

*Concentric: Literary and Cultural Studies* 40.2  
September 2014: 175-201  
DOI: 10.6240/concentric.lit.2014.40.2.09

**Humans among the Other Animals: Planetary,  
Responsibility, and Fiction in  
*Disgrace and Wolf Totem***

Duncan McColl Chesney  
Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures  
National Taiwan University, Taiwan

**Abstract**

This paper stages readings of several fictional and non-fictional explorations of the relation of man and animal, of limits, obligations, and sympathy, as well as larger ecological questions around creatureliness and planetary. I argue for a reassessment, via Agamben's by now familiar gloss on Heidegger's discussion of the animal, of an ineradicable creatureliness internal to the human, and then show what coming to terms with this means more broadly in ethical life. Finally, I insist on the role of fiction in the training of the imagination, a priming for the sort of ethical experience essential to good or right life.

**Keywords**

Planetary, creatureliness, Spivak, Heidegger, Agamben, Coetzee, Jiang Rong

## Wolves and *Zusammenarbeit*

An international publishing sensation of the last decade, now available in over thirty languages, the 2004 novel *Wolf Totem* 狼圖騰 by Jiang Rong 姜戎<sup>1</sup> poses some intriguing questions about the relationship between man and animal and related consequences for ecological thinking crucial not only in contemporary China, with its impending ecological disaster, but much more broadly as an ethical problem about our relationship to the planet. Placed in the larger discourse of eco-criticism the novel invites us to re-conceive our understanding of preservation, of balance, and of man's obligations vis-à-vis the planet. I want to look briefly at the world described by this novel as a way into a reconsideration of man's relation to animals and to the environment shared with them.

The English version of *Wolf Totem* was heavily criticized in a review in the *New York Times* (May 4, 2008) by Pankaj Mishra. According to Mishra, the "book reads like an extended polemic about the superiority of nomadic people and the dangers of a triumphant but brutishly ignorant modernity," which is doubtless true to a certain extent. Moreover "the pastoral education of the protagonist, Chen Zhen, proceeds through an awkwardly paced narrative full of set-piece didacticism." This is Mishra's main aesthetic criticism: the book, in Howard Goldblatt's translation, is a bit too polemical and didactic to be worthy of serious literary consideration. This may be true to a certain degree, but if it is the case, and if it is true that Jiang Rong resisted any attempt to engage in marketing or celebrating his book,<sup>2</sup> then we must seek to account for its tremendous success, both in China and abroad. Mishra dismissively identifies a "go-getting spirit of the West" and "boy-scoutish" toughness as part of the ideological flavor appealing to Chinese readers. As for others, he writes, "In the end, *Wolf Totem* engages the foreign reader only in its attempts to diagnose the spiritual malaise of contemporary China." What surprises him then is that such a stark diagnosis was able to reach readers at all, despite vigilant censors. In the Epilogue to the novel, when Chen Zhen and Yang Ke return 20 years after their sojourn of re-education to the grassland now cleansed of wolves as a result of the dictates of party members like Bao Shungui against the traditional wisdom of the

---

<sup>1</sup> Jiang Rong is the *nom de plume* of Lü Jiamin, 呂嘉民—a former university professor who as a member of the Red Guards willingly moved to Inner Mongolia in the late 1960s to be "re-educated." Later he was a political prisoner of the Chinese state, jailed as a democracy activist after the Tiananmen Square events of June 1989. (François Bougon, "Chinese Ex-Prisoner Now Global Literary Star" *China Post* [Taiwan], 11 March 2008. 5 March 2011).

<sup>2</sup> As described by Jürgen Kremb in "A Wolf in Sheep's Clothing: Beijing's Unwonted Bestseller," *Der Spiegel* online 21 March 2006.

Mongols, they find a region well on the way to becoming a dusty desert. The novel ends symbolically in a Beijing shrouded in a sandstorm from the North. Mishra comments, “It seems strange that the Chinese censors missed [the] indictment [here] of Han imperialism. It’s even more remarkable that a novel so relentlessly gloomy and ponderously didactic has become a huge best seller, second in circulation only to Mao’s little red book.” He concedes that the book’s success may have something to do with the way it “captures a widespread Chinese anxiety about their country’s growing physical and moral squalor as millions abandon the countryside in search of a middle-class lifestyle that cannot be environmentally sustained.” How it can remain a mystery to Mishra why the book has been so enthusiastically received abroad, then, is obscure, since much of the Western world is also in the midst of a growing crisis of “physical and moral squalor” at the center of environmentally unsustainable lives. Doubtless such an insight ought to be packaged in more delicate and sophisticated prose—perhaps like that of Pankaj Mishra—but its environmental appeal is no mystery at all.

Goldblatt’s translation as such has come under fire by Wolfgang Kubin (a Chinese scholar at the University of Bonn), among other things for its abridgement of the “fascistic” epilogue, leading him to the question whether the English translation can really be said to represent the novel at all to the West. Kubin characterizes the full Chinese version of the book, at any rate, as a bad copy of Jack London, whose “ideology reflects the social Darwinism of novels like *White Fang*, an ideology that seems totally outdated in this globalized world where collaboration [*Zusammenarbeit*] rather than the survival of the fittest is emphasized” (my translation).<sup>3</sup> Whether a stereotypical “Social-Darwinian survival of the fittest” is a real theme of the novel is debatable, but what we see in it is a struggle for survival by men and beasts that precisely involves “*Zusammenarbeit*,” as well as respect and a sort of epistemo-ethical humility on the part of men, however tough and rugged they may be, that says to the wolf: of you I know something; I can kill you with my lasso pole and gun if I need to; but ultimately I need you, respect you, and in an essential sense do *not* know and understand you; I am humbled by your “wisdom” that always exceeds my expectations and calculations. Ideologically problematic here, because under-nuanced, is not so much a fascistic celebration of virility and toughness of the Mongols that needs to be imitated by the rest of the Chinese,<sup>4</sup> but

---

<sup>3</sup> Wolfgang Kubin, “Der Übersetzer ‘in Klammern’,” *Deutsch-Chinesisches Kulturnetz*, September 2009 <[www.de-cn.net/mag/lit/de4847519.htm](http://www.de-cn.net/mag/lit/de4847519.htm)>.

<sup>4</sup> “There’d be hope for China if our national character could be rebuilt by cutting away the decaying parts of Confucianism and grafting a wolf totem sapling onto it. It could be combined with such Confucian traditions as pacifism, an emphasis on education, and devotion to study” (377).

rather a perhaps overly-facile pathos that derives from the fact that the “fittest” species for the balance of this eco-system, the wolf, does not survive because of the stupidity of the modernizing Han Chinese party functionaries who intrude on the region and impose on it a political-economic logic fatal to its balance.

The novel tells the story of Chen Zhen, an educated, urbanite Han Chinese who moves from Beijing to north-central Inner Mongolia during the Cultural Revolution to be re-educated through rustication. In a series of vividly described scenes—hunting, culling wolves, raising a wolf cub, and so on—we (along with Chen Zhen and his friend Yang Ke) gradually get to know something about the culture of the Mongolian grasslands. While the beliefs and customs of the Mongolians themselves are certainly intriguing, what emerges as central to Chen’s experience (and the reader’s interest) is the fragile natural balance within the eco-system of the grasslands—the inter-relationships of men, wolves, horses, sheep, gazelles, marmots, and the grass itself. “Out here, the grass and the grassland are *the* life, the big life. All else is little life that depends on the big life for survival. Even wolves and humans are little life” (45).

The version of the novel translated into English by Howard Goldblatt won the inaugural Man Asian Literary Prize in 2007. Reading Goldblatt’s translation, one naturally does recall Jack London, who is explicitly mentioned in *Wolf Totem* (267, 310, 394). *White Fang* (1906) and its counter-volume *The Call of the Wild* (1903), two books clearly known to Jiang Rong, establish a very powerful and influential polarity of wildness and domestication, of the wolf White Fang becoming-dog and the dog Buck becoming-wolf, that is a very typical expression both of anthropomorphic projection in our relation to non-human animals and in a Rousseau-esque glorification of the purity and the primordially of wild nature. This represented the dominant paradigm of imaginative relation to “man’s best friend,” his wild cousin, and by extension to all creatures great and small that come into regular contact with expanding (sub)urban and industrial development from London’s time up to the beginning of a new ecological thinking and reassessment of man among the animals with Rachel Carson, Dian Fossey, Jane Goodall, Ruth Harrison, and many others in the 1960s; or rather, this way of thinking exists as the romantic contrast to the more mundane, morally unexplored instrumental use of animals for human purposes in production, science, for food, clothing and so on that also begins to be undermined by Harrison and others in the 60s.

