

The Poetics of the Encounter:

Animals, Ethics, and God

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**Abstract**

Despite growing interest in the past two decades, animal ethics remains a relatively minute area of theology. Some writings have emerged in theological circles arguing for animal rights or even for how to conceive of animals in terms of conventional theological notions such as souls and salvation. However, not many examine ideas and ways of living and being with animals in the ordinary, even mundane, situations of daily life. I suggest we need to cultivate ethical imagination in our interaction with animals, and that one way to do this involves coming face-to-face with them and being attentive to our embodiment. I draw on philosopher Emmanuel Levinas as well as theopoetics to represent the ethical experience of the encounter. Texts such as *The Lives of Animals* and *Disgrace* by JM Coetzee provide examples of how we may engage our ethical and theological imagination in day-to-day encounters with animals.

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Finally, I dedicate this thesis to Shaddy, golden retriever, 2001-2013 – I love you so much. And, though it was much too early to have to say to you, *àdieu*.

**Introduction:  
Animal Ethics and Christian Theology**

Seriousness is, for a certain kind of artist,  
an imperative uniting the aesthetic and the ethical.  
JM Coetzee<sup>1</sup>

My task does not consist in constructing ethics;  
I only try to seek its meaning (sens).  
Levinas<sup>2</sup>

Methodology: as in a certain style of sketching, one draws a line again and again,  
layering over previous attempts. No one of the lines alone is either sufficient or accurate.  
If one is lucky the shape will emerge from the accumulation of flawed attempts.  
(Although it may not be the shape one had thought it would be, had hoped for.)  
Jan Zwicky<sup>3</sup>

**Introducing the Introduction**

Despite growing interest in the past two decades, animals remain a relatively minute area of theology. Some writings have emerged in theological circles arguing for Christian vegetarianism or against animal experimentation and the like<sup>4</sup> or even for how to conceive of animals in terms of conventional theological notions such as souls and salvation, but not many examine ideas and ways of living and being with animals in the ordinary, even mundane, situations of daily life. These are certainly steps in admitting that animals have a legitimate place in theological discussion and that they are not solely objects for the use of humans; this work also admits that human beings have a greater

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<sup>1</sup> J.M. Coetzee, qtd. in Amy Gutmann, "Introduction," in *The Lives of Animals*, by JM Coetzee (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 3.

<sup>2</sup> Levinas, qtd. in Simon Critchley, *The Ethics of Deconstruction: Derrida and Levinas*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (West Lafayette, Indiana: Purdue University Press, 1999), 4.

<sup>3</sup> Jan Zwicky, *Lyric Philosophy*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1990), 530.

<sup>4</sup> Richard Alan Young, *Is God a Vegetarian? Christianity, Vegetarianism, and Animal Rights* (Peru, Illinois: Carus Publishing Company, 1999) or Andrew Linzey's *Animal Theology* (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1994) as one example from his many publications on the issue.

connection to the world around us than is often granted. And yet I feel it would benefit theology to explore what it means to live with animals on a more everyday basis. In effect, I wonder what it would look like if theology came face-to-face with the animal.

In order to consider these possible encounters, I have found myself moving away from any sort of analytic philosophy or theology that conceives of our ethical relationship to animals in terms of prescriptive oughts or arguments based on some perceived moral status of the animals themselves. Such arguments always include questions such as can animals act ethically? What about those animals who exhibit more rationality or linguistic ability than others “lower” on a hierarchy of capacity? Does this mean some suffer like human beings? Do they have souls and can they participate in salvation? This line of discussion shifts away from any consideration of the encounter itself in favour of delineating abstract conditions for the very grounds of the encounter. I agree with Jan Zwicky’s point that “Any attempt to explain it [the ‘presence of what we live among’] after the manner of Aristotle, to *argue* for its metaphysical adequacy in a systematic framework, will result in some version of idealism. The depths of anti-realism to which one must sink will be directly proportional to the rigour with which the arguments are pursued.”<sup>5</sup> Instead of being restricted in our relationships with animals by questions of ability or status, I suggest we need to cultivate ethical imagination in our interaction with them, especially in order to broaden theological attention to animals beyond terms of food or domestication.

One way to do this involves coming face-to-face with animals and being attentive to the immersion of our whole being in these encounters. As the fragility of this is hard

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<sup>5</sup> Zwicky, *Lyric Philosophy*, 188, no. 101.

to grasp through conventional systematic or logical categories, it requires a more flexible position that is alive to the indeterminacies and contingencies present in each encounter. Also necessary is a fluid sense of conceiving God as permeating our relationships with animals, whether we see God in the face of the animal or we are oriented to God so that we might continuously tune our ethical identities. For these reasons, I turn to poetics as a dynamic approach that can represent the experience of the encounter with vibrancy while also being able to reflect on the interplays between embodiment and making sense of things through language. Texts such as *The Lives of Animals* and *Disgrace* by JM Coetzee work to, in his words, unite “the aesthetic and the ethical,” or the poetics of writing with the poetics of response.

In a nutshell, I am looking at a specific moment – the encounter with an animal – and outlining its theological and ethical contours through the brushstrokes of poetics. For this purpose, the thesis centres on three interconnected ideas: call, orientation, and response. Each chapter takes up one of these ideas, imparting a certain movement to the underlying structure, though there is necessarily some overlap throughout the chapters. One might also conceive of this structure playing out as a reflection on the mind (mental and emotional) side of things in Chapter 1, the engagement of the body in Chapter 2, and the inseparable mingling of both in Chapter 3. In other words, the organization is a bit like a funnel, gradually narrowing in on the demonstration of response carried out in the last chapter by means of looking at the two fictional works by Coetzee.

### **Methodological Sketches and a Number of Intriguing Methods**

For the purposes of methodology, I rely on both my previously stated desire to depart from certain philosophical and theological approaches in favour of more imaginative understandings of relationality. These methods lace together my concern for creative responsibility via the amenable notion of poetics and the ethics of Emmanuel Levinas, with a case study provided by JM Coetzee's *The Lives of Animals* and *Disgrace*. The theological vision of grace acts as a unifying concept for the thesis, notably as it demonstrates sensitivity to God's presence in unexpected relationships.

### *Poetics*

What do I mean by the *poetics* of the encounter? Poetics signals a manner of conceiving the encounter that is constructive, attentive to language and how we shape and are shaped by it in encountering others, and imaginative. Though not entirely reducible to texts, it nevertheless demonstrates a struggle with language, meaning-making, and the (re)presentation of our embodied experiences. It therefore operates both as a methodological vantage point – one that functions more imaginatively than conventional logic and embraces personal responsibility – and as a method, wherein it attends to issues of language, text, and creative expression. In both cases, poetics illuminates the moment of the encounter, drawing attention to the thoughts and feelings that emerge as well as leading to a reappraisal of our own ethical responses.

While poetics can potentially encompass broad terrain, the poetics of this project in part meshes with what in theology has become known as *theopoetics*. Theopoetics can involve a more lyrical style of writing, one that wanders away from systematic theology to embrace the lyrical and multiplicitous, or it may remain more textually based, focussed on how God is conveyed in a particular work. While my comments about theopoetics are



located in the first chapter, it can be said that the rest of the thesis incorporates aspects from both streams.

### *Levinas*

French Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas devoted himself to ethics, even going so far as to identify ethics as first philosophy.<sup>6</sup> A number of Levinas' ethical ideas function as an undercurrent to the entire thesis, especially motifs such as the face and the *àdieu*. The face forms the keystone of Levinas' philosophy – it is the face of the other (a being who is completely external to us and who we cannot subsume into ourselves) that calls us into ethical action, prompting us to respond to their vulnerability. Levinas insists that all encounters with the other are fundamentally ethical ones, a point I find particularly compelling when we include animals in the “other” position. Meeting the animal other becomes an opportunity to find ourselves called to extend to them the hospitality of the kingdom of God. The *àdieu* combines a tender farewell to the other with a sense of renewed responsibility to them, committing them finally to God; Derrida, a close friend of Levinas, offers a commentary on the *àdieu* that is especially useful in Chapter 3.

Those familiar with Levinas will notice that this is a somewhat truncated account of his ethical philosophy which leaves out a good deal more than it includes. Unfortunately, this is a reality of such a short project and thus due treatment of Levinas' idea of the face and the other is not adequately given. While hints of Levinas circulate throughout, a more extended reflection on his thought emerges in Chapters 2 and 3.

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<sup>6</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, “Ethics as First Philosophy,” in *The Levinas Reader*, ed. Seán Hand (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Inc., 1989).

### *Coetzee*

South African novelist JM Coetzee has become well-known for his writings on animals, especially his refusal to consider animals solely in either philosophical or sentimental terms, preferring instead to explore and complicate our relationality with them. I focus on two particular texts in Chapter 3, *The Lives of Animals* and *Disgrace*.<sup>7</sup> *The Lives of Animals* is the published version of Coetzee's 1997 Tanner Lectures delivered at Princeton University and they are somewhat odd in format, describing a character, Elizabeth Costello, as an Australian novelist giving lectures at a fictional college in the United States. Costello surprises her audience by not speaking on her novels at all but on the treatment of animals, a subject that rankles a few present by what they perceive as her bad philosophy and grossly insensitive analogy of animals to Holocaust victims. *Disgrace* offers no such explicit text within a text, instead centering on the upheaval that happens to professor David Lurie when he is dismissed from his university position for having a somewhat coercive affair with a student and not publicly admitting any remorse for his actions. Instead of finding respite at his daughter Lucy's farm, he gets beaten and Lucy is raped by three intruders. In dealing with the aftermath, Lurie finds himself drawn to the animals around him as he volunteers at an animal clinic, euthanizing cats and dogs every week.

Coetzee's two novels provide an opportunity to examine the poetics of the encounter in action, especially given Coetzee's rendering of visceral face-to-face meetings with animals and his emphasis on the capacity of the imagination to reach out to

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<sup>7</sup> JM Coetzee, *The Lives of Animals* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), and *Disgrace* (New York: Penguin Books, 2000).

both animals and people. *The Lives of Animals* explores imaginatively meeting the animal and the possibilities of animal agency within that meeting, while *Disgrace* presents a narrative record of the shape such an engagement might take. At the same time, David Lurie of *Disgrace* circles around questions of religious language and the implications of guilt, salvation, and even sacrifice while Elizabeth Costello in *The Lives of Animals* likewise ponders her involvement with animals as a means to save her soul. In both books, engagement with animals intertwines with a desire to make peace with personal exposure and vulnerability, the moment of which might be called grace.

### ***Grace***

Grace forms a key aspect of Christian identity. It signals receptiveness to God's love and mercy, especially through the life and death of Christ. I conceive of grace as an encounter with God that prompts a fundamental re-orientation in our lives that makes us re-think our habituated activities in the world.<sup>8</sup> It dislocates complacent patterns of thought and urges us to examine and renew our relationships with those around us. Grace can thus be found in our encounters with animals, as when, for example, we find a moment of peace and ethical fulfillment in our relations with them, like David Lurie does at the end of *Disgrace*. This idea of grace book-ends the thesis, emerging through discussion of love's knowledge in Chapter 1 in regards to the lamb of God, and finding realization through Lurie's actions in *Disgrace* towards a different sort of lamb.

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<sup>8</sup> In theology, grace indicates God's gratuitous giving of salvation to a fallen or imperfect humanity; human beings then expose themselves to God to receive this gift. One of the most influential understandings of grace comes from Augustine, who argued that "the graciousness of God's redeeming grace depended on its being absolutely unconditional on human work or merit." However, critics have noted that this description of grace omits "the contribution that one's physical existence in time and space makes to one's eternal destiny." In other words, our embodied reality participates in "shaping human destiny" and receiving grace. Serene Jones and Paul Lakeland, eds, *Constructive Theology: A Contemporary Approach to Classical Themes* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 91-93.

## **Chapter Maps and Other Important Information**

As mentioned above, the three chapters follow a certain flow, all aimed at examining a distinct moment in the encounter with animals. Chapter 1 “Call: Face to Face with the Lamb of God” opens by re-examining the traditional theological image linking Christ and a sacrificial lamb, notably as it is expressed in paintings such as those of Francisco Zurbaran, suggesting that seeing the lamb on its own terms instead of as a placeholder for Christ can encourage new theological paradigms of relating to animals. This revisiting challenges assumptions about epistemology, about seeing, knowing, and loving the animal other; it also elicits the question of how grace may appear in these relations. This chapter prepares the groundwork, briefly noting current discussions in theology regarding animals and where I diverge from them. Poetics surfaces as an approach that can hold relationality and creativity in constructive tension, aligning to an extent with the theological movement called theopoetics. Poetics allows for a reconsideration of how we know the animal when we meet them as well as opening the door for us to love them, seeing in them the face of God.

The second chapter “Orientation: Embodying Ethical Relationship” translates the seeing and knowing of the first chapter into the midst of embodied relationality and the concomitant necessity of being oriented to God and the animal in the context of the everyday. Through poetic attention to language and a study of David Lurie from *Disgrace* attending to the corpses of dead dogs at the incinerator, the shape of the embodied encounter highlights possibilities for appreciating the singular uniqueness and fragility of each animal we meet, urging us to gradually become more attuned to both

God and animal through every subsequent engagement with them. At the same time, such attunement signals the process of ethics, something Stanley Cavell notes as the *task* of ethics, wherein we become alive to the encounters that happen in our ordinary living and continuously adjust our ethical responses.

In Chapter 3, “Response: Bidding the Animal *Àdieu*,” I discuss *The Lives of Animals* and *Disgrace* in terms of ideas presented in the first two chapters – the call and orientation that the encounter initiates requires both response and responsibility, and this is studied through the lens of Costello’s and Lurie’s own vulnerability. Despite their best efforts, the level of need they see in the animals around them causes them to break down. The question becomes how to respond and put into motion our responsibility for the others around us if this ethical task becomes mentally and emotionally overwhelming. I offer as one possible answer the hope of the *àdieu*, the Levinasian committal of self and other to God, wherein we acknowledge the responsibility entrusted to us by the animal but admit both our helplessness and our positioning towards God so that we may find a measure of peace in the midst of our ethical task.

### **Conclusion to the Introduction**

Driving this thesis is the desire to motivate recognition of our myriad encounters with animals and how we can realize our ethical responsibility towards them. This somewhat narrows the concern of animal ethics in theology from a more broad-ranging eco-theology to a focus on individual responsibility for the animals we meet on a daily basis. This could of course manifest in the vegetarianism for which some Christians have advocated – my own vegetarianism emerged from distress about the treatment of all

animals in factory farms. However, I argue that response and responsibility also implicates more complex and subtle forms of involvement with animals, particularly insofar as both encounter and response often take place in a split second without benefit of substantial thought. We have to feel our way through things, doing the best we can to honour the preciousness of animal life, seeing the face of God in the singularity of particular animals. We know them through plunging the self into relationality with them. But while the encounter may be fleeting, it can be infinitely rich, especially if we become attuned to the presence of God in our future encounters with animals and the rekindled need for us to take responsibility for their vulnerability as well as ours; this is the hopeful possibility of grace and of deepened appreciation for God's manifestation in the lives around us. In this manner, it harkens back to the insight articulated by eco-theology that we are vitally interconnected with the animals and world around us, though I hope to draw attention to this on the smaller scale of the face-to-face meeting. Poetics alerts us to the encounters we have with animals in the midst of our everyday living, showing us the possibilities for realizing the depth of our embodied immersion in the life around us.

**Chapter 1**  
**Call:**  
**Face to Face**  
**with**  
**the Lamb of God**

That is the kind of poetry I bring to your attention today: poetry that does not try to find an idea in the animal, that is not about the animal, but is instead a record of an engagement with him.

J. M. Coetzee<sup>9</sup>

But perhaps in the attentive – or I might even (too naively?) say loving – conversation of philosophy and literature with one another we could hope to find, occasionally, mysterious and incomplete, in some moments not governed by the watch, some analogue of the deliberate fall, the aim for grace.

Martha Nussbaum<sup>10</sup>

**First Thoughts: Reconsidering the Lamb of God**

Animals have frequently held a prominent place in Christian religious imagery and theological expression; indeed, a lamb stands at the heart of Christian theology. Acting as a symbol for the sacrifice of Christ on the cross, the lamb has become a ubiquitous metaphor and artistic figure, a visual touchstone for representing Christ's relationship with humanity. But while the metaphor highlights the sacrificial nature of Christ's death, it simultaneously occludes a certain way of seeing and thus of relating to the lamb itself – the animal is of little interest beyond its role of signification, subsumed into the person of Christ. I question whether the animal should be glossed over so readily in favour of one prominent theological interpretation and wonder if closer consideration

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<sup>9</sup> Coetzee, *The Lives of Animals*, 51.

