft of the novel, the ending of “Dr. Moreau Explains” is much less a moment of visual and racial identification: “He laid his hand pleasantly on my shoulder, & became suddenly a graceful friendly gentleman”

More broadly, however, Prendick's gaze is a taxonomical gaze that falters precisely, and tellingly, when it is met by the gaze of another creature. In "A Vision of the Past" (1887) an early narrative essay that anticipated *The Time Machine*, Wells' narrator, a paleontologist, has a dream in which he encounters large reptilian humanoids in a distant primeval world—our precursors from another era, momentarily dominant yet doomed to extinction. Like Prendick, he sees one and immediately attempts to ascertain its nature by sight, only to be frustrated by its aliveness and its ability to reciprocate:

With the intent to benefit science, I attempted to identify the nature of this creature; but, being only accustomed to identify by means of bones and of teeth, I could not do so in this case, because its bones were hidden by its flesh, and because a certain diffidence, that I now feel inclined to regret, prevented any examination of its teeth.

After a time this uncouth beast began slowly to turn round towards me, and then, indeed, I beheld what appeared to me more surprising than all the other grotesque features I had observed; for this strange beast had three eyes, one being in the centre of its forehead; and it looked at me with all three in such a manner that the strangest feelings of fear and trembling were aroused within me (154)

Here, too, Wells presents the cataloguing gaze of the paleontologist not just as more deductive than it is inductive—his investigations are riven with leaps to various premature and moralizing conclusions: the beast is "uncouth," "grotesque"—but also as incompatible with interspecies coexistence.¹⁴ In some ways, the essay anticipates John Berger's "Why Look at Animals?", which begins by imagining the fruitfulness of an asymmetrical exchange of gazes between the human and the nonhuman in a primeval environment. But it really anticipates the back half of

(135). It is telling that the final novel foregrounds Prendick's sight and Moreau's race as the sources of his moral mollification.

¹⁴ Wells' satire of the paleontological method here is somewhat odd considering how much faith he would later express in paleontology's inductive ability to reconstruct the past. In his later essay "The Discovery of the Future" (1902), he proclaimed, "We know to-day, quite as confidently and in many respects more intimately than we know Sargon or Zenobia or Caractacus, the form and the habits of creatures that no living being has ever met, that no human eye has ever regarded, and the character of scenery that no man has ever seen or can ever possibly see ... I doubt no more about the facts in this farther picture than I do about those in the nearest. I believe in the megatherium which I have never seen as confidently as I believe in the hippopotamus that has engulfed buns from my hand" (28-29).

Berger's argument, which is about capitalism's replacement of eye-contact with what Una Chaudhuri has called "a regime of alienated visuality," a unidirectional looking-at ("Interspecies Diplomacy in Anthropocenic Waters" 146). Wells presents sight as a mechanism of dominance that prefers dead things to live things, precisely because dead things can be catalogued—which makes it all the more ironic, of course, that the reptilian has one more eye than the human.

The Island of Doctor Moreau establishes other senses, however, as potential vehicles of interspecies contact, hybridity, and even empathy. Sounds proliferate in the novel's early pages (and all throughout), often directly following references to sight: "then just overhead came a sound like an iron bedstead being knocked about, and the low angry growling of some large animal"; "I heard the unseen dogs growl furiously"; "the growling overhead was renewed, so suddenly and with so much savage anger that it startled me" (6-8). Prendick at first regards these sounds as noises, bothersome and indistinguishable: "I thought slowly. (I was distracted now by the yelping of a number of dogs)" (6). He brackets them in a parenthetical, separated from the operations of "thought." But even at an early stage, he starts attending to them more and more, and finds in them subtle evocations of the hybridity of the Beast Folk that are not available to the eye: "then the noise overhead began again, a snarling growl and the voice of a human being together" (6). If sight can only recall the past, sound offers some hint of what he will find in the near future. It becomes a crucial means of apprehending danger, too, as does smell: Prendick only figures out what Moreau is up to when he smells "a curious faint odour, the halitus of something familiar, an odour that had been in the background of my consciousness hitherto"—"the antiseptic odour of the dissecting-room" (22).

