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Killing Them Softly: Animal Death, Linguistic Disability, and the Struggle for Ethics

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Animal studies, literary studies, and disability studies have recently converged around what could be called a counter-linguistic turn.¹ Although many current projects are intent on proving that certain animals do have language capabilities like those of humans, other sectors of animal studies are concerned with forms of subjectivity that are not language-based. Instead, they are concerned with ways of knowing that appear to work outside those processes of logocentric, rational thinking that have defined what is proper to the human, as opposed to the nonhuman animal. These concerns are also shared by a subset of disability studies that focuses on persons with so-called disorders that manifest themselves linguistically such as Asperger syndrome and autism. Temple Grandin is perhaps the most well-known example, perhaps because she is so keenly aware of the way her autism challenges preconceived ideas of what constitutes rational thought. "I think in pictures," she writes in the beginning to her second book, *Thinking in Pictures*. "Words are like a second language to me." Moreover, she emphasizes, "I would be denied the ability to think by scientists who maintain that language is essential for thinking."²

1. For an interesting discussion of a postlinguistic turn, see James Berger, "Falling Towers and Postmodern Wild Children: Oliver Sacks, Don DeLillo, and Turns against Language," *PMLA* 120:2 (2005): 341–361.

2. Temple Grandin, *Thinking in Pictures and Other Reports from My Life with Autism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995) p. 159.

Grandin's work is compelling especially for the way she turns her linguistic disability into a special ability or gift. She claims, for instance, that her autism has given her special insight into the minds of nonhuman animals, cattle in particular. In addition to having a greater sensitivity to touch that allows her to read their body language with her fingers, she maintains that she is able to see what and how nonhuman animals see. In her third book, *Animals in Translation*, Grandin goes even further to point out the visual impairment of so-called normal humans, produced by an overactive consciousness that screens out much of what is before us. She cites a study in which test subjects were asked to watch a basketball game and count the number of passes made by one member of the teams. Focused on the task, 50 percent of those watching did not notice a woman in a gorilla suit who walks onto the screen and begins to pound her chest. "It's not that normal people don't see the lady dressed in a gorilla suit at all," Grandin writes; "it's that their brains screen her out before she reaches consciousness."³

This notion of "screening," I would suggest, is at the core of what links disability, literary, and animal studies. What Grandin calls screening, the early twentieth-century German poet Rainer Maria Rilke calls "world," referring to the knowledge that structures and shapes our vision. It is world that gets in the way and diminishes our view. And, Rilke suggests, it is world that prevents us from seeing what animals see. Articulating a critical perspective that Martin Heidegger will challenge, Rilke finds it is humans who are disadvantaged by their consciousness and unable to perceive "the open" that is available to animal eyes:

With all its eyes the creature-world beholds
The open. But our eyes, as though reversed
Encircle it on every side, like traps
Set round its unobstructed path to freedom.⁴

In 1922, Rilke's "Eighth Elegy" articulates already what seems to have become an increasingly powerful, contemporary notion that is both mournful and hopeful that: human consciousness is an obstacle to a knowledge we may have once possessed—a larger, less circumscribed, and less rational way of knowing; and it may be possible, if not to retrieve, then to imagine a fullness of vision in beings who are removed from "normal" sociolinguistic behavior. These be-

3. Temple Grandin and Catherine Johnson, *Animals in Translation*. (New York: Scribner, 2005), p. 65.

4. Rainer Maria Rilke, *Duino Elegies*, trans. J. B. Leishman and Stephen Spender (New York: Norton, 1963), p. 67.

ings may be nonhuman animals as well as persons with certain linguistic and cognitive disabilities. From this point of view, then, the very notion of language that has been used to distinguish humans and animals is understood also to put its speakers at a disadvantage. Such is the possibility raised more recently in Jacques Derrida's thinking about animals. Paraphrasing Jacques Lacan, Derrida writes: "Man is an animal, but a speaking one, and he is less a beast of prey than a beast that is prey to language."⁵ In other words, what is proper to man (and presumably woman) is to be caught, if not trapped, by his own words and the world they enforce. This is also a crucial point in Derrida's critiques of Heidegger's obstinate humanism that builds upon essentializing terms like "the animal" in order to draw false and dangerous boundaries between them and us. Thus, in his essay "The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)" he attempts to turn around Heidegger's naming of language as that which designates the superiority of man to animal to ask whether the animal's apparent "lack" of language is indeed a lack: "It would not be a matter of 'giving speech back' to animals, but perhaps of acceding to a thinking, however fabulous and chimerical it might be, that thinks the absence of the name and of the word otherwise, as something other than a privation."⁶