<sup>10</sup> Martha Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 284.

of the image might yield important insights for how theology can engage animals and animal ethics in light of growing interest in this area.

While the symbolism continues to be frequently depicted in religious painting, Spanish artist Francisco Zurbaran took it as his subject a number of times over the course of his career, notably dwelling on the figure of the lamb. In Zurbaran's 1638 painting *Adoration of the Shepherds*, there is a lamb in the bottom right hand corner, just below and off to the side of the manger where a new-born Christ rests amidst a flurry of attention.<sup>11</sup> The lamb is isolated from the others surrounding the manger and bound so that it cannot move. In the *Agnus Dei* completed two years later,<sup>12</sup> Zurbaran paints the lamb lying by itself on a hard, flat surface with its eyes staring dully and all four legs trussed together. *Adoration of the Shepherds* makes explicit the purpose of the lamb and its affiliation with the baby Jesus, while in a different version of the *Agnus Dei* from the same period, Zurbaran includes the faint outline of a halo above the lamb's head to indicate it as a symbolic stand-in for Christ.<sup>13</sup> Even in the unadorned rendering of *Agnus Dei* the name enforces the connection, and it is this title *Agnus Dei* – the Lamb of God – which immediately imposes an interpretation upon the viewer, that of Christ's sacrifice.

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<sup>11</sup> In the collections of the Musée des Beaux-Arts, Grenoble, France. Francisco Zurbaran, *Adoration of the Shepherds*, oil on canvas, 1638, Web Gallery of Art:

[http://www.wga.hu/html\\_m/z/zurbaran/1/shepherd.html](http://www.wga.hu/html_m/z/zurbaran/1/shepherd.html)

<sup>12</sup> Museo Nacional del Prado in Spain. Francisco Zurbaran, *Agnus Dei*, oil, 1635-1640:

<http://www.museodelprado.es/en/the-collection/online-gallery/on-line-gallery/obra/agnus-dei-the-lamb-of-god/>. This version of the *Agnus Dei* also serves as the cover to Matthew Scully's book *Dominion: The Power of Man, the Suffering of Animals, and the Call to Mercy* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2002).

<sup>13</sup> San Diego Museum of Art. Francisco Zurbaran, *Agnus Dei*, oil on canvas, 1635-1640: <http://www.sdmart.org/collections/Europe/item/1947.36>



All three paintings incorporate a centuries-old guide<sup>14</sup> for how to understand the lamb – when we see its sadness and resignation, its meekness and silence, we immediately substitute it for Christ’s attitude prior to his crucifixion. However, this carries certain consequences for our relation to the lamb as an actual animal, consequences akin to Rachel Muers’ and Carol Adams’ observation that we have written our theology onto animals, but in doing so, have effectively penned away the lives of the animals themselves:

They are, literally and figuratively, what we write both our central texts and our marginalia onto. When we look at the Dead Sea Scrolls, to use Adams’ example, we focus on the text and not on the animal skin. The very act of writing the text reduces the animal not only to voicelessness, but to invisibility as anything other than a resource for human use.<sup>15</sup>

Is it possible to have a relationship with the lamb in the painting on terms beyond its figuration as sacrifice, to admit that it has a voice and that it is calling to us? There is a certain challenge involved here: we think we *know* the lamb – it is, after all, a metaphor for Christ, and what else can it be, we ask? It is speaking for Christ and surely that is all the attention a humble lamb requires.

Perhaps, however, the image of the helpless lamb lying alone on the grey platform can provide the impetus for a new encounter, for a new way of seeing and understanding the animal and thus for forging a distinct relationship with it. Zurbaran’s unembellished

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<sup>14</sup> Stemming in large part from verses such as Acts 8:37, John 1:29, and 1 Peter 1:19.

<sup>15</sup> Rachel Muers, “The Animals We Write On: Encountering Animals in Texts,” in *Creaturely Theology: On God, Humans and Other Animals*, ed. by Celia Deane-Drummond and David Clough (London: SCM Press, 2009), 138.

version of the *Agnus Dei* potentially prompts a moment of epiphany: we realize that this lamb will have its throat cut and its blood drained for the sacrificial ritual. There is no redemption or possibility of escape for it; the tight coils of rope around its legs make sure of that. What do we feel at our recognition of the lamb's complete and utter helplessness and vulnerability? Do we feel indifference, compassion, pity, or nausea at how it will unwillingly be led to the slaughter? Do we have any sort of ethical responsibility as a result of this recognition or do we shrug our shoulders at our response to the painting, saying that there is nothing we can do? At the very least, do we notice other animals around us more, be it animals on the street or even on our plates?

In looking at the painting before us, we are brought into relationship with this particular lamb. At the same time, the implications of animal sacrifice bring to mind the millions of other lambs that have also been killed throughout history, be it for sacrifice or, in contemporary terms, food. There exists the necessity of keeping in balance individual and collective bodies, the life of a certain animal and the wellbeing of a whole species, and I think this tension is one of the major tasks of theology when reflecting on current debates about animal ethics. Theologians such as Andrew Linzey<sup>16</sup> and Richard Alan Young,<sup>17</sup> among others, have done admirable work in bringing our attention to the collective plight of animals across the globe, from those raised in factory farms for food, dissected in labs for science, put on view for entertainment, killed for fashion, or just eliminated for reasons of sport or overpopulation. And yet this single, acquiescent lamb

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<sup>16</sup> See his seminal *Animal Theology* (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1994).

<sup>17</sup> Richard A. Young, *Is God a Vegetarian? Christianity, Vegetarianism, and Animal Rights*.

calls out to me for a response *now*, requiring not just my advocacy for its siblings in the slaughterhouses but for its plight at this very moment.

But even if we focus theology on our individual relationships with animals, how do we go about framing this encounter, what discourses do we rely on, and what rhetoric do we use? For much of the discussion, theology has been in dialogue with philosophy, asking questions about animal capacities and animal rights and if the appropriate Christian articulation will be shaped by these ideas.<sup>18</sup> As Kelly Oliver has noted in regards to philosophy, such arguments have tended to rest either on identities of sameness or difference without concentrating on our actual relationships with animals themselves.<sup>19</sup> They rely on abstract scientific modes of thought in order to calculate our obligations to animals by first determining their placement on a hierarchy of capacity or ability, weighing animals' similarity to human beings in terms of rationality, pain, and language.<sup>20</sup> At the base of such attempts lies what J.M. Coetzee bemoans in *The Lives of Animals* – that of finding an idea in the animal, or, in other words, of reducing the animal to a single epistemological assumption that then drives all further ethical interaction.

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<sup>18</sup> Andrew Linzey is one proponent of animal rights, while George Frear Jr. rejects both utilitarian and animal rights approaches as adequate for theology. George L. Frear, Jr. "Caring for Animals: Biblical Stimulus for Ethical Reflection," In *Good News for Animals? Christian Approaches to Animal Well-Being*, edited by Charles Pinches and Jay B. McDaniel (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1993).

<sup>19</sup> Kelly Oliver, "Animal Ethics: Toward an Ethics of Responsiveness," *Research in Phenomenology* 40 (2010): 267-280.

<sup>20</sup> Both the utilitarianism put forward by Peter Singer in *Animal Liberation* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1975 [reprinted 2002]), and the argument for animal rights by Tom Regan in *The Case for Animal Rights*, Revised Edition (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004) participate in the delineation of a hierarchy based on an animal's ability to reason or feel pain. There have been significant refinements in each of these camps since Singer and Regan first wrote (see, for example, Martha Nussbaum's emphasis on the unique flourishing of each species, something for which utilitarianism cannot account, and how this can be represented in terms of animal rights, although Nussbaum does incline towards sentience as a marker of justice). Martha Nussbaum, "Beyond 'Compassion and Humanity': Justice for Nonhuman Animals," in *Animal Rights: Current Debates and New Directions*, ed. Cass Sunstein and Martha Nussbaum (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

While the upsurge in philosophical interest has been crucial to re-thinking our treatment of animals and encouraging political protection and justice for them, these particular currents still enforce a level of intellectual distance and detachment that my body rebels against when it sees the powerless lamb awaiting its death.

Theology has pursued a number of different paths in reply to growing interest in animals and animal ethics, ranging from a re-assertion of human dominion over animals,<sup>21</sup> various reformulations of animal rights (one of the best known being Andrew Linzey), substantial concern about Christian diet and animals,<sup>22</sup> and a broader sense of animals as a part of eco-theology. As the most expansive field in all of the above-mentioned areas, eco-theology somewhat re-works the philosophical approaches by insisting that we are *all* creatures under God, sharing life together on the planet and thus indissolubly inter-connected and inter-dependent. Each life, on both an individual and collective scale, assumes importance in this circular web. As Cecilia Deane-Drummond and David Clough argue, a focus on creatureliness is a step to repairing the “high boundary wall between *Homo sapiens* and every other species of creature within creation.”<sup>23</sup> This premise undergirds much of the recent work in theology centering on animals and has been vital in arguing for the value of all creatures; however, it takes a

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<sup>21</sup> Stephen vanTassel, *Dominion Over Wildlife? An Environmental Theology of Human-Wildlife Relations* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2009).

<sup>22</sup> To name only a few, there are the previously cited *Is God a Vegetarian?* by Richard Alan Young, *Theology on the Menu: Asceticism, Meat and Christian Diet* by David Grumett and Rachel Muers (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010), the collection of essays *Eating and Believing: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Vegetarianism and Theology* edited by David Grumett and Rachel Muers (London: T & T Clark, 2008), and *Good Eating* by Stephen Webb (Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing Group, 2001).

<sup>23</sup> Celia Deane-Drummond and David Clough, *Creaturely Theology: On God, Humans and Other Animals* (London: SCM Press, 2009), 2.

comprehensive look at animal life while spending less time exploring the possibilities for more personal relationships with individual animals.

The lamb in the painting calls to me as a single, unique creature, not just as a placeholder for Christ and not simply as a stand-in for the whole of its species. I may not be able to cut the coils binding this specific lamb, but I can nonetheless respond to it and let its needs influence me – in other words, I can meet it face-to-face and open myself to how an encounter with this animal implicates me as a Christian in the radical infinitude of this particular moment. Rather than writing theology on its broken body, the focus on *this* individual in front of me involves a co-authoring of ethics and a willingness to enter into creative relationality, thereby admitting that we are all porous and susceptible to each other's influence. It is this encounter with a single animal that I concentrate on, arguing in the manner of Emmanuel Levinas that it is fundamentally ethical in nature. The face-to-faceness demands that we acknowledge the ethics that pervade and constitute such an encounter and how it calls forth an ethical response. This simultaneously prompts the necessity of considering and potentially re-framing the very ideas, concepts, and beliefs that we bring to that encounter, including how we interact with animals, how we engage them epistemologically, and how we can love them and constructively desire their wellbeing.

Yet such a way of conceiving relationship with animals calls for a mode of thought that borrows in measure from philosophical reflection and theological emphases without resorting to rigid categories like the moral status of animals or questions of whether or not they partake of any soteriological design. There must be a methodology that strikes a balance between serious reflection and a willingness to bare our own soul in

the face of the other's vulnerability, as well as a method that can capture the exquisite contingency of everyday encounters with animals. Poetics embodies the flexibility and strength required, possessing thoughtfulness combined with attention to diversity of experience. In particular, theopoetics – an emerging current in theology, just like animal ethics – emphasizes the necessity of being more alert to the imaginative possibilities of poetics and language when re-envisioning relationality with animals and consequently with God.

Accordingly, in the rest of this chapter I explore ways in which theopoetics can challenge traditional categories of relating to animals, including the lamb in the painting, and provide alternate orientations to thinking about, knowing, and loving them. Instead of ignoring the face of the animal, poetics makes us alive to the myriad ways in which they call us to be in relation to them. It is this idea of being open to their call, of adjusting our intellectual patterns of perceiving their need and interacting with them, that motivates the following sections as well as running as an undercurrent to the entire chapter. The next two chapters will build on this idea of playing creatively with how we think about, understand, and represent our responses to encountering animals ethically, blending aspects of theology, philosophy, literature, and literary criticism in the process; these chapters will dwell more on the embodied aspects of relation.

### **New Paradigms for God-talk and Animal-talk: Theopoetics**

Theopoetics breaks open the categories for reaching for God through language and experience and is consequently well suited to not finding an idea “in” the animal, admitting instead the animal's inscrutability and distinct ways of moving in the world and

being present in the encounter. Theopoetics can best be described as a process, not a product, system, or thing to dismember and scrutinize. It repositions theological discussion toward practices of interacting, describing, and representing rather than concluding, unifying, or solidifying. While there is no clear consensus about how theopoetics should be defined or employed, that is exactly the point. It is not a model, but a record of engagement, to use Coetzee's phrase in a different context, and it strives to use and understand language imaginatively in order to **acknowledge** heretofore **unacknowledged** possibilities for relating to others as well as to God.

Despite this indeterminacy, John Caputo notes some possible patterns inherent in the use of poetics as a mode of thought and practice:

By a poetics I mean a constellation of strategies, arguments, tropes, paradigms, and metaphors, a style and a tone, as well as a grammar and a vocabulary, all of which, collectively, like a great army on the move, is aimed at making a point. We might say that a poetics is a logic with a heart, not a simple or bare bones logic but a logic with pathos, with a passion and desire, with an imagination and a flare, a mad logic, perhaps a patho-logic, but one that is healing and salvific.<sup>24</sup>

Though theopoetics by no means rests upon adherence to an explicitly textual metaphor, one can liken this to an act of reading the world around us wherein certain dynamics such as imagery, issues of representation, and rhetorical considerations are at play in how we understand the narrative or poetic clues for what meaning should be gathered. Of course, traditional written texts of all sorts are an important part of the process, in the double

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<sup>24</sup> John D. Caputo, "The Poetics of the Impossible and the Kingdom of God," in *The Blackwell Companion to Postmodern Theology*, ed. by Graham Ward (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), 470.

sense of poetics – *poein* – as making/creating and as representing. What they offer is not a mere aestheticizing of experience, a premature criticism levied upon theo-poetics from various quarters, but a critical engagement with experience that is attendant to meaning not captured by logical forms of interpretation and writing but that is equally important.<sup>25</sup> Poet and philosopher Jan Zwicky proposes just this idea in what she calls “lyric philosophy” in which she

[seeks] a grammar of thinking equipped to parse coherence of this kind...Lyric understanding does not proceed by breaking down wholes into parts, nor by adding up parts into wholes. Rather, it perceives particulars in such a way that their resonant unity is grasped in an instant of recognition. We don't deduce meaning sequentially; we *get* it, as our mental set clicks into phase with its overall shape.<sup>26</sup>

Poetics reaches for this involuntary “aha” moment when we intuit meaning and then attempt to relay it in a “grammar of thinking.” It pursues a way to describe what Zwicky might call the emotional resonances of our experience that logic has no means of discussing.<sup>27</sup> Caputo's constellation and Zwicky's lyric understanding thus indicate a methodological vantage point that translates into the practice of attention to more vibrant ways of reflecting on text and daily experience.

Bearing in mind the goal of provoking critical engagement, I understand theo-poetics to foreground three particular elements that are crucial to a poetics of the

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<sup>25</sup> L.B.C. Keefe-Perry, “Theo-poetics: Process and Perspective,” *Christianity and Literature* 58, no. 4 (Summer 2009): 595.

<sup>26</sup> Dennis Lee, “The Music of Thinking: The Structural Logic of *Lyric Philosophy*,” in *Lyric Ecology: An Appreciation of the Work of Jan Zwicky*, ed. by Mark Dickenson and Clare Goulet (Toronto: Cormorant Books, 2010), 21.

