

## *Introduction*

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The last decade (which included the bicentenary of Darwin's birth) has seen an extraordinary upsurge of interdisciplinary interest in relationships between human and nonhuman animals. This interest is manifest not just within academic debate, but also amongst the general public. Ten years ago, the influential animal theorist Cary Wolfe wrote that 'the humanities are [...] struggling to catch up with a radical revaluation of the status of nonhuman animals that has taken place in society at large.'<sup>1</sup> Now, after a period which has seen a proliferation of new paradigms for interrogating the human/nonhuman threshold in such fields as cybernetics, cognitive theory, evolutionary psychology, ecology, epidemiology and medicine, these considerations are beginning to find ever more elaborated scope and expression within the humanities.

More recently, Mark Payne's observation that 'there are good reasons for thinking that new regimes of desire are coming to occupy the contact zone between human beings and other animals,'<sup>2</sup> points to an evolving need for a cultural space in which unexamined assumptions of difference between 'wildness' and 'sociality' can be suspended, informed by new scientific understandings of organisational behaviour in nonhuman animals and of cross-species interaction. Moreover, it is through close readings of literary texts from antiquity to the present day that, he argues, a pre-history of the poetic animal can be retrieved and put to work within the developing field of the posthumanities.

It should, of course, be remembered that although the intensity of this focus on species identity is a recent phenomenon, it arises in the context of three or four decades of intellectual engagement with notions of animality on the part of many leading theorists and thinkers, including Lacan, Kristeva, Derrida, Girard, Coetzee, Agamben and Žižek. This may be seen as consonant with the crisis of humanism which has led to a problematising of the human as the pre-eminent figuration at the heart of historical, social and philosophical analysis. One notable example is

Deleuze and Guattari's exploration of a 'becoming-animal' which is concerned not with imitation, but with a radical becoming-other which dissolves borders and distinctions, evading pre-given forms in order to attain a transversal becoming which is neither animal nor human. Citing works by authors including Melville and Kafka, they demonstrate the power of literature to, in Claire Colebrook's words, 'perceive differently by tearing perception from its human home'.<sup>3</sup>

This volume draws together an international line-up of specialists in order to examine these debates in relation to one of the twentieth century's most prominent writers. Samuel Beckett's work provides a particularly appropriate medium for this investigation because it continues not only to generate an abundance of critical attention in its own right, but also to exert a remarkable interdisciplinary and interaesthetic influence within twenty-first-century art and culture. This is apparent in the work not only of writers and theatre practitioners, but also amongst a wide array of other creative artists – painters, video and non-print media artists, composers, musicians, sculptors, and so forth – who continue to evolve innovative responses to Beckett's writing.

Animals can be found flying, creeping, loping, or simply standing and staring throughout Beckett's *oeuvre*. Their presence allows linkages with diverse strands of Western culture, including economic, mythological or theological frames of reference. In addition to these specific associations, Beckett's radical experimentation with subjectivity gives rise to searching questions about what it is to inhabit skin, whether furred, feathered, fleeced or frocked. A body of work which finds no stability in language, or in predictive affiliations with pronouns or genealogies, is also one which is hospitable to transhuman journeys. Beckett's work contains numerous instances of animal vulnerability, prompting movements of horror or compassion. This foregrounds not only 'what human beings have *made* of the difference between human beings and animals'<sup>4</sup>, but also points to ways in which those conceptions of difference may give way to perceptions of some kind of shared subjection, in the way that Cary Wolfe has described: 'The vulnerability and finitude that we share with nonhuman animals and the compassion that this commonality makes possible are at the very core of the question of ethics.'<sup>5</sup>

The essays which form the collection all include Beckett-related theorisations of animality. Those which conduct their discussion in relation to a broad spectrum of animal manifestations are included in Part I. Those which include a sustained focus upon one distinct animal form or species – horses, sheep, cats, dogs, bees, insects and so forth – are included

in Part II. A number of foundational ideas appear throughout both parts. Some of these are summarised here.

