The Dog Man: Becoming Animal in Coetzee’s *Disgrace*

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Crossing borders or the ends of man I come or surrender to the animal—to the animal in itself, to the animal in me and the animal at unease with itself.

—Jacques Derrida (372)

With their parallel lives, animals offer man a companionship which is different from any offered by human exchange. Different because it is a companionship offered to the loneliness of man as a species.

—John Berger (6)

The comfort lavished by animals . . . is as timely as grace.

—Luce Irigaray (197)

Anyone who likes cats or dogs is a fool.

—Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (*A Thousand Plateaus* 240)

An extraordinary moment in Levinas:

And then, about half way through our long captivity, for a few short weeks, before the sentinels chased him away, a wandering dog entered our lives. One day he came to meet this rabble as we returned under guard from work. He survived in some wild patch in the region of the camp. But we called him Bobby, an exotic name, as one does with a cherished dog. He would ap-
pear at morning assembly and was waiting for us as we returned, jumping up and down and barking in delight. For him, there was no doubt that we were men. (153)

In desperate conditions Emmanuel Levinas comes close to articulating a new relationship with the animal, with the creature that confers on each and every member of the “seventy of us in a forestry commando unit for Jewish prisoners of war in Nazi Germany” (152) the status that is proper to man. Levinas goes a considerable distance toward the other animal; he tries not to allegorize or metaphorize this dog; he tries to see Bobby in his own right. But as the moment of identification passes, Levinas returns to more philosophically conventional modes of thought: Bobby has “neither ethics nor logos,” he is “without the brain needed to universalize maxims and drives” (152). For Levinas, the dog is, as David Clark observes, “too stupid, trop bête, the French condensing idiocy and animality into one crassly anthropocentric expression” (188). But at the same time, Bobby has done something that the human beings surrounding the detainees of Camp 1492 (the guards, the locals living outside the camp) do not. By not differentiating between categories of his fellow beings, by being unconcerned whether these men are gentiles or Jews, Bobby has recognized the humanity of the prisoners; he has acknowledged the absolute and irreducible worth of the other. But for Levinas, the strain of coming to terms with the fact that one’s very humanity has been affirmed by an animal creates passages of remarkable tension and irresolvable contradictions: what or who is this animal? How to respond to the gift he has bestowed on you? How is it possible to be with and alongside this fellow being, this dog, without reducing him to a mere representative of his kind?

Levinas’s difficulties with the animal are by no means unique. Indeed, Jacques Derrida includes Levinas amongst the pantheon of European philosophers (he is thinking in particular of Descartes, Kant, Heidegger, and Lacan) whose discourses [on the animal] are sound and profound, but everything goes on as if they themselves had never been looked at, and especially not naked, by an animal that addressed them ... as though this troubling experience had not been theoretically registered, supposing that they had experienced it at all, at the precise moment when they made of the animal a theorem, something seen and not seeing. The experience of the seeing animal,
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the animal that looks at them, has not been taken into account in the philosophical or theoretical architecture of their discourse.

(383)

When Levinas so movingly registers his debt to this cherished being, we can see a temporary testing of the limits of this discourse, of what Derrida terms “this immense disavowal whose logic traverses the whole history of humanity” (383). But ultimately, for all his jumping and delighted barking and friendly growling, Bobby can only ever articulate that which the animal lacks.

Levinas’s hypothesis on Bobby in particular and on animals more generally is exemplary of a European philosophical tradition that views the animal as a thing possessing neither language nor ethics. With a handful of exceptions (Montaigne, Hume, Mill, Bentham, and Buber) this tradition has hardly concerned itself with the animal, and when it *has* turned its gaze to other living creatures it has viewed them, according to Peter Singer, “as beings of no ethical significance, or at best, of very minor significance” (xi). In his 1997 Cerisy-la-Salle address Derrida makes a startlingly unequivocal distinction between, on the one hand, the difficulty that Western philosophy has always had with the animal (a difficulty that has resulted, more often than not, in the “immense disavowal”) and, on the other, the ease with which writers and poets have produced multiple and diverse engagements with animals. Literature is full of human beings (very often children) encountering, and being with, animals. Referring back to his earlier essay “Che cos’è la poesia?” (1988) in which poetry is regarded as “a little hedgehog,” Derrida asserts that

thinking concerning the animal, if there is such a thing, derives from poetry. There you have a hypothesis: it is what philosophy has, essentially, had to deprive itself of. That is the difference between philosophical knowledge and poetic thinking.

(377)

By valorizing poetry’s animals over the philosophical animal, Derrida comes uncannily close to two of J. M. Coetzee’s recent literary creations: the Australian novelist Elizabeth Costello who appears in *The Lives of Animals* (1999) and *Elizabeth Costello* (2003), and the South African university professor David Lurie of *Disgrace* (1999). In her poorly delivered guest lectures at Appleton College in the United States, Elizabeth Costello in *The Lives of Animals* restates Derrida’s distinction between the inert animal
of philosophy and the multiple lives of animals in poetry. Costello sets out her convictions regarding the cruelty of meat production, the irreducible uniqueness of animals’ experience, and the ethics of vegetarianism, but, tired and depressed as she is, she manages to convince nobody: her lectures are etiolated, and there is little sense of her argument either developing or being responsive to the questions and objections of her audience. Animals are the subject of the lectures and seminar addresses that constitute Coetzee’s novella, but the text is in fact devoid of them. A philosophical counterpart to Disgrace, The Lives of Animals is a simultaneously exhilarating and depressing book that seems to embody Coetzee’s dream of a novel of pure ideas, a novel that can deal with ideas without having to resort to the conceits of action, characters, or plot. But everything in the book is airless and vaguely pointless, and everything seems to end in failure. Witness the utter abjection of the final moments of the novella, when Elizabeth Costello turns to her son and says,