<sup>27</sup> Jan Zwicky, *Lyric Philosophy*.



encounter: it is imaginative, relational, and it emphasizes response. Each of these elements ties into a dynamic view of ethics that stresses personal responsibility while respecting the viewpoints, ideas, and needs of others. It is thus less a prescription than an attempt to grapple with the ethical implications of our experiences in theological language:

- It works imaginatively – it resists propositional knowledge and theology and thus ties into Levinas’ insistence that ethics is not about (Westernized, scientific) knowledge. So, for example, what Catherine Keller writes of Richard Kearney is equally true of a theopoetic endeavour: “For this work he does not seek to define the proper style for God-talk, so much as perform it by example...He does not thereby attenuate the (possible) content of God-talk so much as gently shift its potency from the propositional to the imaginal.”<sup>28</sup> Shifting God-talk in this way leaves room open for identifying how God-talk can take place in literature and other explicitly poetical texts, though it is by no means restricted solely to narrative or poetry. Rather, we can view such texts as generative, initiating dialogue – literally – in other words, encouraging us to do the same in our everyday relationships.
- It highlights relationality – Our interactions with others are always ethical and always relational, but this can become a commonplace truism to which we no

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<sup>28</sup> Catherine Keller, “Richard Kearney’s Endless Morning,” *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 30, no. 7 (2004): 890.

longer give much thought. What Caputo calls theopoetics' mad logic characterized by passion and pathos disconcerts complacent ways of relating, perceiving value in opening oneself to being disturbed and unsettled from our usual modes of seeing and being seen. It urges us to assess the quality of our relationships and seek greater personal responsibility when encountering others.

- It emphasizes response – poetics and poesis necessarily involve creativity, but creativity itself is always predicated on a response to something without seeking to own that something. Response is an integral part of the ethical process – it is the *doing* of ethics and indicates both the affect a situation has had on us as well as our willingness to participate in a relationship with another – but it is difficult to render this nebulous moment into language. Theopoetics does not shy away from engaging imaginative language to try to envision this response and negotiate how our responses take place in and shape our daily experiences. Theopoetics can thus be understood as inherently dialogical in a very Bakhtinian sense, founded on a back-and-forth conversation built on response to the other.

Theopoetics thus holds the resources for enlivening our theological thought about animals, encouraging us to see the animal in front of us while not being deterred by the ambiguity that arises out of our feelings or ethical questioning. Theologians such as Catherine Keller and John Caputo perform theopoetics by example in their writing, embracing an energetic style to convey ideas.<sup>29</sup> They also find themselves free to pursue

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<sup>29</sup> See, for example, Catherine Keller on Sally McFague in “The Flesh of God: A Metaphor in the Wild,” in *Theology that Matters: Ecology, Economy, and God*, ed. by Kathleen R. Darby (Minneapolis: Fortress

unique analogies and ways of seeing relationship with God. In both style and vision, they model a theopoetics interested in the vibrancy of relationships in the here and now, one that I will consistently draw upon in thinking about our encounters with animals. In short, poetics holds together emotion and reflection, imagination and philosophy, in a creative tension in order to delve into the nuances and subtleties of experience.

### **Towards a Poetic Epistemology of the Encounter**

The theopoetics of epistemology fundamentally involves a shift from seeing knowledge as propositional – something to be quickly uncovered, processed, and classified – to understanding it as imaginative and encompassing our whole being, not just our centres of rationality.<sup>30</sup> In propositional epistemology, there is usually a subject actively seeking facts about a given object. The relationship moves in one direction and only the subject has anything to gain. This paradigm has reduced animals to objects without offering them any possibility of voice or participation – we look at the lamb and categorize it as sacrifice, food, or experiment, but never as a being with a capacity for relationship.

The encounter provokes a serious challenge to reasoned forms of knowing because of its ambiguous positioning in our experience: the lamb we are about to kill looks at us for a moment and we feel vaguely unsettled. Ethical questions rise unbidden – am I doing the right thing? Is it suffering? *Why is it looking at me like that?* Our previous confidence escapes us. It does not seem to be just a ‘dumb’ animal after all;

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Press, 2006), 91-108, or John Caputo *The Weakness of God: A Theology of the Event* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006).

<sup>30</sup> Catherine Keller, “The Flesh of God: A Metaphor in the Wild.”

rather, it appears to be saying something to me. Within a poetic epistemology, we do not appropriate the object ‘lamb’ – indeed, the object slips away from the category “object” entirely, leaving us with empty hands. Subject-object positions become confounded as we simultaneously experience ourselves as subject pursuing knowledge about another being and also as an object being seen by the animal. Instead, the question of ethics arises as we are now involved in a relationship with the animal before us.

The encounter represents a liminal moment, marked by uncertainty, unknowing. We scramble for meaning and knowledge, but if we are not to do violence to the other that we meet, then we must re-make our experiences with alternate forms of knowing. In other words, we must un-know – un-learn – our previous modes of interaction with animals through a process of re-education. For Emmanuel Levinas, ethics must jettison all pretenses to Western epistemological frameworks to be ethics. It means, in effect, giving up claims to certitude of moral knowledge – this is how I deal with this animal – and instead coming face-to-face with the perpetual questioning of true ethical responsibility, though this more often than not involves the distress of not knowing in any factual sense. In *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, Simone de Beauvoir notes this disquiet when she refers to Kierkegaard’s thoughts on what constitutes a truly alive morality:

Kierkegaard has said that what distinguishes the Pharisee from the genuinely moral man is that the former considers his anguish as a sure sign of his virtue; from the fact that he asks himself, “Am I Abraham?” he concludes, “I am Abraham”; but morality resides in the painfulness of an indefinite questioning.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (New York: Citadel Press, 1948/1976), 133.

The questioning requires the activity of re-thinking our traditional methods of determining (ethical) knowledge, but at the same time recovers moral questioning as its own formatively unique type of awareness. Instead of being the antithesis of true knowledge, questioning forms a crucial part of its foundation.

Rowan Williams reiterates the idea that the knowledge of the other required for ethical action does not necessarily reside in the ossified ways of knowing that believes it can establish the identity of the other. Rather, there needs to be a sense of sharing through incompleteness. We may not know facts about the other, and, indeed, the animal other may seem incredibly strange, stupid, or frightening, but we can *know* in terms of poetics that something critical and meaningful has passed between us in our encounter. Williams thus anticipates Levinas when he stresses the need to encounter the other without condensing them to our selves, but also in arguing that this way of ethically meeting the other moves us closer to God. Williams remarks that,

The stranger here is neither the failed or stupid native speaker, nor someone so terrifyingly alien that I cannot even entertain the thought of learning from them. They represent the fact that I have growing to do, not necessarily into anything like an identity with them, but at least into a world where there may be more of a sense of its being a world we share. Recognizing the other as other without the immediate impulse to make them the same involves recognizing the incompleteness of the world I think I can manage and moving into the world

which I may not be able to manage so well, but which has more depth of reality.

And that must be to move closer to God.<sup>32</sup>

In other words, we can make peace with partial, imperfect knowledge, resisting the need to dominate the animal by means of a knowledge that appropriates and annihilates both what it knows and what escapes it. The lamb of God can thus be known as more than a sacrifice and more than the metaphorical substitute for Christ; it is a living, embodied creature of whom we can gain only imperfect knowledge of its life and its potential suffering as it lies bound waiting to be killed. As Williams argues, we might not be able to handle this dynamic scenario as well as before, but it cultivates a more profound ethical imagination that ultimately brings us closer to God. And, as it turns out, God has a good deal to say about meeting animals on their own terms and learning to respect their individual patterns of existence in the world.

*Knowing God in the Animal: An Excursus*

The chaos of our verse may open up unfamiliar understandings. But how would they not escape the ‘vertiginous failure’ of a history that nihilates what it cannot appropriate?

Catherine Keller, *Face of the Deep*<sup>33</sup>

The notion that God can be found in the encounter is an old one, finding voice in theophany. But far from being occasioned solely in instances requiring copious amounts of flame, strong winds, or other such dramatic elements, the Bible teaches that theophany can materialize in interactions with all sorts of others – other people, creatures, and even

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<sup>32</sup> Rowan Williams, *Christ at Trial: How the Gospel Unsettles Our Judgement* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000), 62.

<sup>33</sup> Catherine Keller, *Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2003), 106.

the lands and waters themselves. To use both Sally McFague's and Catherine Keller's metaphor of the world as God's body, we can encounter God anywhere, in anything.<sup>34</sup> They are careful to theologically frame the metaphor of God's body so as to avoid the charge of pantheism while maintaining insistence on tuning our perspective to find God in what Romand Coles would call the radical ordinariness of our lives.<sup>35</sup>

This is perhaps what biblical writers have been pushing for all along: when we turn ourselves to the needs of the least among us, be it feeding them or carrying a burden for them, we are doing this to Christ himself. Engaging the world poetically allows us to conceive of the sacred aspects of the encounter, shifting traditional notions of the sacred to the visual glimpses, fragile moments of touch, and stirrings of sound that mark our meetings with others. The encounter signifies a hazy moment at the boundaries of what we know and what we thought we knew, pushing us to meet the other with a sense of newness and wonder. In the midst of this, a space is opened up to care for the vulnerabilities we all expose when we interact and it is in this moment of exposure and vulnerability that biblical texts say God can be found.

Keller asks, "Is the only God who can be 'seen' amidst the infinities and infinitesimals the one who shares the risks of the creatures, the vulnerabilities of birth, the passions of beauty?"<sup>36</sup> Job affirms the answer as an unequivocal yes with God's remarkable speech in the midst of the whirlwind: here, God meets God's own creatures face-to-face, holding, amongst other, the raven, the deer, the ostrich, the horse, and the

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<sup>34</sup> Keller, "The Flesh of God."

<sup>35</sup> Romand Coles, "The Pregnant Reticence of Rowan Williams," *Christianity, Democracy, and the Radical Ordinary: Conversations between a Radical Democrat and a Christian*, Stanley Hauerwas and Romand Coles (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2008), 177.

<sup>36</sup> Catherine Keller, *Face of the Deep*, 140.

eagle up as an astonishing reply to Job's anguished questions about God's justice and presence in the world. God even traces the Leviathan's body like that of a lover's, tenderly drawing out minute details of its embodied existence. Here are its delightful eyes, God says: look – they are like the eyelids of the dawn! Even its nostrils breathe forth smoke, its breath kindling coals with the flame that comes out of its mouth. “Will it make a covenant with you to be taken as your servant forever?” and God laughs at the thought.<sup>37</sup>

God here provides a paradigmatic moment for knowing the animal and for knowing God at the same time. God exalts (in) each animal individually in the whirlwind speech in an example of knowing not as annihilation, but as participation in a glorious dance of what the encounter can be. Such knowing confounds epistemological rationality that desires to appropriate the object, the epistemology that Levinas rejected as being in opposition to true ethics. Thus, this poetical undertaking drastically re-orientates the very enterprise of knowing in a way that can ultimately be reconciled with Levinas' ethical endeavour while foregrounding the presence of God.

At the same time, such a poetics accentuates the idea of knowing as a decidedly uncertain practice wherein the “I” of subjectivity becomes tangled up inextricably with knowing as process (and not knowing as divided into the extremely limited categories of passive or active). In other words, we continually know, are knowing, and are known in the cyclical ebb and flow of living. This is very much in contrast to dominant models of epistemology in which we are the objective knowers, coldly set apart from that which we

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<sup>37</sup> The zoological portion of the whirlwind speech occurs from Job 38:39-39:30 while the parts on Behemoth are at 40:15-24 and Leviathan at 41:1-34.



know. Instead, it finds echoes in Annie Dillard's observations that "What I aim to do is not so much learn the names of the shreds of creation that flourish in this valley, but to keep myself open to their meanings, which is to try to impress myself at all times with the fullest possible force of their very reality."<sup>38</sup> For Levinas, aloofness, distance, and detachment hinder true ethical engagement. In Job, God demonstrates passion for the smallest details of an animal's existence, knowing the very complexity of Leviathan inside out and even devoting attention to how the deer give birth. God's example shows us how to be open to the lives of animals while letting ourselves be known to them at the same time in a disconcerting moment of self-exposure.

### *Love's Knowledge and the Hope of Grace*

A poetic epistemology acknowledges that the animal is distinct in God's body and has the potential to call to us in ways we have hitherto ignored. This approach avoids the tendency to flatten difference, something that ignores a particular animal's own needs and vulnerability, while recognizing that they have their own agency in the world. God starts the process in Job, supplying us with an extraordinary example of a vibrant and non-arrogating knowing of Leviathan and other animals such as the deer, ostrich, and wild ox. However, we are still slightly at risk for this account to become too impersonal. Despite the reclaiming of importance for ethical ambiguity and imperfect knowledge, we have yet to interpret the visceral reaction we are prone to in any encounter with others. I may experience wonder and God's presence in the lamb readied for sacrifice, but how do I make sense of my feelings of love for its fluffy, vulnerable little body or my anguish at

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<sup>38</sup> Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (New York: HarperPerennial Modern Classics, 1974/2007), 139.

what is going to happen to it? The body seems to take over at a certain point, sharing an embodied connection with the lamb. This is partially where Levinas will come to the forefront in the next chapter in his description of the face, how it makes a claim on us in a haunting need for response, and how it pulls us into embodied relationality with it. The face is utterly unique and entirely different from myself, but we are both drawn into an encounter that encourages new ways of orienting ourselves in the world.

The entanglement of the self in the process of knowing means that our emotions and feelings will necessarily be involved. This realization also invites consideration of how self and knowledge can be transformed in light of an understanding of how love can develop ethical capacity, recognize our bonds with others, and express a desire for the wellbeing of those around us. In her book of the same name, Martha Nussbaum writes of “love’s knowledge,” wherein the surprising and unexpected surges of emotion frequently experienced by the body often point to feelings and dispositions we do not think we possess.<sup>39</sup> In other words, Nussbaum suggests that emotions indicate aspects of what matters most to us that philosophical reflection does not always capture, and we should pay attention to the fact that emotions and states of being like love carry with them an important source of knowledge for how we live and interact with others. Though this may seem self-evident to some people, Nussbaum argues that philosophy has often ignored this facet of existence in favour of an abstract form of reasoning that discounts the vagaries of the emotions, the same type of reasoning that seeks to dominate what it

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<sup>39</sup> Martha Nussbaum, “Love’s Knowledge” in *Love’s Knowledge* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 261-285.

perceives to be an object. Nussbaum's idea of love<sup>40</sup> acknowledges how we are affected viscerally by others and in turn how we re-evaluate the ethical underpinnings of our relationships.

Though Nussbaum warns of the dangers of peremptorily dismissing the emotional side of things, she simultaneously recognizes the need to reflect on the emotional experiences we do have so that we are aware of what they are saying and how they influence us. Nussbaum's account of the emotions and love thus finds echoes in the work of theologians such as Graham Ward, who cautions against the conflation of love with flights of desire and consequently the need for love to be educated by and immersed in Christ's incarnation:

the economy of [Christian] desire is not locked into love as not-having. Rather, love is continually extended beyond itself and, in and through that extension, receives itself back from the other as a non-identical repetition. Love construed as having or not-having is a commodified product. It is something one possesses or doesn't possess. It is part of an exchange between object and subject positions. But love in the Christian economy is an action not an object. It cannot be lost or found, absent or present. It constitutes the very space within which all operations in heaven and upon earth take place. The positions of persons are both constituted and dissolved.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Strictly speaking, Nussbaum posits many varieties of love. The point here, however, is that she suggests a connection between "love" generally, our emotions, and knowledge.

<sup>41</sup> Graham Ward, "Suffering and Incarnation," in *The Blackwell Companion to Postmodern Theology*, ed. by Graham Ward (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), 205.

Love is a marker of the work we put into our relationships with others. It is the emotional response of compassion, empathy, or understanding directed outwards, and this very response points to the effort we are exerting, effort that is profoundly ethical. Ward's placement of love in a Christian economy deliberately rejects the commodified desire that often gets knotted up with love, a desire that seeks to possess the other and annihilates their uniqueness in the process. Love for the other requires that individual desire be subordinated to concern for the other's wellbeing. Like knowing, love is not an object but a passion pervading the ethical "I"; it is also a space that dissolves the polarities of "I" and "them." Here, our positions "are both constituted and dissolved" as Ward observes. When this happens, love acts as an indication that we have heard the call of the animal and that we are extending ourselves ethically towards it as a result.

Once we admit love's knowledge and extend ourselves through this love, we become open to possibilities of grace in the encounter, wherein grace signifies a moment in which ethical questioning and visceral reaction become fused into the hope for and practice of God's love and redemption. For Christian theology, Christ's life and death function as the catalyst for discussions of grace. Through the love signified by its sacrificial character, his life and death evoke a sense of participation in grace via notions of mercy, compassion, and reconciliation, wherein relationships hold the possibility of an incompleteness that is mutual and affirming, of leaving behind disordered love and power, of getting a second chance at living with God and with those around us. Indeed, we can argue that grace exists only in the perpetual motion of this relationality. Leaving aside the intricacies of various doctrines of grace, perhaps the grace opened up between

us and God by Christ's life and death may evidence itself wherever we likewise expose ourselves to the radical ordinary surrounding us.