Beckett was a voracious reader of texts and theories from many disciplinary backgrounds. His correspondence, notes and interview material indicate his familiarity with key thinkers on human/animal relationships, including Descartes, Montaigne, Pascal, Pavlov, Woodworth, Watson, Schopenhauer, Spinoza and Darwin. He was also aware of some aspects of ongoing experimental work, such as that described in Wolfgang Köhler's *The Mentality of Apes* (1917),<sup>6</sup> referred to in several of the essays. In considering the extent to which he negotiates with these readings and allows them to inflect his own writing, it is important to acknowledge the complexity of Beckett's responses across a very long writing career. Within this volume, archive material including correspondence is cited where appropriate. In addition, texts ranging from early poems and critical writing from the 1930s right through to his late prose texts from the 1980s are considered, as well as the entire range of genres within which Beckett worked: drama, novel, television and radio plays, prose, short story, poetry, film and critical writing.

Amongst the diversity to be expected in this long succession of outputs, it is, nevertheless, possible to distinguish some common features relating to what might be termed Beckett's species consciousness. One is a recurrent antipathy to the notion of a species hierarchy in which God presides over an order of creation which descends through human beings down to the 'lower' orders of flies and minute pond life. Chris Ackerley points to the palindrome of GOD and DOG in his essay on mankind's 'dogsbody kinship with the zoomorphic world'. He goes on to discuss Beckett's critique of 'anthropomorphic insolence', legitimised by the Book of Genesis in its assertion of human dominion over beasts and fowl. Julie Campbell draws attention to the figure of Schopenhauer (a profound influence on Beckett) in terms of his criticism of the Abrahamic faiths for their perceived severance of mankind from the animal world. Rejecting the notion of mankind's petty status in relation to God, Beckett might be seen to have 'switched optical scales', as Naoya Mori argues in his linkage of Beckett and Leibniz, to align his creatures with the monad who eludes taxonomies.

Steven Connor uses Aristotle to point to a deep-seated uncertainty about the status of flies which allows for linkage between two animal anomalies: human beings and flies – 'Both humans and flies are nonce-or nonesuch creatures, creatures of exception and accident.' Connor here cites two early poems by Beckett in which flies loom large, in one of which the line 'my brother the fly' occurs. Ulrika Maude cites an instance

in Beckett's play *Endgame* where 'Beckett collapses the neat categorical distinction between the lowliest insect imaginable, a parasitic flea, and the highest mammal, namely the human being.' Shane Weller's essay also draws flies and humans into affiliation in his comparison of animalisation in Kafka and Beckett, a comparison which tellingly cites Adorno's image of both Kafka's and Beckett's figures as resembling a swatted fly: an organism incapacitated by violence, yet still alive.

At the heart of many of these analyses is a recognition of Beckett's disavowal of any thought system which bases its tenets on human primacy over other animals. This implies a human-to-animal perception which is wholly at odds with the so-called 'veterinary gaze' whose origins David Rando locates in the nineteenth century: 'For animals, as for humans, this rationalizing, sometimes even vivisectioning, scientific gaze was a technology of knowledge, power, and control.'<sup>7</sup> Jean-Michel Rabaté's essay in this collection refers to 'Beckett's special *bête noire*' as being 'the delusion brought about by anthropomorphism.' In doing so, he draws attention to differing stances on the part of Agamben and Derrida, with the latter questioning the former's distinction between 'zoe' and 'bios', to distinguish between the simple fact of living and the life of human beings living alone or in groups. Agamben's question as posed by Linda Ben-Zvi's essay – 'In what way can man let the animal, upon whose suspension the world is held open, be?', and, by implication, 'In what ways can humans *be* by being in the face of their animality?' – resounds across many of the essays in this collection.