The hunch that human language may be an obstacle to knowing and that, therefore, those who are somehow outside the symbolic may have access to domains that humans cannot know, may also explain why the counter-linguistic turn has been accompanied by a particular attention to death and, even, putting to death.⁷ I am not thinking here of right-to-life issues; rather, I am thinking of a philosophical reevaluation of the human as the only animal who knows death "as such." To have access to death "as such," according to Heidegger, is possible only for humans, because only they properly

5. Jacques Derrida, "And Say the Animal Responded," trans. David Wills, in *Zoontologies*, ed. Cary Wolfe (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), pp. 121–145, quote on 123.

6. Jacques Derrida, "The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)," trans. David Wills, in *Animal Philosophy*, ed. Matthew Calarco and Peter Atterton (London: Continuum Press, 2004), pp. 113–128, quote on 126.

7. The possibility that other animals may live in other worlds (with other temporalities and other meanings) that are closed to humans was raised by the twentieth-century zoologist, Jakob von Uexküll. As Giorgio Agamben explains, von Uexküll's notion of *umwelts* refers to "an infinite variety of perceptual worlds that, though they are uncommunicating and reciprocally exclusive, are equally perfect and linked." See Giorgio Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal*, trans. Kevin Attell (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2004), p. 40.

die, while animals “perish.” This difference, Heidegger attributes, if obliquely, to the faculty of speech: “Mortals are they who can experience death as death. Animals cannot do this. But animals cannot speak either. The essential relation between death and language flashes up before us, but remains still unthought.”⁸

The precise relation of death to language, as Derrida comments, as well as—and more importantly—what it could mean for any being to have access to death “as such” without dying, is itself unclear. Here again, Heidegger reversed Rilke’s privileging of the animal’s freedom from death. “We, only, can see death . . .” Rilke writes in the “Eighth Elegy.” The English translation appears to emphasize the exclusive status of vision—we only *see* it—while the German, “*Ihn, sehen wir allein,*” emphasizes that “death is all we see,” like the world of objects that obstructs our vision of “the open.” Only when we are in fact “near death” does our sight see beyond it:

For, nearing death, one perceives death no longer,
and stares ahead—perhaps with large brute gaze.⁹

And then, we must assume, we see no more.

But what of the death of animals? Is that death “as such” and do they have access to it, or perhaps we through them? What exactly might an animal death do for us, not in terms of what it might supply us as food or clothing, but rather might there be any “knowledge” gained from seeing an animal die, if not from killing it ourselves? The question comes partly out of what we know to be the relative invisibility of the enormous numbers of animal killings that take place daily in slaughter yards, science labs, and animal shelters—killings that, before the middle of the nineteenth century, most often took place before our eyes, on the streets if not in the kitchen. The look of the animal that, according to John Berger, we have lost in the last century could also be the look of the animal we kill, whether for slaughter, sport, or perhaps out of mercy. This is the look that plays an increasingly important role in the work of Nobel Prize-winning author, J. M. Coetzee, whose writing has wrestled with questions of animals and of death for at least the last decade. I want to focus on his novel *Disgrace* in which the look of the animal we kill provokes, however disturbingly, a transforming moment in the life of the main protagonist, David Lurie. That moment, moreover, in its appeal to a non- or other-linguistic realm, is oddly simi-

8. Cited in Jacques Derrida, *Aporias*, trans. Thomas Dutoit (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1993), p. 35.

9. Rilke, *Duino Elegies* (above, n. 4), p. 69.

lar to a moment described by Temple Grandin about her own work in the slaughter yards.

In the concluding discussion of the recent volume of essays titled *Killing Animals* by the Animal Studies Group, Jonathan Burt writes that “it’s almost as though the closer and closer you get to animal killing the more everything begins to fall apart, perspective and everything.” “And language,” adds Steve Baker.¹⁰ Indeed, in the work of Grandin and Coetzee we find that killing animals brings us face to face with the inadequacies of our language, or at least with the rational and logical thinking it enables. Death is the place where the conceptual and ontological distinctions that language makes possible break down, including the distinctions between human and animal. But also apparent in Grandin and Coetzee is that everything also comes together around the right kind of animal killing in a way that is at once elemental and religious—at least for the persons directly involved. For the readers, on the contrary, what falls apart is a framework for judging those killings, especially as we are witnesses to conversion experiences precipitated by what most accounts would count as a “good death,” a euthanasia. But what is a good death and whom or what does it serve? To begin to address these questions, let me turn to the texts.