As has been noted by scholars and “watchers” of China’s prodigiously rapid development in the last three decades, China’s political-economic path is leading to great uncertainty, both internally and for geo-economics and geo-politics in ways partially relating to environmental degradation, pollution, and other problems of

industrialization and urbanization.<sup>5</sup> It is in the context of breakneck “neoliberalism with Chinese characteristics” (Harvey, Chapter 5) and its social and ecological consequences that Jiang Rong wants his compatriots to come to terms with the period of breakneck industrial expansion, and the consequent moral changes of a people exposed to rapid consumerist expansion, with eyes wide open, in order, if possible, to avoid some of the mistakes of the American way, which, *mutatis mutandis*, the recent Chinese case in some ways acceleratedly repeats. Given the mounting environmental and ecological threats in China, this seems perhaps less good advice than wishful thinking, too little too late—and in fact the awareness of this situation is clearly present in the novel itself in the conflict between Chen, Yang and the Mongol elders with Bao Shungui, the lapsed Mongol (e.g. 88, 290) functionary committed to modernization, despite an ostensible shared desire to learn from the regional “rustics.”<sup>6</sup>

I am not sure if Jiang Rong is indulging in a version of Chinese touristic exoticism in his book (whatever Lü Jiamin was up to on his tour of cultural duty), depicting the indigenous, “backward” spiritual wisdom of the other within the borders, a consumerist development I saw on display in the exotic, kitschy, internal tourism industry in Yunnan Province recently.<sup>7</sup> Be that as it may, what he does do is provide a very strong, well-developed description of the comprehensive practices, beliefs, hopes and fears of a people integrated into a harmonious pre-modern ecosystem—the grassland, the masters of which are not the Mongols themselves, but the wolves. “The grassland is a complex place . . . everything is linked, and the wolves are the major link, tied to all the others” (238). What is most compelling here to me is the depiction of a sort of reciprocity, a system of mutual rights and duties that governs the inter-relation of men, the land, and the other animals. While harmonious, this system is far from cozy, and is indeed often quite violent. When the necessity of

---

<sup>5</sup> See Ho-fung Hung, Giovanni Arrighi, and Alvin Y. So’s contributions to Hung, ed., *China and the Transformation of Global Capital* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2009); see also Clark et al., *Ecological Rift* for a broadside against the current economic thinking that reveals the inability of orthodox and neoliberal economics to even conceive of the ecology as such, much less its role in undermining ecological systems; e.g. “Economists in Wonderland” 90ff.

<sup>6</sup> Among the growing literature on this topic, I refer to Judith Shapiro, *Mao’s War Against Nature: Politics and the Environment in Revolutionary China* (New York: Cambridge UP, 2001) for the Mao period; Vaclav Smil, *China’s Environmental Crisis: An Inquiry into the Limits of National Development* (Armonk: M. E. Sharpe, 1993) for the Deng period; and Robert P. Weller, *Discovering Nature: Globalization and Environmental Culture in China and Taiwan* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2006) for literary and other representations.

<sup>7</sup> Yunnan is the province with the greatest number of non-Han ethnic groups and, besides having a pleasant climate, is much less politically touchy than other exotic provinces like Xinjiang or Tibet.

a wolf cull arises, surprising the new convert Chen Zhen, the Mongol elder Bilgee responds,

If there are too many of them, they lose their divine power and turn evil. It's alright for people to kill evil creatures. If they [the wolves] killed all the cows and sheep, we could not go on living, and the grassland would be lost. We Mongols were also sent by Tengger<sup>8</sup> to protect the grassland. Without it, there'd be no Mongols, and without Mongols, ther'd be no grassland. (123)

The wolf itself, as totem, can be at the symbolic center of this system and receive its due respect without a hint of anthropomorphic projection.<sup>9</sup> On the contrary, the wolf totem is respected to the extent of expressing an ideal becoming-wolf of man, though with a conscious sense of the wolf's essential alterity (e.g. Chen "was speechless. The wisdom of the wolf was unfathomable. An almost magical beast" [318]. It was Rousseau, I believe, who suggested that Hobbes' expression, borrowed from Plautus, *homo homini lupus* was an offense to wolves.). What we see, in short, is a situation where man, even out of his own self-interest, needs to learn to be humble, to accept his position, and renounce any ambition of mastery.

Despite many passages of "didactic" explanation of Mongolian nomadic pastoralism,<sup>10</sup> praise of Genghis Khan, criticism of the lack of virility of the Han Chinese (see 218 for a particularly egregious example), and so forth, the novel is really focused on the ecological balance specific to the ecosystem of the grassland, the "simple grassland logic" (257) that determines what man or animal behavior (violence) is good or bad and when—which is to say that the *grassland logic* founds the moral and cultural system, the entire worldview, of the Mongolian pastoralists on the Olonbulag. Life in this pre-modern world, as bloody and arduous as it is, is seen by Chen Zhen and his fellow students to have a beauty, simplicity, and, yes, virility, that contrast starkly with the modern techno-political machine of the Communist state

---

<sup>8</sup> Tengger/Tengri 騰格里 is the Turkic-Mongolian sky god and in the book is referred to not only as a sort of chief deity above but also a sort of fundamental animating spirit.

<sup>9</sup> In fact, Chen Zhen is contrasted with his fellow student Yang Ke who is much more inclined to romanticizing and anthropomorphizing. Jiang Rong nicely alternates styles and perspectives in the chapters focusing on the two separate protagonists in the middle of the book (e.g. 18-19).

<sup>10</sup> For a radically different account of this history, see James Chambers, *The Devil's Horsemen: The Mongol Invasion of Europe* (New York: Atheneum, 1979) and its extension in a very heterodox narrative of human civilization in David A. Nibert, *Animal Oppression & Human Violence: Domeseccration [sic], Capitalism, and Global Conflict* (New York: Columbia UP, 2013), esp. Ch. 1, 9-42.

(and its inevitable corruption). The main example, or indeed allegory, in the novel of the incompatibility of the two worlds or systems, besides the ruining of the swan lake or the ultimate transformation of pastureland into agricultural fields, is the raising of the wolf cub by Chen Zhen and the other Beijing students. This on-going plot is complemented by an episode (in Chapter 15) of a wolf hunted by the Mongol nomad Batu and one of the students, Zhang Jiyuan, who chews off one of its legs after sustaining a gun wound and teaches dignity in death—“the wolf had wrenched justice and righteousness from the humans” (230)—and a later episode (in chapter 32) of a wolf ridden to exhaustion and death by Bao Shungui and the staff officers from the corps advanced party in swift motorized vehicles of some sort (454-56) in a passage so cruel and inglorious it needs no evaluative commentary. Throughout the book the equation of wolf and Mongol is made repeatedly and is clear in the very existence of the wolf totem. Wolves will not be domesticated; “You can tame a bear, a tiger, a lion, or an elephant, but you cannot tame a Mongolian wolf” (458). The novel’s ostensible protagonist and focalizer Chen Zhen, whose curiosity about the Mongolian culture and ecosystem has fueled our own even to the point of excusing not a small degree of preachiness and *aw shucks!* admiration, has undertaken this ill-advised experiment of domesticating while not exactly taming a cub stolen along with a whole litter as part of the wolf cull. The reader is surprised at the end not so much to see the wolf cub finally die from wounds suffered through its own resistance to its chain (and spurred by the howl of its putative father), but to see Chen Zhen, according to the allegory, as the “bad guy,” representative of a China which despite its best intentions—and most of the other Han Chinese (and for that matter Mongolians from other areas) do NOT seem to have very good intentions—has killed off the very thing it was trying to save by circumscribing, controlling, studying. Readers are chastened at the end by this clever manipulation of our identification with the extra-ordinarily sensitive Chen, even if we couldn’t ever see how the wolf cub narrative was going to work out well. We are left to rue the obvious misunderstanding of the eco-logic of the grassland, the fragilely balanced interrelation of man, beast, and environment. A very different modern economic and political logic has indeed *superannuated* this system and culture, but we suspect that everyone and everything have suffered some sort of loss as a result.

