

# Becoming Mongrel: Grotesque Complicity in Don LePan's *Animals*

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“The animal, what a word!”

— Jacques Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*

WRITING ABOUT ANIMALS has been a distinguishing trait of Canadian literature from nineteenth-century writers, such as Charles G. D. Roberts, Ernest Thompson Seton, and Margaret Marshall Saunders, to more recent authors, such as Farley Mowat, Don McKay, and Barbara Gowdy. Don LePan's novel *Animals* (2009), however, is an animal story with an ironic twist. What are we to make of the fact that, despite its title, *Animals* does not contain a single animal, and is even set in a future era when there are virtually no animals left on the planet, and yet the question of what it means to think of certain creatures *as* animals is at the core of both the novel and the society it depicts? As recent theoretical debates have emphasized, this question is more vexed, and more bound up with broader ethical implications, than it might initially appear. It is, ultimately, a question about the simultaneous necessity and impossibility of categories, and about our own unavoidable inscription within these tensions.

In recent years this preoccupation has been paralleled by a corresponding focus within literary criticism.<sup>1</sup> For critics, as for so many of these novelists and poets, these moral complexities are grounded in the central issue of how we think about species-boundaries. Is it more accurate, or more productive, to insist on our commonality with animals (humans *as* animals), or on the differences that divide humans and animals, in order to foreground the power dynamics that structure these relations? Is it really possible to assume that we know anything about animals without slipping into potentially dangerous forms of anthropomorphism? Or, at the other extreme, can insisting on absolute difference in ways that negate the threat of anthropomorphism lead

to a politics that is grounded, even unintentionally, in an unhelpfully patronizing moral stance (what we as humans can do for these creatures that are only animals)? Does the temptation to feature animals in narratives where they figure as implicit symbols of colonized or exploited people, or even as innocent but superior people (as with older images of the noble savage), not fall into the trap of colonizing and exploiting them all over again, even as we enlist them in this emancipatory gesture?

As Susan Fisher suggests in a recent essay on Don McKay,

even if the literary use of animals does not lead to direct cruelty, it is (so the argument goes) not much of a moral advance over the early modern view that animals, like the rest of nature, should be regarded as the book of the world, placed on earth not merely to meet our material needs but to instruct us. (50-51)

On the other hand, as Fisher asks in a consideration of McKay's use of homologies to preserve a sense of difference in the midst of sympathetic attention, are all narratives equally culpable? As Rebecca Raglon and Marion Scholtmeijer argue in *Beyond Nature Writing: Expanding the Boundaries of Ecocriticism*, "the best nature stories are those that have sensed the power of nature to resist, or question, or evade the meanings we attempt to impose on the natural world" (251). Building on Raglon and Scholtmeijer's suggestion, Travis Mason argues that "this sense of resisting dominant modes of meaning-construction" is central to "a multifaceted inquiry into concerns both cultural and natural, both postcolonial and ecocritical" (100). At the very core of these issues is the question of what we mean by the word *animal* and, related to that, how we define the *we* that poses this question. If "the question of the animal," as theorists such as Jacques Derrida and Cary Wolfe have suggested, is, in the context of *Animals*, irreducibly literary (i.e., a question about reading), it is at the same time scientific and philosophical but also, as LePan's novel makes clear, legal and political.<sup>2</sup> All of this amounts to saying that I want to approach the novel, not by re-examining its most pressing concerns — the abuse that is endemic in the livestock industry — but by looking at the ways that tensions within its narrative structure raise fundamental questions about the politics of complicity.

Like Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* (2005), *Animals* is a dystopian account of a future gone badly wrong, in which bio-technical

expertise has outstripped moral accountability. After decades of systematic intensification, the livestock industry has imploded. Ever since “the great extinctions,” as they have come to be remembered, the consumption of meat has become a thing of the past (33). Disease has obliterated virtually all animal life, household pets included. Even worse, rapidly escalating numbers of children are being born with severe mental disabilities, but the economy has bottomed out, making it increasingly difficult to care for these children: “How could you justify putting the resources — the time as well as the money — into improving their lot when so many of the fully human were in such desperate straits?” (37).

Luckily, this second problem gradually comes to be recognized as a solution for the first: a solution, as simple as it is effective, that raises without actually acknowledging the network of philosophical questions that inhere in the phrase “fully human.” Many of these issues disappear as soon as people come to accept a basic categorical refinement. These infants with severe disabilities are not humans but “mongrels,” and as mongrels, of course, they can, and more importantly *should*, be treated quite differently. On the one hand, this means that they are denied the sorts of things that a child might take for granted but which would obviously not be appropriate to a mongrel: using cutlery, eating at the dinner table, consuming the same food as family members, or sleeping in a bed: “To be sure, there were families that would feed it scraps from the table. But a line had to be drawn somewhere” (14). But on the other hand, it gradually occurs to people that these mongrels are ideally suited to filling the emotional vacuum left by the eradication of domestic pets. If “the loss of dogs and of cats” is, the people argue, “in its way as great a loss to humanity as that of beef or pork or cod or chicken,” mongrels, instead of being treated as an enormous social burden, could be used to fill this emotional gap (63). The idea is an immediate success: “Almost everyone seemed suddenly to agree that mongrels could look cute, and many discovered that their warmth and their whimpering could be as comforting as that of a Pekinese or a Labrador” (63).