Toward the beginning of *Thinking in Pictures*, Temple Grandin tells of a “breakthrough” she had while assisting in the act of slaughter at a kosher plant that she redesigned. Having replaced a cruel system of hanging live cattle upside down by one leg with a kind of hydraulic “squeeze machine” into which the cattle would enter, one by one, and be held calmly in place for the rabbi to perform the final deed, she tries out the controls of the hydraulic machinery herself, working the levers as if they were extensions of her own body.

Through the machine I reached out and held the animal. When I held his head in the yoke, I imagined placing my hands on his forehead and under his chin and gently easing him into position. Body boundaries seemed to disappear, and I had no awareness of pushing the levers. The rear pusher gate and head yoke became an extension of my hands. . . .

During this intense period of concentration I no longer heard noise from the plant machinery. I didn’t feel the sweltering Alabama summer heat, and everything seemed quiet and serene. It was almost a religious experience. It was my job to hold the animal gently, and it was the rabbi’s job to perform the final deed. I was able to look at each animal, to hold him gently and make him as comfortable as possible during the last moments of his life. I had partici-

10. Animal Studies Group, *Killing Animals* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006), p. 309.

pated in the ancient slaughter ritual the way it was supposed to be. A new door had been opened. It felt like walking on water.¹¹

This passage is remarkable for a number of reasons. First, as Grandin herself emphasizes, is the revalorizing of what is generally understood to be a disability. The “problems” autistics have with body boundaries and knowing, for instance, where the body ends and the chair begins, here becomes an enabling force that allows her to become one with the machine, if not with the animal.¹² The second reason is, of course, the change in the act of slaughter itself: here, technology is not an evil force, but rather that which, when lovingly implemented (as Grandin describes), allows for an untraumatic and painless death for the animal and something of a religious epiphany for Grandin—indeed, a Heideggerian “revealing” of being: “As the life force left the animal I had deep religious feelings. For the first time in my life logic had been completely overwhelmed with feelings I didn’t know I had.”¹³ It must be remembered, however, that in all this breakdown of boundaries among human, machine, and animal, what remains unaffected is the sacrificial structure that violently reestablishes those boundaries at the moment they appear to be effaced. It is, of course, the animal alone who dies or at least perishes. My point here is not to find fault with Grandin, who has had enormous, positive influence on the handling of cattle, but to draw attention to the contradictory and competing interests of this scene.

A similar problematic is at the heart of *Disgrace*, and although Coetzee, unlike Grandin, is an avowed vegetarian, this novel seems also to suggest that some sort of “grace” can be found through animal sacrifice, if not through the killing of animals. This, moreover, is the culmination of the protagonist’s transformation from one who abjects animals (and women), to one who recognizes himself in animals. We may remember that Lurie is, at least in the beginning of the novel, a wholly despicable character: a university professor of literature with a bothersome sexual appetite that he satisfies with prostitutes and students. He considers animals, like women, as soulless creatures existing to satisfy his appetite: they “do not own themselves,” he thinks to himself when looking at a pair of tethered

11. Grandin, *Thinking in Pictures* (above, n. 2), pp. 41–42.

12. Cary Wolfe makes similar remarks about this passage and also suggests other potential readings in an essay titled, “Learning from Temple Grandin, or, Animal Studies, Disability Studies, and Who Comes after the Subject,” *New Formations* (forthcoming Spring 2008).