### **Planetarity**

What I would like to stress is how Jiang Rong can engage, through the vivid descriptions and imaginative feats of his fictional world, our concern with the particular situation and invite our larger concern with the eco-political-ethical

problematic at its heart in our own lands and lives. Although the situation he describes is quite particular, quite local, it invites a connection to other particularities and localities, a mapping that Gayatri Spivak has dubbed a new thinking of *planetaryity*. “In this era of breakneck globalization, I propose the planet to overwrite the globe. Globalization is achieved by the imposition of the same system of exchange everywhere . . . The globe is on our computers. No one lives there. And we think that we can aim to control globality. The planet is in the species of alterity, belonging to another system; and yet we inhabit it, on loan” (Spivak, *Planet* 44).<sup>11</sup> Linking the planet to other transcendental figurations of the origin of animation (Mother, Nation, God, Nature), Spivak continues, “If we imagine ourselves as planetary subjects rather than global agents, planetary creatures rather than global entities, alterity remains underived from us, it is not our dialectical negation, it contains us as much as it flings us away . . .” (46).

In a different version of the article, Spivak adds a word of caution here: “To talk planet talk by way of an unexamined environmentalism, referring to an undivided ‘natural’ space rather than a differentiated political space, can work in the interests of . . . globalization in the mode of the abstract as such” (Spivak, *Death* 72).<sup>12</sup> This is why particular, local explorations of the inter-relations between men, women, animals, and the environment, without foregone conclusions or prejudices regarding action, conservation, or what have you are crucial. (And why *Wolf Totem* is an important novel even for those of us who are not Chinese.) Such explorations can add up, however, to a larger picture. In endeavoring a new mapping, connecting routes of trade and migration, dis-covering footprints and consequences of laws, activities, choices, consumption, and so forth we discover what, of course, we already know as a facet of capitalism itself—the relative unimportance of boundaries, nations, symbolic categories of us and them—but with a difference. We see how these ideological designations mask economic structures but also note the real interconnection of creatures, irrespective of such designations, in relation not just to the world-system of capital but to the planet as animating power, not just as resource, as Heideggerian *Bestand*, but as life-force. While symbolic categories clearly do

---

<sup>11</sup> As is her custom, Spivak has reprinted this piece with subtle changes in a subsequent volume, *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization*. I stick here to the original, more hopeful talk given in Switzerland, as published in the Austrian edition of 1999.

<sup>12</sup> We can add to this criticism of an abstract concept of nature the very indistinction between human “nature” and the technology that has equipped and supplemented it over the course of history. “Technology is not merely the production of manufactured goods but also a transformation of the one who produces them, an alteration not only of material and environment but also of man” (Esposito, *Terms* 98).

remain important, Spivak nonetheless asserts an “imperative to re-imagine the subject as planetary” (48). At this point in her talk Spivak makes reference to the Islamic concept of *haqq*, “the para-individual structural responsibility’ into which we are born—that is, our true being” (54), a sort of reciprocal system of rights and duties involving a “robust notion of responsibility [that] is the one practiced by most pre-capitalist high culture of the planet” (54).<sup>13</sup> Clearly this term is being used to designate a pre-liberal notion of social community with attendant responsibilities and duties that cannot be translated into the language of liberal rights, the market-based sense of community of abstract citizens or consumers, or other ethical notions based on the bourgeois capitalist system.<sup>14</sup> Keeping in mind Spivak’s wariness about “unexamined environmentalism,” we see that the term “planet” is really “a catachresis for inscribing collective responsibility as right” (56). The planet is the ground of our mutual obligations, and while this term opens on to the ecological in terms of the “Aboriginal,” that is a practice of living “where the opposition between the human and the natural is made indeterminate” (56), Spivak is much more concerned here, as elsewhere, with conceptually grounding a critique of the thinking

---

<sup>13</sup> *Haqq* (pl. *huquq*) “at the same time as it means ‘reality,’ ‘truth,’ ‘actuality,’ ‘fact,’ ‘God,’ and so on, it, or this being Arabic, morphophonemic perpetuations of it, also means a ‘right’ or ‘duty’ or ‘claim’ or ‘obligation’, as well as ‘fair,’ ‘valid,’ ‘just’ or ‘proper’” (Geertz, 187-88 qtd. in Cattelan 387). Cattelan continues:

The performance of a valid act by the agent (the Muslim servant) gives rise to a new setting of *huquq*. But, at the same time, any ‘right’ depends only on God, and God’s pity guarantees the just allocation of entitlements for all mankind: thus, the ‘right’ of an individual is not in ‘competition’ with those of others: since they both represent the (same) manifestation of God’s Will, they are not ‘separate portions of universal justice’, but, according to a monistic conception which does not conceive a (separate) justice of men distinguished from the justice of God, share of the unique, divine justice. In other words, God, the only Ruler and Beholder of any justice, defines any *haqq*, which is not the ‘right’ of a single person, but (both) the right and the obligation, which make sense only within the unity of the ‘two elements . . . the *huquq* are not the rights and obligations that serve to connect autonomous elements . . . [they] do not face (or should we say oppose)?’ [Smirnov, 1996, 345], but represent the fundamental legal structure of any valid transaction. In this way, the principle of ‘giving what is due to the just holder’ is perceived in the Islamic tradition as ‘establishing the right (*haqq*) in its [due/right/just] place (*makān*)’ (*taqrīr al-haqq makāna-hu huwa al-’adl*) [Hamid al-Dīn al-Kirmān, d. 1020 A.D.]. (Cattelan 387)

<sup>14</sup> See Midgley for a revised take on Lovelock’s Gaia hypothesis that incorporates this sort of thinking and is irrelevant to contractarian, liberal political and moral thought, or rather proves the latter to be irrelevant! E.g. 257 and general chapters 17-21.

and practices of international aid agencies, of national immigration policy, and so forth (as of defending, impossibly, a certain pedagogy and language training at the heart of Comparative Literature against a different dominant logic of the academy). In short, Spivak intends planetarity as a grounding for a different *dialogics* than that at play in Hegelian or Habermasian models that could then apply to the practices of such international agencies, the elaboration of such policy. I want however to focus on the relation of men to animals and the planet gestured towards in Spivak's use of the terms "planet" and "Aboriginal."

### **Heidegger, Agamben, and Animality**

The subject as planetary, *haqq* as mutual obligation and respect, and the *Aboriginal* are doubtless essential to thinking the inter-human aspects of planetary relations, but not obviously for understanding the human relation to the animal and to nature itself. Moreover, having mentioned Heidegger's notion of nature reconceived of as *Bestand* (standing reserve, stock, resource) within the current epoch of technology whose essence Heidegger calls *das Ge-stell* (framework or "enframing"), a particular (metaphysical) appropriation of being that impoverishes the world and forecloses a proper thinking of being, or more appropriately here, a proper way of living one's life, I should say a little more about Heidegger and his relevance to the concerns explored in this article. I want to look briefly to Heidegger's 1929/30 lecture course *Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: World, Finitude, Solitude*, as well as Giorgio Agamben's gloss on this seminar in his book *The Open* [L'Aperto 2002]. Heidegger represents an important, if slightly marginal, contribution to ecological thought in his later thinking through of World and Earth, of Dwelling, of the Thing and so forth, and his general critique of the Epoch of Technology. In this seminar shortly after *Being and Time* Heidegger addresses at much greater length than in that masterpiece a fundamental *Stimmung* (Mood, Attunement), namely, boredom, culminating in a deep and unspecified, general indifference, *tiefe Langweile* (profound boredom). What happens in the experience of profound boredom is "Dasein's being delivered over to beings' telling refusal of themselves as a whole" (139). As Agamben explains, this is Dasein's openness, to a closure or refusal—but a telling closure. In this experience, Heidegger states, "there occurs the dawning of the possibilities that Dasein could have, but which are left unexploited precisely in this 'it is boring for one,' and as unexploitable leave us in the lurch. [But there lies here a reference to something else.] This reference is the

telling announcement [*Ansagen*] of possibilities left unexploited” (141)—in Agamben’s conceptual system, potentiality.