It is as if I were to visit friends, and to make some polite remark about the lamp in their living room, and they were to say, “Yes, it’s nice isn’t it? Polish-Jewish skin it’s made of, we find that’s best, the skins of young Polish-Jewish virgins.” And then I go to the bathroom and the soap-wrapper says, “Treblinka—100% human stearate.” Am I dreaming, I say to myself? What kind of house is this?

Yet I’m not dreaming. I look into your eyes, into Norma’s, into the children’s, and I see only kindness, human-kindness. Calm down, I tell myself, you are making a mountain out of a molehill. This is life. Everyone else comes to terms with it, why can’t you? Why can’t you? (69)

In Disgrace the distinction between the philosophical animal and the poetic animal is pursued in even more perplexing and troubling ways, and in this essay I wish to situate a reading of Disgrace within, and then against, the discourse of which Levinas’s “The Name of a Dog, or Natural Rights” is exemplary. I am concerned with the animals that play a part in the story of David Lurie, those creatures that accompany him in his journey into disgrace and to which (or to whom) he eventually turns when all other options appear closed. That animals should at all influence this man so “corroded with scepticism” (Disgrace 102) is surprising, given the fact that until he moves out of Cape Town and into the country, “he has been
more or less indifferent” (143) to them. David’s turn to animals is neither sudden nor easy; it is neither a desirable outcome nor a quietus. David’s coming to animals occurs only after his blithely quasi-philosophical statements on the nature of the animal prove bankrupt once he is forced to encounter real animals in his day-to-day life on his daughter Lucy’s smallholding and in her friend Bev’s animal refuge, where he begins to work as a volunteer. This turn, which in its most profound form involves a veritable becoming animal, occurs only when David is finally forced to abandon all that had hitherto sustained him as a white, liberal, libidinous academic. More than this, it occurs when David enters the widest reaches of the disgrace provoked initially by his affair with a student and then exacerbated terribly by the rape of his daughter; when surrounded as he is by abandoned, dying, and dead animals (those whose period of grace is either ending or has ended), the first flickerings of sympathy and of love seem to ignite within him.

David’s becoming animal has none of the resonances of many other literary identifications with “the animal”—the type ridiculed in The Lives of Animals by John Barnard, who, on hearing his mother, Elizabeth, lecture on the animal in literature, thinks,

Jaguar poems are all very well . . . but you won’t get a bunch of Australians standing around a sheep listening to its silly baa, writing poems about it. Isn’t that what is so suspect in the whole animal-rights business: that it has to ride on the back of pensive gorillas and sexy jaguars and huggable pandas because the real objects of its concern, chickens and pigs, to say nothing of white rats or prawns, are not newsworthy? (55)

David’s becoming is an instance of becoming animal and indiscernible both at the same time. It is not jaguars or mountain lions or blue whales or hawks to which he turns. At the close of the novel David is sitting among “cats . . . and dogs: the old, the blind, the halt, the crippled, the maimed, but also the young, the sound” in a “desolate yard in Africa” (218). He is contemplating the possibility of bringing a crippled dog into the shambles of an opera he has been composing for months. His life is as close to having no material value as that of any character Coetzee has created:

he has become a dog-man: a dog undertaker, a dog psychopomp; a harijan . . . . Curious that a man as selfish as he should be offer-
ing himself to the service of dead dogs... (H)e saves the honour of corpses because there is no one else stupid enough to do it.

(146)

It is in the very absurdity of this scenario that the force of Coetzee’s articulation of disgrace is most profoundly registered. Animals may mean nothing, may be nothing in the larger world of the novel (such wholesale devaluation is of course refuted by Lucy, Bev, and, belatedly, David himself) but it is precisely as a consequence of their lack of power that they come to assume an exemplary, transformative status. Put at its starkest, the novel’s articulation of disgrace cannot succeed without animals. Coetzee’s elaboration of the word, concept, gift of disgrace achieves its undeniably impressive deepening and broadening only when the condition comes to articulate not just David’s individual fall, or Lucy’s rape and subsequent silence, or the state of disgrace that is postapartheid South Africa, but when it comes to embrace the being of animals themselves: in other words, when the notion of disgrace has expanded to include all animals, nonhuman as well as human. All animals, alive and dead.

There are animals everywhere in Disgrace. “There are the dogs,” Lucy Lurie assures her father. “Dog... (the) more dogs, the more deterrence” (60). In the boarding kennels that she runs in South Africa’s Eastern Cape Lucy looks after other people’s Dobermans, German shepherds, ridgebacks, bull terriers, and rottweilers. These are watchdogs, working dogs bred and trained to “snarl at the mere smell of a black man” (110). They are white people’s dogs. Unnamed and largely undifferentiated, they function in postapartheid South Africa as part of an apparatus of deterrence (including electrified fences and guns) designed to control the blacks. But not every dog fulfils such oppressive functions. There is Katy, the bulldog bitch, and there is Driepoot, the crippled mongrel “who likes music” (219). There are the dogs brought in to the animal refuge, the dogs Bev and David destroy on Sundays, the dead dogs in their black plastic bags that David throws into the flames of the hospital incinerator every Monday morning. And there are other animals: ducks (to which David assigns the names Mother Duck, Enie, Meenie, Minie, and Mo), cattle, goats, geese, birds in cages, heifers, bees, flies, sheep, poultry, cats.
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There is a fish eagle, a duiker. David remembers a golden retriever. There may be fleas.