Prendick's sensory changes resemble a form of becoming-animal: as the narrative continues, his *umwelt* seems to overlap more and more with the phenomenological lifeworlds of

the Beast Folk, who rely less on sight than on hearing and smell. Right before he enters the clearing where the Beast Folk recite their law, he follows his Virgilian guide, the ape-man, into a passageway that allegorizes his regression to a more beastlike mode of perception:

It was extremely dark, this passage, after the blinding sunlight reflected from the sulphurous ground. Its walls grew steep, and approached each other. Blotches of green and crimson drifted across my eyes. My conductor stopped suddenly. "Home!" said he, and I stood in a floor of a chasm that was at first absolutely dark to me. I heard some strange noises, and thrust the knuckles of my left hand into my eyes. I became aware of a disagreeable odor, like that of a monkey's cage ill-cleaned. Beyond, the rock opened again upon a gradual slope of sunlit greenery, and on either hand the light smote down through narrow ways into the central gloom. (36)

Grotesque imagery is common throughout *Moreau*, but this "passage" (both literal and textual) seems designed to present grotesqueness of a specific kind. Narrow, dark, covered in "blotches of green and crimson," suffused with "a disagreeable odor, like that of a monkey's cage ill-cleaned," it strongly resembles a giant rectal passage—a place of waste and excretion that Prendick must travel into, willingly, if he is to understand the Beast Folk and their ways. On the one hand, his progression into this place involves an implicit *regression* from the bipedal rectitude of the human into the sense-world of quadrupeds, who move through the world "on all-fours" (as the Law reminds us) and, for lack of a better way of putting it, smell one another's asses (another thing the Law forbids). On the other hand, as Kristevan psychoanalytic theory reminds us, his progression into a place of abjection also suggests the dissolution of an ontological boundary that abjection typically maintains: the boundary between self and other, or more particularly between self and the abjected part of the self (in this case, the animal part of the self). The abject, Kristeva writes, is not "lack of cleanliness or health ... but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite" (*Powers of Horror* 4). Prendick's descent into the sense-world of the

Beast Folk is a descent into their liminality—even if they themselves are constantly, strenuously, attempting to abject that sense-world and maintain the visual rectitude of humans.¹⁵

Wells was fond of regression. In the essay “Zoological Retrogression,” he celebrated it as a crucial mechanism of evolution, especially for species faced with the prospect of their own extinction, suggesting that even the august human species—nature’s “extreme expression”—can trace its ancestry to a primeval “mud-fish” that survived because it retreated from Darwinian conflict and took the low road (246). “Just as the ascidian had retired from an open sea too crowded and full of danger to make life worth the trouble,” he writes, “so in that older epoch did the mud-fish. They preferred dirt, discomfort, and survival to a gallant fight and death. Very properly, then, they would be classed in our zoologist’s scheme as a degenerate group” (252). In purely strategic terms, Prendick’s sensory regression would seem to constitute a form of species plasticity—and mental plasticity—that resembles the wily survivalism of the mud-fish. After all, the Beast Folk outnumber him. Moreau dies because of his brute-force attempts to maintain supremacy and distinction. Montgomery dies, conversely, because of his brute-force attempts at assimilation: his drunken attempts to erase all boundaries swiftly and artificially through Dionysian frenzy (it is his alcoholism that makes Prendick consider him “half-akin to these Beast Folk, unfitted for human kindred” [72]). Only Prendick survives—“The last,” Montgomery murmurs to him, “the last of this silly universe”—because of the adaptations he has undergone. He tries at first to maintain order in the way that Moreau maintained it, by playacting as God. But they eventually stop worshipping him, and he admits that homeostasis, rather than hierarchy,

¹⁵ Moreau’s supplanting of sight—a tool of human mastery—with other senses recalls Cary Wolfe’s description of the project of Derrida’s *Memoirs of the Blind*: “to reframe the question of the visual . . . to cut it loose from its indexical relation to the human, to reason, and to the representational mastery of space itself, and set it adrift within the generalized animal sensorium as ‘merely’ the equal of the dog’s sense of smell or the horse’s sense of touch” (*What is Posthumanism?* 133).

is what keeps him alive. “We were in just the state of equilibrium that would remain in one of those ‘Happy Family’ cages which animal-tamers exhibit, if the tamer were to leave it for ever,” he observes (82). The absence of the “animal-tamer” in this analogy reflects the relative absence of a certain kind of self—the disciplinary “I” and its instrument, the categorizing eye—in the life he shares with the Beast Folk. Like a “‘Happy Family’ cage,” or the Biblical image of the Peaceable Kingdom, this interspecies arrangement is tenuous and fragile, utopian, not built to last.¹⁶ But the conditions that enable it are what matters: above all, Prendick’s immersion in a perspective that recognizes his own difference as a matter of degree rather than kind.