Now, what is of interest to me here is the later part of the seminar when Heidegger discusses world: stones and other material objects are according to Heidegger worldless (*weltlos*); man, by coming to terms with his own mortality and with his relation to death, history, language, and the environment (later, *das Geviert*) is world-forming (*weltbildend*) as is especially developed in the 1930s—for example in the “Origin of the Work of Art”; the animal, however, is described by Heidegger as being *weltarm*: poor in world. What does this mean? Heidegger explains by reference to contemporary studies in biology (von Uexküll) that an animal is trapped in a surrounding environment (*Umwelt*) determined by its particular instinctual capabilities (and its sensory-representational system) and can only be affected by its “disinhibitors” [*Enthemmende*].<sup>15</sup> An animal’s relation to its disinhibitors (food, danger, potential sexual mates, etc.) is one of captivation [*Benommenheit*]. Heidegger concludes:

the animal as such does not stand within a manifestness [*Offenbarkeit*] of beings. Neither its so-called environment nor the animal itself are manifest [*offenbar*] as beings. The animal in principle does not possess the possibility of attending either to the being that it itself is or to beings other than itself, because the animal is directed in its manifold instinctual activities on the basis of its captivation and of the totality of its capacities. (248)

Here, as Agamben notes, Heidegger is responding to Rilke’s famous eighth *Duino Elegy* which begins: “Mit allen Augen sieht die Kreatur / das Offene” / “With full gaze the animal sees the open” (Rilke 60-61). On the contrary, “a being such as the animal, when it comes into relation with something else, can only come upon the sort of entity that ‘affects’ it or initiates [a given] capability in some way [as discussed explicitly by Heidegger at the end of the *Parmenides* lecture course, 1942-43]. Nothing else can ever penetrate the ring around the animal” (254). The animal can only be affected by its disinhibitor(s) [*Enthemmende*]. Heidegger takes some pains to point out that the poverty-in-world of the animal does not entail a hierarchical

---

<sup>15</sup> It should be noted that von Uexküll’s development of these concepts of perceptual capabilities and *Umwelt* is much cheerier and more sympathetic (to say nothing of biologically well-informed!) than we see in Heidegger’s dour appropriation. See the delightful recent English translation of *A Foray into the Worlds of Animals and Humans*.

assessment. Clearly it does mean that the animal is closed to Being. But the animal's poverty can also be described as a sort of wealth.

*The essence of life can become accessible only if we consider it in a deconstructive [abbauenden] fashion. But this does not mean that [animal] life represents something inferior or some kind of lower level in comparison with human Dasein. On the contrary [animal] life is a domain which possesses a wealth of openness with which the human world may have nothing to compare. (255)*

Rilke, again in a poem Heidegger clearly contests, writes, “*Wir haben nie, nicht einen einzigen Tag, / den reinen Raum vor uns, in den die Blumen / unendlich aufgehn. Immer ist es Welt / und niemals Nirgends ohne Nicht . . .*” (MacIntyre: “Never, not for a single day do we have pure space before us in which the flowers are always unfolding. It's forever world, and never Nowhere-without-Not . . .”).<sup>16</sup> Ultimately the animal remains for Heidegger, “essentially enigmatic” (Mulhall 108).

In animal behavior there is no “letting-be of beings as such”—but either captivation or non-relation. As Agamben writes, the animal is

open in a non-disconcealment [*non-disvelamento*—a non-unveiling] that, on the one hand, captivates it and dislocates it in its disinhibitor with unmatched vehemence, and on the other, does not in any way disconceal [reveal,] as a being[,] that thing that holds it so taken and absorbed [non svela in alcun modo come un ente ciò che pure lo tiene così avvinto e assorbito]. (Agamben 59 [62])

Now, Agamben's corrective to Heidegger in *The Open* is to move from the similarity of Dasein in profound boredom, delivered over to something that refuses itself, and the animal in its captivation as exposed in something which remains unrevealed.

---

<sup>16</sup> Rilke here expresses a late Romantic desire to escape from (anthropomorphic) nature into some kind of simple being without desire for transcendence or need for negation that we see variously in Leopardi, Baudelaire, Rimbaud . . . Adorno, for his part, imagines such a “bestial” day in a beautiful passage in *Minima Moralia*, “*Sur l'eau*”: “Perhaps the true society will grow tired of development and, out of freedom, leave possibilities unused, instead of storming under a confused compulsion to the conquest of strange stars . . . *Rien faire comme une bête*, lying on water and looking peacefully at the sky, ‘being, nothing else, without any further definition and fulfillment’, might take the place of process, act, satisfaction, and so truly keep the promise of dialectical logic that it would culminate in its origin. None of the abstract concepts comes closer to the fulfilled utopia than that of eternal peace [ewigen Frieden]” (§100, 156-57).

“Both are, in their most proper gesture, *open to a closedness* [*aperti a una chiusura*]; they are totally delivered over to something that obstinately refuses itself” (65). Agamben takes this to be a metaphysical moment of indistinction between man and animal. He writes, “Dasein is simply an animal that has learned to become bored; it has awakened *from* its own captivation *to* its own captivation. This awakening of the living being to its own being-captivated, this anxious and resolute opening to a not-open is the human” (70). But, he concludes, if we “restore to the closed, to the earth, and to *lethe* their proper name of “animal” and “simply living being,” then the originary political conflict between unconcealedness and concealedness will be, at the same time and to the same degree, that between the humanity and the animality of man” (73). This suggests that *anthropogenesis* occurs in the worlding of the world Heidegger describes in detail throughout the 30s. But this moment must not be forgotten. According to Agamben, we are given a choice by Heidegger: either

- (a) posthistorical man no longer preserves his own animality as undisclosed, but rather seeks to take it on and govern it by means of technology; [or]
- (b) man, the shepherd of being, appropriates his own concealedness, his own animality, which neither remains hidden nor is made an object of mastery, but is thought as such, as pure abandonment. (80)

So, a coming to terms with the animality of man, typically suspended in a zone of exception and only revealed in moments of profound boredom, is essential if Dasein is to deliver himself over to the world of beings. This is stated in what Agamben calls the supreme category of Heidegger’s ontology: “*Sein-lassen*,” letting-be.<sup>17</sup>

Neither Heidegger nor Agamben makes the next move explicitly, but I would argue that a crucial way of coming to terms with this animality or creatureliness<sup>18</sup> of

---

<sup>17</sup> “Letting-be [*Sein-lassen*] means doing nothing for [*Nichtsdazutun*] and taking nothing away [*Nichtswegnehmen*], and is successful most purely through in-difference [*Gleichgültigkeit*]. Letting-be assumes as reversed the highest urgency in the truth of the essence of Be-ing [*Seyn*]. Urgency as deep patience in the grounding of the truth of Be-ing. Man is most *expelled* from this grounding the more essentially his being is wrested from animality and spirituality. The letting-be of beings must remain furthest distanced from any ingratiation to the real as effective and successful.” (Heidegger, *Besinnung* 103, my trans.; As for Rilke, this *Sein-lassen* seems in the end quite similar to the conclusion of *Duino Elegy* 9 about the non-transcendent *Hiersein* of man, with the added poetic task of speaking the name of things, thereby worlding the earth . . . .)

<sup>18</sup> Eric Santner (2006) following Agamben’s discussions of “bare life,” has developed the notion of “creaturely life” in a different direction (see e.g. 15), relating to the zone of indistinction between animal and man as subsequently marked/scarred by sovereign decision, an exposure to the traumatic

man is precisely in a certain rapport of *Sein-lassen* with animals. This is not tantamount to leaving wolves to their own devices (i.e. killing off all the cattle and undermining human settlement in Inner Mongolia), but is the proper attitude to the animal other initial to (or complementary with) adopting a behavior vis-à-vis that could serve mutual interests and indeed being (*Mitsein*) without being instrumental or presuming to act from a position of knowledge-power-domination. What would such *Sein-lassen* look like? To answer this and relate it to the notion of planetarity, I turn now to J. M. Coetzee's novel *Disgrace*.

### Disgrace

*Disgrace* (1999) is a superb and complex novel addressing among other things desire and time, South African history and immediate post-apartheid society, art and its moral force in life. It also, like the *Lives of Animals* (1999) and *Elizabeth Costello* (2003) addresses man's relationship to animals, but in a different way from these more explicit texts. David Lurie, the central character, is presented initially as quite skeptical towards his daughter Lucy's relation to dogs (and other animals) and is even a bit contemptuous of her friend Bev Shaw (72-73), the volunteer leader of the Animal Welfare League. *Disgrace* is the narrative of Lurie's "lessons" in re-thinking ethical life, and while it does not provide any dramatic epiphanies or end with Lurie in some state of enlightenment,<sup>19</sup> it does show essential development in how Lurie understands certain fundamental ethical questions, above all, what is a/the good life and what is love? And crucial in the moral development of David Lurie, such as it is, is his changed relationship to animals.

