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CULTURE REVIEW

Edna's Touch

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On the last page of *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, Derrida invokes us to radically reinterpret and to think differently about the animal.¹ Without providing us with any answers or examples on how to do this, Derrida asks us to dispense with our comfortable, traditional, and anthropocentric assumptions that tend to fetishize the animal and which, in turn, inevitably maintains a strong distinction and boundary between the 'Animal' and the 'Human'. For many years I have struggled with this invocation. Not because I don't believe in it, and not because I want to maintain the distinction. I have struggled because *I haven't known how to think differently*. I am a human constructed in and by a language that renders a logocentric perspective: one that 'apprehends' and understands the world in particular ways. According to our philosophical tradition, to be able to apprehend is the sole privilege or purview of the human; it is what defines the 'essence' of the human; it is what constitutes the 'I Am': the self-reflecting (auto-affecting) autonomous human. In this struggle I have come up against my own limitations, the limitations of my language (and hence thinking) and therefore the limitations of what it means to be human.

The struggle lessened, a little, when in 2014 I met Edna. We have been friends in a relationship of mutual trust ever since. Over this time she has helped me to understand Derrida's invocation and why rather than provide answers or examples for us to follow he himself performs his invocation, but that's another and longer story. Meanwhile, through her touch Edna has given me access to another world in a language that is not my own. When I first met Edna she was just a babypossum, the size of a kitten, clinging to her mother's back. In the first year of our relationship she would sometimes accidentally bite my fingers, looking for grapes in my hand. It seemed she was unable to distinguish between my hand, which smelled of fruit, and the fruit itself. When she did this, I would make a noise in pain and jerk my hand away. She would run to the wall. I would coax her, call her, and she would respond by slowly making her way back to me and the fruit in my hand. After a few accidental bites she eventually started to sniff around my hand to locate the fruit rather than bite randomly. Even

now, six years and four of her own babies later, she sometimes inadvertently puts her mouth around my finger, but she is now aware of my body; the texture and shape of my fingers, and quickly withdraws her mouth before biting down. Since those few accidental bites she has never bitten me. She has learnt to be gentle with me, and has established my trust, just as I have established hers by being gentle in return by taking care to notice and respect her differing moods through her touch.

Through Edna's touch I can sense and feel her responding to a world that is not mine: she lives in a group of trees in a park next to my apartment. And I have come to know or associate certain touches with certain responses. Every time she eats she either closes her hand around one of my fingers, or she rests it on the open palm of my hand. When her hand with its long nails is wrapped around my finger I can gauge her moods by how tightly she grips. There is a certain grip: a simultaneous tightening and pushing down on my finger. Whenever this happens I know she is going to burp. Or, when there is something happening in 'possum world' she sometimes acts jittery, or seems hyper-aware, and if she hears something her hand grips so tightly that her nails dig into my skin, and from the edge of my door, with her back to the room with its dim lights, she looks outside into the darkness and her ears are like antennae moving in all directions. Other times she simply rests her hand in mine, relaxed, blissed out as she eats her favourites: grapes, kiwi, and bananas.

One day while eating from my hand (her preferred way of feeding by the way), she suddenly sat on her haunches so that our faces were at the same level (I always lay on the floor to feed her with my head supported by my hand and my elbow on the floor or door frame). Our eyes locked, at first I didn't notice the light brown colour of her eyes (as Levinas says), instead I saw her pondering me, and I saw that she saw me looking back at her. At that moment I felt totally exposed, and not in control. I felt uncertainty and a little fear that comes with absolute wonder, and this was because I had been confronted by the absolute other that sensed me (not as some 'I Am') but as a presence that was different to hers. In that moment I didn't know who I was, because she didn't see me as 'I Am' in the humanistic sense, and so at that moment I seemed to become, or be, something different. When I am with Edna I am directed and shaped by her touch, so that it is Edna who defines me when I am with her, in ways that entail in part losing my human self.

Because of Edna I have finally stopped trying to '*think* differently about the animal' (which still relies on privileging the phono-logocentrism that characterises the human). Instead I move beyond words into emotional and physical touch, which enables me to *feel* with the animal by becoming possum when *with* Edna.

Works Cited

Derrida, Jacques. *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, trans. David Wills, Fordham University Press. 2008.

Endnotes

1. Jacques Derrida *The Animal That Therefore I Am*. Fordham University Press, 2008, 160.