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Burn after Reading: Animal Terrorism in Duncan the Wonder Dog: Show One

Abstract

At present, the tradition of the animal fable remains strong in popular narrative even as the narrative arts, on the whole, remain marginal to the field of animal studies. *Duncan the Wonder Dog: Show One*, Adam Hines's 2010 graphic novel, sets a new course for the animal fable and constitutes an unexpected intervention in our conceptions of animals and our relation to them. Hines constructs a world where animals can speak to humans, but are treated much as they are today in the era of the factory farm. He then paints a vivid, complex picture of animal terrorists who resist human oppression. Through his images of animal terrorism, which disrupt the reader's typical relation to animal fables, Hines not only overturns an ancient tradition of anthropomorphism in narrative, but also challenges some of the assumptions of contemporary animal studies. *Duncan the Wonder Dog: Show One* thus demands attention as a radical text that exceeds the bounds both of the beast fable and of contemporary philosophy on human-animal relations.

Keywords

Comics studies, Graphic novels, Animal Studies

Burn after Reading: Animal Terrorism in *Duncan the Wonder Dog: Show One*

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There is perhaps no clearer testimony to the currency of the animal fable than Disney's recent *Beauty and the Beast*, a remake of the 1991 film of the same name. For most of this live action film's running time, the actors playing the Beast's enchanted household give their voices to digitally generated characters; they are then restored to their physical bodies by the dénouement. In this arrangement, the digital and the beastly are wondrous, but ultimately secondary, phenomena. They are initially celebrated for their capacity to express the non- or sub-human by human means and are subsequently set aside to assert the primacy of the human itself. The spectacular success of this arrangement (the film has grossed over a billion dollars worldwide) reminds us that despite constant intellectual investigation of the posthuman in recent decades, the realm of popular narrative remains strongly invested in the human/non-human binary. And as in previous eras, the other-than-human, which must be expelled from the heart (and from the heart of narrative) in order for the human to be asserted, is expressed in the category of the beast. In short, the animal fable in its traditional role—to express what is human—is still very much with us.

The persistence of the beast fable as an anthropomorphic instrument might suggest, in turn, why the realm of animal studies—which tasks itself with making new categories of the human, of the other-than-human, and of the relations among these categories—does not set much store by the arts. In a survey of the field of animal studies, Dawne McCance notes that there is a “strong opinion . . . within the field that critical animal studies is properly philosophical, in the Anglo-American sense, and thus not the purview of the literary and visual arts” (122). While there are exceptions to this claim, it is nevertheless true that as a means to articulate human-animal relations, the arts are granted a limited role in animal studies at present.¹ In the coda of this essay, I will consider what the marginalization of the arts might teach us about both animal studies and contemporary animal fictions. For the moment I simply note that in animal studies, as in the popular narratives it implicitly critiques or rejects, no one has been waiting for a new kind of animal fable, one that would challenge the traditional inclination to anthropomorphism.

Nevertheless, such a fable has arrived, and in what many would consider the unlikely form of a talking-animal comic: Adam Hines's 400-page graphic novel *Duncan the Wonder Dog: Show One*. A video game maker previously unpublished in comics, Hines has stated that *Show One* is the first of nine volumes; given their likely rate of completion, the series will take his lifespan to finish. However, even in this first installment, published in 2010, Hines expresses, and realizes, an

extraordinary ambition to challenge and overturn the beast fable's traditional anthropomorphism. The advent of *Show One* is, I will demonstrate, a watershed in the history of the animal fable, and of contemporary fiction.

Though it has not generated ongoing critical and academic study—an unfortunate fact this essay is intended to help correct—*Show One* was acclaimed in the world of comics and received a modicum of attention elsewhere, leading to a number of revelatory interviews with Hines. In one such interview given in 2011, Hines is asked how he sees himself in relation to Aesop. Seldom does a contemporary artist prompt readers or critics to evoke the greatest name in the Western tradition of animal fabulism, but Hines does not shy away from the question and takes it as an opportunity to specify the ambition driving *Show One*:

I think the main difference between Aesop's intentions and my own (if I may be so bold as to ascribe Aesop's intentions), is that his stories don't actually require animal protagonists [and are] allegorical . . . meant to be applied to any situation where [they] may ring true. . . . *Duncan the Wonder Dog's* anecdotes [are not] . . . similarly spread . . . [W]hen I talk about cows being slaughtered, I mean to talk about cows being slaughtered, and not to invoke every situation where there is a clear and terrible misuse of power. ("Talking Animals" 46)

While this answer might initially suggest that Hines's focus on the exploitation of animals is merely a self-imposed limitation of scope, what it actually indicates, in its glaring reference to factory farming, is the massive historical change that has separated classical animal fabulists from their descendants in the present. The latter face the challenge of addressing the contemporary condition of animals, billions of whose lives and deaths have become more miserable than can easily be conceived.

Because of this "clear and terrible misuse of power," Hines suggests, the broad topical "spread" of Aesop's work is no longer appropriate. In fact, the animal fable as traditionally defined has become newly troubling; as Hines observes in another interview, "just making [animals] talk is going to cut out half of their real world 'otherness'" ("Talking with Hines"). Given his concern with the present condition of animals, this remark implies that using animal figures to discuss human concerns can partake of an ongoing system of domination earlier generations of storytellers could not have imagined and that contemporary animal fabulists must reckon with this problem.

Yet as Hines understands it, such a reckoning is not easily achieved; it forces a confrontation with the paradoxes that can overtake even the most conscientious attempts to tell stories about animals. Hines notes that the animal-related "stories and fables" featured in *Show One* are meant to indicate "the difference in what we humans would take away from such a parable and what an

animal would” (“Talking Animals” 46). Readers of *Show One* will note passages in which Hines offers a fresh look at stories about animals through some form of intratextual commentary, and typically it is his non-human characters that offer alternate interpretations.² Hines thus invites readers to notice how traditional beast fables can erase the presence and significance of animals rather than giving them voice. However, imagining animals that comprehend and interpret human stories—even if this is done in order to protest anthropomorphism—obviously means representing animals in ways that humanize and distort, since fictional animals share the consciousness, and the language, of human readers precisely in order to communicate on their terms.