Lurie's initial position about animals is familiar in the skeptical discourse around "animal liberation": ". . . by all means let us be kind to them. But let us not lose perspective. We are of a different order of creation from 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).<sup>20</sup> A number of critics

---

dimension of "creative" sovereign power. I clearly intend something simpler here: the zone of indistinction understood not as originary or onto-politically primary, but as always potentially, palpably present in daily life, as an intimate extimacy or internal otherness never far away from daily, embodied experience. Creaturely and not simply animal because it involves a rethinking of animality itself.

<sup>19</sup> Although, as Derek Attridge insists, he does reach a state of "grace" (187).

<sup>20</sup> This sort of reasonable, mild position is articulated well by Roger Scruton in *Animal Rights and Wrongs*. The most interesting thing about his discussion of philosophical problems with the notions of "animal rights"—which he ultimately denies, pleading instead a "humane" welfarist position mixing elements of utilitarian, Kantian, and traditional virtue-based moral thinking—is his

take Lurie at face value when, several times in the novel, he qualifies his engagement in various new tasks, for example, accepting to work with Bev Shaw: “All right, I’ll do it. But as long as I don’t have to become a better person. I am not prepared to be reformed. I want to go on being myself” (77). I think it is fair to say that Lurie ends up with something like the same understanding about animals stated above (74), and with the same sense of not being a “good person” (77), but his “simple generosity” has taken on a new meaning, and he *has* become a better person.

Early in the novel Lurie, a professor who has been involved in a sex scandal with a student, is “retired” from his faculty position. In exile from his Cape Town existence and newly arrived in the Eastern Cape where his daughter has a small-holding, he begins his lessons on changing his life. Indeed, I use this somewhat clumsy phrase because, despite his skepticism about animals as well as about life-changing, particularly at his age (he is constantly described as getting old but is only 52!), Lurie himself at one point late in the novel refers to lines from Rilke’s famous poem on the archaic bust of Apollo, “Du muss dein Leben ändern!” (209). But it is not art that gives the imperative to Lurie. It is Lurie’s inability to understand the behavior of his daughter towards the black South Africans, including her rapists and her possibly complicit neighbor Petrus; her refusal to leave the land and admit defeat—indeed to think in terms of defeat (and what, victory?), in her relation to the land and its occupants. Something about Lurie’s inability to even conceive of her motives—he, Lurie, the city-boy, the intellectual (61), the scholar, the Westerner (202)—leads him to the epiphanic moment borrowed from Rilke: everything in his life must change. But, while things are changing, the drama of epiphany seems a bit irrelevant to the sort of renewed life we see at the end.

What Lucy has experienced Lurie names: humiliation. “Yes, I agree, it is humiliating. But perhaps that is a good point to start from again. Perhaps that is what I must learn to accept. To start at ground level. With nothing. Not with nothing but. With nothing. No cards, no weapons, no property, no rights, no dignity.” Lurie responds, “Like a dog” (205). Like a dog, but we might also point out, like a black South African during centuries of colonization and oppression. All the same, the dog is very important here. One must learn to live like a dog (and consequently one must learn to let dogs live, in a certain way, or help them die). Spivak stresses the reference here to the end of Kafka’s *Trial*: “With failing eyes K. could still see the two of them

---

notion, beyond the limits of philosophical reasoning, of “piety”: the “recognition of our dependence, the acknowledgement that the burden we inherit cannot be sustained unaided, the disposition to give thanks for our existence and reverence to the world on which we depend and the sense of the unfathomable mystery which surrounds our coming to be and our passing away” (65).

immediately before him, cheek leaning against cheek, watching the final act. ‘Like a dog!’ he said; it was as if the shame of it must outlive him” (*Trial* 251; Spivak “Ethics” 324). However, Spivak does not seem to take Lurie here very seriously, though she certainly takes Coetzee to be up to something very important. She rather calls for a counterfocalization of the novel away from Lurie towards Lucy which I think is very interesting and partially compelling,<sup>21</sup> but I do not agree that Lurie himself remains basically in ignorance and political-moral blindness, following the wrong scent. Spivak concedes only this much: “Lurie literalizes her remark and learns to love dogs as the other of being-human, as a source, even, of ethical lessons of a special sort” (324). It is these lessons I want to pay attention to, fully acknowledging the legitimacy of Spivak’s different reading. Lucy’s humiliation is not at all the same as Lurie’s disgrace. Lurie has been disgraced; society has judged him remiss in his duty and dignity, no longer worthy of his position or symbolic status.<sup>22</sup> And Lurie has accepted this judgment. As he says to the father of Melanie Isaacs, the young woman whom he seduced, “I am sunk in a state of disgrace from which it will not be easy to lift myself. It is not a punishment I have refused. I do not murmur against it. On the contrary, I am living it out from day to day, trying to accept disgrace as my state of being” (*Disgrace* 172). However, as Adriaan van Heerden points out, despite Lurie’s acceptance of his disgrace, he is not ashamed of what he has done. Lurie thinks that the “Puritanism” behind the animadversion of his peers is completely wrong-headed, a prurience that ultimately denies desire, or condones it only in the spectacle of its repression (66). What Lurie does not feel is, precisely, humiliation<sup>23</sup>—his deeper self is not implicated in the disclosure of his misdeeds. On the contrary, he feels justified (“I became a servant of Eros” 52) and not a little superior.<sup>24</sup> He has not yet begun his life-changing lessons.

---

<sup>21</sup> Likewise compelling, though somewhat differently focused, is Alice Cray’s claim in “J. M. Coetzee, Moral Thinker” that we have to appreciate this very narrative constraint (the limitations of David Lurie) in order to hope to understand the ethical import (and *a fortiori* any political meaning) of the novel. See Leist and Singer, eds. 249-68.

<sup>22</sup> This status was already compromised for disgraceful institutional rather than personal reasons when Lurie was “demoted” from professor of modern languages at Cape Town University College to adjunct professor of communications at the restructured Cape Technical University.

<sup>23</sup> He does, however, feel humiliated during his assault by his daughter’s rapists (94-99). He is forced on all fours, lit on fire, and made to feel not only physical pain, but complete impotence and the humiliating inability to help his daughter in any way. This is a key experience both of his fragile embodiedness and his severe physical and other limitations.

<sup>24</sup> As Martin Woessner argues, “behind the feeling of disgrace,” as we see in the melodramatic episode with Mr. Isaacs, “is egotism, for which love, selfless love, is the only antidote” (238).

Learning lessons is a major though subtle issue in *Disgrace*, unlike *Elizabeth Costello* which is explicitly a series of lessons, although it is unclear what we learn from them. After all, Lurie's professional disgrace derives not so much from his sexual indiscretion, as from his refusal to "learn a lesson" from the episode, or at least play the penitent to the moralizing crowd. Since he will not learn his lesson, he is discharged, disgraced. When Lurie discusses the misconduct episode with his daughter, he tells the story of a male golden retriever whose owners beat it regularly for acting on its instinctual desire to the point where the animal, as it were, repressed its own nature and ran around in a cowardly fashion in the garden whenever a female of the species entered the vicinity—who learned his lesson all too well and began "to hate its own nature" (89-90). Lurie's somewhat defiant stance is complicated after the violent episode of violation, which Lurie comes to understand as the teaching of a lesson—of historical guilt and present vulnerability. Lurie and his daughter have opposite ways of learning this lesson—he wants her to flee; she eventually comes under her neighbor Petrus' wing, will bear a child, and through violence become a part of the community rather than its other. ("Pay the price for staying on . . ." [158].) Later, Lurie describes himself to Mr. Isaacs as living "in disgrace without term"; he has taken on his *pensum* and is learning to learn from it. A final example is when Lurie discovers the boy Pollox, one of the three rapists and kin to Petrus, now living on the farm with them, peeping into the bathroom window at Lucy. Lurie is infuriated and sics the bulldog Katy on him while yelling "swine" and feeling an "elemental rage. He would like to give the boy what he deserves, a sound thrashing. Phrases that all his life he has avoided seem suddenly just and right: *Teach him a lesson, Show him his place*. So that is what it is like, he thinks! This is what it is like to be a savage!" (206). Lucy intervenes and lets the boy escape, arguing with Lurie that though he is implicated in the rape and though he may be mentally or morally deficient, he is also of the community: "He is here, he won't disappear in a puff of smoke, he is a fact of life" (208). Lucy is beyond thoughts of vengeance, as well as us-and-them. She has made herself a part of the land ["His daughter is becoming a peasant" (217)], a part of the community (one of Petrus' women), at the cost of what Lurie calls her honour, her self-respect. I argue that what we see here in Lucy is something like what would be involved in becoming a planetary subject within such an unjust society. David Lurie doesn't yet get it. However, after the episode he reflects, "When he thinks of the boy and his threats ["I will kill you!"], he seethes with anger. At the same time, he is ashamed with himself. He condemns himself absolutely. He has taught no one a lesson—certainly not the boy" (208). But he has been taught a lesson himself, or is beginning to learn it. He has learned something about the depths of his own self, seen

a lack where he thought he was fundamentally morally grounded, and is open now to change.