Liberated from the fetters of outmoded distinctions, people soon come to realize that the situation can be most productively confronted by viewing things in the radically different light that these new conditions require. Approached in this new, more appropriate way, one good idea soon leads to another. If, even after many of them have been adopt-

ed as pets, “the supply of mongrels had come to exceed the demand,” many

cogent voices plausibly argued that it was merely practical and not in any way cruel to look at the big picture, to see the surplus mongrels not simply as a key part of a large problem, but as a key part of a potential *solution* to that problem. Rather than letting them die often painful deaths due to illness, would it not make sense to harvest a proportion of the mongrel population at a somewhat earlier stage? That would, it was argued, be a win-win situation. It would lead in most cases to a happier end for the mongrels themselves, and certainly it would provide at least a partial solution to what was being seen as a great crisis in nutrition. (65-66)

As in Jonathan Swift’s *A Modest Proposal*, the real horror of this solution lies less in the genocidal implications than in the hyper-rational and endlessly well-intentioned tone with which it is related. Not that the narrator, Broderick Clark, an outspoken advocate for free-range mongrels, can be counted as a blind apologist for this new industry. On the contrary, however impatient he may be with those “extremist vegetarians” (40) and “cranks” (37) who obstinately deny what has become obvious to everyone else (i.e., the fundamental difference between mongrels and humans), he is even more strongly opposed to the steady reintroduction of the same “cruelties of intensive farming” (144) that led to “the great extinctions” in the first place: overcrowding in pens, in which mongrels are forced to stand in their own waste, and an over-reliance on “a daily low-level dose of antibiotics intended as preventative medicine, and a hyper-antibiotic ‘cocktail’ at the first sign of any significant infection in any member of the herd” (103).

Broderick’s chilling tone of steady but calm disapproval of these industrial excesses is balanced by the emotional immediacy of the novel’s second narrative, the story of Sam, one of the mongrels, and Naomi, the young girl who befriends him after he is left on her family’s doorstep one night by his desperately poor single mother. Naomi’s parents at first refuse to take him in — “we can’t keep it, Gnome, you know that,” her father tells her after Naomi hears Sam whimpering on the veranda outside her bedroom window (48). But in the end, of course, her family does take Sam in, the way any decent family with young children might adopt a stray kitten that appears on their doorstep. For a while, things go well. At first, Sam sleeps down by the furnace, but he is soon

allowed to sleep next to Naomi's bed. Naomi shares her floppy stuffed penguin with Sam and reads to him, especially her two favourite books, *Where the Wild Things Are* and *Winnie the Pooh*. The whole family treats him well. They dress him in "a smart, clean overall," the style of clothing universally reserved for mongrels, "usually a cheery yellow or green. . . . Others might allow their mongrel to go gallivanting about in a dirty old grey coverall, but not the Stinsons" (87-88). Furthermore, they rarely use a leash on walks "unless propriety demand[s] it." The Stinsons are humane: "They weren't the sort of family to be always pulling a creature this way and that, bossing it about" (88).

Then Naomi realizes with a shock that Sam has learned to speak — quite badly, it is true, but recognizably all the same. This is a major revelation. The problem is that, diagnostic resources having become so limited, deaf children are increasingly dismissed as mongrels, and therefore incorrectly classified. But were this error to be recognized, a creature's status would need to be re-evaluated. To be capable of speech, everyone agrees, is a sign that the creature is a human rather than a mongrel. Sam is just deaf. Naomi is understandably thrilled. Now that this is clear, Sam can be adopted into the family as a child rather than a pet. But the news touches some sort of horrible nerve with her mother, Carrie. Driven by demons from her past, she takes matters into her own hands, reassuring herself that it is a parent's job to make those difficult but morally necessary decisions that children are too young to understand. Mongrel pets cannot legally be reclassified as livestock, but, of course, if one knows where to look, there are always people who can take care of these things. The plot unravels with a horrifying inevitability as it follows Sam's downward path through an industrial farm to his final end. The tale is all the more harrowing for Sam's fragile, stubborn innocence. Unable to make anyone listen, he takes useless comfort in reciting lines from his favourite books, especially the story of Max, who told the wild things to stop and then suddenly wanted to be where someone loved him best of all, and who "had sailed back to his very own room with the supper his mother had made waiting for him and it was still warm, please could it be like that?" (124).

As horrifying as Sam's individual torment is, his ordeal also stands in as a synecdoche for the larger socio-economic decline of a culture whose imploding values create the conditions that enable this tragedy to occur. Sam's experience of *becoming mongrel* (to echo Gilles Deleuze and