The moment we realize the lamb has its own enfleshed existence apart from its metaphorical servitude marks the moment we simultaneously bare ourselves to new possibilities of grace in the everyday act of looking at an animal in a painting. Such a comprehension frees our attitudes to notice the other hitherto invisible animals calling to us on a daily basis, impressing themselves upon us in their uniqueness and individuality. An opportunity for engagement and interaction, response and responsibility, emerges as a result and influences our ethical selves – we can experience grace through our loving relations with an animal we have come to know in vibrant new ways. Grace therefore furnishes the hope towards which the encounter aims.

### **Liberating the Lamb, Metaphorically Speaking**

In this chapter, I have argued that one reason we cannot hear the call of the lamb who is bound to Christ's sacrifice is because we have already placed it within a certain epistemological framework that precludes more imaginative means of relation; our emotional reactions to its plight are discounted and there is little room for any sense or performance of love. Fortunately, there are other possibilities we can draw on in order to bring theology face to face with this lamb. I suggest that poetics provides a way of cutting the lamb loose from its theological bindings, helping us acknowledge the fleshly realities of its life and death and also its power to influence our ethical existence. Its embrace of dynamic modes of conceptualizing and representing daily experience offers

resources not given much credibility in philosophy or theology,<sup>42</sup> allowing us to move into new ways of knowing and extending our ethical selves towards the lamb through love and thus of achieving the possibility of grace and right relations with God and animal. In so doing, poetics serves as a starting point for reconsidering fundamental aspects of our encounters with all animals, not just the lamb in the painting. It enables us to hear their voice and reconsider their vulnerability and need on an individual basis, opening up an important stream for thinking about animals and ethics within theology.

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<sup>42</sup> Though there are currents in both philosophy and theology that resist the dominant ideas of how experience should be navigated and represented. As mentioned, Nussbaum is one key figure in philosophy, as is Jan Zwicky (see Chapter 2), both of whom call for ways of doing philosophy that do not solely rely on rationalism divorced from emotions and the realities of embodiment.

**Chapter 2**  
**Orientation:**  
**Embodying Ethical Relationship**

Lyric Philosophy: thought in love with clarity, informed by the intuition of coherence; by a desire to respond to the preciousness of the world. Thought, therefore, conditioned by a sensibility that can experience exhaustion in the face of the welter of stimuli.

Jan Zwicky<sup>43</sup>

This exterior being is named ‘face’ (*visage*) by Levinas, and is defined as ‘the way in which the other [*l’Autre*] presents himself, exceeding *the idea of the other in me*.’ In the language of transcendental philosophy, the face is the condition of possibility for ethics.

Simon Critchley<sup>44</sup>

**Performing Relationship in the Kingdom of God**

In Chapter 1, I suggested that theology would benefit from giving more attention to ethical issues arising from encounters with individual animals, and that poetics offers a means of reflecting on this relationship. Through its embrace of embodied, experiential meaning, poetics makes a space for imperfect knowledge and lack of moral certainty while also understanding this ethical questioning as a place where love can emerge. Love directs us toward the animal and God, but it this moment of *direction*, of orientation, that concerns me in this chapter. If a poetics of epistemology (see Chapter 1) opens up the possibility of different ways of relating to animals, what shape could this relationship take and what will be its central features? Caputo provides some clues in his discussion of the kingdom of God: hospitality, affirmation, and a *doing* of relationality are central to enacting the kingdom, which Caputo argues welcomes everyone in a very radical

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<sup>43</sup> Jan Zwicky, *Lyric Philosophy*, 192, n. 103.

<sup>44</sup> Simon Critchley, *The Ethics of Deconstruction: Derrida and Levinas*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 1999), 5. Emphasis Critchley.

manner.<sup>45</sup> These three elements together indicate an orientation towards the animal, one that demonstrates an acknowledgement of their enfleshed existence and unique needs.

This acknowledgement of their individuality is well-described by Emmanuel Levinas' idea of the face, which highlights both the distinctiveness of the animal as well as important ethical facets of our relationship with them. Recognition of the face functions as a moment of defamiliarization. It disturbs our routine patterns of seeing and interaction with others, prompting us to re-assess our ordinary everyday encounters. This destabilization of the ordinary in turn allows a fresh look at our ethical responses, and this will partly be accomplished through language, particularly poetic representation. Such representation marks an attempt to understand our relationships and what responses and responsibilities they involve in evocative terms rather than prescriptive ones. Seeing the face means grappling with our visceral experiences. It is through language, however, that we begin to fathom how we position ourselves towards others. The words we choose illustrate our inevitable entanglement with the bodies of animals and allow us to struggle with the sense of this enfleshed experience so that we can adjust our ethical response accordingly. We do not necessarily achieve any level of sense in one single moment of illumination. This requires more of a gradual ethical process, as each encounter in which we participate carries with it an abundance of unconscious, unintentional feelings, thoughts, and emotions that incessantly affect us and shape our future responses. From this visceral, ethical, and linguistic tumult, animals emerge from invisibility to tangibly influence us. Through Levinas' idea of the face, we can grasp how they call us into

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<sup>45</sup> John Caputo, *The Weakness of God: A Theology of the Event* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 275.



ethical relationality, even if we do not think their claims are always readily apparent. It is through the *process* of ethics and continuous relationality that we become more attuned to their vulnerability and the ways in which we can respond.

### **Dead Dogs and the “Honour of Corpses”**

Though it is necessary to be aware of potential plummets into the codified or hardened language that hinders the possibility of the God-event of hospitality of which Caputo speaks, poetics simultaneously points to the patterns, intricacies, and strangeness in the very words we use to gesture towards the meaning we find around us. Poetics plays with language in order to seek the resonances of experience enfolding our discourse. And, while Levinas’ ethics run as the undercurrent to my intimations of the encounter, Other-talk can become tediously abstract and depersonalized. Poetic attention to language and its limits in representing experience – or what Jan Zwicky calls lyric understanding – illuminates the particular: this is not any face that is calling to me, but *this* dog in front of me or *this* chickadee outside my window. Such understanding becomes invested with unmistakable urgency – this could be my *only* encounter with this chickadee and I will probably not “get things right” when I respond or fully understand what I am doing.

In J.M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace*, main character David Lurie helps out at the local animal clinic. Every week, a significant number of animals are euthanized, and Lurie “takes charge of disposing of the remains” (144). He finds himself unable to leave the bodies at the dump over the weekend amidst the trash and carrion – “he is not prepared to inflict such dishonour on them” (144) – and drives them on Monday morning instead. He

then loads them one at a time onto the trolley that goes into the incinerator. Lurie does not have to do this, but the workers who previously did it beat the stiffened corpses so that they fit on the trolley, breaking limbs with “the backs of their shovels” (144). Admitting to himself that it is a rather strange, even stupid action, he wonders why he does it anyway:

For the sake of the dogs? But the dogs are dead; and what do dogs know of honour and dishonour anyway? 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. The dogs are brought to the clinic because they are unwanted: *because we are too menny*. That is where he enters their lives. He may not be their saviour, the one for whom they are not too many, but he is prepared to take care of them once they are unable, utterly unable, to take care of themselves...Curious that a man as selfish as he should be offering himself to the service of dead dogs. There must be other, more productive ways of giving oneself to the world, or to an idea of the world...He saves the honour of corpses because there is no one else stupid enough to do it. (146)

David Lurie is not quite sure why he ushers the dead dogs to the incinerator – the very last encounter in which they will participate – but the need to honour their lives and bodies impels him nonetheless. In so doing, he displays an orientation towards them that proves significant even though the dogs can no longer benefit from it. As one crucial instance of his various meetings with animals, this moment taps into the poetics of relationship – it brings to the forefront the notion that ideally each encounter re-orient us toward each specific animal we meet, as we admit our own helplessness even as we seek

to care for the vulnerability of these animals and extend to them the overflowing hospitality of the kingdom of God. Certainly, Lurie realizes his own powerlessness to aid the dead dogs and he does not hold much hope that his action means anything to the world at large. Yet it means something profound to him, something fundamentally ethical: he does it because no one else will. He both affirms the lives of the dogs and extends to them one final act of hospitality.

Much hinges on what we devote to the words we attach to our experience. Jan Zwicky writes: “Analytic style invites us to concentrate on the thought ‘behind the words’ – the ghost trapped in the machine. Lyric forces the question in the opposite direction: is the thought *achieved*? Are its soul and its body indistinguishable?”<sup>46</sup> She also realizes, through her concept of domesticity (humanity’s technical existence in the world, or use of tools), that “To become domestic is to accept that one cannot live in wordlessness. This is compatible with wanting to. It is subtended by our understanding of its nature.”<sup>47</sup> When Lurie calls himself stupid for caring for the corpses, he is struggling to clarify his involvement and make sense of what he is doing. When compared to other altruistic endeavours like feeding orphans or providing care to animals while they are still alive, Lurie’s deed does not seem that important in the larger picture. Yet it means something to him, something that will not quite fit within the grand scheme of things, but which is nonetheless important to him. As Zwicky maintains, we cannot always sort our analyses of experience into systems – there will always be something indefinable, something that escapes distillation into pure logic, but that we nevertheless

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<sup>46</sup> Zwicky, *Lyric Philosophy*, 346, n. 187.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 534, n. 298.

feel the need to *try* to represent. It becomes a matter of welcoming the indeterminacy of our language, opening ourselves to exposure in and through language in an attempt to make sense of our embodied encounters with others:

No system can do justice to the intensity and complexity of lyric experience. Nor can lyric language succeed where systems fail by *referring* more precisely. What is needed is not words that pretend they are doing justice, but words that convey an awareness of their own inadequacy, their inevitable conditioning by grammar and culture. And for *this*, one needs words that are full of their own being *as words*.<sup>48</sup>

It is not the essence of the encounter we are after here, but the impressions, feelings, and contingencies that emerge as a marker of our (ethical) relationality and orientation to the animal. “Stupid” seems a strange word to describe Lurie’s emotional state, but it suffices to capture the ambiguity of his feelings and the puzzling nature of his actions. Stupid does not do justice to the depth of his experience, but it does hint at the self-exposure he feels by caring for the bodies.

The relationship between representing experience and orienting ourselves to others draws out the idea of sense and resonances, not essences. Levinas maintained that “My task does not consist in constructing ethics; I only try to seek its meaning (*sens*),”<sup>49</sup> a position that seeks less to define moral oughts than to appreciate the depth of the ethical in the everyday, something which Zwicky keenly understands in her emphasis of lyric

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<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 202, n. 108.

<sup>49</sup> Levinas, qtd. in Critchley, 4. Once again, I would call this the search for sense, not essences, in which sense (*sens*) becomes a more fluid concept open to the embodied orientation which I am arguing that the poetics of the encounter best describes.

philosophy as resonance and through her attention to the physicality of hearing and making sounds. Awareness of the resonances of experience signifies a different kind of attunement to the things around us that does not rely on objective, positivistic knowledge. Instead, this awareness learns in action **and on the ground** through encountering the other face to face. Relationality occurs through the body, through the unbidden rise of emotions and the body's en fleshed immersion in the encounter. This highlights our interdependence and how we are shaped ethically in perpetual contact with others.

Zwicky uses an appropriately embodied metaphor in describing this form of relationality through what she calls lyric: "Lyric is based in an integrity of response and co-response; each dimension attending to the others. The mouth of lyric is an ear."<sup>50</sup> The response and co-response of lyric indicate the dynamic back-and-forth exchange that occurs in a relationship, even as the centrality of the ear – of listening – points to relationship as involving the whole person. The soul and the body, intertwined, turn together towards God and animal in a moment that nurtures affirmation and hospitality. This very quality of being fundamentally interwoven with others also means that we are always already in the middle of an encounter. This acknowledges our continuous entanglement in the stuff of life – we are continuously amidst and betwixt things, flowing into relationality with the others around us and recognizing the vitality of our everyday relationships. It is a matter of keeping our ears open and identifying how we respond to this constant flux, including how we shape these encounters into words.

The words we use for matters of representation and meaning are actively linked to our actual embodied orientation to all of the others around us. Lurie may think he is

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<sup>50</sup> Zwicky, *Lyric Philosophy*, 336, n. 181.

stupid for his relationship with the dead dogs, but he also believes he is honouring them. Honour here becomes another curious word that semantically demonstrates how Lurie has positioned himself physically and psychologically towards the dogs. For Lurie, “honour” emerges as a touchstone for his experience of carefully loading the dogs onto the trolley so that they go into the incinerator in one piece and then standing there waiting while they are cremated. “Stupid” and “honour” mark attempts for Lurie to grasp meaning through language by trying to understand just what he is doing. At the same time, they summarize his ethical attitude – he is the only person willing to stand watch with the dog corpses and to take care of them, even if there will be no material benefit from his actions.

There is always the temptation for language to become nothing more than a salutary rite of acknowledgement, emptied of constructive ethical significance. However, the poetics of the encounter (and certainly Zwicky’s lyric philosophy) suggests that there is a crucial connection between body and soul, that both can be oriented together. The halting words we use show a step toward the animal. But what is it exactly that we are stepping toward? Animal seems a rather vague word to reveal the complexity of their existence and the affect produced in us by encountering them. To admit that they have a voice and are important to theology, we need to sketch an idea of how we are encouraged to move into relationship with them. In describing the evocative nature of the face instead of assembling an ethical system, Levinas offers a useful way of conceiving the individuality of a given animal and how we can honour each face, just as Lurie honoured the dead dogs.

### **The Face and the Possibility for Ethics**

The positioning that emerges from relationship in the flesh divests the self of third-party detachment, exposing us instead to a multiplicity of encounters with self, God, and animal other. We cannot hide behind words or consider them a safe haven against involving our visceral being; instead, they direct us to take account of the very embodiment of that response and how we are situated *vis-à-vis* the animal. What Levinas terms the face presents one such way of responding to the animal while remaining open to its uniqueness, balancing the tension between maintaining their individuality and identifying the need to respect them theologically and ethically.

The face stands out as the most recognizable feature of Levinas' ethics, encapsulating his core ideas regarding the ethical relationship. At the same time, it remains an ambiguous concept, hard to describe and consequently open to misinterpretation, especially insofar as it simultaneously evokes physicality yet is not reducible to it. Theologian Roger Burggraeve illustrates this paradox and it is worth quoting him at length:

If we go in search of what Levinas means by the term "face," we immediately encounter a great, but obvious misunderstanding. When we hear the word "face," we spontaneously associate it with "countenance," with the physiognomy, facial expression, and, by extension, character, social status, situation, and past, that means the "context" from which the other person becomes visible and describable for us. The face of the other thus seems to coincide perfectly with what his appearance and behavior offers to "seeing" and "representing." By taking literally an "option" regarding the other person, we suppose ourselves able to "define"

him, whereupon we then also delimit our reactions and behavior... What Levinas really means by the “face of the other” is not his physical countenance or appearance, but precisely the noteworthy fact that the other—not only in fact, but in principle—does not coincide with his appearance, image, photograph, representation, or evocation. “The other is invisible” (TI 6). According to Levinas, we therefore can not properly speak of a “phenomenology” of the face since phenomenology describes what appears. The face is nonetheless what in the countenance of the other escapes our gaze when turned toward us. The other is “otherwise,” irreducible to his appearing, and thus reveals himself precisely as face. Surely, the other is indeed visible. Obviously, he appears and so calls up all sorts of impressions, images, and ideas by which he can be described.<sup>51</sup>

The face therefore defies simple classification, emerging out of each unique encounter. Levinas even goes so far as to use the term invisible, suggesting that, confronted with the embodied other, the self necessarily must learn how to see not just their material presence but an aspect of their *alterity*, or their individual distinctiveness. This is ultimately a visceral moment, and one that unsettles the self and upsets its complacency. In a curious reversal of seeing the face of the other even in the midst of their death, David Lurie recognizes the face of the dead dogs when he honours their corpses by re-arranging their stiffened limbs on the incinerator trolley rather than hacking at them with a shovel. Their lives are completely invisible to the workers at the dump – they are merely remains in an inconvenient shape that need to be processed. By resisting this view and by

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<sup>51</sup> Roger Burggraeve, “Violence and the Vulnerable Face of the Other: The Vision of Emmanuel Levinas on Moral Evil and Our Responsibility,” *Journal of Social Philosophy* 30, no. 1 (Spring 1999): 29-30.



understanding the dead bodies to possess an intrinsic honour, Lurie, even in his self-admitted selfishness, is aware that neither the physical face nor even the quality of being alive has the sole capacity to provoke reaction. Instead, Lurie and the dogs participate in a moment of mutual exposure that goes beyond the vulnerability shared between living creatures to extend to the living and the dead.<sup>52</sup> He possesses this perplexing, “stupid” need to honour the dogs’ dead bodies while they have no one else to help them and they are “unable, utterly unable, to take care of themselves” (146).