Lurie's moral development involves four elements—the initial disgrace stemming from the sexual misconduct case; the racial-sexual problem around his daughter, the land, and the proprietary sexual violence of the three (black) rapists; the imaginative involvement in the afterlife of the affair between Lord Byron and the Contessa Guiccioli, the subject of his chamber opera; and the dogs. The interaction with the healthy dogs at Lucy's kennel, before they are brutally shot during the violent event that changes everything, is complemented by his awkward assistance in veterinary care at Bev's clinic and finally what becomes his real job, taking dogs euthanized by Bev to be incinerated, a two-stage process he calls "Lösung."<sup>25</sup> Early on Lurie experiences his first change vis-à-vis animals when he develops an attachment to the sheep the neighbor Petrus has bought to slaughter for the party celebrating his successful land transfer. "A bond seems to have come into existence between himself and the two Persians, he does not know how. 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). This is the key, initial *passive* epiphany, beyond reason, unsentimental, unaffectionate. Something has occurred in his relation to animals.

Simon Critchley, in developing a notion of ethical experience based on the thought of Emmanuel Levinas, writes, "At the basis of ethics, there has to be some experience of an approved demand, an existential affirmation that shapes my ethical subjectivity and which is the source of my motivation to act" (23). A sort of interpellation—recognizing one's duty in the call of another, even if this is a bleat, a bark, or a mute stare.<sup>26</sup> Critchley relates and contrasts this appeal to the Heideggerian silent call of conscience which he places in a Kantian tradition of "autonomy orthodoxy." For Heidegger, "the experience of conscience is that of a call (*Ruf*) or

---

<sup>25</sup> Here one can hardly fail to hear Elizabeth Costello's claim about animal slaughter and the holocaust in this "appropriately blank" German expression (*Disgrace* 142; *Lives of Animals* 21-22; *Elizabeth Costello* 65-66).

<sup>26</sup> "That by which the comprehension of another alone begins to count for an I . . . is not the knowledge of his character or his social position or his needs, but his nudity as the needy one; the destitution inscribed upon his face; it is his face as destitution, which assigns me as responsible and by which his need can only count for me." Levinas stresses that this is not just a *vocative*, an interpellation—this would not be enough. "Ethics is when I not only do not thematize the other; it is when another *obsesses* me or puts me in question. This putting in question does not expect that I respond; it is not a question of giving a response but of *finding oneself responsible*" (*Of God Who Comes to Mind* 99; emphasis added).

appeal (*Anruf*) which seems to come from outside Dasein, but which is really only Dasein calling to itself” (Critchley 36). [“Dasein ruft im Gewissen sich selbst” (*Sein und Zeit* 275).] Conscience, then, like death, is for Heidegger ultimately “non-relational” (Critchley 145). To this Critchley contrasts a fundamental moment of incomprehensibility/difference/otherness within ethical experience “where the subject is faced with a demand that does not correspond to its autonomy . . . [and] in this situation I am not the equal of the demand that is placed on me” (37). Thus in thinking of ethics we are obliged “to acknowledge a moment of rebellious heteronomy that troubles the sovereignty of autonomy” (37). What we see here in *Disgrace* is precisely such an experience, an unfathomable, heteronomous appeal. The question is, what must David Lurie do to respond properly to such an incomprehensible, *exorbitant* call?

### David Lurie: Du Mußt Dein Leben Ändern!<sup>27</sup>

*Disgrace* is essentially about being, or becoming, a good person. At the end Lurie asks his to-him-inscrutable daughter whether she loves the child of violence she bears. She responds, “No. How could I? But I will. Love and grow—one can trust Mother Nature for that. I am determined to be a good mother, David. A good mother and a good person. You should try to be a good person too.” Lurie responds, “I suspect it is too late for me. I’m just an old lag serving out my sentence. But you go ahead. You are well on the way.” He concludes, commenting to himself, “A good person. Not a bad resolution to make, in dark times” (216).<sup>28</sup>

As is clear from his disgrace, his divorce, his patronizing prostitutes, Lurie has problems in his “love-life.” We are given to understand that his primary relationship

---

<sup>27</sup> It is possible that Lurie’s ultimate decisions and commitments can be understood as forms of “practice” in what Peter Sloterdijk has described as a re-spiritualized “anthropotechnics.” However obscure it may be, Lurie is attuned to a vertical tension which, despite his resistance, draws him upwards towards a changed, better life. See Sloterdijk, *You Must Change Your Life*.

<sup>28</sup> “Dark times” brings to mind the destitute times of Hölderlin’s question, “und wozu Dichter in dürftiger Zeit?” which Heidegger discusses at length in his essay on Rilke, “What are Poets For?” “To be a poet in destitute times means: to attend, singing, to the trace of the fugitive gods” (*Poetry* 94). Though posed as a question of poetry or art, this is clearly for Heidegger a moral question, though not directly in the sense of Lurie’s comment. Adorno, for his part, offers a direct response regarding how to live in dark or destitute times: “try to live so that one may believe himself to have been a good animal” (*Negative* 299). Incidentally, if I tend to mention Adorno regularly in proximity to Heidegger, it is not in ignorance of their fundamental antagonism and irreconcilability, but as an antidote, itself somewhat vitriolic, whereby ultimately a sort of health (or truth) can be incubated . . .

to others, besides the pedagogic one, is in sexual relationships. So love is perhaps the fundamental ethical relationship for Lurie, and he has not been successful, has not been good. (His ex-wife calls him “A great deceiver and a great self-deceiver” [188].) Lurie comes to learn that his love has been selfish (servant of Eros . . .). He has to learn a different love from/for Lucy and the dogs. He passes judgment himself on the puritanical society incapable of understanding desire, but he himself fails fully to understand, deceives himself. It is true that desire has its part (even—as Plato well knew—in a pedagogical relationship, thus the power of pedagogical transference) and must be acknowledged, even indulged sometimes when social norms militate against it. But Lurie has not learned love from desire. In a key passage he muses over his past relationships and finds himself, without regrets, *enriched*: “By Melanie, by the girl in Touws River; by Rosalind, Bev Shaw, Soraya; by each of them he was enriched, and by the others too, even the least of them, even the failures. Like a flower blooming in his breast, his heart floods with thankfulness” (192). I think Coetzee intends us here to agree to a certain extent with this notion, beyond the still-dominant prurience and Puritanism of our own societies. To see beyond knee-jerk accusations of sexism, sleaziness, abuse of power, and so forth to a more fundamental truth and beauty of desire. (This is something like what Elizabeth Costello would like to be able to teach her sister Blanche in the “Humanities in Africa” lesson of *Elizabeth Costello*.) In this sense Lurie is superior to those colleagues who judged him disgraceful. And in his way Lurie offers his humble thanks for the bounty of sexual union he has been allotted. But Lurie’s limit here is his selfishness: he is thankful for what he got. It is not so much that he “objectifies” women and treats them merely as means to his sexual ends, but he has been unable to love beyond his own enrichment. This seems clear in the Melanie case, which is in no way described as a rape (and is erroneously linked to Lucy’s rape by some critics [e.g. Attridge 171; on Lucy’s rape, see Spivak, “Ethics” 322]). The point here is not Lurie’s sexism and the latent violence in male desire or anything like that, but the limit of his philosophically sanctioned concept of Eros. To a certain extent, Lurie himself sees this: “So much for the poets, so much for the dead masters. Who have not, he must say, guided him well. *Aliter*, to whom he has not listened well” (*Disgrace* 179).