By his own account, the development of *Duncan the Wonder Dog*, which began as a series of comics Hines started in childhood, has brought this problem into increasingly sharp focus:

[At first] the animals portrayed were basically humans in costumes: they all walked upright, drove cars, had jobs, wore clothes. As I got older, the comic changed, and the animals were stripped of various anthropomorphisms, until slowly but surely only their speech was left. . . . [I]t wasn't so much a decision to make them talk as it was the last bit of unreality (excluding their human-like intelligence) that I kept. (“Talking Animals” 46)

Concerned to avoid the Aesopian practice of representing human concerns in animal guise, Hines nevertheless makes his animal characters speak human language, expressing thoughts that human readers can (at least partly) understand, despite the fact that the “unreality” of this procedure is insufficient, a point Hines has reiterated in other interviews.³

Hines's insistence on the “unreality” of his narrative tactics helps prepare us for the complex, self-opposed dynamics of *Show One*. Throughout its considerable length, this comic feels driven by a need for radical narrative innovation. As we will see, Hines's animals say unprecedented and striking things that vividly express both the otherness of their consciousness and the suffering to which humans subject them. At the same time, *Show One*—as might be expected, given its author's insistence on its failures—manifests a discontent with its own procedures and is weighted by a sense that its representations of animals should, but cannot, totally avoid the trap of anthropomorphic narcissism.

A signal achievement of *Show One* is the way its creator grasps this dilemma as both a pressing creative problem and a fundamentally historical one. Hines is convinced that in the present era of large-scale exploitation of animals, any human attempts to speak for them should surpass ordinary representational limits. Yet attempts at new kinds of fictions will reinscribe those limits in some fashion, a problem that, in the present more than ever, precipitates a crisis of narrative

authority. While storytellers find themselves especially obligated to speak of the atrocities committed against animals at this historical moment, the very magnitude of these atrocities calls into question the moral legitimacy of the animal fable, with its anthropomorphic tendencies. Those who see the destruction of an actual animal and the transmission of an animal fable as unrelated will reject this logic and wonder if the Aesopian tradition has really been thrown into crisis. Hines, however, is committed to a totalizing view of the era of the factory farm and sees even the most well-intentioned human fictions about animals as potentially implicated in it.

Describing his development towards his current viewpoint, Hines speaks in terms of an expanding awareness that, like his comics, began in childhood: “I think once I started learning about what the food was and where the clothes came from and what extinction was and on and on it just overran me” (“Talking with Hines”). In *Show One*, the problem of domination often “overruns” the distinction between material exploitation and fictive anthropomorphism. Hines amplifies the paradox he sees so that the creative impulse to make new narratives about animals and the critical impulse to judge all such narratives insufficient feed into one another; ultimately, *Show One* offers itself as a story that must be read and ought to be destroyed.

The degree of Hines’s influence may depend partly on whether *Duncan the Wonder Dog* receives the academic attention it merits. Should the volumes that follow meet the expectations set by *Show One*, scholars may find it increasingly difficult to overlook them. In advance of such attention, my coda will offer Hines’s radically self-critical work as a model for thinking about the moral standing of the human speaker—whether artist, scientist or philosopher—in relation to animals. *Show One*, I will suggest, collapses our distance from the overwhelming realities of contemporary human destruction of animals and challenges the idea that we can redeem ourselves through engagement with these realities. Thus, I will suggest, *Show One* offers radical and transformative points of contact between animal studies and contemporary fiction.

But first I consider the ways Hines works out the problems of contemporary animal fabulism, along with some formal and historical aspects of comics that might shape our understanding of what Hines is attempting. As suggested by my title, I believe the key achievement of *Show One* is an animal terrorist, a Barbary macaque named Pompeii, who is central to the paradoxes Hines explores. Some context will be needed for this figure, whose attitudes and actions are best understood against the background of the world Hines creates. Working on this background, and on the introductory gestures above, I have become increasingly aware of the pressure the character of Pompeii exerts on any serious attempt to read *Show One*. In one sense, my own dilatory opening gestures are in accord with Hines’s narrative, which sprawls and digresses in non-linear fashion, inventing and dropping characters and plotlines in profusion and inviting a kind of wandering

attention from the reader. In another sense—here the paradox of Hines’s project is felt keenly—such reading must at all times admit the urgency of what is at stake in attempting to imagine new human-animal relations, and this urgency is strongest in relation to the animal terrorist. While creating a context for Pompeii, I have grown conscious of how impatiently she might react to my opening gestures. She would likely destroy this text, and its author, without waiting to see whether I do her justice. As far as Pompeii is concerned, my time, and that of any human reader, is already up; the moment when humanity might redeem itself has passed.

The world of *Show One* is, as I have indicated, full of new kinds of human-animal encounters and moments of animal self-expression, many of which are wonders unto themselves, inviting extended meditation apart from the overarching plot. In various short segments, some less than a page long, we encounter such diverse characters as a harassed, underpaid cormorant who pauses to remember a lost loved one, a rabbit who mourns the death of a fellow in free verse, and a dog who responds to the trauma of seeing what goes on in a slaughterhouse by killing a human infant. What brings us back to the central concern of the book, by these various routes, is our gradual understanding of how Hines’s world works. *Show One*’s narrative conceit is that many species of animals can speak, write, and otherwise interact with humans in ways that testify to their sentience. Despite this fact, however, there is very little difference between this world and our own present; as Hines himself succinctly puts it, “[n]othing is really different except [animals] can talk” (“Talking with Hines”).