Félix Guattari's formulation of *becoming animal*) epitomizes the broader dehumanization of an entire culture. Graham J. Murphy's analysis of David Malouf's *Remembering Babylon* reinfects Deleuze and Guattari's formulation as *becoming insect*, a term that, like *becoming animal*, offers the possibility of a decolonizing perspective capable of resisting the categorical impulses of an imperialist hegemony by fostering a space of new possibilities "that engender alternate ways of thinking" (Murphy 76).<sup>3</sup> Malouf's character, Janet, "perhaps seeing with the eyes of a child, constantly struggl[es] with the sense that she can become someone new, someone different, someone *becoming*" (Murphy 82). LePan's account of Sam's descent from human to mongrel and then to raw material for factory farming offers yet another twist — *becoming mongrel* — but it also strips this process of its utopian resonance by highlighting what Derrida has insisted on as "the *sacrificial* structure" of discourses about nonhuman animals: "a place left open, in the very structure of these discourses (which are also 'cultures') for a noncriminal putting to death" ("Eating" 112). It is one thing to exist in a state of *becoming* whose very fluidity resists hegemonic pressures; it is quite a different thing, in the theatre of global politics, to suffer the consequences of *becoming animal* as a consequence of others' decisions: as an effect of broader power relations rather than as a form of agency ("becoming someone new, someone different"). To experience these changes as the object of larger hegemonic forces is to recognize first-hand Helen Tiffin's important reminder about "the political history of Western racism and its imbrication with discourses of speciesism; its use of animals as technologies of human social division; and above all, perhaps, its metaphorisation and deployment of 'the animal' as a derogatory term in genocidal and marginalising discourses" (32). *Animals* literalizes Tiffin's warning in its account of Sam's intensely personal ordeal, but even more insidiously in its careful attention to the broader ways that scientific, economic, and judicial discourses of the "mongrel" help to sustain these categorical impulses.

Sam's plight carries Tiffin's warning that "both human genocide and human slavery have been, and in some cases continue to be, predicated on the categorization of other peoples *as* animals" (32) to its logical extreme, but LePan's unflinching attention to the processes of categorization that make this possible registers Tiffin's historical point most forcefully in Broderick's careful explication of the genealogy of the word

*mongrel*, which, he explains, emerged out of the earlier terms *mongo* and *mongoid*:

That coinage originated when James Langford Peake published his “Inquiry Into the Ethnic Element of Idiocy” in 1870; he quite rightly observed the degree to which the creatures he was describing, though born to Caucasian parents, resembled the peoples of the Mongo River region of North Africa. “Mongan idiocy” was the name he gave it. (34)

The postcolonial imperative implicit in Broderick’s uncritical allusion to James Langford Peake’s nineteenth-century association of “idiocy” with Africans (even when he is actually discussing Caucasians) is reinforced by Broderick’s equally detailed account of the historical association of *chattel* — the term used for those mongrels who are destined for consumption — with slavery (40). Broderick’s nonchalant acceptance of the ease with which “the narrow old categories came to be replaced by the broader and more comprehensive ones that reflect our modern understanding” underscores the high stakes of Tiffin’s important point “that the line [between human and nonhuman animals] is not a fixed, but an always politically contingent one, constructed and policed by representation” (LePan 34; Tiffin 33).<sup>4</sup> “A line had to be drawn somewhere,” Broderick insists, and not just drawn but “policed,” which, most fundamentally, means naturalizing these distinctions so that the work of policing them can be rendered invisible (14). As Derrida suggests about the word *animal*, “it is an appellation that men have instituted, a name they have given themselves the right and the authority to give to the living other” (*Animal* 23).

Derrida’s insistence on “the *sacrificial* structure” of discourses about nonhuman animals aligns these political issues with the more fundamental theoretical question of the rights to ethical consideration that must always have been sacrificed or disallowed — the line that must be drawn somewhere — in order to establish the very groundwork of humanist claims to moral responsibility. “The other, such as this can be thought according to the imperatives of ethical transcendence, is indeed the other man: man as other, the other as man” (“Eating” 113). Ironically, Derrida argues, twentieth-century challenges to humanist assumptions have reinscribed these delimitations:

Discourses as original as those of Heidegger and Levinas disrupt, of course, a certain traditional humanism. [But] in spite of the differ-

ences separating them, they nonetheless remain profound humanisms *to the extent that they do not sacrifice sacrifice*. The subject (in Levinas's sense) and the *Dasein* are "men" in a world where sacrifice is possible and where it is not forbidden to make an attempt on life in general, but only on the life of a man, of other kin, on the other as *Dasein*. ("Eating" 113)

One irony of recent theoretical challenges to inherited ideas of subjectivity is precisely the extent to which this challenge "continues to link subjectivity with man," reinforcing the human/nonhuman divide even as it deconstructs the idea of subjectivity that had, in earlier philosophical moments, legitimated that divide ("Eating" 105). In other words, the revisionary force of this critical challenge is ultimately negated by the implicit acknowledgment that it is only human subjectivity that can be deconstructed. Critics such as Cary Wolfe and Jodey Castricano have argued along similar lines that the historical exclusions perpetuated by the humanist tradition have been replicated by a disturbing paradox within the cultural studies movement that has challenged it. "Current critical practice," Wolfe suggests, "for all its innovation and progressive ethical and political agendas," is grounded in "a fundamental repression that underlies most ethical and political discourse: repressing the question of nonhuman subjectivity, taking it for granted that the subject is always already human" (*Animal* 1-2). Even as poststructuralist theorists have insisted on "the raising of unsettling questions of *difference* with regard to normalized categories of gender, ethnicity, race, class and sexuality," their revisionary challenge has been undertaken in ways that have unthinkingly, but effectively, reinforced older humanist assumptions about differences between human and nonhuman animals (Castricano 5).