Lurie learns a lesson in love from the dogs. Gradually he comes to see his task as the psychopomp (146) for unwanted dogs—accompanying them to death out of what he at the very end comes to call “love” (219). This “love” is the key to understanding the various epiphanic moments, however passive, in the novel, and to seeing Lurie as a character who undergoes true moral development, who changes his

life, as he must.<sup>29</sup> Van Heerden draws attention to the dog-man motif throughout the story. Petrus begins as the self-styled “gardener and [. . .] dog-man” (64) and later Lurie takes on the role (146; see van Heerden 54-59). Despite Elizabeth Costello’s warning against trusting “the anagram GOD-DOG” (*Elizabeth Costello* 225—van Heerden himself notes the warning [note 43, p. 63]), van Heerden attempts a reading of the “animalization of the function of the god-man, the one who brings salvation or shows the way to salvation” (56). More intriguing is the

deconstruction of the supposed difference between animals and humans . . . What Coetzee seems to be saying is that the way to salvation is to rediscover our fundamental animality . . . By reconnecting with animals and learning to treat them with kindness and respect, we will also discover ourselves as animal and human and treat our fellow human beings and ourselves with kindness and respect. (56)

That is, Coetzee seems to exemplify in Lurie a moral blindness, despite a distance from (superiority to?) the conventional, puritan values of his society, which keeps him from treating his fellows with kindness and respect. For various reasons, individual—age, gender, personality—and social-historical—race and power—Lurie cannot see his fellow humans properly,<sup>30</sup> and it is only through a detour, through the unlovable dogs at Bev Shaw’s clinic who make a claim on his responsibility that he cannot *not* hear, that he can change his life, become better. Lurie does not learn to know the dogs: this is not a lesson in knowledge.<sup>31</sup> Indeed, we see quite explicitly that he is in ignorance about others, animal and human, including his own daughter, about whom, as closest kin, he should perhaps know the most. Coetzee, with wry self-reflective humor, has Lucy state this to David in narrative terms: “You behave as if everything I do is part of the story of your life. You are the main character, I am a minor character who doesn’t make an appearance until halfway through. Well,

---

<sup>29</sup> As Pieter Vermeulen notes, *Disgrace* here fits in a whole series of Coetzee’s works “in which the main character of the novel is evacuated from the realm of desire to a situation in which he or she must cope with the demand to acknowledge death, the body, and suffering” (281).

<sup>30</sup> Timothy C. Campbell argues, with reference to some of the same theoretical material I draw on in this paper, for a need to think “improper life” towards an Esposito-inspired affirmative, post-human biopolitics. See *Improper Life*.

<sup>31</sup> Whether Levinasian ethics can be understood to allow for an “ethical” call of an animal other is the subject of Matthew Calarco’s interesting revisionist account of Levinas in *Zoographies*, Ch. 2, addressing Levinas’ “The Name of a Dog, or Natural Rights” in *Difficult Liberty*, 151-53. On Coetzee’s “critique of reason . . . for the sake of moral life” see Woessner. See also Leist and others in Leist and Singer, eds. for rich discussions not explicitly about *Disgrace*.

contrary to what you think, people are not divided into major and minor. I am not minor. I have a life of my own, just as important to me as yours is to you . . .” (198; here is the explicit invitation to a sort of counterfocalization-counter-narration, the sort Coetzee himself engaged in in *Foe* with respect to his precursor Daniel Defoe). We are invested in our own narrative, in which everyone else is minor, more or less, which is to say we don’t really know much about them. What’s more, we cannot really know them—Lurie does not succeed in understanding Lucy better, in coming closer to her, over the course of the novel. What he does is begin to learn to respect the other, human or animal, in its opacity, without conditions, and to open himself, without particular knowledge or desire, to a new way of being.

Why does Lurie devote himself to the dogs in the *Lösung* process? Certainly not for their sake, he thinks. In a sentence worthy of Adorno, Coetzee continues, “For himself, then. For his idea of the world, a world in which men do not use shovels to beat corpses into a more convenient shape for processing.” Though *for* himself, this activity is not selfish, but it is also not yet love. “He saves the honour of corpses because there is no one else stupid enough to do it” (146). Only when he moves beyond stupidity-intelligence—a whole gamut of understanding in relation to the other—does he start to love, to become capable of love. Honour, dignity, grace, love—we see then a re-definition of these fundamental ethical qualities so absent in the relation among certain men and women of apartheid South Africa. Lurie, through his canine detour, in the end has changed, as we see in the episode with the unnamed dog that has developed love for him and which he must euthanize. It is this creature that truly engages the most giving, least demanding good in Lurie and that finally teaches him love.

Is this trivial, a sorry substitute for Lurie’s inability “to touch either the racial or gendered other” (Spivak, “Ethics” 324)? On the contrary, I think it is a crucial beginning for that ever being a possibility, given who Lurie is, what he represents. Is this love selfless? Attridge argues that Lurie’s is “not a practical commitment to improving the world, but a profound need to preserve the ethical integrity of the self” (187) like Elizabeth Costello’s need “to save my soul” (*Elizabeth Costello* 89). This doesn’t sound quite right. It is not clear that David Lurie cares that much about ethical integrity. Of course he also doesn’t do much for the world, even the dogs. But it seems just as likely to me that his commitment, his daily difficult, dull, unrewarding work of “love,” serves a *loss* of self as a shoring up of it. Or rather, what is going on here in David Lurie through the dogs and other animals, through his own creatureliness, is the development of a different sort of self, no longer a Cartesian-Kantian rational self-reflective subject, nor a late-humanist, post-colonial, gendered

(all-too-male) subject, but something both more expansive and less reflective or controlled. As Roberto Esposito writes about a certain becoming animal of man, this “is not a pure return to a primitive condition but the arrival at a never before experienced state: not the simple re-animalization of man by now humanized, but a mode of being man which is no longer defined in difference from his animal origin [nella alterità alla sua origine animale]” (*Terza persona* 140; my translation). Such a development is what I suggested above in citing Heidegger’s *Gelassenheit*, a general slowing down and letting be or “releasement” which also, to a certain extent, involves the letting go of the very self (in its “integrity” or mastery) who chooses to let-be (see note 15). This has to do with the larger connection to something bigger than and encompassing the self, as indicated by the atheist Elizabeth Costello when she uses the word “soul” or by Scruton when he speaks of “piety.” Is this what Spivak means by reference to a communal and indeed planetary responsibility in *haqq*? Spivak would certainly not agree that David Lurie approaches such a “planetary subjectivity.” But his newfound creatureliness has opened him to a post-personal (Esposito), post-human, post-self-ish self for whom such a subjectivity—“finding oneself responsible” and accepting one’s infinite task—might be possible. Is planetary *haqq* an unknowable and infinite obligation like that Critchley refers to? Infinite because unknowable, perhaps, rather than the reverse. This isn’t theology. It’s a felt duty to a claim or call, and thence a way to live a decent life in a disgraceful world.

### Conclusion: Fiction’s Ethical Task

In *Wolf Totem* we get a sense of the planet and the animal as alterity—the Other which remains unknown to a certain degree but implicates us in an eco-logic of mutual need and obligation. With Coetzee, via Heidegger and Agamben, we also learn of the animal and the other in the self: the other which escapes reason and calculation but still makes a demand. Human being, lupine being, canine being—incommensurable but linked, inextricably, to and through the planet. A Heideggerian imperative, if you can call it that, of *Sein-lassen* is established; but not definitively, rather as way of relating to nature and elaborating projects of *Zusammenarbeit*. Through Elizabeth Costello and David Lurie, Coetzee explores the zone of indistinction between man and animal to find not the philosopher’s concept of “moral patient” (even as merely the latest articulation of a non-essential distinction), but a call, an obligation, which is also a discovery of an internal animality or creatureliness, not that wildness harnessed by reason and logos (as might be suggested by *Wolf Totem*), but a common embodied way of being, hurting and feeling joy—common

though radically different from species to species. This is the sort of motivating ethical experience that gives force to any norms—for example, love thy neighbor—which Critchley strives to find in *Infinitely Demanding*. Whether the obligation that results is infinite, and what this would mean vis-à-vis animals is left open by Coetzee. Jiang Rong, who doesn't probe nearly as deeply into all this, though he makes an initial move, places the problem for the most part in the past—a lost opportunity, if not a *paradis perdu*.