We do encounter a few instances where traditional institutional boundaries separating humans and other animals have blurred, most notably in the story of a gibbon named Voltaire who manages, against daily expressions of human prejudice, to sustain a position of power as a corporate executive. We see hints of a few differences in the letter, if not the spirit, of the laws governing the lives of animals, particularly in a legislative wrangle over ranchers’ rights that seems to have a bearing on animal welfare. There are also some modifications in human-animal domestic relations, from conflicts between pets and owners to the intimate moments of a romantic relationship between Voltaire and a human journalist. But alongside these scenarios, the realities of the current predicament of animals are present: intrusive documentary practices, the confinement and mistreatment of working animals, the suffering and slaughter of factory farms, and the entire interlocking system of laws, economies, and ideologies that constitute human domination of all other animal life. The capacity of animals to speak, to lobby for their welfare, to express their pains and aspirations and desires, does little to change their fate.

To readers who prize plausible extrapolation of a fictional premise, *Show One*’s close resemblance to our own world, despite a radical difference in the expressive capacities of animals, might look like a failure of execution. But this

limitation of the significance of the speaking animal, as an element of Hines's world building, is clearly intended as an indictment of our contemporary treatment of animals, which is abetted by our failure to absorb and act on what we know of their suffering. We are perfectly aware—and not just because of reportage on factory farming or research into animal cognition and emotion—that human activity causes countless animals to suffer.⁴ Hines's alternate world functions as satire on our own apparent incapacity or unwillingness to apply our knowledge. This is not to discount the efforts of human individuals or groups struggling to change current realities; Hines obviously counts himself among them. Yet his premise insists on a species-wide examination of the problem he is attempting to change.

On that scale, *Show One* suggests, the gap between what humans know and what they continue to do is so vast that no justification for it seems possible—and terroristic attacks upon humans by non-human animals, were they to come to pass, would be perfectly rational. Thus, Hines's setting paves the way for a serious consideration of Pompeii's revolutionary campaign against humanity. In *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, Jacques Derrida describes a “war . . . being waged between, on the one hand, those who violate not only animal life but even and also [the] sentiments of compassion, and, on the other hand, those who appeal for an irrefutable testimony to this pity” (28-29). *Show One* imagines that some animals take up this “war” while setting aside compassion or pity for their human enemies.

The challenge Hines confronts in presenting the figure of an animal terrorist is how to make such a character comprehensible without thereby nullifying the force of her speech and actions. That is, the narrative must make her readable while barring the way to readerly identification. Hines's verbal and visual tactics are designed to address this challenge, as shown by a key passage of which Figure 1 is the climax. In the sequence from which this page is taken, Pompeii, together with other members of a militant animal liberation group known as ORAPOST, has just bombed a university library. Having escaped the site of the bombing, she stands over a human named Robert Paige, whom she has taken hostage and is holding at gunpoint. Aware that he is about to die, Paige experiences a rush of memories, and Pompeii strikes him, declaring: “You open your eyes, you stay right here! . . . You don't get your last inventory check! . . . The pigs in the slaughterhouses, the minks, the cows you know what they see? In their last moments—all they get . . . all they know—is the slaughterhouse. . . . They don't get nostalgia. So you don't get it either” (191).⁵ Paige begs for his life, and on the page in Figure 1, Pompeii responds by killing him and cursing his corpse: “YOU TAKE EVERYTHING! YOU TAKE AND YOU TAKE AND YOU TAKE!! YOU TAKE EVERYTHING AND YOU GIVE NOTHING BACK!” (195.7-9). Hines remains focused on Pompeii as she beats the corpse; then she passes out of the frame, leaving an empty panel followed by four additional frameless panels.



Figure 1: from *Duncan the Wonder Dog: Show One*, p. 195

On this page, Hines is attempting to make an animal character say things that fictional animals rarely express in the face of contemporary conditions. Counter to a range of well-known types—the lumbering forest guardian who expresses dignified sorrow at environmental destruction, the cuddly herbivore who is panicked and uncomprehending in the face of human predation, and so forth—

Pompeii expresses highly articulate rage. First refusing to allow the reader to enter the mind of Pompeii's human victim, Hines then forbids any attempt to identify with Pompeii herself. To read her as if we share her sentiments would be to "take," in her wording, an experience we cannot "give back" in the form of genuinely earned response; what we have to contribute to her sentiments is precisely "nothing."

Here we have one of Hines's leading strategies in miniature: an innovative and powerful expression of the plight of animals interwoven with a thoroughgoing critique of that expression. To read this sequence is to read the condition of animals anew while also seeing afresh our implication in that condition, thus foreclosing any hope that we are amassing ethical capital we can add to our stock of redemptive thoughts or sentiments. Hines makes no pretense that Pompeii's rage is a picture of the actual experience of animals in our world. Rather, it is a provocation to see the inadequacy of any response we might make to that experience. Rather than offering us an authentic encounter with an oppressed animal, Pompeii forbids the idea that such an encounter could be ours to possess. Pompeii passes from our sight, and we confront the blankness of frames that do not function as mirrors for our own point of view.

It must be admitted (Hines would likely be first to do so) that even at their most effective, such strategies cannot be wholly successful. Insofar as Pompeii communicates to us, we might feel we can commune with her. However, Hines seeks to minimize the stability and satisfaction of such communion. In another scene of hostage taking, Pompeii discusses narcissistic tendencies in the discourse of zoology. Beginning with a discussion of Genesis and of human possessiveness, expressed in Adam's naming of the animals and in the story of Cain and Abel, she then describes a species of eagle that hatches two offspring, one of which kills the other in order to survive. Pompeii concludes by observing, with disgust, that humans have named this phenomenon "Cainism And that's how far gone you people are" (250.17, 22). Here, Pompeii indicts the human tendency to interpret the life processes of other animals in terms of human culture and implies a strong connection between such narcissism and the more general problem of domination. Hines encourages readers both to resist such tendencies and, simultaneously, to be wary of the idea that such resistance is any proof that we are not as "far gone" as Pompeii suggests.