In one sense, then, Prendick’s adaptation narrative offers the moral of Darwinism as Wells perceived it: he survives because he is plastic, because he is willing to regress, because he is willing to forego anthropocentrism’s dangerously static modes of sensory apprehension and self-understanding. In other ways, however, his narrative offers something much more intriguing: a vision of Darwinian morality—a moral sensibility compatible, that is, with the manifold liminalities of a post-Darwinian perspective. Two of the novel’s middle chapters center on moments in which Prendick hears the same creature, the puma, crying; one is called “The Crying of the Puma,” while the other is called “The Crying of the Man.” The former chapter culminates in a moment of recognition that reveals not just the development of his sense of hearing, but also the development of his faculties of sympathy. As the puma yells in pain, Prendick is irritated at first: “I flung aside a crib of Horace I had been reading, and began to clench my fists, to bite my lips, and to pace the room. Presently I got to stopping my ears with my fingers” (24). But he then begins to find a voice of suffering in what was once noise:

¹⁶ Wells is referring to a common street entertainment in mid- to late-nineteenth century London that involved displaying animals that were ostensibly foes—predator and prey—in the same cage.

The emotional appeal of those yells grew upon me steadily, grew at last to such an exquisite expression of suffering that I could stand it in that confined room no longer. I stepped out of the door into the slumberous heat of the late afternoon, and walking past the main entrance—locked again, I noticed—turned the corner of the wall.

The crying sounded even louder out of doors. It was as if all the pain in the world had found a voice. Yet had I known such pain was in the next room, and had it been dumb, I believe—I have thought since—I could have stood it well enough. It is when suffering finds a voice and sets our nerves quivering that this pity comes troubling us.

(24)

Prendick's recognition of animal suffering in this moment strongly resembles the mode of moral attentiveness advocated by eighteenth-century sensibility, a discourse recently unpacked by Tobias Menely in *The Animal Claim*. In Menely's account, the philosophers and poets of sensibility (who were also, ironically, the philosophers and poets of Enlightenment humanism) responded to the moral inadequacy and the naked speciesism of Descartes' *bete-machine* hypothesis by formulating philosophical doctrines around the apprehension of the "cry of nature"—around an attentiveness to, rather than a rejection of, the animal voice. Sensibility "[valorized] ... a communicativity that begins in the passivity of the passions and stands always in excess of conventional meaning"; it prioritized the cries of animals over reasoned speech; it was, above all, a doctrine (and a poetics) of attentiveness (9). Because sight is a medium of discrimination, and because it supersedes sound in our moral imaginaries, it has a way of masking the suffering of other creatures; a "regime of alienated visuality" reduces what could be

a voice to background noise.¹⁷ Because sound is diffuse, encompassing, and inscrutably demanding—because it awakens vestiges of a prelinguistic “communicativity” *in* the self-differentiating human subject—it can be a better medium of recognizing the “creatureliness” we share with other forms of life: a “condition of shared ontological equivalence, a shared susceptibility to injury” (10). At this moment in the novel, Prendick elides distinctions that might otherwise impede moral action. To him, the cry of the puma is not the cry of “a puma,” or even of “an animal,” but of a *living being*; its voice of suffering seems to stand in synecdochically for “all the pain in the world.” Pivoting to sound from sight, prioritizing sound *over* sight, gives him access to a mode of sympathy better suited to a post-Darwinian world of liminal variations—a world of lives rather than types. He can attend to the puma’s suffering without having to ask what the puma is.

Adopting a species-less point of view, mediated by sound, brings Prendick closer not just to the moral framework of sensibility (which involves an almost indiscriminate attentiveness to all biosemiotic signs of suffering) but also to “moral individualism,” the moral framework that James Rachels has identified as most compatible with Darwinism: a way of valuing individual creatures on their own terms, according to their capabilities rather than the categories they happen to inhabit. Within this framework, “how an individual should be treated depends on his or her own particular characteristics, rather than on whether he or she is a member of some preferred group—even the ‘group’ of human beings” (Rachels, *Created from Animals* 5). Prendick can attend to the puma because it has the capacity to cry in pain, which reflects an equal (and shared) capacity to feel pain. And yet, Ursula Heise raises an important objection to

¹⁷ “On the carcass we feed, without remorse, because the dying struggles of the butchered creature are secluded from our sight; *because his cries pierce not our ear, because his agonizing shrieks sink not into our soul,*” wrote the vegetarian activist John Oswald in 1791 (Qtd. in Menely 204).