While animals can be found on virtually every page of *Disgrace*, they are often in the process of becoming lost. Neglected, abandoned, attacked, burned—animals fare badly in a world in which they “do not own their lives” and in which “they exist to be used” (*Disgrace* 123). In fact, most of the animals in the novel end up dead. The book teems with the detritus of “Africa’s suffering beasts” (84): “grilled meat,” “burning meat,” “meatballs,” “soup-bones,” “dog-meat,” “blood,” “brains,” “bones,” “butcher’s meat,” “stench of chicken feathers,” “mutton chops,” “boiling offal,” “singed fur,” “fried chicken,” “carcases of pigs,” “mess of bones and feathers,” “carion.” Some of the most moving passages in the book are those that attend to animals’, especially dogs’, deaths. Some of the most powerful writing is concerned with what happens to animals after their death, “once they are unable, utterly unable, to take care of themselves” (146). Alive and dead, animals are entirely at the mercy of that other, supposedly higher animal in whose world the lower orders of creatures are, for the most part, beneath regard, hardly worth bothering about. The lives of animals are routinely erased by human beings, not just through acts of physical violence but also by means of their exploitation in cliché, in pseudobiological assertion, and in metaphor.

Although Lucy will be proved disastrously wrong about the deterrence provided by dogs, she is no doubt correct when she states: “On the list of the nation’s priorities animals come nowhere” (73). Indeed, *Disgrace* works to amplify her assertion. It is not a manifesto of animal rights. It does not advocate an appreciation of animals as either a correlative or an alternative to the “dark times” (216) it so vividly depicts. But as the novel goes on, animals nonetheless emerge from under the shadows cast by the more obviously weighty ethical and political matters invoked by the text, namely the “white dilemma” in postapartheid South Africa; the breakdown of law and order there; the ethics of silence as a response to black-on-white, male-on-female rape; the notion of historical retribution; the mechanics of land redistribution; the impact of economic rationalization; the status of truth and the possibilities for reconciliation. As these concerns threaten to overwhelm David and Lucy to the extent that what seems to be the most appropriate response to “dark times” is to become imperceptible—Lucy suggests to David that they need to live without
“things,” to live “like a dog” (205)—then, strangely, animals proceed into the book’s center. Crowding the text, animals become the novel’s matter; they become what matters.

It is precisely the precarious marginality of animals, their virtual invisibility, set alongside their never-ending struggle for survival, that renders them essential to the workings of a novel that, in its severely attenuated articulation of the possibilities of human growth and transformation, has much in common with the earlier fictions of Coetzee, in particular The Life and Times of Michael K. (1974). Of course, Coetzee’s texts discourage readings that would seem to endorse such fulsome categories as growth and transformation. But something does happen to David, something is kindled in him—and that change has something to do with his increasing engagement with animals. Precisely what it is that happens to him is difficult to articulate. It is not something that he (or the narrator) seems to fully understand.

Talking about animals, thinking too much about them, does run the risk of diverting attention away from the novel’s depiction of the difficulties encountered by human beings in dangerous times. And of course many humans suffer just as greatly as animals in Coetzee’s bleak postapartheid world. Indeed, our “instincts” tell us that human suffering somehow means more, that it should register more profoundly than that of animals. This should not, however, blind us to the real sufferings inflicted on and experienced by countless animals as a result of what Derrida describes as “the industrial, mechanical, chemical, hormonal, and genetic violence to which man has been submitting animal life for the past two centuries” (395). Nor should it diminish the possibilities of exploring a relationship between the two spheres of suffering. Personally, I have no wish to overturn the hierarchy. I certainly do not wish to minimize the extent or depth of human suffering which is a legacy of a system of government that imposed untold hardships on huge numbers of people over a period of nearly half a century, a system of government that regarded the majority population as not fully human. But just as human beings continue to suffer in that place, so too do animals. And it is the altogether unexpected implications of this shared suffering that challenge and then transform Coetzee’s difficult protagonist, David Lurie.
The novel, however, continues for some considerable time by displaying little interest in animals. For much of the time they are either barely discernible (the shrimp in the salad, a Malachite heron, the gopher design on a pair of slippers) or objects of revulsion (the cockroach in the washbasin, the worm in the apple). When they do feature in the earlier parts of the novel they are usually the stuff of metaphor: "bull’s eye," "chickens come home to roost," "dogged silence," and so forth. When they are invoked more explicitly it is in order to demonstrate narrowly anthropocentric concerns. For example, contemplating self-castration in the first of many despairing and self-pitying moments, David Lurie’s sympathies are briefly and, in the light of his later encounters with animals, inadequately extended to them: "they do it to animals every day, and [they] survive well enough, if one ignores a certain residue of sadness" (9). This is pretty much typical of the style of discourse David retains for large parts of the novel. Until the point when animals become a real, physical presence in his life (and on occasions after it) he is prone to making casual and avowedly disinterested assertions on the worth of animal life. The first substantial exchange with Lucy is illustrative. Accompanying her on a visit to meet Bev and Bill Shaw, David is repelled by the smells and sights of animals in their house: "cat urine . . . dog mange . . . birds in cages . . . cats everywhere underfoot" (73). The garden is just as bad:

Through a window he glimpses the Shaws’ back yard: an apple tree dropping wormridden fruit, rampant weeds, an area fenced in with galvanized-iron sheets, wooden pallets, old tyres, where chickens scratch around and what looks uncommonly like a duiker snoozes in a corner.