In this example, while Pompeii gives us insight into the ways we view animal life, Hines's page design frustrates our visual and narrative relationship to the character. The closer we get to her crucial final utterance, the more Pompeii turns away from the viewer, and the more the panels in which she is situated shrink in size (250). In a dual move that governs our relationship to Pompeii at every point, Hines offers powerful new discourse on human domination of animals, uttered in a way that is likely to trouble reader response. Even as we experience what might

fairly be termed the wonder of a new kind of political discourse on human oppression of animals, we remain aware that this discourse is not one to which we can legitimately lay claim. It belongs to Pompeii, whose existence is substantialized precisely insofar as we recognize an image that is not our own, a figure uttering a discourse no human reader can repeat with the authority of the fictional speaker.

If such a figure is, in strictly literal terms, the mouthpiece of her creator, what it utters is still radically self-critical. Setting aside the question that underpins the tradition of the animal fable—What stories would be possible if animals could speak and act as humans do?—Hines boldly asks a question appropriate to the present: What stories might articulate our current inability, and lack of authority, to comprehend animals justly? While recognizably derived from the tradition of the animal fable, *Show One* turns the usual suspension of disbelief native to that tradition against the authority of the teller and his audience; our attention to Pompeii is, in uncanny fashion, something other than a displaced investment in ourselves.

Of course, there is a sense in which Pompeii's sentiments have been waiting for a speaker. That is, given the current scale of animal slaughter, it would seem inevitable for someone to imagine an animal terrorist. Thus, as Pompeii comes into focus, readers may well apprehend this character, however unprecedented her utterances and actions, as fated to appear in the era of the factory farm. The dialogue Hines creates for Pompeii seems designed to get ahead of any such advance familiarity by perpetual shock. In one of *Show One*'s central scenes, Pompeii is on the run after the university library bombing. In order to hide from the authorities, she breaks into the house of a human family named Johnson and kills everyone except the husband and father, John (the hostage discussed in the previous passage on Cainism). Together with a gorilla named Georgios, she waits impatiently to make an escape. During this waiting period, we see her reading from a Bible and presenting a paraphrase of Matthew 10:34-36: "I have come to set the man against his father I have come to set the daughter against her mother And the daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law And a man's foes will be those of his own household Do not think that I have come to bring peace I have not come to bring peace But a sword" (157-60). Pompeii then addresses John and declares: "I am the light that Jesus pretends to be" (161). This declaration makes clear that Pompeii wishes to destroy not just individuals or groups, but the human community as such.

This scene also indicates how, taking into account the common wisdom that acts of mass murder tend to unify witnesses and survivors, Pompeii attempts to use terrorism to split humanity asunder, to atomize relations among the living and the dead. Not only does she target a site of communal knowledge (the university library), but also she orchestrates bombings of memorial services for the victims of previous bombings, striking at the heart of collective efforts to remember and recover from trauma.⁶ In terms of Hines's project, this terroristic campaign is consonant with the claim to be "the light that Jesus pretends to be." Pompeii offers

a message of destructive hostility to her human audience; we are invited not to join a community of right-minded readers and follow her to a place of redemption, but to admit our irredeemability and perish.

Tracking Pompeii's radically anti-human discourse, readers may wonder exactly how Hines means for us to absorb such a massive indictment of his audience. What repeatedly emerges as his main target is the claim to authoritative comprehension of human-animal relations. This becomes clearer as Pompeii's temporary stay in the Johnson home unfolds, and here I turn to a portion of *Show One* that is, for many readers, its centerpiece: the diary of John's wife Jill, which details incidents from her family's life over a period of years. Wandering through the Johnson house in frustration and boredom, Pompeii finds Jill's diary and reads a series of passages from it. As laid out by Hines, this diary is a comic, though its cartooning style, lettering, and page design are distinct from the larger text. The sections we are given last more than thirty pages and delve into key moments in the life Jill led with John, with her children, and with others, especially her pets. We observe these relationships with growing emotional attachment and nuance, grieving over the death of Bundle, the family dog, and admiring the wisdom and fortitude of Polly, the cat who seeks to protect and care for him. And as we read, a question opens before us: with whom might we best identify?

Our first, likeliest option is to connect with the Johnsons (recently dead or, in John's case, soon to be) whom Hines has claimed he wanted to be "likable" because "they genuinely love this dog and cat, and want to do right by them" ("Math, mystery"). A second, more difficult path leads us to a critique of the casual selfishness Jill often displays. If we take this option, we might nod approvingly when Polly criticizes her for spending too much time at a local women's shelter and not enough with Bundle:

The poorest, most pathetic humans live like gods compared to any animal! It doesn't matter who you [were trying to help], they won't get rounded up and burned in an oven if they walk the long way through somebody's back yard. You wear clothes and Bundle wears a collar that you gave him to match your carpeting and all he wants is for you to be here! He's dying and he just wants you to be here with him! Who cares about the fucking shelter! (315)

Perhaps something in us protests momentarily here; arguably, some humans lead lives far worse than Polly's. Jill, however, does not—nor, presumably, do most readers of *Show One*. And when Jill tries to replace Bundle after his death and is disappointed with her new dog for not being like the one she misses, perhaps we begin to take the measure of her domineering narcissism, which might also encourage us to believe we can take the measure of our own.

To read as a human or, however provisionally, to read as an animal: this would appear to be the choice. At least, so we might think, insofar as we have forgotten the animal who is reading. The diary closes, and in Figure 2, without a word of commentary, Pompeii sets it alight and, after watching it burn for a few moments, douses it in the Johnsons’ kitchen sink, which begins to overflow. Pompeii then walks into the living room where Georgios is keeping watch over John and remarks, “They have a cat.” Georgios asks how Pompeii knows this; she responds, “Forget it, it’s time to go anyway” (331).



Figure 2: from *Duncan the Wonder Dog, Show One*, p. 331

Moments later, Pompeii is enraged to discover that John, whom she was planning to use in her getaway, has died of a heart attack. No further mention is made of the diary; its animal reader has dismissed it from her mind. We have a glaring sense, however momentary, of the way we ourselves might be read by a non-human animal who has decided to address us only in the language of violence and death.