Rachels' attempts to formulate a more individualistic, post-Darwinian morality: "It is difficult to imagine ... how one could possibly determine what the 'welfare' of a particular individual means without reference to species" (*Imagining Extinction* 138). Prendick's run-ins with the Thing demonstrate Heise's point: it is perhaps even more difficult to imagine him attending to the individual "welfare" of a being that seems to escape categories altogether. Even his post-species morality involves some level of attachment—some sort of "reference"—to species as a heuristic, to a grid of legible types.

As though to further accentuate this point, "The Crying of the Puma" is echoed by its opposite: "The Crying of the Man." The second chapter about the puma's cry depicts an entirely different form of moral responsiveness, suggesting that Prendick cannot maintain a post-species moral sensibility for very long:

But this time it was not the cry of a puma. I put down the mouthful that hesitated upon my lips, and listened. Silence, save for the whisper of the morning breeze. I began to think my ears had deceived me.

After a long pause I resumed my meal, but with my ears still vigilant. Presently I heard something else, very faint and low. I sat as if frozen in my attitude. Though it was faint and low, it moved me more profoundly than all that I had hitherto heard of the abominations behind the wall. There was no mistake this time in the quality of the dim, broken sounds; no doubt at all of their source. For it was groaning, broken by sobs and gasps of anguish. It was no brute this time; it was a human being in torment!

This change in Prendick's perceptions is partly due to Moreau's efforts: the puma's cry sounds human at this point because its vocal cords have been molded into quasi-human form. But the key irony of the passage (and of these two mirroring chapters more generally) is that the change in Prendick's perceptions, his regression to an anthropocentric mode of moral recognition and adjudication, actually *depends on* his adaptation to new and more 'animal' ways of perceiving. The very sense that Prendick had employed earlier to recognize the shared suffering—the "shared susceptibility to injury"—of another creature becomes a mechanism of distinction and

categorization: he can sense that “it was not the cry of a puma”; he can sense that “it was no brute this time,” but “a human being in torment.” Spontaneously, organically, almost gleefully, his mind finds a way to recover anthropocentrism in the dissolute disarray of his new sensorium. It is as though anthropocentrism itself were the mud-fish: a wily, primitive, plastic species capable of adapting to changing cognitive circumstances.

As the Beast Folk revert gradually (if spasmodically) into mere animals toward the end of the novel, Prendick reverts more and more to the idea of his own distinction, betraying a palpable happiness whenever they seem to reenter categorical cages that they had previously vacated. Following the period of his intermingling with them, he arrives at definitions of them that seem to acknowledge their idiosyncrasy: “Of course,” he confidently asserts, “these creatures did not decline into such beasts as the reader has seen in zoological gardens—into ordinary bears, wolves, tigers, oxen, swine and apes. There was still something strange about each” (82). But even that summation reveals the durability of species categories as his own explanatory and representational apparatus; he can only make sense of—and narrate—the most stable and domesticated of them by pinning them against broadly familiar zoological phenotypes (the “Leopard-man”; the “Ape-man”; “three Swine-men and a Swine-woman”). He becomes particularly fond of the “Saint-Bernard-man,” not only because it becomes his faithful companion against the horde of indeterminates but also because it offers both existential and epistemological comfort when it reverts to dogginess. “There was something very suggestive of a dog in the cringing attitude of the creature,” he observes. “It retreated a little way, very like a dog being sent home, and stopped, looking at me imploringly with canine brown eyes” (78). Prendick is grateful for the opportunity to defer to canine essentialism, finding evidence in his companion not just of a biological species but of a cultural archetype: in the dog he finds the ur-Dog, a

creature intrinsically accountable to the human and instinctually responsive to the language of punishment and guilt. *Canis familiaris* gives him recourse to other forms of familiarity, enabling him to project some semblance of the bourgeois domestic interior onto the island's endless biological and ontological chaos.