13. Grandin, *Thinking in Pictures* (above, n. 2), p. 205.

sheep. "They exist to be used, every last ounce of them, their flesh to be eaten, their bones to be crushed and fed to poultry."¹⁴

Lurie, however, experiences a change both with regard to the animals around him and to his own "animal" nature once he is charged with sexual harassment and forced to retreat to his daughter Lucy's farm. The animals on that farm and, in particular, those animals who are in their "grace period"—the time they have before being put down or slaughtered for food—begin to have an odd and inexplicable effect on him. It begins with the same two sheep: "suddenly and without reason, their lot has become important to him." "I am disturbed," he says, "I cannot say why."¹⁵ This irrational bond is deepened when Lurie begins to help Lucy's friend Bev euthanize sickly and unwanted dogs and cats in a local clinic. As if overwhelmed by what happens in this "theater," as he calls it, he is slowly drawn to devote his life to the death of the animals, ensuring that they will die with his full attention and, indeed, with his love—a word Grandin also uses—which it seems that both only experience in the silent act of killing: "He and Bev do not speak. He has learned by now, from her, to concentrate all his attention on the animal they are killing, giving it what he no longer has difficulty in calling by its proper name: love."¹⁶

Here, as in Grandin, the individual experiences a certain communion with animals through the retrieval of that lost look at the moment of death. As in Grandin, moreover, modern technology here is not associated with mass slaughter and factory farming, but rather with a death that individualizes and affords each victim the recognition that their life seems to have denied them. Technology is less a means of instrumentalizing, less a tool of mastery, than a force by which Lurie slowly comes to sense a slow unraveling of mastery and comprehension:

He had thought he would get used to it. But that is not what happens. The more killings he assists in, the more jittery 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.¹⁷

Whereas for Lévi-Strauss animals are good to think, for Coetzee, killing animals is good to unthink, to strip us of the rational and metaphysical assumptions by which we have distinguished ourselves

14. J. M. Coetzee, *Disgrace* (New York: Penguin, 1999), p. 12.

15. *Ibid.*, pp. 126, 127.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 219.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 143

from animals. It is in the animal clinic—in the theater where the performance of life is enacted through a putting to death—that Lurie will begin to value what Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben calls “bare life,” a zone of indistinction between human and animal.¹⁸ It is bare life that Lurie first experiences when it is threatened by the four intruders who beat him, rape Lucy, and kill all her dogs. And it is that life—the one that, as Lucy says, “we share with animals”—that Lurie begins to devote himself to as he tends to giving the dead animals a proper burial, making sure that their corpses “will not be beaten into a more convenient shape for processing.”¹⁹ Calling himself a “dog-man,” Lurie takes heed of his own creatureliness, especially his smell—the smell he gives off to the dogs in the clinic, the smell of his thoughts. As world begins to fade around him he becomes, in effect, captivated by the dogs, as by the unformed music in his head, *captivation* being the word that Agamben uses to describe the animal’s being open to its environment, “ecstatically drawn outside of itself”²⁰ even if it cannot know it as such. It is in this state that Lurie, like Grandin, senses the overwhelming if irrational need to respond, not only to the suffering of the animals, but even more so, to an unfathomable absence of being that, because of our shared mortality, we will also share with animals in death. “Mortality,” writes Derrida,

resides there, as the most radical means of thinking the finitude that we share with animals, the mortality that belongs to the very finitude of life, to the experience of compassion, to the possibility of sharing the possibility of this nonpower, the possibility of this impossibility, the anguish of this vulnerability and the vulnerability of this anguish.²¹

‘Du musst dein leben ändern: you must change your life,’ Lurie says to himself, citing Rilke’s famous line about the power of art, if not the intense power of a headless body.²²

Like art, animals call us (pace Lévinas²³) to witness our own and the other’s time-bound, vulnerable existence. But how does this ex-

18. Agamben, *The Open* (above, n. 7).

19. Coetzee, *Disgrace* (above, n. 14), p. 143.

20. Agamben, *The Open* (above, n. 7), p. 62.

21. Derrida, “The Animal That Therefore I Am” (above, n. 6), p. 121.

22. Coetzee, *Disgrace* (above, n. 14), p. 209. This is the last line of Rilke’s poem “Archaic Torso of Apollo,” which describes how, in the absence of a head, “there is no place that does not see you / You must change your life”; see Rainer Maria Rilke, *Selected Poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke*, trans. Stephen Mitchell (New York: Vintage, 1982), p. 61.