In the car on the way back from the Shaws’ place, father and daughter initiate a strand of debate that runs through the rest of the novel. Discussing Bev’s work at the animal refuge, David comments:

"I’m sorry, my child, I just find it hard to whip up an interest in the subject. It’s admirable, what you do, what she does, but to me animal-welfare people are a bit like Christians of a certain kind. Everyone is so cheerful and well-intentioned that after a while
you itch to go off and do some raping and pillaging. Or to kick a cat."

In view of what is soon to happen to Lucy—and of his earlier treatment of his student Melanie Issacs—David's joking reference to sexual violence and cruelty to animals is quite disturbing. Lucy has picked up on the disdain that David feels not just for the Shaws' lifestyle, and not just for animal welfarists in general, but also for her association with such people:

"You don't approve of friends like Bev and Bill Shaw because . . . they are not going to lead me to a higher life, and the reason is, there is no higher life. This is the only life there is. Which we share with the animals. That's the example that people like Bev try to set. That's the example I try to follow. To share some of our privileges with the beasts. I don't want to come back in another existence as a dog or a pig and have to live as dogs or pigs do under us."

"Lucy, my dearest, don't be cross. Yes, I agree, this is the only life there is. As for animals, by all means let us be kind to them. But let us not lose perspective. We are of a different order of creation from the animals. Not higher, necessarily, just different. So if we are going to be kind, let it be out of simple generosity, not because we feel guilty or fear retribution." (74)

These are the first substantial thoughts he has voiced on the question of animals and his relation to them, and they are voiced as far as we can tell with seriousness. But at the same time they are academic, lecturily, abstracted: characteristics of thought and verbal performance that within a short space of time David will be forced to abandon.

In apparent contradiction to his professed lack of interest in animals, David is in fact rather fond of describing himself and, more pointedly, his relationships with women, in terms drawn from the animal kingdom. "Were he to choose a totem," we are told, "it would be a snake." And the reason? "Intercourse between Soraya [the prostitute he visits every Thursday afternoon] and himself must be, he imagines, rather like the copulation of snakes: lengthy, absorbed, but rather abstract, rather dry, even at its hottest" (2–3). More commonly he employs the language of predation. When, for example, he foolhardily attempts to visit Soraya at her home, he invokes an image from animal nature: "what should a predator expect
when he intrudes into the vixen’s nest, into the home of her cubs?” (10). Later, when he forces himself on the almost entirely submissive Melanie Issacs, the episode is described in equally predatory terms:

Not rape, not quite that, but undesired nevertheless, undesired to the core. As though she had decided to go slack, die within herself for the duration, like a rabbit when the jaws of the fox close on its neck. (25)

Lurie’s reaction to being confronted by Melanie’s father is to admit his part in her seduction but, this time, deploying the language of animal parasitism: “Why not come clean? I am the worm in the apple, he should have said” (37). Moments later he concurs with Issacs’s damning verdict on him: “A viper: how can he deny it?” (38). This tendency toward autozoomorphism reaches its climax in the course of his arraignment before the committee of inquiry set up to investigate the charges of misconduct brought against him by Melanie and her family. Accused by the chair of the university’s committee on discrimination of abusing Melanie (the accusation has racial as well as sexual dimensions: Melanie is, as far as we can tell, colored), David seethes:

Abuse: he was waiting for the word. Spoken in a voice quivering with righteousness. What does she see, when she looks at him, that keeps her at such a pitch of anger? A shark among the helpless little fishes? (53)

Exiting the tribunal (the confidentiality of which has been breached) the predator becomes the prey as David is pounced on by student newspaper reporters, photographers, and “the loiterers and the curious,” all of whom “circle round him like hunters who have cornered a strange beast and do not know how to finish it off” (55–56). And much later in the novel David will remember Melanie’s reaction to his seduction of her as akin to “stepping out in the forest where the wild wolf prowls” (168).

Until the moment when, having resigned his post of adjunct professor of communications, David travels out to Lucy’s smallholding, this is the extent of animals’ presence in the novel. And why should it be otherwise? Up to this point, the world of the novel has been resolutely urban: we have an academic satire, with lectures and seductions, tribunals and procedures, scandals and dismissals. However, once out of the city—exiled in
the Eastern Cape, or "old Kaffraria" (122) as he calls it, or "darkest Africa" (95, 121) as he also calls it—everything changes when David finds himself in the midst of real and not simply metaphorical animals.