In considering the relativisations undertaken when human and non-human animals cross paths, the 'veterinary gaze' does, then, give way to the reciprocal inter-species gaze, described memorably by Derrida in relation to being stared at, whilst naked, by his cat, and experiencing a curious sense of shame, of indeterminable origin: 'C'est comme si j'avais honte, alors, nu devant le chat, mais aussi honte d'avoir honte'<sup>8</sup> [It is as if I was ashamed, then, naked in front of the cat, but also ashamed of being ashamed]. Whereas Aristotle could confidently assert: 'In a word, they are not ashamed [...] before those whose opinion in regard to the truth they greatly despise – for instance, no one feels shame before children or animals,'<sup>9</sup> the surveying consciousness within modernity may be seen to forge itself somewhere between two related dispersals: one of species hierarchy and the other of secure subjecthood.

Against this background, the intimacy (no longer able to be ignored) induced by the act of mutual looking takes on an ethico-political dimension. In a fascinating article on the animal gaze in Beckett, Coetzee

and Sebald, Peter Boxall has asserted that: ‘To attend to the slim, clear boundary that intervenes between he or she or that which looks, and that which is looked upon, is necessarily to think about the forces which shape distinctions between self and other, and between self and world – the distinctions that lie at the foundation of all political and ethical structures.’<sup>10</sup> In texts such as *Malone Dies* and *Worstward Ho*, he argues, ‘the merging of self and other, of human and animal in the expanded space of the dilated eye, produces a very particular kind of vision that is won from darkness and from failure, from the sundering of the distinctions that separate mind from mind’ (Boxall, p. 143).

Beckett’s animals are variform and unpredictable; they can be constituted as victim or persecutor, companion or adversary, disconcerting impediments or passive space occupants. On the one hand, Beckett supplies instances in his writing where the gaze of animals marks them not only as sites of otherness but also as invasive or alien forces. Hence, Joseph Anderton writes of the effect upon the narrator of the horse’s stare in Beckett’s short story *The Expelled*: ‘The fixed, inexpressive stare invades his privacy, suspends his introverted sense of self and alters his behaviour.’ It does so, Anderton argues, in a manner which can be related to Foucault’s description of the surveillance function of the panopticon. The animal, in other words, takes cognizance of the human, whilst remaining opaque itself. This story, and other fiction by Beckett, is used by Maximilian de Gaynesford in the context of Kleist’s fencing bear, who seems to ‘read’ his human opponent through eye contact whilst appearing inscrutable himself. In Beckett’s *Film*, as Linda Ben-Zvi explores, the gazes of live animals provide the ‘absolute alterity’ which the protagonist spends his time trying to avoid.

On the other hand, many of the essays also establish human/animal communalities by engaging with the challenge Beckett’s work mounts towards Cartesian notions of animals as organic machines, devoid of reason and communicative skill. Brigitte Le Juez argues for some measure of ontological continuum between Beckettian narrators and avians, particularly parrots, who, ‘like their human counterparts, are prisoners of a deficient language they have learned against their will’, sharing in the disturbance which attaches to codified language. In this respect, Beckett may be seen to be developing and diversifying the human/animal participations which Joyce’s radical linguistic experimentation had facilitated, and with which the Joyce-soaked Derrida was also preoccupied.

Accordingly, Ulrika Maude points out that: ‘Language, another guarantor of the species barrier, is itself breaking down in Beckett’s work,

which often features vocalizations that are circumstantial, convulsive even.' Shane Weller makes a similar argument in referring to the way in which 'Beckett disintegrates the human/animal distinction founded on the possession of speech,' stating that the 'animal voice' underlies Beckett's *Molloy*, and is suggested by a remark which its author made to the novel's translator: 'It is as if there were a little animal inside one's head, for which one tried to find a voice.'