While not specifically describing the face of Levinas’ ethics, Dennis Lee provides an example of this provocative meeting:

There is a moment in which I experience other people, or things, or situations, as standing forth with a clarity and a preciousness which makes me want to cry and to celebrate physically at the same time...It is the moment in which something becomes overwhelmingly real in two lights at once. An old man or woman whose will to live and whose mortality reach one at the same instant...Each stands forth as what it is most fully, and most preciously, because the emptiness in which it rests declares itself so overpoweringly. We realise that this thing or person, this phrase, this event, need not be. And at that moment, as if for the first time, it reveals its vivacious being as though it had just begun to be for the first time.<sup>53</sup>

Contingency and vulnerability etch the face, marking what Zwicky calls “losability” – the preciousness of “things [blooming] into their own radiant specificity” and the knowledge

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<sup>52</sup> This idea of resonance across life and death appears in Chapter 3 through Levinas and Derrida’s conception of the *à dieu*, a prayer that merges farewell to the dead or departing with continued ethical responsibility.

<sup>53</sup> Dennis Lee, qtd. in Zwicky, *Lyric Philosophy*, 189.

that such preciousness can be easily lost.<sup>54</sup> The primacy of the ethical burden lies on the self to respond and be responsible to this vulnerability. The basis of this call is an old idea – “thou shalt not kill”<sup>55</sup> – but it nevertheless carries with it an unmistakable particularity – “thou shalt not kill *me*.” It seeks response, not violence, and it is this moment that constitutes ethics for Levinas. Violence takes many forms, however, and the killing and death of the other indicates far more than their physical death – it implies annihilation of their “radiant specificity.” This can occur through physical or psychological harm, but it also manifests in more subtle ways of encountering the face. It arises in the positivist epistemology that Levinas decries, which seeks only essences, not ethics, and consequently disdains the other’s claim upon us. Derrida implicitly speaks about both kinds when he notes philosophers’ tendency to ignore the animal:

If, indeed, they [past philosophers] did happen to be seen furtively by the animal one day, they took no (thematic, theoretical, or philosophical) account of it. They neither wanted nor had the capacity to draw any systematic consequence from the fact that an animal could, facing them, look at them, clothed or naked, and in a word, without a word, address them. They have taken no account of the fact that what they call “animal” could look at them, and address them from down there, from a wholly other origin.<sup>56</sup>

For Derrida, the animal *sees* – a capacity of orientation usually reserved for people – and it addresses us from its position as other. It addresses the philosophers, but they have

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<sup>54</sup> Zwicky, *Lyric Philosophy*, 536, n. 300.

<sup>55</sup> Burggraeve, “Violence and the Vulnerable Face of the Other: The Vision of Emmanuel Levinas on Moral Evil and Our Responsibility,” 31.

<sup>56</sup> Jacques Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, translated by David Wills (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 13.

committed the violence against which Levinas warns by refusing to see that the animal sees them. They persist in defining the animal according to their own preconceived ideas, thus denying that it has a face. True response for both Derrida and Levinas includes recognizing the face of the animal as first step.

### **Excess and Ethical Change**

Somewhat paradoxically, the greatest challenge to seeing the face of the animal other comes from Levinas himself. Levinas did not understand his ethics as including animals, even though he famously wrote about Bobby, the dog that visited him and other prisoners in a German concentration camp in World War II. He called Bobby “the last Kantian in Nazi Germany,” appreciating the dog as an affirming presence of the prisoner’s humanity in the midst of such atrocity.<sup>57</sup> Despite Bobby’s enduring influence on his thoughts regarding his time in the camp, Levinas refused the question of whether animals have a face to which human beings can ethically respond.

Nevertheless, several scholars have since argued that animals do indeed ‘fit’ the main ideas of his ethical philosophy.<sup>58</sup> Levinas’ exclusion and the subsequent attempts at ascertaining animals as both being Other and possessing a face immediately become entangled in practices of classification and moral justification in order for them to be seen and deemed worthy of being engaged ethically. To use Caputo’s terms, animals are viewed as being outside the kingdom and thus excluded from hospitality, discounted

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<sup>57</sup> David Clark, “On Being ‘The Last Kantian in Nazi Germany’: Dwelling with Animals after Levinas,” in *Post-Modernism and the Ethical Subject*, eds. Barbara Gabriel and Suzan Ilcan (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2004).

<sup>58</sup> Derrida chief amongst them, but also Peter Atterton, among others. See Peter Atterton, “Levinas and Our Moral Responsibility toward Other Animals,” *Inquiry: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Philosophy* 54, no. 6 (2011): 633-649.

from any meaningful relationship with God or human beings. The question, for Caputo, is one of who gets in and who gets left out.<sup>59</sup> Levinas' ethics can be otherwise be seen as embodying the radical hospitality Caputo holds up as constitutive of kingdom politics, and, indeed, he professes his indebtedness to Levinas for his understanding of such hospitality.

At the same, perhaps it is a matter of coming to see the animal as Face, a process of ethical relationality opened up by our positioning towards God and other. David Clark argues that Bobby recognized the prisoners as human in the midst of the dehumanizing Nazi regime. Though Levinas strenuously denied this possibility, in a way Bobby recognized the face of the human prisoners, barking and jumping up and down at the sight of them.<sup>60</sup> Clark further suggests that

Language is the implacable human standard against which the animal is measured and always found wanting; but what if the 'animal' were to become the site of an excess against which one might measure the prescriptive, exclusionary force of the *logos*, the ways in which the truth of the rational mind muffles, strangles, and finally silences the animal? These questions are worth asking, it seems to me, because of the 'audible' gap between what Bobby says and what Levinas hears him say.<sup>61</sup>

I tentatively wonder if the *logos* which Clark describes – the propositional rationality which I have been arguing against as the dominant model for encountering the animal – can be re-read in terms of Christ as divine *logos*, the enfleshed Word of God. Borrowing

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<sup>59</sup> Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 260.

<sup>60</sup> Clark, "On Being 'The Last Kantian in Nazi Germany': Dwelling with Animals after Levinas," 64.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

Caputo's own poetics of the impossible, the mad hatter's kingdom of God<sup>62</sup> revels in such exultant role reversals – Bobby sees the face of the human, the ethics philosopher cannot hear the call of ethics, and Christ transforms the logos into the paradigmatic expression of welcoming all into his relational embrace. Fundamental here is the excess that pervades both the kingdom and all of our ordinary relationships as well as the very attempt to situate the animal. For Caputo, excess destabilizes the usual way things are done – it provides an entryway into seeing the kingdom differently. Once again, however, this excess is not something quantifiable or containable by the usual routes of argumentation. Rather, it carries with it its own ethical dimension.

In theoretical discourse, excess is often represented in terms of rupture, breakage, shock – all words that forcefully feel hard and jagged, indicative of a momentous action occurring at the level of the self. There is even a dimension of violence implicit in the rhetoric: shattering boundaries, disrupting categories, fracturing assumptions. But a lot of ethical change is prompted through more subtle means, occurring over time and through daily situations rather than in the more urgent moments of life. It is felt as a softening wherein experience sinks into the body to become part of our embodied memory and identity. This is distinctly at odds with notions like Lacan's *jouissance*, where an encounter with the Other – *jouissance* – is experienced as traumatic.<sup>63</sup> But describing excess as a slow, gentle infusion does not lessen its influence. Instead, it traces the pathways through which excess runs away from propositional language and knowledge into self and body. It is not introjected, to borrow again from psychoanalysis, swallowed

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<sup>62</sup> Also Caputo's analogy.

<sup>63</sup> Bruce Fink, *The Lacanian Subject* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995).

whole by the mouth to sit undigested. Rather, it is held by the hands, absorbed by the skin, flowing through the movements of our muscles. These are visceral metaphors that disregard any premise that ethics lives in the head, emphasizing that only through poetics can we struggle to realize the depth of influence that the ethical possesses. Thus, while many ethical phenomena can be shocking or even traumatic, much ethical work is carried out far more innocuously and behind-the-scenes, so to speak.

In the encounter, we are called by the face in an address which, in terms of ethics, ideally overruns our sense of self-sufficiency and power, comparable to Jean-Luc Marion's notion of the saturated phenomenon "in which what is given to intuition exceeds the intentionality that becomes aware of it. My transcendental ego cannot anticipate it, nor can my concept contain or comprehend it. My horizons are overwhelmed and submerged by it. I am more the subject constituted by its givenness than it is the object constituted by my subjectivity."<sup>64</sup> Excess, like love, unsettles fixed subject-object relations, initiating a more fluid relationship of exposure, vulnerability, response, and responsibility. The encounter with the other also leaves a trace in our personal history as well as our ongoing trajectory, meaning that ethics and ethical responsibility deepen as time goes on. Response is not necessarily immediate, and the excess of the encounter bleeds over into daily practices with response potentially emerging at strange, unexpected moments. Excess causes changes in our positioning

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<sup>64</sup> Merold Westphal, "Transfiguration as Saturated Phenomenon," *Journal of Philosophy & Scripture* 1, no. 1 (Fall 2003): 26.

toward God and others, involuntarily making slight adjustments in how we see, know, and act in the world.<sup>65</sup>

This mode of excess proves transformative for David Lurie in *Disgrace* through his prolonged exposure to various animals – he goes from honouring the corpses of dead dogs to cradling the body of a living one as he ushers it not just to the incinerator, but through the moment of death itself. Lurie has experienced change in this regard, especially as he can now call this act of accompanying the dogs through death love (219). But Lurie has only come to this realization through his previous encounters with the dead dogs in the dump, the sheep to be killed for a dinner party, and finally the dog that is attached to him. Each animal has left their trace on him.

At the same time, the kingdom of God itself “is a certain excess in the world,” which furthermore leaves traces of God’s presence on all of the others we meet.<sup>66</sup> It is the abundant, surplus nature of excess that institutes the radical hospitality of the kingdom that Caputo describes – excess disregards conventional boundaries placed around who gets in and who does not, who is worthy of ethical attention and who gets left by the wayside, arguing that there is enough love for all. This hospitality without guarantee of reciprocity – another crucial aspect of Levinasian ethics – effectually subverts the hospitality of this world by asking for nothing in exchange when the self responds to the other. Rather, it demonstrates the self’s relation to God, who in turn orders the self’s relation to others:

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<sup>65</sup> Alyda Faber quotes Benjamin’s idea of the messiah accomplishing slight adjustments in the world in regards to Lurie’s slow changes: “Intuitively, I find Lurie’s transformation in keeping with what Benjamin calls ‘weak messianic power’, which effects only a ‘slight adjustment’ rather than large adjustments invariably implicated in violence.” Alyda Faber, “The Post-Secular Poetics and Ethics of Exposure in J.M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace*,” *Literature & Theology* 23, no. 3 (2009): 314-315.

<sup>66</sup> Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 270.

The self is always already turned to God, who has in turn turned the self to the stranger, deflected it in a certain way, ordered and commanded the self to the stranger, who bears God's trace and seal. Being turned to the Other means a devotion to God that responds without desire for reciprocity, in a love without eros, in a relation without correlation and reciprocity, like the nonreciprocity, the interruption of symmetry and commensurability that constitutes the gift, or death itself.<sup>67</sup>

This represents a lavish love that overflows the disordered desire mentioned in Chapter 1 and makes room in the kingdom for the animal other, tying our wellbeing to theirs in an act of what Caputo calls 'doing God.' Even so, embracing the kingdom in this way means cultivating the capacity not just to see, but to see the 'radiant specificity' of each guest that enters – in other words, to see the invisible other.

### *Voir l'Autre invisible*

One of the chief risks of engaging in "Other" talk is the possibility of de-personalizing the face through the very act of rendering our ethical necessity to it. In other words, the face becomes an anonymous other for whom I *ought*, in an abstracted moralistic sense, to do something. However, Levinas' point that the face is not reducible to physiological entity proves provocative for the very reason that it means the face will always be singular and completely unique – there is always *a* face expressed in the radical infinitude of a particular moment. The *ought* emerges not from a pre-formulated moral system, but from the time- and situation-specific call of the other who addresses

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 264.



me. During his former position as a professor of communications at a university in Cape Town, David Lurie would probably not have imagined that he would eventually be loading dead animals onto a conveyor belt to be incinerated.

In terms of animals, such a claim saturates the everyday with ethical importance for the key fact that animals surround us, filling our living spaces with their bodies, sounds, and needs. Campaigns aimed at bringing awareness to momentous examples of animal cruelty such as factory farming, animal testing, and the clothing industry are crucial in addressing animal wellbeing on a large-scale level, but at the same time, these sizable efforts neglect the animals of the everyday in their goal of making wide-spread societal changes. But part of achieving such a goal lies in acknowledging the ethical importance of particularized response, because there is a potential relationship to be honoured – because we have a Face in mind when we cringe at hearing the ways in which cattle are slaughtered or hens are caged. Our flinching reaction to the animals in food factories or in laboratories points to our empathy with the suffering of those individual animals and the recognition that something has gone badly askew in our ethical relationship with them. This empathy is part of the process of tuning ourselves to the multitude of other animal faces around us, of coming to see their faces and their own specific needs. There are just too many faces, however – *we are just too menny*, Lurie thinks about the dead dogs – when the image of the abattoir is invoked, and ultimately this can dull response into a sense of futility rather than passionate ethical action. Emphasis on everyday meetings with animals can restore focus to the individual animal with whom we share our living places (even if it is our plate) and motivate us to ethical decision-making.

Derrida writes about his own realization of animals' indisputable particularity in regards to his cat who accompanies him around the house. He offers an especially poignant remark that the cat is an "irreplaceable living being," one who, moreover, enters his space and has the audacity to look at him while he is naked:

No, no, my cat, the cat that looks at me in my bedroom or in the bathroom, this cat...does not appear here as representative, or ambassador, carrying the immense symbolic responsibility....If I say "it is a real cat" that sees me naked, it is in order to mark its unsubstitutable singularity....I see it as *this* irreplaceable living being that one day enters my space, enters this place where it can encounter me, see me, even see me naked. Nothing can ever take away from me the certainty that what we have here is an existence that refuses to be conceptualized.<sup>68</sup>

This cat cannot be conceptualized or reduced to a biological organism,<sup>69</sup> merely one of millions of domesticated felines throughout the world. *This* cat affects Derrida, undeniably through its material presence, but also because Derrida suddenly sees the losability of this particular cat addressing him.<sup>70</sup>

For Derrida, a cat prompts his astonished speculation, one in the rather awkward location of the bathroom no less. For Levinas, it is the dog Bobby, a frequent visitor to the concentration camp where Levinas was imprisoned. Cat, dog, bathroom, concentration camp – the disparate circumstances are noteworthy. There is the mundane,

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<sup>68</sup> Jacques Derrida, qtd. in Cary Wolfe, "Introduction: Exposures," in *Philosophy & Animal Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 36.

<sup>69</sup> Stanley Cavell, "Companionable Thinking," in *Philosophy & Animal Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 103-104. Cavell cites Cora Diamond in exploring the possibilities for existing with animals on a companionable level that goes beyond animal as mere biological edible.