The change of orientation seems initially unremarkable. There is little to suggest that animals will play any part in David's rehabilitation or accommodation to changed conditions. And there is certainly no suggestion that an engagement with animals will not only parallel his deepening state of disgrace but will actually constitute it. One reason for this is that David's style of discourse on animals continues largely unabated even after his move to the country, as we saw in the conversation with Lucy on the drive home from the Shaws' animal-crowded house and garden. Almost immediately after this exchange, at something of a loss about how to fill his time, David begins working with animals. The first real interaction comes when David enters the cage of Katy, the bulldog bitch. Stretching out beside her on the bare concrete floor, he is soon asleep. "Making friends?" asks Lucy, finding him there:

"Poor old Katy, she's in mourning. No one wants her and she knows it. The irony is, she must have offspring all over the district who would be happy to share their homes with her. But it's not in their power to invite her. They are part of the furniture, part of the alarm system. They do us the honour of treating us like gods, and we respond by treating them like things." (78)

As in their first exchange, when Lucy employs the language of humanitarian concern, David responds in language redolent of the seminar rooms he has recently vacated:

"The Church Fathers had a long debate about them, and decided they don't have proper souls," he observes. "Their souls are tied to their bodies and die with them."

Lucy shrugs. "I'm not sure that I have a soul. I wouldn't know a soul if I saw one."

"That's not true. You are a soul. We are all souls. We are souls before we are born." (78–79)
A measure of how far David moves in his journey through disgrace is the fact that by the end of the novel such language of certainty and authority—even if introduced ironically via the Church Fathers—will be augmented by altogether more inclusive, more imaginative ways of thinking. From the start of the book, David (once an active scholar of romanticism but now reduced to teaching something called communications, the premises of which he finds “preposterous” [3]) sees his language as more or less irrelevant to the changed circumstances of his country: “More and more he is convinced that English is an unfit medium for the truth of South Africa” (11). After Lucy’s rape, David increasingly imagines his language and his own identity sharing the same fate: the language is “tired, friable, eaten from the inside as if by termites” (129), while he himself is “like a fly-casing in a spiderweb, brittle to the touch, lighter than rice-chaff, ready to float away” (156). He feels “as if he has been eaten away from inside and only the eroded shell of his heart remains.” He and his language are becoming hollowed out, emptied: metonyms beloved of David. Used to articulate his sense of moribundity they quickly become tedious; employed in the final moments of the book as a way of articulating the passage of the animal’s soul after death—that eternal soul he had earlier reserved exclusively for the human species—they become remarkably powerful.

At Lucy’s suggestion, David volunteers to work at the animal refuge run by Bev (whose name he refuses to utter, as it reminds him “of cattle” [79]). The care she displays toward the diseased and injured animals provokes in David barely concealed derision. To her enjoiinder “Think comforting thoughts, think strong thoughts. They can smell what you are thinking” he responds with a silent “what nonsense!” (81). To her remark “I sense that you like animals” he replies “Do I like animals? I eat them, so I suppose I must like them, some parts of them.” And to her rejoinder “Yes, we eat up a lot of animals in this country. . . . It doesn’t seem to do us much good. I’m not sure how we will justify it to them” David wonders “Justify it? When? At the Great Reckoning?” (82). That David’s attitude is somewhat more complex is revealed moments later, however, when, after attempting to treat a particularly unpleasant injury to a goat, Bev attempts to persuade the animal’s owner to have it humanely destroyed. The owner refuses, and Bev is downcast. David’s response, although slightly off the mark, is interesting, not least to himself:
“Perhaps he understands more than you guess,” he says. To his own surprise, he is trying to comfort her. “Perhaps he has already been through it. Born with foreknowledge, so to speak. This is Africa, after all. There have been goats here since the beginning of time. They don’t have to be told what steel is for, and fire. They know how death comes to a goat. They are born prepared.” (84)

This is how it is with David. Moments of identification and genuine interest (“Who does the neutering?” [84] and “Are they all going to die?” [85]) are offset seconds later by dismissal (“New Age mumbo jumbo” [84]). Even when he has come almost to admire “the task this ugly little woman has set herself ... to lighten the load of Africa’s suffering beasts” (84), and even when her way of being with animals in their final moments has effected a change in him that he acknowledges without pretending to understand, he is still more than eager to point out the sheer extent of what he regards as her ugliness: “her hair is a mass of little curls,” “the veins on her ears are visible as a filigree of red and purple. The veins on her nose too.” She possesses “a chin that comes straight out of her chest, like a pouter pigeon’s” (82).

What I’ve been calling David’s transmutation will not completely erase these habits of thought. Everything at the end of the book is tentative, balanced between what is determined (“Well, he is too old to heed, too old to change” [209]) and what is mutable (“There may be things to learn” [218]). In this, David has much in common with Tolstoy’s Levin who, in the closing moments of Anna Karenina, confides in his reader:

This new feeling has not changed me, has not rendered me happy, nor suddenly illuminated me as I dreamt it would. ... But be it faith or not—I do not know what it is—this feeling has also entered imperceptibly through suffering and is firmly rooted in my soul. (740)

But change David does. And the transmutation is precipitated, I want to argue, by what Martin Buber calls “tiny episodes” (97) of reciprocity and exchange with animals. In being close to animals, in looking after them (even when they are dead), in learning from them, and in dwelling amongst them, David’s capacity for sympathy is broadened to a remarkable degree. As David descends deeper into his disgrace, he travels alongside
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the animals that share his fate. In the final part of this essay I want to chart David’s becoming animal and to demonstrate how it is, as Deleuze and Guattari insist, “perfectly real” (*A Thousand Plateaus* 238).