On the page following Figure 2, this sense is strengthened by the way Pompeii curses John's corpse: "STRIKE THIS GODFORSAKEN HOUSE TO ASHES! DEAR JESUS GRANT ME A HAMMER TO ANNIHILATE THIS WREATH AND SALT THE EARTH WITH HIS BONES!" (333). Pompeii professes no religious faith here; she simply uses available language to express an absolute wish for destruction of an established order in which humans dominate animals (note the apparent substitution of "wreath" for "hearth," the root of the former term indicating the twisted hierarchy that founds the latter). Yet even without this final curse, the image of an animal terrorist obliterating a human book, retaining from it only one bit of data she finds pertinent (there is still a cat, a being worth knowing, somewhere among these inconsequential corpses), is enough to shatter our previous sense of how we might read the diary.

The careful reader will notice two elements of this scene that slightly trouble the interpretation I am pursuing. First, on the page just prior to Figure 2, Pompeii sets the diary alight and then lets the flame go out, suggesting a moment of hesitation (330.14-23). Second, as the diary burns again in Figure 2, Pompeii kisses it once, and the sound effect "KISS" rhymes visually with the "SSSSSSSSSS" of the running water just below it in the same panel, suggesting that Pompeii is expressing a kind of displaced grief by dousing the diary instead of burning it completely (331.7). When she proceeds to curse John Johnson's corpse, it is clear that she is not weeping for any of the diary's human characters; her grief is most likely reserved for Bundle, the Johnsons' dog. If so, there is at least a slight overlap between her reading and our own and an acknowledgment that something of actual animal life shines through Jill's journal in a way that even Pompeii, the harshest imaginable critic, must momentarily acknowledge.

However, given that Pompeii still destroys the diary, this sentimental pause is scarcely comforting. Against the background of her project of terroristic destruction, it should be clear that her reading of the diary and its creator, and her reading of any potential human reader of the diary, are one and the same. In fact, once we feel the force of Pompeii's condemnation of our species, any book that touches upon human-animal relations can be put in place of the diary: Peter Singer's *Animal Liberation*, Derrida's *The Animal That Therefore I Am* (we can easily imagine Pompeii's one-sentence evaluation: "He has a cat"), Donna Haraway's *The Companion Species Manifesto* ("She has a dog"), this very essay "Burn After Reading," or Hines's *Duncan the Wonder Dog* itself. And this last, perhaps, before any other; Hines puts forward the radical suggestion that from a point of view that

may be more authoritative than our own—a perspective we must imagine both despite and because of the fact that we have no authority to do so—his work ought to be burned.

Yet we must read. The facet of Hines’s work that I have brought into focus retains a link to other portions of *Show One* that function differently. Hines has insisted that his work is not only about the implications of factory farming, but also about “about the differences, similarities and connections between humans, animals and the natural world” (“Hines on Creating”). Hines’s ruthless attitude toward our species, which on occasion seems reducible to a pessimistic conviction that human oppression and destruction of other animals will never change, inhabits the text along with more hopeful explorations of animal consciousness and of human-animal relations.

Notably, many of these explorations allow for more open negotiation of human and animal perspectives. One instance is a conversation between Daniel Vollman, a human government official involved in animal welfare legislation, and a bird sitting on the balcony outside his dwelling. The encounter begins with a marvelous reversal of gazes; in Figure 3, as Vollman turns off his television set, a voice from outside the panel remarks, “I was watching that” (284.2). Vollman, whose role in the text relative to animal welfare is not yet revealed, seems annoyed by the bird’s presence and suggests it nest somewhere else for the night, since he plans to smoke on the balcony. “No,” the bird responds, “you’ll finish and go inside and then I’ll start the nest and we’ll both have what we want” (284.14). The ensuing encounter is structured around further negotiations of character and perspective. The bird turns out to be named Southand Ladders, and when Vollman points out that “That doesn’t sound like an animal name,” the bird responds “It isn’t,” a remark that both acknowledges the anthropomorphic limitations of the animal fable and retains a degree of cryptic otherness (285.13-14). Vollman seems convinced the bird would treat him differently if his legislative role were known (again, Hines has not made clear what this role is) and asks, “You really don’t know who I am?” “You are every man I have ever seen on this roof tonight,” the bird responds, blurring the distinction between individual and group in baffling fashion. “Fair enough,” responds Vollman (289.4-9). Finding our way through such passages, we are given license to exceed the boundaries of our own historical subject positions—again, at whatever risk of anthropomorphism—and imagine anew our relations to animals. Obviously, Pompeii provides a counterweight to such moments that trouble any authoritative possession of their meaning, but they are still offered as moments of substance, not merely as lures for the unwary, narcissistic reader.