In any case, if Critchley is right in feeling the need to find experiential motivation for ethical action and belief, I think it also important to see what role art—here fiction, the novel—plays in securing this experience. What Elizabeth Costello calls the “sympathetic imagination” (*Lives of Animals* 35) is not just the gift of the novelist but the gift to the reader who can not only enter into strange and rich worlds but return enriched and slightly estranged.<sup>32</sup> Spivak has called the imagination the “great inbuilt instrument of othering” (*Death* 13). Imaginative literature, fiction, is the active site of an othering—a practice in the interaction of self and non-self and non-self within self, and of the otherness of language itself. Thanks to writers like Coetzee, we can explore this imaginative territory in ways that have real implications for contemporary ethical life. I take David Lurie's case to be an example of the letting be of a certain creatureliness within the human, accepting an external alterity by accepting internal alterity. This can be related to other works by Coetzee, as a relation to planetarity: an accepting response to an unknowable but appealing call that changes one's life, one's world. It will be noted by Coetzee readers that this is hardly the key focus of his work, which rather addresses the realities and indignities of colonial and post-colonial life; living within unjust social structures, even benefitting from them, and having to come to some sort of terms with this. Proof of his brilliance as a writer of fiction, and indeed his status as an indispensable “contemporary” in Agamben's terms,<sup>33</sup> is the way he can interrelate these highly complex and difficult concerns.

---

<sup>32</sup> “I was the world in which I walked, and what I saw / Or heard or felt came not but from myself; / And there I found myself more truly and more strange.” Wallace Stevens, “Tea at the Palaz of Hoon,” *Harmonium* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1923), p. 97. Chinua Achebe writes, “beneficent fiction calls into full life our total range of imaginative faculties and gives us a heightened sense of our personal, social, and human reality . . . that ability to say ‘Let us pretend’ like grace before our act; and to say ‘Our revels now are ended!’ like a benediction when we have finished—and yet to draw from this insubstantial pageant essential insights and wisdoms for making our way in the real world” (151).

<sup>33</sup> “The contemporary is he who firmly holds his gaze on his own time so as to perceive not its light, but rather its darkness” (*What is an Apparatus*, 44).

## Works Cited

- Achebe, Chinua. *Hopes and Impediments: Selected Essays*. New York: Anchor, 1988.
- Adorno, Theodor W. *Minima Moralia*. Trans. E. F. N. Jephcott. London: Verso, 1978.
- . *Minima Moralia: Reflexionen aus dem beschädigten Leben*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1951.
- . *Negative Dialectics*. Trans. E. B. Ashton. New York: Continuum, 1973.
- Agamben, Giorgio. *L'aperto: l'uomo e l'animale*. Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 2002.
- . *The Open: Man and Animal*. Trans. Kevin Attell. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2004.
- . *What Is an Apparatus? And Other Essays*. Trans. David Kishik and Stefan Pedatella. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2009.
- Attridge, Derek. *J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2004.
- Bougon, François. "Chinese Ex-Prisoner Now Global Literary Star." *China Post* [Taiwan], 11 March 2008. Web. 5 March 2011.
- Calarco, Matthew. *Zoographies: The Question of the Animal from Heidegger to Derrida*. New York: Columbia UP, 2008.
- Campbell, Timothy C. *Improper Life: Technology and Biopolitics from Heidegger to Agamben*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2011.
- Cattelan, Valentino. "From the concept of *haqq* to the prohibitions of *ribā*, *gharan* and *maysir* in Islamic finance." *International Journal of Monetary Economics and Finance* 2.3-4 (2009): 384-97.
- Clark, Brett, et al. *The Ecological Rift: Capitalism's War on the Earth*. New York: Monthly Review Press, 2010.
- Coetzee, J. M. *Disgrace*. New York: Penguin, 1999.
- . *Elizabeth Costello*. London: Vintage, 2004.
- . *The Lives of Animals*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1999.
- Crary, Alice. "J. M. Coetzee, Moral Thinker." *Leist and Singer* 249-68.
- Critchley, Simon. *Infinitely Demanding: Ethics of Commitment, Politics of Resistance*. London: Verso, 2007.
- Esposito, Roberto. *Terms of the Political: Community, Immunity, Biopolitics*. Trans. Rhiannon Noel Welch. New York: Fordham UP, 2013.
- . *Terza persona: Politica della vita e filosofia dell'impersonale*. Torino: Einaudi, 2007.
- Geertz, Clifford. *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology*. New York: Basic Books, 1983.
- Harvey, David. *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2005.

- Heidegger, Martin. *Besinnung*. Gesamtausgabe vol. 66. Frankfurt-am-Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1997.
- . *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: World, Finitude, Solitude*. Trans. William McNeill and Nicholas Walker. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1995.
- . *Parmenides*. Trans. André Schuwer and Richard Rojcewicz. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1992.
- . *Poetry, Language, Thought*. Trans. Albert Hofstadter. New York: Harper & Row, 1971.
- . *Sein und Zeit*. Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1984.
- Hung, Ho-fung, ed. *China and the Transformation of Global Capital*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2009.
- Jiang Rong. *Wolf Totem*. Trans. Howard Goldblatt. New York: Penguin, 2008.
- Kafka, Franz. *The Trial*. Trans. Willa Muir and Edwin Muir. Geneva: Edito-Service S.A./Heron Books, 1968.
- Kremb, Jürgen. "A Wolf in Sheep's Clothing: Beijing's Unwonted Bestseller." *Der Spiegel* 21 March 2006. Web. 5 March 2011.
- Kubin, Wolfgang. "Der Übersetzer 'in Klammern'." *Deutsch-Chinesisches Kulturnetz* September 2009. 5 March 2011. <[www.de-cn.net/mag/lit/de4847519.htm](http://www.de-cn.net/mag/lit/de4847519.htm)>.
- Leist, Anton, and Peter Singer, eds. *J. M. Coetzee and Ethics: Philosophical Perspectives on Literature*. New York: Columbia UP, 2010.
- Levinas, Emmanuel. *Difficult Liberty: Essays on Judaism*. Trans. Seán Hand. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1990.
- . *Of God Who Comes to Mind*. Trans. Bettina Bergo. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1998.
- Midgley, Mary. *Science and Poetry*. London: Routledge, 2001.
- Mishra, Pankaj. "Call of the Wild." *New York Times* 4 May 2008. Web. 5 Mar 2011.
- Mulhall, Stephen. *The Wounded Animal: J. M. Coetzee & the Difficulty of Reality in Literature and Philosophy*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2009.
- Nibert, David A. *Animal Oppression & Human Violence: Domesecration, Capitalism, and Global Conflict*. New York: Columbia UP, 2013.
- Rilke, Rainer Maria. *Duino Elegies*. Trans. C. F. MacIntyre. Berkeley: U of California P, 1961.
- Santner, Eric L. *On Creaturely Life*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2006.
- Scruton, Roger. *Animal Rights and Wrongs*. London: Demos, 1996.
- Shapiro, Judith. *Mao's War Against Nature: Politics and the Environment in Revolutionary China*. New York: Cambridge UP, 2001.

- Sloterdijk, Peter. *You Must Change Your Life*. Trans. Wieland Hoban. Cambridge: Polity, 2013.
- Smil, Vaclav. *China's Environmental Crisis: An Inquiry into the Limits of National Development*. Armonk: M. E. Sharpe, 1993.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. *Death of a Discipline*. New York: Columbia UP, 2003.
- . "Ethics and Politics in Tagore, Coetzee, and Certain Scenes of Teaching." *Diacritics* 32.3-4 (2002): 17-31. Rpt. in *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 316-34.
- . *Imperatives to Re-Imagine the Planet*. Wien: Passagen Verlag, 1999.
- Stevens, Wallace. "Tea at the Palaz of Hoon." *Harmonium*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1923. 97.
- van Heerden, Adriaan. "Disgrace, Desire, and the Dark Side of the New South Africa." Leist and Singer 43-63.
- Vermeulen, Pieter. "Being True to Fact: Coetzee's Prose of the World." Leist and Singer 269-90.
- von Uexküll, Jakob. *A Foray into the Worlds of Animals and Humans*. Trans. Joseph D. O'Neil. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2010.
- Weller, Robert P. *Discovering Nature: Globalization and Environmental Culture in China and Taiwan*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2006.
- Woessner, Martin. "Coetzee's Critique of Reason." Leist and Singer 223-47.

### About the Author

Duncan McColl Chesney is an Associate Professor of Comparative Literature in the Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures of National Taiwan University in Taipei. He has a Ph.D. in Comparative Literature from Yale University and has published articles on Proust, Faulkner, Joyce, Beckett, Coetzee and various topics in film studies. His book, *Silence Nowhen: Late Modernism, Minimalism, and Silence in the Work of Samuel Beckett*, was published in 2013, and he is currently at work on a book-length project on J. M. Coetzee and "serious fiction."

[Received 1 August 2013; accepted 10 July 2014]