In *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* Deleuze and Guattari suggest that certain types of writing can constitute forms of becoming. One of these forms—the becoming animal—is seen most clearly, they argue, in the short stories of Franz Kafka. Kafka is, let us not forget, a presiding spirit in several works of Coetzee: most notably *The Life and Times of Michael K*, but also *Disgrace* and *The Lives of Animals*, the last of which contains several extended discussions of Kafka’s bestiary. Kafka’s desert world is not far from Coetzee’s desiccated landscapes and relationships. Referring not just to *The Metamorphosis* but also to “Report to an Academy,” “Josephine the Singer, or the Mouse Folk,” “Investigations of a Dog” and “The Burrow,” Deleuze and Guattari characterize Kafka’s becomings animal as follows:

To become animal is to participate in movement, to stake out the path of escape in all its positivity, to cross a threshold, to reach a continuum of intensities that are valuable only in themselves, to find a world of pure intensities where all forms come undone, as do all significations, signifiers, and signifieds, to the benefit of an unformed matter of deterritorialized flux, of non-signifying signs. (13)

So, for example, Gregor Samsa enters into that most famous becoming, a becoming insect,

not to flee his father but rather to find an escape where his father didn’t know where to find one, in order to flee the director, the business, and the bureaucrats, to reach that region where the voice no longer does anything but hum.

(Deleuze and Guattari, *Kafka* 13)

For all the audacity of Kafka’s becomings animal and in spite of the virtuoso acts of imagination that produce Gregor, Josephine, and Red Peter, there is something within the stories that blocks the success of their becomings. For Deleuze and Guattari this has to do with the processes of re-Oedipalization that enforce a reterritorialization of the subject within
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an order of things from which he or she has made such a valiant attempt to escape. Even though becomings are real, they can never result in a successful outcome:

becoming does not occur in the imagination. . . . Becomings—animal are neither dreams nor fantasies. They are perfectly real. But which reality is at issue here? For if becoming—animal does not consist in playing animal or imitating an animal, it is clear that the human being does not "really" become an animal any more than the animal "really" becomes something else. Becoming produces nothing other than itself. We fall into a false alternative if we say that you either imitate or you are. What is real is the becoming itself.  

(A Thousand Plateaus 238)

Whilst David Lurie's becoming animal is less explicitly audacious than that of Kafka's characters, he seems nonetheless to "succeed" in ways in which Gregor, Red Peter, et al. do not. Those nets of reterritorialization and re-Oedipalization that Deleuze and Guattari perceive as death traps in Kafka do not seem to catch David. His journey out seems irreversible. There are two related reasons for this. First, there is no father (actual or symbolic) in Coetzee's text who would rein David back into an order of propriety, obedience, or docility. David is curiously orphaned, with no parents, no siblings, no friends, few relationships of any sort. It might be argued that Petrus—once the dog man but now increasingly a man of social importance—could perform this function; certainly he has come to assume a position of authority over Lucy. But for David, there is no power or authority acting on him other than the amorphous but nonetheless powerful experience of disgrace. He moves into a realm of nonsignification, a "thing" neither fully human nor fully animal: a kind of ghost. Second, David will not be returning to any of his former ways: he will not go back to Cape Town (his house is ransacked); he will not resume his teaching at the university (he has been fired); and with his mollusk ear and diminished sexual attractiveness it seems unlikely he will return to roving. His time is taken up with three concerns: the pending birth of his grandchild, the shambolic animal opera, and the dogs and cats for whom he cares.
Through his work assisting Bev Shaw at the animal refuge, David forms an initially confused but increasingly profound awareness of animals’ experience of suffering. Almost all the animals brought to the clinic are destined for death:

The dogs that are brought in suffer from distempers, from broken limbs, from infected bites, from mange, from neglect, benign or malign, from old age, from malnutrition, from intestinal parasites, but most of all from their own fertility. There are simply too many of them. When people bring in a dog they do not say straight out, “I have brought you this dog to kill,” but that is what is expected: that they will dispose of it, make it disappear, dispatch it to oblivion. (142)

It is in his dealings with these doomed animals that the seeds of David’s expanded sympathies are sown. Watching the dogs eat—“It surprises him how little fighting there is. The small, the weak hold back, accepting their lot, waiting their turn” (84–85)—David’s gaze is returned by one of the dogs who, “eyes shining with wellbeing, sniffs his fingers through the mesh, licks them” (85). David “squats, allows the dog to smell his face, his breath. It has what he thinks of as an intelligent look, though it is probably nothing of the kind.” Over the course of the next few months David will be observed by the dogs in his care, and in this being observed by dogs, especially in the final moments of their lives, there are the beginnings of a more specific identification with the other animal. “An animal’s eyes,” writes Martin Buber, “have the power to speak a great language” (97). For Buber it was a cat whose eyes spoke:

Sometimes I look into a cat’s eyes. . . The beginning of this cat’s glance, lighting up under the touch of my glance, indisputably questioned me: “Is it possible that you think of me? Do you really not just want me to have fun? Do I concern you? Do I exist in your sight? Do I really exist? What is it that comes from you? What is it that surrounds me? What is it that comes to me? What is it?”