For critics such as Wolfe and Castricano, however, the revisionary force of our posthumanist moment has at last begun to dislodge these enduring forms of speciesism by "calling into question the boundaries that divide the animal kingdom from humanity and by exploring the medical, biological, cultural, philosophical, psychological and ethical *connections* between nonhuman animals and ourselves" (Castricano 1-2). As Donna Haraway famously argues in "Cyborg Manifesto,"

By the late twentieth century in United States scientific culture, the boundary between human and animal is thoroughly breached. The last beachheads of uniqueness have been polluted if not turned



into amusement parks — language, tool use, social behavior, mental events, nothing really convincingly settles the separation of human and animal. . . . Movements for animal rights are not irrational denials of human uniqueness; they are a clear-sighted recognition of connection across the discredited breach of nature and culture. (*Simions* 151-52)

*Animals* contributes to this posthumanist challenge not by widening the ethical boundaries to include nonhuman animals (and in doing so, rejecting the sacrificial structure of Western philosophical traditions, from traditional humanism to critics such as Heidegger and Levinas and their cultural-studies successors), but by insisting on the arbitrariness of the category of “human” in the first place. Fracturing the apparent coherence of the “human” as a category by highlighting the fallibility and the politically fraught nature of this designation dislodges the rationale for sustaining human/nonhuman oppositions. In doing so, LePan’s narrative ultimately converges with the efforts of posthumanist critics by insisting on the philosophical necessity of including nonhuman animals in the designation of the Other to whom we remain morally responsible.

Crucially, *Animals*’s satirical force focuses not only on the consequences of inherited designations, but also, even more radically, on the social dynamics that helped to ensure their origin and which have contributed to their enduring influence. The description of Sam’s last days offers a powerful indictment of industrial farming practices, but, in many ways, the more fundamental questions raised by the novel are less about a particular industry — as offensive as it may be — than about our more general capacity for complicity. “People are quite willing to admit openly that they more or less know that what they are doing is hideously wrong,” Broderick tell us; “They just don’t want to *really* know” (44). This willing suspension of disbelief — our capacity not to *really* know — surfaces most forcefully in the novel’s preoccupation with categories and with names, in the title itself but also throughout the narrative as a whole. If the differences between humans and mongrels must be everywhere patrolled and reinforced, the agricultural breakthrough in harvesting mongrels requires a further linguistic revision. Those mongrels that are destined to be eaten become referred to as chattel: “Everyone agreed you couldn’t dress a mongrel like a human, and everyone agreed you couldn’t dress it like a chattel

in a finishing pen either, which is to say, to keep it mostly or entirely unclothed” (87). Once harvested, the meat becomes subject to further euphemistic revision: it is called *yurn* in North America and *fland* in Britain and Australia (68).

The resistance with which characters respond to anything that might unsettle these categories, from the general consensus that develops to the various individuals who fail to correct their positions once they have realized that Sam can speak, demonstrates the fundamental importance of these categories. Complicity, in other words, emerges not just as self-serving indifference — knowing without *really* knowing — but as active resistance to what Peter Stallybrass and Allon White describe as a liminal form of the grotesque, not as the monstrous Other — the wholly foreign or extreme opposite of everything we embrace as normal — but “as a boundary phenomenon of hybridization or inmixing, in which self and other become enmeshed in an inclusive, heterogeneous, dangerously unstable zone” (193). Distinguishing between these “two quite distinct kinds of ‘grotesque,’” Stallybrass and White argue that various processes of hybridization inherent in bourgeois society produced “new combinations and strange instabilities in a given semiotic system” that exceeded the traditional oppositions of polite/vulgar, high/low, or culture/anarchy (193). Whereas the first, more straightforward version of the grotesque reaffirms our normative judgments through the oppositional logic it enacts, the second, more complex version of the grotesque as a liminal phenomenon unsettles the very possibility of these sorts of coherent logical oppositions. In the futuristic dystopia conjured by LePan, it is precisely the hybrid nature of Sam in particular, but also of mongrels generally, that must be resisted and rewritten as absolute difference. Whatever threatens the coherence of these categories must be forcibly expelled as wholly Other.

The depiction of Sam *becoming mongrel* — a definitional shift in process — highlights both the contingency of these categorical barriers and the ideological resources invested in sustaining them. On the one hand, the distinction between human and mongrel that licenses these practices is treated as a purely ontological difference: they are fundamentally different orders of beings. But, on the other hand, these categorical differences circulate as pragmatic epistemological necessities. “There was so much change going on,” Broderick explains, “changes in classification systems and linguistic changes quite as much as changes in

societal attitudes and changes in circumstances for the mongrels themselves" (38). The transition proves to be remarkably easy, once public opinion has been "nudge[d]" in the right direction:

It did not take much of a nudge to tip public opinion into an acceptance of the appropriateness of considering a mongrel-centred solution to the perceived nutrition problem. To be sure, a few dissenting voices were raised. But remarkably quickly, the stage of open debate came to an end. Either no one was sending letters to the editor or calling in comments, or else the editorial staffs had simply stopped publishing and airing the views of dissenters. However it happened, the debate went away surprisingly quickly. (66)

Eventually, "many people began to think of mongrels as less than fully human — and before long, as not human at all" (61). Broderick never pauses to ask what it means to be "less and less human" — or whether it is theoretically possible to cross this divide by degrees, to gradually become something ontologically distinct.