<sup>70</sup> Just for interest's sake, the cat was a little female cat, a "small, mute living being." Derrida, *The Animal that Therefore I Am*, 18.

even banal ordinariness of the bathroom, as well as the wrenching situation of the concentration camp. Both occasions speak to the perhaps rather obvious notion that the capacity for animals to influence us is both ubiquitous yet entirely singular – animals are everywhere yet there is always a *specific* animal expressed by the face who is addressing me at a particular moment. As such, there is an urgency to the encounter that somewhat heightens the stakes. We can here remember Zwicky’s point that “The gift of lyric is to see the whole in the particular; and in so doing, to bring the preciousness, which is the losability, of the world into clear focus.”<sup>71</sup>

In other words, the animal who has hitherto remained largely invisible becomes visible when we re-orient ourselves to them.<sup>72</sup> But, as Zwicky emphasizes, a poetic or lyric attention to this shift also involves recognition of the losability of the very particularity it points out in the first place. To see, but to see how something can be lost. This losable quality stresses the fragility of the animal we are encountering, highlighting its vulnerability within the context of life and death. In *Disgrace*, the singularity of the face manifests in the easily over-looked observation that a certain dog enjoys music. Such a characteristic distinguishes this dog from the others in the clinic, marking its uniqueness but also drawing attention to a precious quality of that dog that would be lost by his death. The context of the clinic tragically underlines both his preciousness as well as his vulnerability in the midst of an environment in which a great number of euthanizations are carried out on a regular basis. Seeing the face therefore carries with it a high cost – “the world is secured by the act of relinquishing it...the way to secure the

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<sup>71</sup> Jan Zwicky, *Lyric Philosophy*, 538, n. 302.

<sup>72</sup> The invisible visible being one of the key issues of the face, to return to Burggraeve’s quote above.

world from loss is to give it over to the fullest possibility of loss.”<sup>73</sup> Despite this, it is necessary ethically to engage the possibility of loss and honour our relationality with the face of the animal. To do this, we must do our best to put our orientation into motion and respond.

### **The Ethics of the Encounter**

It is therefore not enough to admit the fragility and losability of the irreplaceable animal in front of me. The idea of ethics always involves notions of “effective operations,” to quote Michel de Certeau,<sup>74</sup> implying some sort of concrete action to be taken. Yet ethics here is not a clearly-defined set of steps, but becomes jumbled up in the processes of adjusting our capacities to see and hear the call of the animal other. The excess that flows through the encounter blurs the lines between what should be done and what happens, between demarcations of passive and active. Nor does ethical responsibility necessarily conclude once some condition of the *ought* has been met. Ethics is risky business, complicated by the indeterminacy of the encounter – its unknown and unpredictable characteristics – and by our response, which unavoidably takes place in a situation encumbered by limits and restraints.

To reiterate an earlier point, we are always in the middle of an encounter – it is not a discrete event,<sup>75</sup> a situation requiring a one-time ethical response. Levinas’ notion of responsibility is radical precisely because of the enduring demands it makes upon us,

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<sup>73</sup> Zwicky, *Lyric Philosophy*, 538, n. 302.

<sup>74</sup> “Ethics is articulated through effective operations, and it defines a distance between what is and ought to be. This distance designates a space where we have something to do.” Michel de Certeau, *Heterologies: Discourse on the Other* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 199.

<sup>75</sup> With event not used here in the more precise way Caputo develops it.

even after the death of the other.<sup>76</sup> Acknowledgement of this simultaneously involves recognition of the extraordinary in the ordinary, an admission of the degree to which our ethical encounters inform, shape, and saturate our ongoing daily existence. It also means not taking the ordinary for granted, allowing the self and our ethical responses to stagnate and submerge into apathy and indifference:

The vivid extremes in responding to the world-wide existence of food factories is a cautionary, even lurid, example warning against supposing that the ordinary in human life is a *given*, as it were a *place*. I would rather say that it is a task, as the self is. I sometimes speak of the task as discovering the extraordinary in what we call ordinary and discovering the ordinary in what we call extraordinary; sometimes a detecting significance in the insignificant, sometimes as detecting insignificance in the significant.<sup>77</sup>

Cavell emphasizes the *task* of responding to the radical ordinary. Our encounters with the animal other are simultaneously ongoing (as in we bear the traces of each encounter as we move through life) and concretely unique. Yet we often only get one chance to respond to the other, and this means that we will make mistakes and (either intentionally or unintentionally) do violence to the animal;<sup>78</sup> it is a bit of trial-and-error as we learn to tune ourselves to the (previously) invisible others around us. As we will see in the next chapter, Coetzee's main character David Lurie spends little time thinking about animals when he first goes to live on his daughter's farm. It is only after more exposure – in

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<sup>76</sup> This idea will be developed further in the last chapter.

<sup>77</sup> Stanley Cavell, "Companionable Thinking," in *Philosophy & Animal Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 96.

<sup>78</sup> Though violence manifests in far more than the infliction of bodily or psychological harm. It can be as simple as passing by or ignoring the animal other – convincing oneself that the cats will be fine if supper is given after I do all the other chores.

terms of physical contact as well as emotional proximity – to the dogs, sheep, and clinic animals that Lurie can even do such a small act as carefully re-arrange the limbs of the euthanized dogs so that they are not haphazard and askew on the platform heading to the incineration chamber.

I thus identify Cavell's task as partly the province of excess: even if we do not "get things right" in a particular encounter, the excess – the visceral emotions, thoughts, and feelings that cannot be summed up by propositions, but can only (if at all) be tentatively grasped through lyric – gradually works on our selves nonetheless to produce changes in our attitudes and our capacities for seeing and knowing and – crucially – responding to each new animal other. Lurie's act towards the dead dogs eventually leads to his cradling a live dog about to be euthanized, signalling a hefty shift in his relating to animals overall – he now responds to them very differently (thus embodying a new orientation towards them) after many weeks of agonizing work in the clinic. The task – one embodied by Lurie – is a matter of becoming "transparent to presence."<sup>79</sup> This is "to become vulnerable," but it also requires attending to the texture of that presence: "what is present is that: present. It stays with one. That is, it has meaning."<sup>80</sup> Coming face to face with the animal, even if it is not on a daily basis like Lurie, involves both poetic attentiveness and a willingness to let the animal work on us through our embodied memory of the encounter, transforming us, even if it is only in small ways.

## Conclusion

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<sup>79</sup> Zwicky, *Lyric Philosophy*, 539, n. 302.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 539, n. 302.

Speaking once again of the mad hatter's tea party that he identifies as the event that initiates the kingdom of God, Caputo says, "If the event calls upon us, addresses us and invites us, then we enter the kingdom by responding to the invitation in spirit and in truth. Ask and it shall open to you, or answer, because you have already been called."<sup>81</sup> Caputo frames his understanding of the event of God as a call, an address, and an invitation, all evocative terms that can equally describe the call of the animal's face. We are invited to respond to the animal who addresses us, thereby opening up ourselves to both animal and God. As has been outlined above, this involves mistakes, the vulnerability of exposure, and the struggles of meaning-making through language and the representation of experience. Ultimately, the goal is a new position towards both God and animal other. We are invited through the ethical process into new sight and thus into new relationality, into bodily immersion in the radical ordinary of our everyday encounters. Sometimes it may not seem like we are actually helping the animal, just as Lurie felt he was contributing nothing of great value to the dogs by guarding their corpses, but there is nevertheless an ethical honour to the action, one which, moreover, will continue to influence our future ethical behaviour.

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<sup>81</sup> Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 260.

**Chapter 3**  
**Response:**  
**Bidding the Animal *Àdieu***

My own life has convinced me that the limitations most of us encounter in our relations with other animals reflect not their shortcomings, as we so often assume, but our own narrow views about who they are and the kinds of relationships we can have with them.  
 Barbara Smuts<sup>82</sup>

From its opening pages, *Disgrace* is about the debilitation of imagination. Its subject is estrangement. Its mood is bereaved. Slipping from one register to another, from figure of speech to embodied form, it repeatedly describes the appearance of unfathomable strangers...  
 Alice Brittan<sup>83</sup>

**Introduction: Texts/Contexts**

*In which we invoke the poetics of the encounter with regards to the poetics of the literary text, finally committing both animal and ourselves to God.*

Though best known for his writing in the context of South African apartheid/post-apartheid, JM Coetzee has spent a great deal of time considering the question of animals. Invited to deliver the 1997-1998 Tanner Lectures at Princeton University, Coetzee diverged from the usual lecture format, choosing in its place to present the story of Elizabeth Costello, a well-known novelist giving lectures at fictional Appleton College on the subject of animal ethics. Complete with scholarly footnotes displaying substantial knowledge of the philosophical debates about animals, *The Lives of Animals*<sup>84</sup> received widespread attention, and the published version contained reflections from people in a

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<sup>82</sup> Barbara Smuts, "Reflections," in *The Lives of Animals* by JM Coetzee (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 120.

<sup>83</sup> Alice Brittan, "Death and J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*," *Contemporary Literature* 51, no. 3 (Fall 2010): 484.

<sup>84</sup> JM Coetzee, *The Lives of Animals* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999). Further citations will be given in text with the abbreviation *LA*.



variety of disciplines concerned with animal issues, including such noteworthy names as Peter Singer and Barbara Smuts.

But Coetzee's interest in animals was not a one-time curiosity restricted to public events; instead, it pervades one of his most famous novels, *Disgrace*,<sup>85</sup> even in the midst of its concerns about post-apartheid South Africa. Indeed, there are a number of interplays and parallels between Costello in *The Lives of Animals* and David Lurie in *Disgrace*, though the two characters move in very different circles. Both demonstrate a willingness to encounter animals and their unique faces, be attuned to their needs, and recognize their call to respond ethically. In this sense, both texts suggest that while the animal may epitomize the figure of the *unfathomable* stranger, we can still open our eyes to the appreciation of grace in their individual faces. Yet this proves no easy task as the two characters are circumscribed by the realities of violence and death – either animals are killed for food having suffered greatly in an impersonal system of production (which is Costello's concern) or they are euthanized at animal clinics and shelters for burdening local populations (Lurie's situation). Moreover, Costello and Lurie each exhibit their fair share of difficulties relating to their families, and it is questionable if these particular issues are ever resolved by the texts.

In this chapter, I want to explore textual encounters with animals as experienced by these two characters, Costello and Lurie, claiming that Lurie achieves a moment of grace at the end of *Disgrace* whereas Costello seems unable to imagine her way to any sort of religious or emotional release. Grace surfaces, not just through the shadow of

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<sup>85</sup> JM Coetzee, *Disgrace* (New York: Penguin Books, 2000). Further citations will be given in text with the abbreviation *D*.

disgrace, but as the potential for uncovering and creating right relationships and bonds with others. While Lurie displays wariness of religious discourse, religious overtones nevertheless infuse his interactions with others, including his relationship with the animals of the novel. Unexpectedly, individual animals form a crucial part of Lurie's ethical and imaginative task and his realization of grace, in contrast to Costello who remains buried in a stack of animal corpses. Throughout each text, both characters demonstrate how they have heard the call of animals – hearing animal voices so that they are no longer invisible – and have oriented themselves in body and mind to the animal's needs. They thus perform the ideas discussed in the first two chapters, modelling a means of critically reflecting on their visceral responses while demonstrating ways we can bear responsibility for our relationships with animals and thus move towards grace-full relations.

### **The Animal and the Imagination**

*The Lives of Animals* presents Elizabeth Costello first delivering an address to the philosophy department at fictional Appleton College in Waltham. She admits that as a novelist she is a bit out of her field, but nevertheless does not spare the audience from her dissatisfaction with philosophical approaches to animal ethics. Her blending of philosophy and poetic imagination thus wins no points from the philosophers present, especially her unsympathetic daughter-in-law Norma (specializing in philosophy of mind), and her use of the Holocaust as an analogy for the realities of animals in factory farming provokes their response still further (Jewish poet Abraham Stern declines to meet with Costello, sending her a note conveying his dismay at her analogy). At an academic

dinner later the same evening, Costello refuses to soothe the rising tension surrounding questions of her ethical stance towards animals or of various philosophical and religious arguments about human-animal relations. She presents one more lecture and participates in one debate before leaving Waltham, at which point, in trying to explain her obsession with animals to her son, she breaks down in his arms at her inability to perceive the deaths of animals with such dispassion as everyone else.

*Disgrace* follows David Lurie, a professor of communications at a South African university attempting to navigate the post-apartheid climate. Lurie becomes infatuated with a student, having an affair with her but rebuffing the attempts of a university committee to prompt him to confess or express a sense of guilt when the student brings a complaint against Lurie. He leaves to move in with his daughter Lucy, a farmer with a bit of land who also kennels dogs, but they are soon attacked by three men who set Lurie on fire, lock him in the bathroom, rape Lucy, shoot the kennel dogs, and steal all that they can. Lurie's and Lucy's previously detached relationship becomes further strained as Lucy, to Lurie's utter incomprehension, does not report the rape. He turns to assisting Bev Shaw in the local animal clinic, helping with the euthanizations and cremations that happen every week while finding that he is becomingly increasingly concerned about animals, even the bodies of the dead dogs that go into the incinerator. His relations with Lucy do not improve as she decides to keep the baby that resulted from the rape, and Lurie moves out, focussing on writing his opera and caring for the dogs at the clinic.

Though *Disgrace* includes animals as one strand of the novel among others, it, along with *The Lives of Animals* which explicitly takes animals as its subject, complicates simplistic assumptions about animals and their possible relationships with humans. Both

novels ultimately reject the extremes of sentimental affection and moral rigidity while emphasizing the role that imagination plays in creatively enacting the encounter. In this middle ground lies an attempt to let animals speak and influence the bonds of those around them, which is an activity that, for Derek Attridge and Alice Brittan, partakes in grace.<sup>86</sup>

For Elizabeth Costello, the animal is caught up in a system that views it solely as property valued only for certain commodities such as food, clothing, or domestic affection. Its animality or the life of the animal (animal as self) is unimportant or considered to be irrelevant. But seeing the animal anew – the animal that has been rendered invisible in the routinized banality of the everyday – also means acknowledging the animal *as animal* with its own particular way of being in the world. This could, of course, involve mention of an animal’s biological individuality – a dolphin possesses different characteristics than does a spider – but is not reducible to such explanations. Animality recognizes a certain quality of vitality that is peculiar to each species and every single animal and as such stands as an integral part of seeing the face of the animal.

In each of her lectures to the Philosophy and English Departments at Appleton College, Costello offers a way of thinking about animality when she invokes the poetics of imagining oneself into the being of an animal, firstly in regards to Thomas Nagel’s example of a bat (*LA* 35) and then Ted Hughes’ jaguar poem (*LA* 50-53). She asks,

“What is it like to be a bat? Before we can answer such a question, Nagel suggests, we need to be able to experience bat-life through the sense-modalities of

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<sup>86</sup> Derek Attridge, “Age of Bronze, State of Grace: Music and Dogs in Coetzee’s ‘Disgrace,’” *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction* 34, no. 1 (Autumn 2000): 98-121.

a bat. But he is wrong; or at least he is sending us down a false trail. To be a living bat is to be full of being; being fully a bat is like being fully human, which is also to be full of being...To be full of being is to live as a body-soul. One name for the experience of full being is *joy*.” (LA 33)

By bodying forth the jaguar, Hughes shows us that we too can embody animals – by the process called poetic invention that mingles breath and sense in a way that no one has explained and no one ever will. He shows us how to bring the living body into being within ourselves...we are for a brief while the jaguar. He ripples within us, he takes over our body, he is us. (LA 53)

Employing the imagination to immerse oneself in the animal’s being is one part of the process of attuning oneself to the animal, while constituting, as Alice Brittan argues, a necessary component of refiguring bonds of grace and moving past the moral and emotional impoverishment of disgrace. She observes that “[m]ost of Coetzee’s novels are about the bankruptcy of this economy of imagining, which means that they are about disgrace. His characters inhabit worlds that have prohibited them from learning to imagine one another, especially across the divides of race and gender, and therefore all they know how to do is to steal or go without.”<sup>87</sup> Costello’s example of imaging bat-being and jaguar-being provides a bridge across the divide between humans and non-human animals, opening up the possibility of abundant relations full of grace.<sup>88</sup> Samuel Wells emphasizes abundance as a crucial element in realizing God’s work in the midst of

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<sup>87</sup> Brittan, “Death and J.M. Coetzee’s Disgrace,” 482.

<sup>88</sup> We can also understand grace within a theological context, though Brittan does not use it this way. Derek Attridge retains theological overtones of grace without developing a core definition beyond a responsiveness to the divine. This more fluid, working notion of grace perhaps works best in conjunction with a novel where God and religion are always at the edge of thought and language, despite being pushed away consciously.

us, positioning it against scarcity – or bankruptcy – as necessary to effect meaningful as well as ethical relationality.<sup>89</sup> Wells would agree with Costello’s emphasis on the imagination as crucial to achieving deepened connections with others, with the additional note that imagination participates in the re-orientation of sight so that one can see abundance where previously one saw only lack.