23. Emmanuel Lévinas is equivocal at best about the ability of an animal to call a human to his or her ethical responsibility; see, for instance, Lévinas, “The Name of a Dog, or Natural Rights,” in *Animal Philosophy* (above, n. 6), pp. 47–51.

perience change our lives? It seems surprising, if not contradictory, that for both Grandin and Lurie communion with animal suffering leads not to “the sacrifice of sacrifice”—that is to say, to the condemnation of a noncriminal killing of animals—but rather to embracing such sacrifice in its lost ritualistic aspects, its lost look. “There is a need,” writes Grandin,

[t]o bring ritual into the conventional slaughter plants and use it as a mean to shape people’s behavior. It would help people from becoming numbed, callous, or cruel. The ritual could be something very simple, such as a moment of silence. . . . No words. Just one pure moment of silence. I can picture it perfectly.²⁴

The very end of *Disgrace* similarly makes an appeal to the ritual of sacrifice, as Lurie decides to end the grace period of the one dog for whom he began to have a real fondness, the dog who became the sole audience for his music, the dog who, he says, “would die for him”:

He opens the cage door. “Come,” he says, bends, opens his arms. The dog wags its crippled rear, sniffs his face, licks his cheeks, his lips, his ears. He does nothing to stop it. “Come.”

Bearing him in his arms like a lamb, he re-enters the surgery. “I thought you would save him for another week,” says Bev Shaw. “Are you giving him up?”
“Yes, I am giving him up.”²⁵

Thus in both Grandin and Coetzee, the attention to animals finds a kind of posthumanist religiosity as if each were called, although by whom and for what is unclear. “For the sake of the dogs? But the dogs are dead; and what do dogs know of honor and dishonor anyway?” Lurie ponders.²⁶ Indeed, the very ritual that acknowledges the being if not soul of the animal also undergirds the sacrificial and logocentric structure that puts the human back at the center. “The sacrificial animal,” Nietzsche wrote, “does not share the spectator’s ideas about sacrifice, but one has never let it have its say.”²⁷

Insofar as animals bring us to think, or to unthink, they can have an immensely powerful effect; but the ethical demands produced by this encounter with animals may be equally unfathomable, if necessarily contradictory. On the one hand, such nonlinguistic thought acts as a call to what Cary Wolfe has called an ethical pluralism: a

24. Grandin, *Thinking in Pictures* (above, n. 2), p. 206

25. Coetzee, *Disgrace* (above, n. 14), p. 220.

26. *Ibid.*, p. 146.

27. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1974), p. 210.

deep sense of responsibility for and affinity with those who may be different from us²⁸; on the other, such a call begs “us” (we who have language) to speak for those who do not (“we are their voices” an ASPCA campaign suggests) and thus risks having us reassert our sovereignty over them.

In Coetzee’s Lurie as in Grandin, we see the effects of a posthumanist subjectivity whose ethical responsibility is determined, not by law or some repeatable maxim, but by something that, as Derrida insists, is “incalculable.” “Affect” is one word used to describe it: “And what you call affect, that is the relation of the living being to the other—the relation to oneself as a relation to another—this affect remains, by definition, incalculable. . . . The other, the arrival of the other is always incalculable.”²⁹ It is important, indeed critical, to be open to affect, to what we do not know; it is what calls us to ethics. But affect responds to and calls upon potentially unethical drives and passions. An animal-other may call us to our responsibility, and we may interpret that responsibility as “thou shall kill” or “thou shall not kill.” We cannot know for sure which is right; all we can do is to attempt to listen and respond through an act of empathy that may require becoming someone or something we have never been and imagining a response that is other than we have known. If Lurie’s life has changed, it is not by deliberate, rational calculation, not through a promotion of some universalizable law, but by being hailed by the force of an inexplicable.

Empathy is at the core of Grandin’s visual thinking, as it is, according to another Coetzee protagonist and animal advocate, Elizabeth Costello, the goal of poetry. But insofar as we are called to speak for others, Grandin’s and Coetzee’s works suggest that the response to the empathic will always be contentious and contradictory. “Il faut bien mourir” Derrida might say: “Well, we all must die” or “We all must die well.” It is up to each of us to determine what dying well might mean for the animal-other who calls us to our responsibility, when and how it might come about, and whether the ability to kill softly and with attention and respect and love are enough.

28. Wolfe, “Learning from Temple Grandin” (above, n. 12).

29. Jacques Derrida, “Unforeseeable Freedom,” in Jacques Derrida and Elisabeth Roudinesco, *For What Tomorrow . . . : A Dialogue (Cultural Memory in the Present)*, trans. Jeff Fort (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2004), pp. 47–61, quote on 58.