The singularity of the name itself — mongrels — implies some sort of unifying essence that is everywhere belied by the extent to which it functions as an umbrella term, conveniently gathering together a whole range of distinct conditions, which now no longer needed to be thought of with any kind of specificity: "*people with Peake's Syndrome, people with Gyberger's Syndrome, people with Sellars' dystrophy, people with Wilson's Disorder*, so many of them now seemed such a mouthful" (62). The boundaries are helpfully elastic.

As economic conditions changed, and particularly after the great extinctions occurred," more and more conditions are consigned to the status of mongrel. With "significant nutritional shortages and with medical resources so scarce, it seemed to everyone's advantage to keep to a minimum the number of humans suffering from conditions that were expensive to treat. . . . And many who would in an earlier age have been classified as suffering from one or other of a long list of abnormalities were more and more frequently lumped in with the class of mongrels and chattels. (33)

It becomes a question of pragmatics: "If the reality for those affected by Gyberger's Syndrome and Peake's Syndrome and Wilson's Disorder and dozens of others were broadly similar, then for functional purposes

these could reasonably be regarded not as three or four or twenty or thirty categories, but as one. . . . As more and more people realized, there was little point in splitting hairs” (39). The language is insidious. What does it mean to say that these various illnesses “could *reasonably* be regarded not as three or four or twenty or thirty categories, but as one,” or to imply in passing that scientific decisions with moral implications could be adequately made in response to “functional purposes”? Arbitrary distinctions become absolute without the question ever being raised of how such terms can be located on some sort of continuum or accommodated through a shift in perspective. These issues are not, however, as unrealistic as the novel’s dystopian style might suggest. As Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin insist, in the context of their broader argument about the history of racism,

the fiction that the species boundary is a fixed one . . . is reproduced through the language we use in spite of our knowledge that some peoples considered ‘human’ by some have been dubbed ‘animal’ by others; and in spite of our awareness that the species boundary is not fixed at all, but always temporally and politically contingent, continually constructed and policed by the processes of representation itself. (135)

The danger of approaching these ideas through satire, of course, is the tendency of satire to foster a sense of moral self-righteousness in its readers. How could people behave so badly, fool themselves so deliberately, manage to know without *really* knowing, we might ask, the way that we often do (to take the classic example) when confronted with questions about people’s complicity with the Nazi Holocaust. How, we want to know, could people have accepted something so evil? Why did they not behave more as we would have done, were we in their shoes? Rather than allowing the reader this sort of easy, and counterproductive, get-out-of-jail-free card, the novel repeatedly implicates us in these issues, beginning with the title itself, which forces us to reflect on our own categorical judgments. Whether one insists, along with posthumanist scholars, that the human/animal divide has been so thoroughly breached that one can now only speak of human and nonhuman animals, or whether one insists on the political efficacy of retaining this divide in order to foreground ethical questions about what it means to speak for animals, one is necessarily forced to confront the political implications of these choices.<sup>5</sup> The ambiguity of LePan’s title enforces a recognition — as

soon as we pose the question of whether there *are* any animals in the novel and regardless of how we answer it — that we are always already caught up within the classificatory dynamics that constitute the foundation of the book's political questions. Once lines have to be drawn, there can be no politically uncompromised positions. To insist, as I have from the outset, that *Animals* does not contain a single animal invites a recognition of the ease with which well-intentioned perspectives can be implicated in the mindset of those characters whose limitations we are invited to condemn. Our complicity begins, in other words, as soon as we ask, or fail to ask, the questions about animals (with all of their historical and philosophical implications for what counts as non-animal) that the simplicity of the title necessarily implies.

Nor is our inscription in these dynamics always quite so subtle. Taking umbrage at the fact that “the ‘enlightened’ populace of, say, a century ago would be appalled were they to see the practices of today when it comes to the treatment of mongrels and chattels,” Broderick responds:

They might do well to remember how economics and expediency shaped their own practices with regard to their fellow creatures. To remember how, over the course of a little more than half a century, they had quietly changed virtually every aspect of the lives of the creatures whose milk they drank and whose flesh they ate. People for the most part forget history. (39-40)

Even worse, “people in those days had not the excuse of a twenty-year depression and an environmental upheaval such as the one that was caused by the great extinction of species” in the first place (41). For good measure, Broderick quotes a Margaret Wentte column from the *Globe and Mail* which insists, with typical Wentte bravado, that

most of what we do to animals before we eat them isn't nice. If we knew exactly how they lived and died, we'd be horrified. Fortunately for us, we're so removed from where our food comes that we can choose not to know. Ignorance is bliss, and I, for one, am a devoted carnivore. I have studiously tried to avoid learning about the revolting details of factory farming, because if I knew, then I would have to stop eating meat and start sending money to the animal-rights movement, or at the very least search out meat that had an okay life. That would be hard. It's easier to be a hypocrite. (43-44)

Living in the age in which livestock abuses produced “the great extinctions” that necessitated the consumption of chattel, Broderick suggests, we cannot congratulate ourselves on occupying any sort of moral high ground.