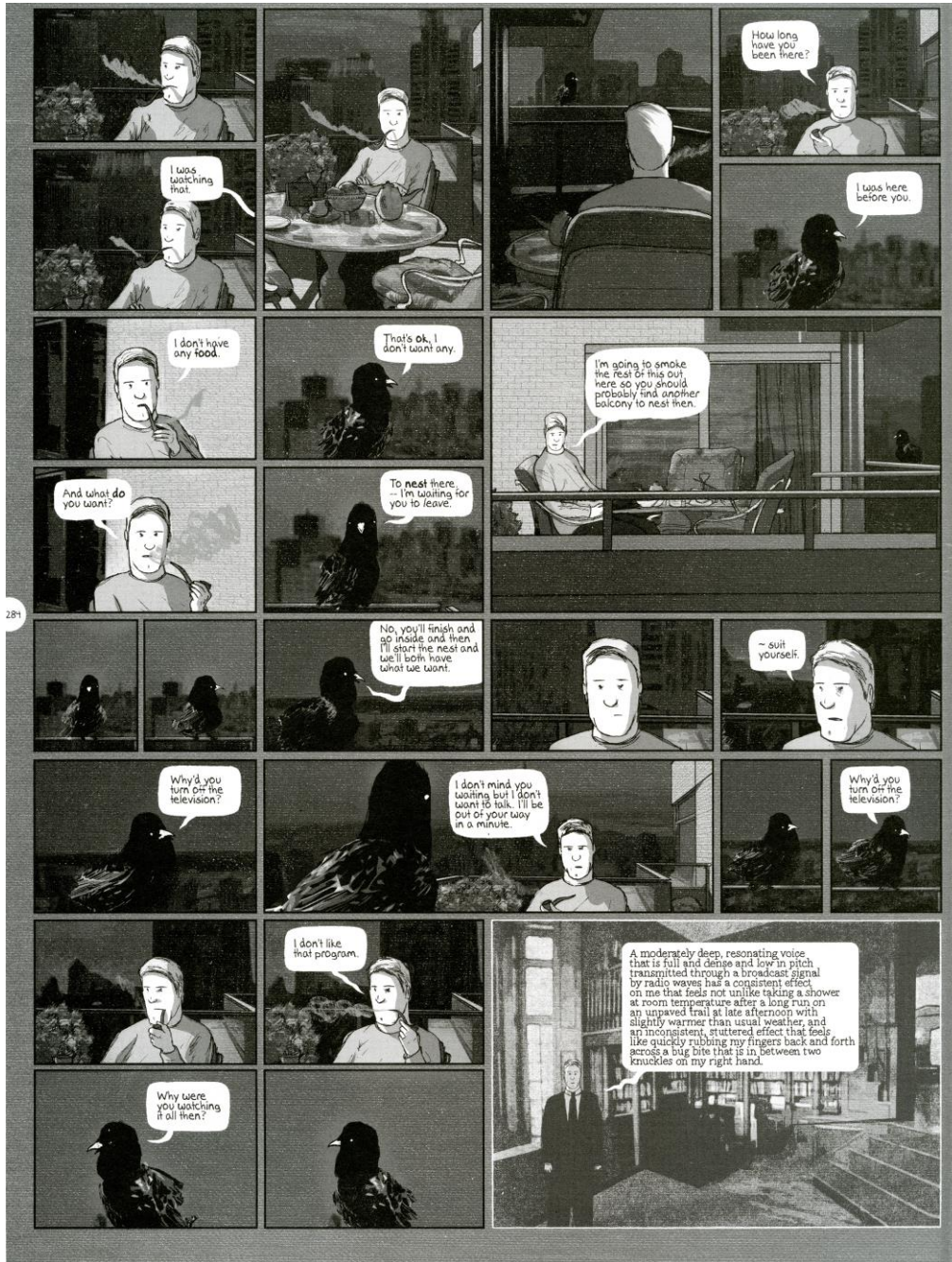


Figure 3: from *Duncan the Wonder Dog, Show One*, p. 284

In its determination to undercut itself while still opening up new avenues of representation, *Show One* differs strongly from other comics that attempt to reimagine animal consciousness and human-animal relations. Two contemporary

works that deal with talking animals will illustrate this difference. In Gerry Alanguilan's *Elmer*, when the world's chickens suddenly develop new expressive capacities and begin to speak and write, humans quickly respond by granting them political recognition, and progress towards human-avian equality is substantial, if uneven. Speech and writing thus function as guarantees of standing, and while this seems believable enough on its own terms (especially as developed by Alanguilan's brilliant plotting and characterization), it also draws our attention away from the fact that the chickens in *Elmer* can easily be read as thinly disguised humans.

In Grant Morrison and Frank Quitely's *We3*, the reader-animal relationship is considerably more complex; instead of humanizing animals, there is an impressive attempt to animalize the reader. The story focuses on three animals—a dog, a cat and a rabbit—who are given cyborg enhancements for military purposes. The work's unusual pictorial vocabulary and experimental page designs certainly seem like attempts to preserve the protagonists' animality, showing how their modes of perception and action differ from our own. Yet precisely insofar as the comic purports to put us into the minds and the bodies of animals, it offers itself as a kind of cyborg enhancement of readerly consciousness that can bridge the gap between our species and others. Such a project is admirable, as is its goal, which is to increase our awareness of human cruelty to animals. What *We3* lacks, however, is Hines's willingness to foreground our perpetual implication in this cruelty.⁷ Reading *Show One*, we are constantly reminded that no matter how innovative and progressive a human attempt to represent animality might be, its achievement must be seen and judged against a broader horizon, inside of which writing and picture-making serve largely as forms of anthropomorphic domination.

While Hines's approach would presumably apply to animal fables across an array of media, it has specific implications for comics. The medium has a strong anthropomorphic tradition that, it could be argued, is rooted in the very nature of the cartoon as comics' basic unit of pictorial vocabulary. At the center of English-language comics theory is the assumption that readers tend to see cartoon animals and cartoon humans in the same way: as versions of themselves. Scott McCloud's founding theoretical work *Understanding Comics* nowhere states this idea directly, but it is nevertheless implied beyond doubt. If we examine McCloud's famous pictorial vocabulary diagram, which charts the various ways a figure can be drawn, we see immediately that among the images drawn in a style we might term abstract, iconic, or cartoonish are a large number of human, humanoid and animal figures (52-53). An effective cartoon works in a way that has nothing to do with resemblance—Charlie Brown does not “look like” a real human boy any more than Snoopy “looks like” an actual beagle—and everything to do with what McCloud calls “amplification through simplification” (30.4). Abstracted from the representational, cartoons prompt the reader to take up the identity of a figure as if it can be worn, like a mask.⁸

This tendency of the cartoon is problematic for a creator like Hines, who wishes to interrupt anthropomorphism to the fullest possible extent. The surest sign of his attention to this issue is the way his pictorial vocabulary shifts for the pages of Jill's diary. In most of *Show One*, Hines renders animals in notably realistic fashion. The diary is far more iconic, or cartoonish, and this choice underscores the narcissistic attitude Jill has toward her pets. Through this stylistic shift, Hines suggests that the tradition of the highly iconic funny animal character (visible across a range of creators, from canonical examples such as Barks and Kelly to contemporary creators such as Watterson, Woodring and Onstad) is one the contemporary animal fabulist should avoid.⁹