This is, as Brittan observes, a core problem in *Disgrace* where the task, particularly for the main character David Lurie, becomes utilizing the imagination in the fraught relations of post-apartheid. Lurie never specifically engages in the imaginative exercises that Costello encourages her audience to practice, but he does occupy himself in two notable ways: he writes an opera about Byron and his last lover, Teresa Guiccioli, and becomes more involved in the lives of the animals around him who are usually slated for death. Both of “these themes [the opera and dogs] increase in importance as the novel goes on, the space given to them on the pages reflecting their growing role in Lurie’s daily existence,”<sup>90</sup> and, I would add, in his own sphere of imagination. Lurie undergoes a shift from a general disinterest in animals to experiencing bonds with them, bonds which, moreover, work to subtly influence Lurie and provoke him in new directions: “The powerful but baffling claim made by the sheep on him is, it seems, far from either the emotional pull experienced by the animal lover or the ethical demand acknowledged by the upholder of animal rights.”<sup>91</sup> The sheep are destined to be the main course at Petrus’ (Lucy’s employee and neighbour) party, and Lurie significantly finds himself neither indifferent to nor passionate about the sheep or the other animals of the novel. This

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<sup>89</sup> Samuel Wells, *God’s Companions: Re-imagining Christian Ethics* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006).

<sup>90</sup> Attridge, “Age of Bronze, State of Grace: Music and Dogs in Coetzee’s ‘Disgrace,’” 106.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.

middle road is no less taxing (perhaps even more so) emotionally or imaginatively than complete indifference or affection, and it demonstrates a certain quality of receptivity Lurie has to the animals around him. This openness on Lurie's part to such an unexpected rapport with animals partly speaks to Attridge's idea of grace as "a condition of constant receptiveness to the divine."<sup>92</sup> In an echo of Catherine Keller, the divine may appear in strange places as well as in surprising figures – "the "arrival of the unexpected in unexpectedly beneficent form"<sup>93</sup> – even as this appearance accentuates the need for ethical response.

Both books also hint at another way of approaching relationality with animals, one simultaneously laced with imagination but more focussed on their actual presence rather than our imaginative outreach: they avoid "fixing" the animal to one mode of discursive representation, instead suggesting that the animal possesses its own agency and that poetics is a means of encountering it. In other words, both texts admit that the animal can *address* us, calling to us to respond ethically in the Levinasian sense. The characters rely on knowledge gained through relationality rather than what Costello dubs the "less interesting thought" of scientific reasoning (*LA* 29). Aaron Moe would term this zoopoetics, wherein animals "engag[e] imaginatively with their own kind, with other species, with their environments, and with the human-other."<sup>94</sup> Costello presents the case of Sultan the ape, captured and taken to a research station on an island for the purposes of "experimentation into the mental capacities of apes" (*LA* 27). Sultan had to endure his

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 112.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 112.

<sup>94</sup> Aaron Moe, "Zoopoetics: A Look at Cummings, Merwin, & the Expanding Field of Ecocriticism," *Humanimalia* 3, no. 2 (2012): 29.

food being placed in increasingly complex situations such that he had to maneuver crates or use implements to obtain the food. Costello once again uses imaginative empathy (possibly a deterrent to true zoopoetics for Moe, but nevertheless gesturing in that direction), though with the intent of signifying the fact that Sultan had his own perspective on what was happening to him as well as an understanding of what the correct response was, and thus that he was aware that his actions would influence his relations with his food and the man giving the food:

Sultan knows: Now one is supposed to think. That is what the bananas up there are about. The bananas are there to make one think, to spur one to the limits of one's thinking. But what must one think? One thinks: Why is he starving me? One thinks: What have I done? Why has he stopped liking me? One thinks: Why does he not want these crates any more? But none of these is the right thought...The right thought to think is: How does one use the crates to reach the bananas?...One is beginning to see how the man's mind works. (*LA* 28)

Sultan had a family, a social group, and a past before he was captured, but now he is “relentlessly propelled toward lower, practical, instrumental reason (How does one use this to get that?) and thus toward acceptance of himself as primarily an organism with an appetite that needs to be satisfied” (*LA* 29). The researcher reduces Sultan to biological animality whereas Costello urges her listeners (and readers) to see how Sultan communicates to humans through his actions. He plays the game, so to speak, despite his real question – the question that “occupies the rat and the cat and every other animal trapped in the hell of the laboratory or the zoo” – being: “Where is home and how do I get there?” (*LA* 30). That, however, is a question in which the researcher is not



interested, nor is he concerned about Sultan's own agency of behaviour in relation to humans, other apes, or his own family. Conversely, Costello's poetics acknowledges that animals possess their own space within reality and text and that they, too, have their own imaginative modes of engaging the world. Such a recognition forms a part of bridging the divide between humans and animals and ushering in the abundance that results from bonds of grace – of finding resonances across differences, to use Jan Zwicky's terms. I would suggest that this is the crux of Costello's statement: "That is the kind of poetry I bring to your attention today: poetry that does not try to find an idea in the animal, that is not about the animal, but is instead a record of an engagement with him" (*LA* 51).

This kind of record emerges in *Disgrace*, where Lurie learns to encounter the animal and respond ethically to them, while they engage and address him and offer him the potential for grace-full relations. The sheep are part of this process, as we have seen, and so is Lucy's watchdog, Katy. However, it is one particular dog that stands out for Lurie. While dogs comprise most of the animals that appear in *Disgrace* and generally seem to exhibit all the stereotypical dog behaviours, such ordinariness is where we find the beginning of the extraordinary of which Cavell speaks, including the agency of animals we often take for granted. Within the confines of the animal clinic where Lurie volunteers, a dog with a withered leg gradually attaches himself to Lurie. He "is fascinated by the sound of the banjo" (*D* 215), trying to sing along with the music. He also "adopts" Lurie, sleeping at his feet and licking his face. Such behaviour may seem trivial, but it is key both to the ending of the novel and to any possibility of hope for Lurie that this ending holds. The dog reaches out to Lurie, accepting and loving him and

thus providing a model for abundant relationality.<sup>95</sup> In such extravagant love, the wounded dog acknowledges Lurie's face, which in turn prompts Lurie to appreciate the dog's "losability" and thus his preciousness. Beyond any philosophical debates about the morality of animals, the dog performs the ethical response that is so crucial for Levinas – "the dog would die for him, he knows" (*D* 215) – embodying the radicality of what we might call grace.

### **Baring/Bearing One's Soul**

Costello's son and his wife consider her preoccupation with animals to be nothing more than her latest 'hobbyhorse,' the fleeting cause of an old, tired woman. Their refusal to take her seriously belies their own lack of sight, their persistent unwillingness to be re-oriented to positions other than their own, much less to put themselves in the jaguar's body (*LA* 51-53). On the other end of the spectrum of response comes admiration, stemming from a kind of polite, if detached, respect for her moral stance. Costello herself is less optimistic about her motivations, evincing a kind of desperation when the issue arises: "But your own vegetarianism, Mrs. Costello," says President Garrard, pouring oil on troubled waters: "it comes out of moral conviction, does it not?" "No, I don't think so," says his mother. "It comes out of a desire to save my soul" (*LA* 43). Costello's response illuminates the tepid ethics behind President Garrard's

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<sup>95</sup> This dog offers a reminder of Derrida's cat and Levinas' Bobby (Chapter 2), in which the animal initiates the encounter, recognizes the face of the human, and provokes an ethical response from Derrida and Levinas.

question<sup>96</sup> – moral conviction pales beside the anguish that implicates Costello’s whole being, including an unshakeable sense of culpability. And yet, though Costello wears leather – what she calls an example of “degrees of obscenity” with no substantial distinction from meat-eating<sup>97</sup> – perhaps her leather items are less a failure of her resolve or any indifference to the animal skins that make up her clothing than of her inescapable entwinement in a system built on the corpses of animals. Her guilt indicates how she has been engulfed in her sensitivity to the animals around her as well as her helplessness to significantly change the system. But it also points to how her embodied relationality, of knowing the animal through imagining herself in their being, can lead to paralysis – her soul is sore and inflamed, and, while she is not afraid to speak about societal treatment of animals, she ultimately collapses into her son’s arms under the weight she is carrying: “‘Calm down, I tell myself, you are making a mountain out of a molehill. This is life. Everyone else comes to terms with it, why can’t you? *Why can’t you?*’ She turns on him a tearful face. What does she want, he thinks? Does she want me to answer her question for her?” (LA 69).

David Lurie also experiences such a moment. While Costello explicitly struggles with the cruelty and indifference to animals that most people exhibit, she never mentions

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<sup>96</sup> Stephen Mulhall writes about this rather tense exchange at the dinner table: “The reader is torn between amusement at Costello’s obdurate refusal to smooth away social difficulties, satisfaction at her literal-minded responses to remarks that give priority to civility over truth, and sympathy with those forced to confront ideas of salvation and obscenity over a baked Alaska (the ice cream stubbornly retaining its frozen solidity beneath that sweet, whipped covering.” I’m not sure if the baked Alaska represents the salvation or the obscenity, but it apparently plays a large part in dinner. *The Wounded Animal: J.M. Coetzee & the Difficulty of Reality in Literature & Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 59.

<sup>97</sup> The wearing of leather, even though it is not an act of eating the flesh, nevertheless participates in consuming the animal’s body. This act of consumption indicates another mode of detachment from their lives and deaths. Wearing leather or fur means that we still view their body as a commodity, placing them in an economic or aesthetic register divorced from response to them in an ethical one.

any specific encounters with animals except textual ones.<sup>98</sup> For Lurie, the obverse is true: he has been one of the uncritical majority Costello sees all around her until he moves in with his daughter, after which he encounters more and more animals as the novel goes on. He furthermore encounters them not as packaged consumer products – little bits of soap or shrink-wrapped meat – but as living, breathing *specific* animals who most of the time are about to meet their death. In other words, he meets them face-to-face, holding them “so that the needle can find the vein” (*D* 219), letting them lick him right before the drugs work. There is no escaping the call of these animals at this moment, but there is also no way to escape their deaths. The ethical implications of what he is doing gnaw at Lurie until he is physically and emotionally overwhelmed, his whole being wounded just like Elizabeth Costello<sup>99</sup>:

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 to him. Until now he has been more or less indifferent to animals. Although in an abstract way he disapproves of cruelty, he cannot tell whether by nature he is cruel or kind. He is simply nothing. (*D* 143)

Lurie can no longer tuck away his thoughts and feelings into rationalized, disinterested abstraction. Instead, the sheer excess engendered by the latest events of his life and the large number of animal deaths in which he has been complicit boils to the top and

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<sup>98</sup> Such as with Ted Hughes’ poem about the jaguar or Franz Kafka’s story about Red Peter the ape.

<sup>99</sup> Costello’s wounded animality, which “I cover up under my clothes but touch on in every word I speak.” *The Lives of Animals*, 26.

overflows, rendering him mentally and emotionally shattered and physically weakened. His whole body betrays his affectedness, exposing his vulnerability to the call of the novel's animals as well as his inability to help them. He can no more change the system than can Elizabeth Costello, a realization both bear with agonizing distress.

At the same time, both exhibit damaged relations with the people around them, especially with family members. Costello's relationship with her son is distant and decidedly strained with her daughter-in-law, Norma. She makes no attempt to be sociable to the guests at the university dinner, neither defusing the tension building around her clipped replies nor seriously engaging their concerns about animal ethics. She is, as her son describes her, "gray and tired and confused" (*LA* 44), revealing the same bodily vulnerability as Lurie. Lurie himself cannot seem to forge any constructive relationships with people, except possibly Bev Shaw who runs the animal clinic and who he assists in the killings; even then, he considers her unattractive, and, though he has an affair with her, feels no substantial affection for her. The rest of his relationships are, to put it mildly, a disaster, especially with his student and his daughter. He cannot seem to understand Lucy's refusal to report the attack on her, or her decision to keep the child that results from it. He is unable to "stand back and let Lucy work out solutions for herself" (*D* 210), preferring to buffer himself in the role of protective, if unimaginative, parent. Consequently, she asks him to leave, which he does, though in injured self-righteousness: "'And am I part of what you are prepared to sacrifice?' She shrugs. 'I didn't say it, you said it.' 'Then I'll pack my bags'" (*D* 208).

Paradoxically, animals are the only beings left with whom Costello and Lurie can build any semblance of connection and respect. Though he resists naming the dog with

the withered leg, Lurie nevertheless “has come to feel a particular fondness” for the dog, realizing in return that “[a]rbitrarily, unconditionally, he has been adopted; the dog would die for him, he knows” (*D* 215). If Mike Marais contests the idea that Lurie achieves a sympathetic imagination with others by the end of the novel, perhaps it is because Marais discounts the presence of animals in the text and their effects on Lurie’s character.<sup>100</sup>

How do we make a space for our own helplessness when we face the animal, much less theirs? While Lurie consciously resists the language of salvation – denying the religious discourse of grace, confession, guilt, and repentance at his university hearing for sexual misconduct – it is only in terms of such concepts that the paralysis and wounding borne by Lurie and Costello can be acknowledged and fused into the response the face of the animal needs. The mystery of grace trusts that where the self fails, God takes over.<sup>101</sup> Thus, at the breakdown of emotions and language, there emerges the potential for the self to be re-oriented to animal and to God. Similarly, an acknowledgement of our limits and helplessness is necessary for the moment of *metanoia* to occur. Even if Lurie never fully reaches the place of repentance, we can, along with Attridge and Brittan, suggest that he finds himself enfolded within the bonds of grace.

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<sup>100</sup> Mike Marais, “J.M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace* and the Task of the Imagination,” *Journal of Modern Literature* 29, no. 2 (Winter 2006): 76.

<sup>101</sup> Though Alyda Faber argues that Coetzee does not necessarily agree with a theistic sense of transforming grace, she suggests that he does realize the limits of the self and the need to resort to religious language to capture it. She writes: “[A] confession of the obscurity of the self includes a realization of the limits of willing. For Coetzee, that obscurity exceeds the powers of psychological self-analysis (and also psychoanalytic theory and practice), requiring instead a religious language that acknowledges an unmanageable strangeness in ‘the self’, ‘the soul’.” Faber, “The Post-Secular Poetics and Ethics of Exposure in J.M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace*,” 305.

### **Bidding the Animal (and ourselves) *Àdieu***

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.’ (*D* 220)

*Disgrace* concludes with yet another death, but this time it is the dog with the withered leg, the one who likes music and who has adopted Lurie and, at the same time, the one for whom Lurie has developed a fondness.<sup>102</sup> By this time, Lurie has assisted with many euthanizations, acting as a dog “psychopomp” (*D* 146) in guiding the dead to the afterlife and caring for – “honouring” – their bodies when they are sent to the incinerator. In so doing, Lurie demonstrates an ethical responsibility towards the animals that both takes account of and concludes with their deaths. Alice Brittan argues that Lurie “bear[s] witness to death until there is nothing left to see, acknowledging the claims to recognition made by the body even after the spirit is gone...David’s purpose is not to alter the fact of death but to pay it attention, because to think of the dead is to hold them a little longer within the reaches of what can be thought, and thus to prolong grace.”<sup>103</sup> Death is no longer a disgrace, something at which to hang one’s head in shame, but rather an event to which we bear witness and hold with us a little longer, the excess of which will continue to shape our ethical imagination.

The attentiveness of bearing witness grasps both the resonances of Zwicky’s lyric understanding, wherein lyric or poetics can comprehend a depth of meaning not available in other forms of discourse, and the significance of reaching for religious language to

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<sup>102</sup> The novel’s ending has perplexed many commentators, provoking a number of widely varying interpretations.

<sup>103</sup> Brittan, “Death and J.M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace*,” 498.

represent this experience. Brittan may not adhere to a Christian notion of grace, but the term nevertheless arouses the association, especially given that “this [religious] discourse already steeps his [Lurie’s] thinking,” despite his own rejection of the language of guilt, confession, repentance, and salvation.<sup>104</sup> Lurie certainly seems unable to evade such Christian overtones, and the inflection in the final scene with the dog is therefore notable: Lurie “bear[s] him in his arms like a lamb” (*D* 220) into the surgery, evoking both the image of Christ on his way to dying by crucifixion illustrated in Acts 8:32 – “Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter, and like a lamb silent before its shearer, so he does not open his mouth”<sup>105</sup> – and the lamb representing Christ in Zurbaran’s paintings. The refraction of this specific animal imagery – dog like a lamb – proves interesting not just for the centrality of animals to the conclusion of the novel, though this is very much the case, but for its intimation of the death and sacrifice of Christ and its connection to the lambs that act as metaphorical placeholder for Christ.<sup>106</sup> In bearing witness to the dog’s death, Lurie simultaneously bears witness to the dying of the innocent – Christ’s dying – finding the possibility of hope therein, what Brittan calls the image of a “lightened horizon.”<sup>107</sup> At the same time, Lurie does not subsume the dog into the larger paradigm of sacrifice, making it yet another voiceless victim like the lambs in the *Agnus Dei* paintings. Instead, he is keenly aware of its own unique enfolded existence as evidenced

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<sup>104</sup> Alyda Faber, “The Post-Secular Poetics and Ethics of Exposure in J.M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace*,” 307.