Ironically, though, Broderick is himself the best evidence of the ways that forgetfulness enables complicity. Having recalled researchers’ much earlier discovery that “the biological basis for” Peake’s syndrome was “an odd number of chromosomes,” Broderick insists that these researchers, having gone to “all that effort and all that research,” “failed to see it in its true light, as confirmation of the simple fact that mongans — and mongrels generally, had they been classifying things at that time in the broader fashion we have come to understand as more appropriate — were simply not fully human” (36). As Haraway argues in *When Species Meet*, “the fact that human genomes can be found in only about 10 percent of all the cells that occupy the mundane space I call my body, . . . [that] the other 90 percent of the cells are filled with the genomes of bacteria, fungi, protists, and such” casts into question the coherence of the phrase “fully human.” However, this phrase circulates throughout the novel as an authoritative and — for characters such as Broderick — unexamined concept, ensuring the possibility of absolute difference (3). Explaining the next major shift — cloning mongrels to help supply the renewed demand for livestock — Broderick explains that “mongrels were not humans, and as that simple fact came to be widely and then near-universally accepted, the grounds for opposing research into mongrel reproductive cloning dropped away” (80).

However blind Broderick may be to this categorical slide, from the human to the “not fully human” to simply “not human,” and however untroubled he may be by the steady addition of various disorders to the term “mongrel,” what makes his progressive stance as an advocate for these free-range livestock practices so unsettling may actually be its internal coherence — that is, if you grant him his starting assumptions. Far from being cruel, he insists, the very opposite is true: “the twentieth and early twenty-first century practice of treating several varieties of mongrel as fully-fledged humans was as ruinously expensive as it was psychologically painful” (33). Rather than treating the shift as some sort of dangerous innovation, Broderick suggests, the rise of the term “mongrel” and the practices associated with it represent a turn back toward a much earlier and healthier approach. Back in the day “when Peake [had]

identified these creatures . . . as a sub-species they were understood not to be human, or at least not to be human in the same way and to the same extent as you and me,” but the “key point” was that “nature was allowed to take its course”:

Mongans in the nineteenth century were not subjected to unnatural cruelty, subjected to systematic mistreatment and crammed onto factory farms as they are now. But nor were they given a lot of special treatment to make them live artificially long lives. (34)

Twentieth and early twenty-first century attitudes and care practices, with the “vast amounts” that was being spent “on researching their condition and on trying to lengthen and improve their lives,” with special schooling and therapy and the careful language that came to be insisted on (what Broderick dismisses as “the social services double speak of the era” [35]) emerges as the well-intentioned but cruel exception, the brief historical blip when “nature was [not] allowed to take its course,” in large part because of people’s insistence on lying to themselves about the truth of things. Shackled by the pressures of this “social services double speak,” people acknowledged that the sorts of individuals who would come to be identified as mongrels were “‘slower’ than others, subject to language and cognitive ‘delay.’” But it was rarely admitted, Broderick insists, that, “however much they might slowly improve, the cognitive and language skills of many mongrels would never reach the level of the average pre-schooler” (35).

That determination to prolong these wretched lives must be dismissed, Broderick explains, not as an act of caring or love, but as a unique version of liberal guilt: a form of self-indulgence based on an unwillingness to confront the reality of the situation and to let nature take its course in light of that reality. But, fortunately, “in the mid-twenty-first century, of course, the pendulum started to swing back towards where it had been in the nineteenth century — at least when it came to the treatment of mongrels” (37). Faced with growing economic pressures, the public mood gave way to “what one might call *necessary* neglect. . . . And so, slowly but surely, mongrels lost that ‘sensitive support’ that had nurtured the development of their mental abilities in general and their verbal skills in particular” (37). In strictly scientific terms, it was possible, of course, to insist on the legitimacy of the sorts of highly nuanced distinctions between various conditions that twentieth

and early twenty-first century scientists had embraced, but, Broderick insists, this search for taxonomical detail ignored the larger question:

Did the struggle to be ever more precise, to categorize things in an ever narrower and narrower fashion always serve a useful purpose? And how much truth did the conclusions capture? You could make a plausible case on either side of an issue like that, but over time a consensus emerged that the sort of classification system that made the greatest sense in the real world in a case such as this was the one that best harmonized both with underlying categories and with the realities of what would constitute appropriate and acceptable treatment for these various related types. (38-39)

Fortified by this managerial doublespeak, Broderick insists that a truly ethical stance must be grounded on a frank recognition of the reality of the situation, rather than on the kind of self-deception practised by earlier, and supposedly more “sensitive,” advocates for the victims of these various disorders. Once that reality has been fully accepted — namely, that mongrels are not human and therefore perfectly legitimate candidates for consumption — one can develop a truly progressive politics about how this might best be done.