Here we reach what is, from the perspective of comics history, the most striking of the tensions that animate *Show One*. In his implicit critique of the iconic tradition of funny animal comics, Hines seems to concede to a narrative that, as I have argued elsewhere, has long undermined the medium's legitimacy, particularly in the US and the UK. What I call the *Bildungsroman* discourse, a mainstream view of comics that projects a story of natural growth towards a condition of respectability, is a distortion of history that elides the realities of the medium's marginalization. At present, the *Bildungsroman* discourse continues to marginalize comics, not least through the tokenistic acceptance of a subset of the medium considered adequate for adult readership, namely the graphic novel. It is this discourse that perpetuates the double-edged claim that comics are "not just for kids anymore"; examined closely, this claim asserts that the graphic novel is an exceptional kind of comic and that the medium as a whole can still be dismissed as juvenile.¹⁰ There is no evidence that Hines consciously subscribes to the *Bildungsroman* discourse, and the influences he has cited suggest wide acceptance of the medium in all its forms.¹¹ It is nevertheless striking that in establishing a more rigorous way of approaching animal representation, he seems to condemn a more cartoonish—in stereotypical terms, a more childlike—approach to representing animals that necessarily co-opts them for anthropomorphic purposes.

Show One suggests that such an approach must be rejected as immature and limited because at the most basic level of visual apprehension, it ignores the divide that structures human-animal relations in the era of the factory farm. Consider again Hines's own account of how his work progressed from childhood onward: "[At first] the animals portrayed were basically humans in costumes As I got older . . . the animals were stripped of various anthropomorphisms, until slowly but surely only their speech was left. . . . it was the last bit of unreality (excluding their human-like intelligence) that I kept" ("Talking Animals" 46). This account suggests a disciplining of youthful naïveté in order to take seriously the realities imposed not only by differences between human and animal consciousness but also by the power relations that now separate humans from animals; the end result of this process is a new kind of comic that, Hines asserts, is superior to his earlier work. Taken in

concert with *Show One*'s condemnation of Jill's cartoonish and narcissistic journal, the implication is that funny animal comics are fatally naïve. And given the centrality of the funny animal tradition, not only for the newspaper strip but also for children's comics in general, this is a rather sweeping, if implicit, critique of the medium's immaturity, at least in relation to the question of human-animal relations.

How can we explain what looks like anti-comics discourse in a comic by an artist who is obviously committed to the medium? Shaping Hines's view of the funny animal tradition is a determination to interrogate comics for their potential weaknesses in relation to his goals. Presumably he does not find the figure of the iconic cartoon animal any more intrinsically prone to anthropomorphism than comparable techniques for inducing reader identification in fiction or viewer identification in film. But the relative status of this or that medium apparently does not enter into his thinking. However illegitimate comics may seem to some human readers, they can still be employed in ways that abet the domination of animals.

I have argued elsewhere that for the generation of creators whose work has opened new cultural possibilities for comics in the last thirty years, the question of status has remained central, and that the medium's illegitimacy manifests in autoclastic, or self-breaking, formal tactics that make status problems visible on the comics page.¹² The scenes featuring Pompeii in *Show One* might seem similarly autoclastic; like his predecessors, perhaps especially Chris Ware, Hines engages in relentless and formally rigorous self-critique.¹³ Still, his reasons and goals are distinct; he has no apparent concern with the damage done to comics and focuses on the harm that many forms of human culture might do to animals. For the critic, the problem of status cannot be wholly set aside; in offering *Show One* as important to animal studies, I am aware of serving as advocate for a medium that is subject to highly selective reception in the academy. A proper reading of Hines's work, however, must ultimately acknowledge that while comics are just as legitimate as any other human mode of representing animals at present, they are also just as potentially insufficient.

Coda: A Question of Sacrifice

Throughout this essay I have deployed, with greater or lesser degrees of explicitness, the language of religious concepts and practices: moral culpability, prohibition, redemption. Such language, consciously acknowledged or not, is quite common in animal studies and in larger conversations about animal welfare; the "war" Derrida mentions is, much of the time, a holy war (28). One of the readiest examples is Cary Wolfe's introduction to the influential volume *Philosophy & Animal Life* (2008). The essay opens with a remark from an animal rights advocate who, asked why she is a committed vegetarian, responds that this practice "comes out of a desire to save [her] soul" (2). Wolfe closes his essay with another remark

from the same advocate, who wonders how it is that many people accept the contemporary condition of animals while she is unable to do so; “Everyone else comes to terms with it, why can’t you? *Why can’t you?*” she wonders aloud, suggesting that her moral convictions stem from a kind of revelation denied to others (37). The speaker is Elizabeth Costello, a fictional novelist created by J. M. Coetzee who appears in two books, *The Lives of Animals* and *Elizabeth Costello*. Wolfe makes clear that these sentiments should resonate with anyone concerned with the plight of animals and that Elizabeth Costello’s aspirations and obsessions are common to the thinkers featured in *Philosophy & Animal Life* and to the field of animal studies more broadly.

What I find striking is the inclusion of utterances from fictional characters (Wolfe also cites passages from Coetzee’s *Disgrace*) as a way to focus the human experience of “the sheer weight and gravity of what has become one of the central ethical issues of our time: our moral responsibilities toward nonhuman animals” (Wolfe 3). It is worth asking what prompts or permits Wolfe to express this specifically historical experience—the same experience, on the whole, that “overran” Hines’s thinking at a young age—using figures from fiction (“Talking with Hines”). Insofar as Elizabeth Costello is an avatar for Coetzee, himself an advocate for animal liberation, it would seem the arts and the more properly philosophical realm of animal studies collaborate best when there is only a modicum of distance between them.¹⁴ The implication is thus that fiction, when aligned with the goals of philosophy, can usefully illustrate the relationship between moral drives and philosophical praxis. However, the passages Wolfe cites from Coetzee also underscore a self-interested drive for personal redemption—in Coetzee’s terms, a desire to save one’s soul. So perhaps fiction is, for animal studies, the place where human-centered concerns can be hidden and preserved.