That this moment of I-Thou relationship will be replaced moments later by the world of I-It does not wipe out the momentary intensity of the
animal's returning look and the shared glance. A similar exchange occurs many years later when, stepping out of his shower to be confronted by his cat, Derrida experiences a similar moment of intensity: "nothing" Derrida writes, "will have ever done more to make me think through this absolute alterity of the neighbor than these moments when I see myself naked under the gaze of a cat" (380). This encounter leads directly to one of Derrida's most powerful meditations on human-animal relationships and on the multiplicity of the lives of animals. Eschewing the notion of a rigid division between the human and the animal, Derrida instead imagines altogether more mobile ways of interrelated being:

There is no animal in the general singular, separated from man by a single indivisible limit. We have to envisage the existence of "living creatures" whose plurality cannot be assembled within the single figure of an animality that is simply opposed to humanity. This does not of course mean ignoring or effacing everything that separates humankind from the other animals ... [I]t is rather a matter of taking into account a multiplicity of heterogeneous structures and limits. (415–16)

David is never as forthright as the philosophers. About his dealings with animals he articulates little other than a sense of confusion. For example, when he is faced with two sheep tethered on a piece of barren ground he realizes that

a bond seems to have come into existence between himself and the two Persians, he does not know why. The bond is not one of affection. It is not even a bond with these two in particular, whom he could not pick out from a mob in a field. Nevertheless, suddenly and without reason, their lot has become important to him. (126)

Contemplating the fate of these half-starved animals, he admits to being "disturbed. I can't say why" (127). Considering the ethics of mourning, "the death of beings who do not practice mourning among themselves" leaves him only with a "vague sadness." And then there is the killing and disposal of the animals brought into the clinic. In one of the most compelling sections of the novel David reflects on his Sunday afternoons at the clinic, when "the door is closed and locked while he helps Bev Shaw lösen the week's superfluous canines":

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He had thought he would get used to it. But that is not what happens. The more Killings he assists in, the more jerry he gets.

One Sunday evening, driving home in Lucy's kombi, he actually has to stop at the roadside to recover himself. Tears flow down his face that he cannot stop; his hands shake... He does not understand what is happening to him. (143)

...and as metaphor, but as any operatic qualities David's work might have come to actually constitute its form. Rejecting the piano as "too rounded, too physical, too rich", (184) for this antiphonic opera, David adopts an old banjo as his instrument of choice. This "old little seven-stringed banjo"

But it has also become the kind of work an animal might write. In the early stages of composition, animals have featured largely as ornament and as metaphor, but as any operatic qualities David's work might have come to actually constitute its form. Rejecting the piano as "too rounded, too physical, too rich" (184) for this antiphonic opera, David adopts an old banjo as his instrument of choice. This "old little seven-stringed banjo"

The truth is that Byam in Italy is going nowhere. There is no action, no development, just a long halting cantilena hurted by Teresa into the empty air... The lyric impulse in him may not be dead, but after decades of starvation it can crawl forth from its cave only pinched, stunted, deformed... It has become the kind of work a sleepwalker might write.

...it "consumes him night and day," articulates the novel that deals with David's chamber opera - an episode of recuperation, that animals cease to be fit objects for David's theoretical and philosophical speculation. As his professional sexual, and gender identities crumble, and as his relationship with Lucy undergoes severe strain in the aftermath of the attack on her, David moves from a philosophical position on animals to the understanding articulated by poets or artists, "...those men and women," writes Derrida, "who admit taking upon themselves the address of an animal that addresses them." (383).
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squawks the banjo” cradled “like a child” in Teresa Guiccioli’s arms as she calls out to her dead lover, Byron; and David hopes that among all the notes he has written, from “amidst the welter of sound there will dart up, like a bird, a single authentic note of immortal longing” (214). Then, most audaciously, David has the idea of introducing into his opera the voice of the dog who likes music, the dog with the “withered left hindquarter which it drags behind it” (215), the dog referred to consequently by Bev Shaw as Driepoot (Threelegs) although David is at pains not to give it a name—and who mirrors most faithfully his own state of disgrace. Like Levinas in wartime Germany, David is “sensible of a generous affection streaming toward him from the dog. Arbitrarily, unconditionally, he has been adopted; the dog would die for him he knows.” And here in the novel’s closing moments, David’s opera becomes animal:

The dog is fascinated by the sound of the banjo. When he strums the strings, the dog sits up, cocks its head, listens. When he hums Teresa’s line . . . the dog smacks its lips and seems on the point of singing too, or howling . . . Would he dare to do that: bring a dog into the piece, allow it to loose its own lament to the heavens between the strophes of lovelorn Teresa’s? Why not? Surely, in a work that will never be performed, all things are permitted? (215)

These are David’s final thoughts on the opera that will be performed (only in starts and snatches) to an audience of animals: to Driepoot and the other dogs in the yard of the animal refuge where David has made “a nest of sorts” (211). There David seems to embody the frugality espoused by Lucy in her degree-zero checklist of survival through humiliation in dark times:

“To start at ground level. With nothing. Not with nothing but. With nothing. No cards, no weapons, no property, no rights, no dignity.”

“Like a dog.”