Except, of course, there is Sam, whose transformation we are forced to witness, as his changing conditions make him “less and less human” in the eyes of those around him (17). Ironically, even as Sam’s treatment moves him “steadily further away from the realm of the human,” he becomes increasingly articulate, both in his capacity to understand the world around him and, eventually, in his ability to speak (18). Through Sam, we gain a first-hand account not of how he changes, but how the world around him changes: “It was strange how people dealt with him, now that he was not the lowest member of a family of poor humans, but something else, something a notch lower than that” (52). As in so many other literary texts, *Animals* offers the child’s perspective as a morally superior alternative. Having befriended Sam, Naomi cannot help wondering, “How different was he? How different were all of them, the mongrels? Maybe they weren’t really *that* different at all, maybe they could think things and feel things almost as we can. . . . And for sure some mongrels could say some things as well as understand things, they were sort of animals but sort of humans too. They just hadn’t been taught to do things; maybe she could be a teacher” (76, 78). Whereas adults behave according to what Broderick calls “some unacknowledged



societal logic,” which insists, above all, on the coherence of categorical distinctions (the line which “had to be drawn somewhere”), Naomi and Sam arrive at radically different moral conclusions. The books that Sam identifies with most of all — *Where the Wild Things Are* and *Winnie the Pooh* — intensify the novel’s pathos by accentuating his emotional depth, but they also depict curiously anthropomorphized worlds dominated by creatures that similarly resist the impulse to distinguish between human and animal. Indeed, the appeal of these books lies in their ability to conjure up precisely the condition that Naomi attributes to Sam and to mongrels generally: “sort of animals but sort of humans too” (78). But even this is not so simple.

LePan’s use of free indirect discourse underscores the morally revolting truth of the factory farming conditions that Sam ends up experiencing, and of the hypocrisies that enable these conditions to continue, by filtering them through the vulnerable and innocent perspective of a child. In Sam’s reaction, we receive an unmediated glimpse into the true cost of these practices — except, of course, and this is where the question of complicity most fully engages the reader, it is all a lie. Or not a quite a lie but, if we bear in mind the novel’s narrative structure, not quite the way that we are asked to believe, either. As Sheryl Vint argues, the novel’s split narrative, shuttling between Broderick’s hyper-rationalist and adult explanation of the history and economic subtleties of the situation, and Naomi’s younger and more emotional account, reflects the problematic duality that Derrida identified with

Western culture’s discourse on the animal, polarised between the philosophers — who “have no doubt seen, observed, analyzed, reflected on the animal” but have never acknowledged that “what they call ‘animal’ could *look at* them, and *address* them from down there, from a wholly other origin” — and the poets — who “admit to taking upon themselves the address that an animal address to them” but who fail to contest the structural centrality of the human/animal boundary to our cultural forms because they do not acknowledge this address “as theoretical, philosophical, or juridical man, or even as citizen.” (36)

The larger framing structure of *Animals* may well gesture to what Vint describes as the political challenge of “bring[ing] these two kinds of discourse together,” but it also highlights the interpretive hazards that confront this sort of approach (36). Broderick, it turns out, is Sam’s

older brother; Naomi grows up to be a “renowned novelist and professor of Creative Writing, who began to make her name in fiction even while she was still practicing medicine” (147). “Her reputation as a novelist,” Broderick explains, “has been based very largely on the basis of her skill with the very sort of shifting third-person narrative — those who don’t like it call it ‘slippery’ — that she offers here in recounting the story of Sam, and of the formative years of her own life” (147). The two first meet during the final stage of her research on this manuscript. After it is almost fully completed (but only then), it occurs to her “to look up the surviving members of Sam’s family,” which leads her to Broderick. They “hit it off immediately” he says, but this does not remove his “doubts and reservations” about “the free-wheeling approach she takes” (148). His main concern, for instance, is the liberties that Naomi seems to take with her own self-representation: “surely the young Naomi she imagines as the story draws to a close is in some ways *too* young. Does the Naomi of the final pages you are about to read — almost-a-teenager by this time — not seem implausibly young?” he asks us. “Seem still to be much like the younger child she was when she first met Sam?” (148). He suspects her, in other words, of taking liberties with the truth. And he insinuates that we as readers have fallen for it, that we are unable or unwilling to separate truth from fiction, which must be the first responsibility of any sort of political intervention.

But though it goes unsaid, Broderick’s reservation about Naomi’s “free-wheeling approach” applies even more to Sam, whose voice is almost never his own but Naomi’s imaginative construction. Ironically, the very sections of the novel whose power lies in Sam’s emotional immediacy — the painful final sections where we witness his patient resignation to the factory conditions of the chattel farm — are the most highly mediated and even fictitious: not Sam at all but adult Naomi’s after-the-fact reinvention of herself and of what Sam might have experienced and thought so long ago. Nor do the complications end there. Naomi’s account is rigorously separated from Broderick’s, distinguished throughout the text by subtitles, but in terms of the actual narrative structure, it is also inscribed within Broderick’s. Broderick interrupts his own account of these past events to explain his and Naomi’s personal connection and, more importantly, to remind his audience of the importance of their discretion: “unless and until Professor Okun decides that she would like to take the further step of publishing the manuscript

during her own lifetime, it must remain a private manuscript to which you have been permitted access in this context only" (147). He decides to permit people access to her manuscript "in this context only" and only as long as they agree to respect her desire for privacy, though the details of "this context" remain wholly unidentified. He shares it with some unspecified audience and then demands, for her sake, that they not share it. And this admission becomes, in turn, part of his story.