But what happens to these concerns if, instead of hearing from Costello/Coetzee—a voice that adds a potentially redemptive arc to the project of animal studies—we attend to the much less reassuring utterances of Pompeii/Hines? *Show One* leaves us uncertain that animal rights advocates, whether artists or philosophers or both, can expect that their efforts might save their souls. In place of a logic of redemption, whereby the human advocate for animals can attain a degree of moral standing (or at least a diminishment of moral debt) by right thinking and right action, Hines offers a different logic, one of sacrifice. The term has quite a radical sense here; what *Show One* ultimately sacrifices is the idea that any representational or philosophical project could diminish the “sheer weight and gravity,” to use Wolfe’s phrasing, of human implication in contemporary human-animal relations.

Long before Pompeii appears in the text, this idea is visible in *Show One*’s lengthy prologue, which includes both a fable of animal sacrifice, wherein the human designer of a bridge ensures its completion by killing a dog, and images of

Laika, the first dog to orbit Earth and the most famous animal killed as part of human exploration of space (22-25, 35 ff.). The images of the bridge (suggesting a link between human and animal) and of spaceflight (as an attempt to reach uncharted realms) both bespeak Hines's ambitions to offer new stories of human-animal relations, yet the sacrifice of the dog in each image foreshadows the way *Show One* will inevitably fall short of its goals. A proper approach to *Show One*, having grasped its critique of anthropomorphism, will go further and sacrifice any sense that reading well means improving one's moral condition—much less saving one's soul.

Readers who have Elizabeth Costello's concerns for their ethical or spiritual well-being may not wish to make this sacrifice. And for those with a less religiously freighted approach to human-animal relations (and/or friendlier relations to the tradition of the animal fable), Hines's approach may seem to be a dead end for other reasons. Haraway, for instance, might point out that Hines's radically self-critical attack on animal fabulism could seem to depend on the idea that "to be human is to be on the opposite side of the Great Divide from all the [non-human] others," a notion Haraway, with her investment in a vision of "situated naturecultures" that include humans and other animals, finds self-defeating and destructive (*When Species Meet* 11, 25).

However, the historical divide Hines stresses is not really between humans and animals, but between humans and discourses of connection or redemption that can blunt the moral implications of the current moment. As previously discussed, Hines gives himself considerable latitude to imagine new human-animal encounters, and Haraway might find such passages in *Show One* quite fruitful. What Hines insists upon is that such imaginings inhabit a textual space that makes room for thoroughgoing critique, not only of creative practice but also of the moral subject positions of creator and audience. I stated at the outset that in *Show One*, the creative impulse to make new narratives about animals and the critical impulse to judge all such narratives insufficient feed into one another. The structure of this circuit is, however, remarkably open. The moments of critique do not necessarily permit the moments of invention, nor do the latter somehow undercut the former. Both must take place, but beyond this basic requirement Hines imposes on himself, their connection—at the material level of the comic book, their interleaved co-presence—is not subject to any organizing principle. Further, neither the attempts at innovation nor the self-critical devices seem subject to any limit.

Show One thus combines—without a final pronouncement on the outcome of this combination—a radicalized version of Wolfe's moral weightiness and new images of "situated naturecultures" as articulated by Haraway. Perhaps it is no accident that this achievement has taken the form of a comic, perhaps the most marginalized of popular narrative arts in the US, and thus a medium in which creators have had to forge their own sense of conceptual rigor and creative

achievement. Derrida claims that “thinking concerning the animal, if there is such a thing, derives from poetry. There you have a thesis: it is what philosophy has, essentially, to deprive itself of. It is the difference between philosophical knowledge and poetic thinking” (7). I take it that Derrida’s use of “poetry” does not make the traditional distinction between the verbal and the visual, but refers to the arts in general: the creative act, expressed in either word or image, that is not circumscribed by or beholden to philosophical authority. To be outside this realm of authority is, in Hines’s case, to pursue a different kind of rigor that imagines new possibilities for human-animal relations generously, and critiques such imaginings ruthlessly. Thus, from what many might deem the unlikeliest of genres, we have a new contemporary animal fable that testifies to the power of contemporary fiction to further our relations with non-human others—as long as we are willing to sacrifice not only the anthropomorphic tradition of the animal fable, but also a newer philosophical tradition of self-redemption.

Notes

1. For notable exceptions, see Baker (1993, 2000), Broglio (2011), and Steiner (2013).
2. See in particular 22-27, 147, and 224-25.
3. In addition to the passages already cited from “Talking Animals” and “Talking with Hines,” see “Math, mystery” and “Xeric-Winner.”
4. For recent comprehensive documentation of factory farming, see the two volumes edited by Imhoff from 2010. For research on animal suffering, see Masson and McCarthy (1995), Bekoff (2007), and King (2013).
5. Hines’s radically experimental page designs make exact panel counts impossible in many cases; I provide them when possible. When provided, panel number is given immediately after page number, and the two are separated by a period. I am happy to credit this citation method to Jacob Karle, a former student.
6. See Hines, *Duncan* 164-65.

7. To the creators' credit, however, *We3* does acknowledge that the link between human reader and animal subject is made possible by a sort of cyborg distortion of animals as such; the story's conclusion clearly challenges readers to sustain their connections with animals without the aid of the fictional enhancements Morrison and Quitely have provided.
8. See McCloud 29-45.
9. For a different view of the anthropomorphic tradition that allows for subversive shifts in its meaning, see Baker 1993 chapter 4.
10. See Pizzino chapter 1.
11. For a discussion of Hines's influences, see "Hines on Creating."
12. See Pizzino chapter 2.
13. Hines has indicated Ware in particular as an influence; see "Hines on Creating."
14. In this respect it seems no accident that the lines Wolfe quotes from Elizabeth Costello appear both in *The Lives of Animals*, a hybrid work that is not fiction in the ordinary sense, and in the eponymous novel. Wolfe gives *The Lives of Animals* as his source text, but the lines he cites can also be found verbatim in *Elizabeth Costello* 89 and 115.

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