This notion of little animals in the head is taken up in a Cartesian context by Yoshiyuki Inoue, in discussing Descartes's notion of the 'esprits animaux'<sup>11</sup> – the minuscule bodies made up of agitated particles of blood running from heart to brain, and which are carriers of memory. For Inoue, this model of the pineal pathway (on which Beckett made notes) bears strong similarities to the processes described in Beckett's text *Le Dépeupleur*. The notion of tiny animals in the brain is in fact one which resurfaces in other parts of Beckett's writing. As Steven Connor points out: 'For centuries human beings have lived with a dread of their skulls and brains being invaded by worms and maggots.' He goes on to cite the figure of Worm in *The Unnamable*, who voices this unease: 'What to still this gnawing of termites in my Punch and Judy box.'

Is there, then, a prevalent mode? Does Beckett more often seem to lean towards assertions of the intactness of animals in their alterity, or, rather, of their coterminousness with human animality? There is no straightforward formula other than to observe that the repertoire of responses to animalhood found within Beckett's texts demonstrates his nuanced awareness of the issue's complexity. For Yoshiki Tajiri, Beckett deals with the ambiguity by retaining it, in highlighting 'the simultaneous approximation to and distantiation from animals.' This recruitment of both familiarity and strangeness can be found in many examples of medieval bestiaries and other illuminated manuscripts which feature marginal images of real, mythical or grotesque animals, in often exuberant and complicated negotiations with the text they writhe around. My own essay uses this model to suggest the readiness of Beckett's visual imagination to encompass liminal and hybrid ways of being and becoming.

Many of the cavorting animals to be found in illuminated bestiaries seem calculated to provoke belly laughs just as surely as pious reflection. With this in mind, it might also be noted that, within Beckett's early work, there can often be found a humorous flippancy associated with commentary on animal/human distinctions, inviting affiliation with Simon Crichtley's suggestion that 'humour explores what it means to be human by moving back and forth across the frontier that separates

humanity from animality, thereby making it unstable.<sup>72</sup> In addition, though, the casualness of much of this early Beckettian material disguises a much more profound anxiety about what, if anything, does mark out human ontological territory. Hence, what is referred to in *Watt* as ‘loss of species’ becomes, in David Wheatley’s words, ‘progressively, which is to say regressively, more paralysing.’ Wheatley goes on to diagnose ‘species anxiety’ in a wide range of texts, including *The Unnamable*, where he notes that ‘the multiple animal references [...] are rarely without a twist of abjection.’

That abjection is indeed an optional ‘twist’, rather than a thorough-going feature of animality. In this respect, Angela Moorjani goes so far as to assert that some of Beckett’s writing exhibits affinities with the Cynics, and notably with Diogenes of Sinope, who championed, over and above human intelligence, the qualities of self-sufficiency and indifference to be found in nonhuman animals. Linda Ben-Zvi suggests that it was in his critique of anthropocentrism as undertaken in the sphere of theatre that Beckett *performs* the possibilities of a new understanding of species in relation to both human and nonhuman animals.

In aligning Kafka and Beckett in terms of the ambiguous status of some of their central figures, ‘determined negatively and neither properly human nor nonhuman forms of animal life’, Shane Weller also draws attention to the essential *weakness* of these figures. Beckett was drawn to Pascal’s apprehension of mankind as weakness, finding in this idea some clues towards where his direction lay as a writer. Weakness alone, then, does not provide a ‘negative determination’ in Beckett’s fictional world. Weller concludes his essay with a reference to J M Coetzee (who undertook a doctorate on Beckett) as an exemplar of a literary approach to animality which is even less marked by abjection. Appropriately, this volume also includes an essay by Yoshiki Tajiri which focusses on exactly that pairing. Tajiri studies Coetzee’s lecture ‘Eight Ways of Looking at Samuel Beckett’, suggesting that, although Coetzee goes further than Beckett in advocating thinking into the full being of animals, the two writers share a view of ‘the contingency of the human mode of being.’