All of this is then subjected to a further layer of distantiation. An editor's note at the beginning of the novel insists that "the background of how the [Naomi] Okun and [Broderick] Clark manuscripts together came into the publisher's hands is now a matter of public record" (and therefore does not need to be shared with us), "as are formal assurances from the publisher as to the appropriate permissions now being in place to authorize the combined manuscript being made available to the public" (n. pag.). The editor's note further infers that Naomi has since died: "Clark's advisory from some years ago to the audience he was then addressing" — that she had asked that it remain private during her lifetime — "is of course now superceded" (n. pag.). So Sam's speech isn't Sam's at all but Naomi's imaginative reconstruction, framed by Broderick's comments in his address to some unnamed audience, which, by the time it falls into our hands, has been reproduced by some unnamed editor.

These narrative dislocations are reinforced by the *différance* produced by the novel's structure generally, weaving between two discrepant accounts whose stylistic differences seem to interrupt rather than complement one another. "I know the story is just getting started," Broderick apologizes at the beginning of his first discourse, "but I want to interject here just briefly to sketch some of the historical background that the author of the manuscript I've presented you with has not bothered to fill in" (12-13). "I hope you won't mind me breaking into the story again at this point to offer a few comments," he says at the beginning of his second discourse, though, ironically, Broderick's passages often turn out to be far longer than the "story" he keeps interrupting (31). "I guess I should make clear," he concedes at the beginning of another long explanation of the historical economic realities of the livestock industry, "that if none of that interests you — if what you really want is to find out about Sam and Naomi, find out how it ends and not hear all the whatnot about politics and the rest of it — that's perfectly

all right” (57-58). The irony of Broderick’s good-natured concession turns once again on the spectre of our own readerly complicity. To care so much about Sam and Naomi — to be so focused on their story and “how it ends” — amounts to a willed ignorance about the political and socio-economic realities that helped to produce their individual tragedy (58). “I have told you a good deal about the history and the current practice of chattel farming,” Broderick repeats later in the text. “Many of you may feel that I have already told you more than you wanted to know. And if that is the case, I do invite you to skip past these next few pages — as I invite you throughout to skip past such intrusions” (97). The imbalance between these “intrusions,” which we are repeatedly invited to skip past, and the real story they continually interrupt is compounded by the endless footnotes (many of which run for pages) that Broderick attaches to both his own and Naomi’s narratives. Nor is the status of these footnotes self-evident. A parenthetical comment, apparently by the unnamed editor, at the beginning of another footnote explains that “here and elsewhere where footnotes to Broderick Clark’s material appear in these pages, they have unless otherwise indicated been supplied by Clark” (33).

These various tensions between the novel’s form and content reinforce, rather than cancel out, the novel’s message by enjoining an ethics of reading that forces readers to become a better critical thinkers, the way that characters in the story (and, by extension, we ourselves) fail to be — knowing without *really* knowing. Recognizing that we have to read the story against the grain of its own apparent consistency (in the case of Sam’s account), and despite the deferrals and differences set up by the *différance* of its own structure, highlights the difficulty but also the importance of not taking things for granted, especially the sorts of distinctions that are implied by the settled public opinions of Broderick’s age and the sly duplicity of the narrative structure. Both turn out to be unreliable, but, even so, it can be hard work resisting entrenched assumptions. The novel’s form and content converge in their shared emphasis on the need for critical vigilance in worlds, both social and textual, where it can be too easy to leave these sorts of distinctions unquestioned. As readers, we remain irreducibly bound to the same interpretive challenge of negotiating categorical instabilities that confronts the characters whose choices we are invited to judge. Casting its own textual coherence into doubt even as it raises questions about

certain industrial practices, *Animals* warns us — as readers of this particular text and of the world around us — that we remain bound to respond with critical thoughtfulness even as we recognize the capacity for complicity that haunts this responsibility at every turn.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The most significant contribution in recent Canadian literary criticism is the essay collection *Other Selves: Animals in the Canadian Literary Imagination*, though the question has also been raised in a number of other critical contexts, often within the broader context of “Nature Writing.” See, for instance, Christopher Irscher’s chapter on “Nature Writing” in *The Cambridge Companion to Canadian Literature*; Alec Lucas’s entry on “Nature Writing in English” in *The Oxford Companion to Canadian Literature*; Gerald Lynch’s entry on “Animal Stories” in the *Encyclopedia of Literature in Canada*; and W. H. New’s section on “Nature Stories” in *A History of Canadian Literature*.

<sup>2</sup> See Derrida, “‘Eating Well,’ or the Calculation of the Subject: An Interview with Jacques Derrida”; see also Cary Wolfe, *Zoontologies: The Question of the Animal*.

<sup>3</sup> For a related study that applies Deleuze and Guattari’s formulation of “becoming animal” to the issue of our ethical relations to non-human animals, see also Lori Brown, “Becoming Animal in the Flesh: Expanding the Ethical Reach of Deleuze and Guattari’s Tenth Plateau.”

<sup>4</sup> *Animals* also emphasizes the role of class in these dynamics, from the massive social inequalities that fostered many of the pressures that lead to these changes, to the active role played by corporate interests in the legitimization of mongrel consumption and in the return to intensive factory-farming conditions.

<sup>5</sup> For an approach that insists on the animal-human divide as the necessary basis for an ethical politics, see Janice Fiamengo, “The Animals in *This Country*”: *Animals in the Canadian Literary Imagination*.” See also the two special issues of *Mosaic* that focus on “The Animal” (McCance).

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