The novel's darkest implication may be that it subsists, in the end, on these moments of conceptual regression. In "The Crying of the Man," Prendick's recognition of a "human being in torment" spurs him directly to moral action: "As I realized this I rose, and in three steps had crossed the room, seized the handle of the door into the yard, and flung it open before me" (32). In "The Crying of the Puma," Prendick's recognition of "all the pain in the world" in the puma's wailing leads, conversely, to antinarrative stasis, even a kind of suspended lyric time: "But in spite of the brilliant sunlight and the green fans of the trees waving in the soothing sea-breeze, the world was a confusion, blurred with drifting black and red phantasms, until I was out of earshot of the house in the chequered wall" (24). The parts of the story in which Prendick achieves homeostasis with his fellow-creatures, maintaining ontological equilibrium in the "'Happy Family' cage," are also (and not coincidentally) the parts that get papered over by iterative narration, excised from the plot. There is a "gap of time," Prendick tells us, that he will not narrate, "ten months I spent as an intimate of these half-humanised brutes" (80). There is an implied causal relationship between the two parts of this statement: it *is* a "gap of time," unnarratable, because he was their "intimate," indistinguishable from them. In *Moreau*, the plot seems to grind to a halt—to diffuse into lyric time—when Prendick recognizes his own liminality, his intimacy and kinship with the Beast Folk; it restarts again when he finds a way, however tenuous, to recognize the human species. A question emerges from this relationship: Why does the novel seem to correlate loss of species with lack of plot? A larger question

emerges, too, that would seem to complicate the critical premise—shared among critics such as Gillian Beer, George Levine, Jessica Straley, et al.—that Darwinism dovetailed harmoniously, if complexly, with the nineteenth century’s various forms of emplotment: Can plot even exist in a posthumanist conceptual framework? Or does it depend inevitably, hopelessly, atavistically, on the anthropocentric concepts of agency and identity that get erased in a posthumanist world?

Wells does not answer this question completely. What he does suggest through Prendick’s perspectival adaptations and equivocations—and through the implication that species categories and narrative continuity are intertwined—is that accepting a post-Darwinian view of the human animal requires more than the complete abjuration of anthropocentrism; indeed, he suggests that such an abjuration is impossible. Rather, it requires acknowledging and even accepting the inescapability of anthropocentrism. It requires maintaining the uneasy stereoscopy of *Moreau* itself: keeping one eye on the human as a species—keeping one eye *above* the human—but knowing that the other eye will always see from a human point of view. Prendick arrives at the end of the novel torn between posthumanism and anthropocentrism—between an outward perspective that sees the contingency of the human species in utter clarity, and an upward perspective that hopes for the mere existence (and perhaps the eventual revelation) of ontological distinction, something that “is more than animal within us,” which he hopes to find among the stars. This latter perspective is, of course, susceptible to irony in a few ways. Readers of Wells’ next scientific romance, *The First Men in the Moon*, would know that outer space offers little solace for those seeking the reification of the human-nonhuman binary; readers of Tennyson would know that the human species does not fare well when viewed from a cosmic perspective that renders Man a speck of dust.¹⁸ But Wells, at the end of *Moreau*, is not interested

¹⁸ “With great economy,” writes Philmus, Wells “brings into confrontation the anthropocentric view of the world and the cosmic perspective which perceives man as ‘less than an iota in the infinite universe’”—a perspective

in the reality of anthropocentrism; he is interested in the necessity and the inevitability of its resurgence. He is interested in precisely what Prendick says: that if he could not maintain the “hope” that in “the vast and eternal laws of matter”—and not in the contingent and mutable laws of the terrestrial world—he might find some basis for anthropocentrism once again, he would not be able to “live” (87). The novel’s depiction (or rather, non-depiction) of the plotlessness of a posthumanist perspective gives us a better understanding of what this line means. In the absence of a stable category of the human, Prendick experiences not just a dissolution of self but a paralyzing excess of vision. He is unable to do anything except *observe* in a way that elides the disciplinary and epistemological boundary between people-watching and zoology; he is transfixed by hybridities, liminalities, humans on the verge of becoming something else. Not having a category of the human means he can acknowledge the inhumanity of the human world, but it also means he cannot live in the human world.