In exploring this contingency, I also want to suggest that Beckett makes an important contribution towards the development of what Susan McHugh has called a ‘narrative ethology’, in which ‘animal narrative forms prove useful not only for interrogating key elements of identity and society but also for confronting the limitations of disciplinary knowledges.’<sup>73</sup> Beckett’s animals are never pets or constant companions; they do not serve to affirm or console a narratorial subjectivity. They are



seen in their environments, existing as best they might. When caged or tethered, they continue to exhibit a mournful withdrawal or independence. Beckett does not put words into their mouths, unless they are parrots. And even the most intellectually sophisticated of Beckett's parrots – the pink and grey one which suffers the indignity of belonging to Jackson in *Malone Dies* – succeeds in 'confronting the limitations of disciplinary knowledges' by taking the initiative to abbreviate the Peripatetic Latin dictum to 'Nihil in intellectu' [nothing in the mind] (*T*, p. 200). Jackson has tried repeatedly to instil into the bird the missing 'quod non prius in sensu', but in vain. In discussion of this episode, it is often observed that the parrot is not only failing to assert the plenitude of the intellect, but also to make the connection with the senses. Certainly the narrator attributes the shortfall to incapacity: 'the celebrated restriction was too much for it' (*T*, p. 200). There is, however, another possible reading. Notably, after repeating the rehearsed opening, the parrot does not simply dry up. Rather, instead of relapsing into dumbness, and aware of the need for further words, it makes a bilingual utterance, translating the expected phrase into 'a series of squawks' (*T*, p. 200). In so doing, it has performed a minimum sample of the imposed human sentence, but has also succeeded in asserting the existence and validity of its own native tongue.

There is, then, no space for human primacy and monolingualism within the Beckettian bestiary. As Ulrika Maude expresses it: 'Like Clov's flea in *Endgame* from which all humankind might start anew, Beckett's work casts doubt over all the major premisses – consciousness, intentional subjectivity and language – that have served to privilege the category of the human. Animals in Beckett frequently evoke a radical alterity, [...] but Beckett's writing also rethinks the human as nonhuman, making us encounter the animal within.' This reflection upon the continuum between human and nonhuman animality not only reveals the parts that animals play in human self-definition, but also prompts further reflection upon what it is to be human. This in turn offers new and important insights for thinking the animal within contemporary culture.

## NOTES

- 1 Cary Wolfe (ed.), Introduction, *Zoontologies: The Question of the Animal* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), pp. ix–xxiii [p. xi].
- 2 Mark Payne, *The Animal Part: Human and Other Animals in the Poetic Imagination* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2010), p. 145.
- 3 Claire Colebrook, *Gilles Deleuze* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 136.



## Introduction

9

- 4 Cora Diamond, *The Realistic Spirit: Wittgenstein, Philosophy, and the Mind* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991), p. 351.
- 5 Cary Wolfe, 'Exposures', in Stanley Cavell, Cora Diamond, John McDowell, Ian Hacking and Cary Wolfe, *Philosophy and Animal Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), pp.1–41 [p. 18].
- 6 Published in English translation in 1925.
- 7 David Rando, 'The Cat's Meow: *Ulysses*, Animals, and the Veterinary Gaze', *James Joyce Quarterly*, Vol. 46, Nos. 3–4 (Spring–Summer 2009), pp. 529–43 [p. 529].
- 8 Jacques Derrida, *L'animal que donc je suis* (Paris: Galilée, 2006), p. 18. The translation is my own.
- 9 Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, tr. by J H Freese (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press; William Heinemann, 1926), #1384b [23].
- 10 Peter Boxall, 'The Threshold of Vision: The Animal Gaze in Beckett, Coetzee and Sebald', *Journal of Beckett Studies*, Vol. 20, No. 2 (2011), pp. 123–48 [p. 124].
- 11 In the *Traité de l'Homme*.
- 12 Simon Critchley, *On Humour (Thinking in Action)* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 29.
- 13 Susan McHugh, *Animal Stories: Narrating Across Species Lines* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), p. 18.

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