“Yes, like a dog.” (205)

As so often in Disgrace, Lucy has preempted David’s thoughts and behavior. Her checklist is a call to become minor, indiscernible, and animal. And that is what he does.
“Like a dog”: the phrase resonates throughout Disgrace. David’s response to Lucy’s renunciation of privilege, power, and position not only invokes the animal as embodied disgrace but also brings together all the instances of cruelty inflicted on animals in the course of the novel—the massacre of the dogs in their cages; the beatings suffered by the retriever wanting only to follow its instinct; the abandoning of the dogs at the clinic. David is in fact quoting from an author whose name he never mentions, either to his students or in subsequent conversations with Lucy. Here is the end of Kafka’s The Trial:

The hands of one of the partners were already at K.’s throat, while the other thrust the knife into his heart and turned it there twice. With failing eyes K. could still see the two of them, cheek leaning against cheek, immediately before his face, watching the final act. “Like a dog!” he said: it was as if he meant the shame of it to outlive him.

In the terrible world into which he is swallowed, K.’s final words will never, we suspect, find a home, a sympathetic ear. There is nothing in The Trial to suggest that “the shame” will outlive the hapless K. In dying like a dog he dies not only in the manner of a dog but as a dog. His becoming dog is simultaneously a becoming dead.

David’s becoming is not quite of the same order of bleakness as that of Kafka’s K. Notwithstanding the “unquestionably disheartening view of the times of which it tells” (Attridge 318), a slender and thoroughly unsentimentalized lightening is detectable in Coetzee’s novel. The reason for this is that when the lives of human beings and of animals are considered as interrelated and interdependent, the animal can no longer be deployed unthinkingly as a convenient metaphor of human indignity. David carries a disfigured dog

into the clinic building, into the theatre with its zinc-topped table where the rich, mixed smells still linger, including one he will not yet have met with in his life: the smell of expiration, the soft, short smell of the released soul. (219)

He is attending to the death of a fellow being who may just possess what for so long has been attributed only to human beings, one of the marks
of the absolute limit between the human and the animal: an eternal, living soul. This is the step Levinas was unwilling or unable to make toward the fellow being who had refused to accept the tenets and the application of Nazi racism. Although Bobby is the only being in the world who does not accept the status of Levinas and his comrades as “subhuman, a gang of apes” (Levinas 153) he is nonetheless disregarded because of the “lack” (of soul, of ethics, of language) that most philosophers of the Western tradition have seen in the nonhuman animal.

David Lurie’s expanded sympathies, his sense of affiliation with the animals in his care, is complicated somewhat by a distinctive feature of a deeply embedded racism that is revealed once he moves out to the Eastern Cape. This is not a racism marked by a virulent hatred of all black people; indeed, David has good relationships with a number of black and colored people, notably Manas Mathabane, professor of religious studies and chair of the disciplinary inquiry into David’s behavior toward Melanie. Rather, his racism emerges in his persistent zoomorphism, in which animal characteristics are projected, mainly but not exclusively, onto black people. While this habit of thought becomes more pronounced after Lucy’s rape, his very first encounter with an Eastern Cape black sets up a certain association between the black man and the animal:

He is left with Petrus. “You look after the dogs,” he says, to break the silence.

“I look after the dogs and I work in the garden. Yes.” Petrus gives a broad smile. “I am the gardener and the dog-man.” He reflects for a moment. “The dog-man,” he repeats, savoring the phrase. (64)

Petrus’s support for the Bushbucks football team sustains his association with animals, and the metonymic chain of associations linking blacks, football, and animals surfaces again when David tries unsuccessfully to escape the lavatory into which he has been forced by the rapist-attackers: he “falls heavily. Some kind of trip: they must practice it in soccer” (96). But it is his daughter’s rape and his near immolation that prompt the most sustained yoking of black people and animality. The youngest
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rapist is described minutes before the attack as hissing at the dogs in their cages and having “piggish eyes” (92). When Lucy orders the men to “Get away from the dogs!” she shouts “Hamba,” a command normally issued to dogs. The rapist in chief appears in David’s nightmares: “panting, shouting soundlessly, [he] runs from the man with the face like a hawk, like a Benin mask” (121). When the boy rapist returns to the scene of the crime as a guest at the party Petrus is throwing to celebrate a land transfer in his favor, he is regarded by David as “the running-dog” (131). Later David will refer to him as “a jackal boy” (202). And when he catches the boy peering at Lucy through the bathroom window, David attacks him: “‘You swine!’ he shouts, and strikes him . . . ‘You filthy swine!’ . . . The word still rings in the air: ‘Swine!’” (206). Other instances of zoomorphism occur to David in almost every encounter he has with black men. They culminate in his final pronouncement to Lucy on the mentality of her rapists: the men, David concludes, “were not raping, they were mating” as animals mate; their “seed driven into the woman not in love but in hatred, mixed chaotically, meant to soil her, to mark her, like a dog’s urine” (199).

David’s conflation of black men and animals complicates an understanding of his becoming animal. His racism, compounded by an authorial arrangement of events in which it is blacks who perform acts of cruelty and whites who clear up the mess (Bev and David minister to dying animals; black people are responsible for the violence against and neglect of them), contributes to a scenario in which the animal David becomes is pervaded with racial anxiety and barely suppressed aggression. The novel’s “ethical turn” (Attwell 339) will not erase these problems. But it is precisely for this reason that the story of his expanded sympathies is so astonishing. For a man so “corroded with scepticism” (102) to consider so seriously the lives, deaths, and passage of the souls of fellow disgraced beings is, as Coetzee’s 1993 Nobel citation suggests, to “capture the divine spark” in humans and in other animals. The phrase well describes a novel that manages to allow what Derrida calls the animal’s address to the human whilst at the same time extending to animals human kindness, sympathy, and, finally, love.
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