One of the most memorable moments in Boswell’s *Life of Johnson* is when he recalls how Johnson refuted Bishop Berkeley’s subjective idealism. In Berkeley’s view, there were no material things; all objects in the universe are ideas, ontologically coextensive with the human mind. It was a monistic, totalizing philosophy, horrifying in its lack of distinctions—and also horrifying in its irrefutability: walking out of church, Boswell observed to Johnson that they could be confident in their intuitive sense that “Bishop Berkeley’s ingenious sophistry” is “not true,” but could never reject it fully (333). But Johnson did refute it: “I shall never forget the alacrity with which Johnson answered, striking his foot with mighty force against a large stone, till he rebounded from it—‘I refute it *thus*’” (333). There is a moment in *The Island of Doctor Moreau* that echoes this anecdote, intentionally or unintentionally. Prendick is being chased by

Philmus even goes on to compare to “Tennyson’s ‘sad astrology’” (*H.G. Wells: Early Writings in Science and Science Fiction* 14).

the repugnant Thing that elides categories of any kind (suggesting a world without categories of any kind), and his foot runs into the reliable form of a stone:

I could see the Thing rather more distinctly now. It was no animal, for it stood erect. At that I opened my mouth to speak, and found a hoarse phlegm choked my voice. I tried again, and shouted, "Who is there?" There was no answer. I advanced a step. The Thing did not move, only gathered itself together. My foot struck a stone. That gave me an idea. Without taking my eyes off the black form before me, I stooped and picked up this lump of rock. (29)

As it did for Johnson, geology here offers some refuge to a mind on the verge of madness—a mind more specifically on the verge of what Elizabeth Sewell, in her study of nonsense, called "oneness," an enveloping sense of categoryless disorder that "cannot be resolved into its component parts because it never had any distinguishable parts in the first place" (*The Field of Nonsense* 51).¹⁹ There is a notable inversion of the Johnsonian situation: anthropocentrism—the *ultimate* anthropocentrism: the idea that the whole universe is a creation of the human mind—was the totalizing problem for Johnson; the dissolution of the human, a threat to anthropocentrism, is the problem for Prendick. But the solutions are similar. Whereas the Thing represents the awakening of a new and disastrously indeterminate ontology, the stone literally confronts Prendick with the reassurance of something solid, discrete, and other. "Who is there?" is an unanswerable question when facing the void-like "black form" of the Thing; it becomes answerable when Prendick grasps hold of a rock and, like Johnson, feels it asserting its *own* distinction through Newton's third law. Geology provides the ammunition that Prendick needs to (literally) combat the paralyzing, all-consuming idea that there is no fundamental distinction between him and the categoryless creaturely world.

Yet all the rocks in *Moreau* are volcanic, and volcanic rocks, to Wells, would have been connected metonymically to the lessons of the geologist who specialized in them. It was in his

¹⁹ See Chapter 3 for a more extensive discussion of Sewell's theory of nonsense in relation to evolution.

study of volcanoes that Judd most extensively argued that even the most seemingly solid forms “pass into one another by the most insensible gradations” (*Volcanoes* 23). The irony of the scene is that in his battle with a fluid Thing, an allegory for fluidity itself, Prendick reaches for a fluid thing. This certainly does not dawn on Prendick, however, in a moment of physical immediacy and existential danger; he apprehends the rock squarely within a human temporality, as something solid, definite, delimited, concrete. And this may be the scene’s larger point, staged through a mischievous form of dramatic irony that is itself complexly stereoscopic: the vista of deep time—which reveals the fluidity of the stone—might be accessible in moments of withdrawal, inaction, speculative abstraction, but it is incompatible with the temporality of survival. It might be accessible to a distant reader, but it will only be accessible in fragments of lyric time to an active and self-interested protagonist. It might even be necessary for the survival of the species, as Wells suggests both in his essays and throughout the novel: Prendick’s mental plasticity, his ability to apprehend the fluidity of species, is his most important and evolving trait. But mental rigidity remains a powerful refuge and a powerful weapon. Anthropocentrism is the human’s most tenacious and atavistic tendency; it will always return when threatened with its opposite. The novel’s project is to reveal this dynamic by representing expansions and contractions—evolutions and regressions—of vision, tracing the dialectic of posthumanism as it plays out in a human life. The plasticity of *Moreau* itself might be the most instructive plasticity of all.

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