<sup>105</sup> New Revised Standard Version. This particular deliberately recalls the similar passage in Isaiah.

<sup>106</sup> The connection with sacrifice has been made several times. Alice Brittan mentions it, citing at least two other scholars who have also pointed it out. Once again, Brittan does not necessarily read this passage specifically in a Christian light, but both Lurie’s sacrifice of the dog and the evocation of him carrying the dog like a lamb certainly call to mind the well-known trope of Christ as paradigmatic sacrificial lamb discussed in Chapter 1.

<sup>107</sup> Brittan, “Death and J.M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace*,” 499.



in his acknowledgement of its love of music, its affection for him, and its challenges with its withered leg.

It is this notion of bearing witness tied with the possibility of hope that seems to me to be mingled with ethical promise for Lurie in a way not realized for Costello. Lurie, if he has not ‘come to terms’ with it so to speak, at least understands that there are things one can do in the face of death. And while death does not represent the unavoidable condition for every encounter with an animal, it certainly encapsulates the confrontation with the “losability” that Zwicky describes. It also offers a means of exploring one’s responsibility to the animal within the perception of one’s own limits, and therefore of moving past the woundedness and paralysis immobilizing Lurie.

Lurie’s decision to finally allow the euthanization of the dog who likes music therefore marks not the conclusion of their ethical relationship, but a continued, perhaps even renewed, call upon Lurie himself. Levinas thought that ethical responsibility did not conclude after the other’s death, as if the death of the other affords us an escape route from ethical concern for them. Lurie demonstrates this idea when he feels ethically responsible for honouring the bodies of the dead dogs about to be burned in order to enact “his idea of the world, a world in which men do not use shovels to beat corpses into a more convenient shape for processing” (*D* 146). Levinas describes this in how

The Other individuates me in my responsibility for him. The death of the Other affects me in my very identity as a responsible I...made up of unspeakable responsibility. This is how I am affected by the death of the Other, this is my

relation to his death. It is, in my relation, my deference toward someone who no longer responds, already a guilt of the survivor.<sup>108</sup>

Costello, as we have seen, possesses guilt aplenty, immobilized in her soul and alienated in her relations with other people. But while Levinas may identify the guilt of the survivor as an inevitable component of the other's death, Derrida understands him as shifting guilt from the blame and culpability that Costello feels to the reaction of the "upright": "Levinas indeed speaks of the survivor's guilt, but it is a guilt without fault and without debt; it is, in truth, an *entrusted responsibility*, entrusted in a moment of unparalleled emotion."<sup>109</sup> Costello grasps the idea that the death of the other and our frequently emotional, visceral response entrusts us with the task of responsibility, but she cannot move past a negative embodiment of survivor's guilt. There can be no peace for her in her relationships with animals, only a haunting sense of failure.

In speaking of the death of the other, Levinas also re-thought the familiar expression of farewell, the *àdieu*. It was something he and Derrida discussed together, and when Levinas died, Derrida presented the eulogy as his own personal *àdieu* to one of his great friends.<sup>110</sup> They wanted to recapture the valence of commending another to (*à*) God (*Dieu*) as a means of expressing one's relationship to the other, the other's death, to our newly-renewed commitment to the other, and to God. For both philosophers, the *àdieu* in and of itself "is not a finality" but "greet[s] the Other beyond being" in an instance that is "signified, beyond being, by the word 'glory'" (13). In this way, the *àdieu*

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<sup>108</sup> Levinas qtd. in Jacques Derrida, *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 7.

<sup>109</sup> Derrida, *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*, 6.

<sup>110</sup> The text of the address can be found in *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*.

functions as a powerful performative gesture serving all at once to say good-bye, declare the renewal of responsibility in a greeting of the animal beyond being, and to re-call to God the body and spirit of the animal. It bears witness to the other's death and shoulders the responsibility entrusted as a result of that death, but it also implies a farewell, a letting go of the other as well as of our own feelings of negative guilt and helplessness.

For John Caputo, the *àdieu* marks a fundamental positioning of the self towards God. We dedicate our relational vulnerability to God in what Caputo describes as “*Adieu*: (I commend you) ‘to God’ (à Dieu), may God be with you. This word is a beautiful prayer embedded in ordinary language, and it is very precious for Levinas, for upon it, in a real sense, everything turns.”<sup>111</sup> *Àdieu* is the culmination of one's positioning towards God and the animal, a prayer for the animal's wellbeing and a committing to God of the precariousness of life and the fragility of all relationships. The *àdieu* thus reiterates the qualities that constitute any encounter with an animal – exposure, vulnerability, and “losability.” In this way, it bears within itself the fundamental helplessness of human beings in the face of the Other's extraordinary request – we will never be able to fulfill the needs of all the animals of the world, whether it be for love, life, or health. The *àdieu* admits this, giving our self to God when we run up against the inevitable awareness of our own limits and needs.

Through this positioning towards God and animal, the *àdieu* marks the realization of grace – of the fostering of a relationship based on the cultivation of bonds and the embrace of emotional interaction. This is not necessarily a conscious, determined move on our part, but accepts the bonds we already have with each other and with God:

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<sup>111</sup>John Caputo, *The Weakness of God: A Theology of the Event*, 265.

For Levinas, *à dieu*, from *ad deum*, ‘to God,’ has the sense of being turned to God. The *à* in *à-Dieu* represents a turn toward God, not a turn taken by the conscious freedom of an auto-turning autonomous self, but a *being-already-turned* to God, long before the conscious self steps in and takes one turn or another. Hence: Here I am (*me voici*) always already turned *by God to God: à Dieu*.<sup>112</sup>

Caputo’s insistence that getting to the moment of the *à dieu* is not a conscious, intentional effort simultaneously emphasizes the continuous nature of relationality – we always bear the trace of the other as we move on to new encounters and new opportunities for saying the prayer embodied by the *à dieu*. Though the task of imagining oneself in the animal’s being is a deliberate one relying – at least to an extent – on personal will, it nevertheless points to this pre-positioning described by Caputo as well as the excess of the encounter that seeps into the body to influence the next encounter. David Lurie’s character does not change “all at once” – it requires a process (Cavell’s task of ethical imagination) in order for Lurie to love the dog with the withered leg. One can see appearances beforehand, as when Lurie takes it upon himself to care for the bodies of the dead dogs when they are about to be incinerated, or in his surprising concern for the sheep to be killed for the party. However, Lurie’s final words (and the concluding words of the novel) – “Yes, I am giving him up” (*D* 220) – signal his ability to finally verbalize a realization on Lurie’s part that some things cannot be evaded or saved for another week. It has been the very process of learning to love and finding one’s responsibility that illuminates the very act of cradling the dog at the moment of euthanasia as a tender benediction, a heart-breaking performance of the final *à-Dieu*.

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<sup>112</sup> Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 264.

### **The Promise of Grace**

I find it significant that the novel begins with Lurie on his way to a tryst with a woman he pays for sex and ends with him holding in his arms a dog to be euthanized. Ascription of any concrete moral progression to Lurie's character would be both simplistic and premature,<sup>113</sup> and I do not see either Coetzee or *Disgrace* as offering the "affirmation of animal lives" as a solution to the "multiple problems of the age"<sup>114</sup> or as a panacea for his personal relationships. However, I do understand Lurie's relationality with the animals of *Disgrace* to gesture towards his potential to "educate the eye" (*D* 218) and extend hospitality to them, even if it is only their corpses he is honouring.

His encounters with animals have proven not to be merely a side path or diversion as he wrestles with the emotional and interpersonal aftermath of Lucy's rape and his beating. Instead, these encounters have tugged responses from Lurie that he could not give to the humans around him. Despite the death that surrounds all these animals – from the kennel dogs who are shot by the intruders, the sheep who provide the food for Petrus' party, and all the cats and dogs who are euthanized every week – Lurie can now name attention to them as love: "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" (*D* 219). While I am not sure he employs Costello's form of imagination, immersing the self into bat-being or jaguar-

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<sup>113</sup> The novel provides no sense of moral resolution – Lurie undergoes no substantial change of character (never regretting his behavior towards Melanie Isaacs) and experiences only minute improvements in his relationship with Lucy; additionally, the men who attacked them are not caught or charged.

<sup>114</sup> Attridge, "Age of Bronze, State of Grace: Music and Dogs in Coetzee's 'Disgrace,'" 109.

being, Lurie has nevertheless experienced a reorientation towards animals and life, which perhaps signals his own return from the realm of the dead.<sup>115</sup> His loving *àdieu* to the dog with the withered leg, the one who loves the music of the banjo and tries to sing along, marks his exposure to others and thus his new-found openness to grace.<sup>116</sup> It is a constructive response to the animal that embodies love's knowledge as well as an ethical imagination that relies on the contingencies of face-to-face relationship. Costello experiences no such moment of committing the self and animal to God, and we close with her in her son's arms, still helpless and vulnerable. All she gets is the rather dubious reassurance from her son that "[i]t will soon be over" (*LA* 69).

Both David Lurie and Elizabeth Costello have been submerged by helplessness – Lurie by the sudden coalescence of violence and death in his life and Costello by what she perceives as the corpses of dead animals wherever she goes and the normality of people in the face of this. Coetzee ends both books with a curious moment of embrace – Lurie cradles the dog with the withered leg and Costello is held by her son as she weeps. For Costello, this bespeaks her powerlessness and flawed family relations, but for Lurie it points to his love for the dog he is carrying. As Caputo writes, "God's epiphany takes place in the face-to-face relationship with the stranger."<sup>117</sup> *Disgrace* reminds us that it is about doing what we can, when we can, and, moreover, never forsaking the animal in front of us:

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<sup>115</sup> Alice Brittan, "Death and J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*," 487.

<sup>116</sup> Attridge argues that Lurie "achieves something that can be called grace" but that "we cannot say either that he finds it or that he is found by it. Rather, we have to say both." Attridge "Age of Bronze, State of Grace: Music and Dogs in Coetzee's 'Disgrace,'" 110. I would connect this with Caputo's merging of one's positioning towards God concurrent with God pre-positioning us – it is a little bit of both.

<sup>117</sup> Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 271.

He can save the young dog, if he wishes, for another week. But a time must come, it cannot be evaded, when he will have to bring him to Bev Shaw in her operating room (perhaps he will carry him in his arms, perhaps he will do that for him) and caress him and brush back the fur so that the needle can find the vein, and whisper to him and support him in the moment when, bewilderingly, his legs buckle; and then, when the soul is out, fold him up and pack him away in his bag, and the next day wheel the bag into the flames and see that it is burnt, burnt up. He will do all that for him when his time comes. It will be little enough, less than little: nothing. (*D* 220)

But that little enough is not nothing – it is enough, and it is enough to sustain hope for Lurie’s character even if no resolutions or promises are made by the end of the novel, momentarily serving to take him out of his self-absorption into care for the vulnerability of another being. He has indeed experienced an unsought and unexpected epiphany, but it is at this terribly unsettling and moving moment that Lurie finds grace in the face of the animal.

## Conclusion

The truth is, he has never had much of an eye for rural life, despite all his reading in Wordsworth. Not much of an eye for anything, except pretty girls; and where has that got him? Is it too late to educate the eye?

*Disgrace*<sup>118</sup>

*There is no theoretical way to 'get this right.'* The only way to negotiate the multiple dangers and reap the possible harvests is to 'make an art of ordinary living.' At the heart of this Williams tells us, is learning to live without fear of the radical ordinary, learning a strange freedom from our relentless efforts to exit the challenges and gifts of the present by deepening the vortex of 'the busy and frantic ego, trying to impose an individual will on the world.'

Romand Coles<sup>119</sup>

I have been glad to see the discussion about animals in theology growing over the past few years, a discussion that has been questioning Christianity's relationship with animals and pondering the shape of our ethical responses to them. This body of writing takes seriously the idea that animals have a claim on our theological attention and that they are a significant part of the body of God. It is still a relatively new area, however, and a comparatively minute one at that, but I find hope in it that, as Christians, we will continue to think about our interactions with animals so that we may welcome them into the kingdom of God instead of excluding them. This involves extending to them love and hospitality on an individual basis as well as the eco-theological interest in their collective place in the world.

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<sup>118</sup> Coetzee, *Disgrace*, 218.

<sup>119</sup> Romand Coles, "The Pregnant Reticence of Rowan Williams," *Christianity, Democracy, and the Radical Ordinary: Conversations between a Radical Democrat and a Christian*, Stanley Hauerwas and Romand Coles (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2008), 193.



This thesis looks at a particular moment – an encounter with an individual animal – and reflects on how we experience and represent that encounter in order to find ways we can develop our ethical responses. Rather than turning to arguments about the status of animals, I look to poetics in order to explore the indeterminacy, vulnerability, and exposure that arise out of meeting animals face-to-face. Levinas stresses that ethics is “first philosophy” and that our encounters with others always carry an ethical dimension; poetics makes a space in which to consider these ethical facets without resorting to more rigid strands of moral philosophy that place little emphasis on the role of embodiment, including the emotions and visceral impressions. Novels such as *Disgrace* and *The Lives of Animals* and paintings such as the *Agnus Dei* series urge us to think about the relationships depicted so that we may similarly be attuned to the unique circumstances in which we encounter animals in our own lives.

In *The Ethics of Sex*, Mark Jordan expresses optimism in negative theology for rethinking sexual ethics, arguing that

it has freed theological language from the smallness of human purposes – of human regimes – for the possibilities of transcendence. We need new roles for speaking sexual ethics. We thus also need new genres for our speaking. I imagine that they will be less like the single-voice genres of legal code or verdict and more like the polyphony of complex narratives or lyrics written over a lifetime. Audre Lorde...once wrote: ‘where language does not yet exist, it is our

poetry which helps us to fashion it. Poetry is not only dream and vision; it is the skeleton architecture of our lives.<sup>120</sup>

The poetics I am invoking here hopefully points to new genres and new roles with which to animate the development of animal ethics within theology. It can do God-talk in an amazingly rich and inventive style, touching on the life and breath of meeting God through individual animals. The poetics of the encounter encourages us to come face to face with them, re-considering our epistemological prejudices so that we can hear them when they address us. Their call transforms our everyday lives into the radical ordinary of which Romand Coles and Rowan Williams speak, wherein the call of Christ suffuses all that we do so that even minute day-to-day decisions become steeped in ethical significance. At the same time, this poetics realizes that each new encounter with an animal forms a layer that adds to the architecture of which Audre Lorde speaks so that we are continually influenced by their presence and drawn to broaden our responsibility.

Implicit within John Caputo's idea of hospitality in the kingdom of God as the reaching out in love to the stranger (discussed in Chapter 2) is also the realization that at any moment we may be the ones who require hospitality and who will need someone to imagine themselves into our being, just as Elizabeth Costello did for Sultan the ape, the bat, and the jaguar. While such reciprocity is not necessarily constitutive of the encounter with animals, it marks recognition of our personal fragility and how we can embrace what Jan Zwicky calls resonances across differences, caring for the animal's vulnerability while admitting our own. The radical ordinary highlights the fact that our

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<sup>120</sup> Mark Jordan, *The Ethics of Sex* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2001), 154.

ethical responses are a work in progress, a process in which we can admit our limits while reaching out to greater heights of hospitality and love.

At the same time, being attentive to animals through poetics involves “making an art of everyday living,” while understanding that it is never too late to “educate the eye.” There may be no way to get all the ethical aspects right, so to speak, but we can nonetheless share vulnerabilities and forge constructive relationships with the animals around us. In doing so, we can move towards the promise of grace, of seeing the love of God in the face of the animal and cultivating ethical and social bonds with them, even if involves great personal struggle. This is the poetics of how we grapple with, shape, frame, represent, meld ourselves in the interstices of our existence while ethically and theologically realizing our responsibility to the animals that surround us.

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