

1. *Viewing a New World*

In his study of the Europeans' first encounters with the New World in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries the historian of ideas, Anthony Pagden, writes that the European "observers ... had to classify before they could properly see; and in order to do that they had no alternative but to appeal to a system which was already in use. It was indeed the system, not the innate structure of the world, which determined what areas they selected for description." (Pagden 1982: 4-5) For Pagden the order of comprehension of this New World was classification, observation, representation: the conceptualisation of the world came before the world itself could be reproduced for a wider audience. On this basis, it was the classification - not simply the world - that formed the representation.

This sounds straightforward, but in practice there were complications. Pagden writes that the European observer had an inadequate "descriptive vocabulary" for the New World, and was "beset by an uncertainty about how to use his conceptual tools in an unfamiliar terrain;" that "he tended to describe things which looked alike as if they were, in fact, identical." For Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo, "author of the earliest natural history of America, pumas *were* lions, jaguars, tigers and so on." Pagden explains this conflation of different species by suggesting that "Immediate perceptions of this kind relied upon an implicit and at first unchallenged belief in the interchangeability of types and the consistency of natural forms." (Pagden 1982: 11) To early modern observers this New World was new, but it was also, importantly, familiar; this, we can see, must always be the case if systems of classification are transferred across geographical - and conceptual - boundaries. Difference is reduced through the assertion of likeness or recognisability.

This sense of the categorisation (and understanding) of the New World can be traced in the English colonialist Alexander Whitaker's 1613 *Good Newes From Virginia*. In this text - written as propaganda for the London-based Virginia Company - Whitaker takes the time to mention some of the wildlife of the New World and, as well as acknowledging recognisable animals such as "Lions, Beares, Wolves and Deare" ("lions" here must - like Oviedo's definition of a puma - refer to another big cat rather than the lion itself which is indigenous to Africa and, before extinction, to areas of eastern Europe and Asia: not to the Americas). But Whitaker also describes one of the 'strange' (unfamiliar) creatures he has encountered:

the female Possown, which will let forth her young out of her bellie, and take them up into her bellie againe at her pleasure without hurt to her selfe, neither think this to be a Travellers tale, but the very truth; for nature hath framed her fit for that service, my eyes have been witnes unto it, and we have sent of them and their young ones into *England*. (Whitaker 1613: 41)

The "Possown" is the opossum, an animal currently classified as a marsupial. To Alexander Whitaker, however, this word - 'marsupial' - would have been meaningless. As a designation of a particular class of mammal differentiated "by the bearing of very immature young which are typically nursed in an abdominal pouch" (*OED*) this term was first used in the early nineteenth century (and the term 'mammal', of course, only entered usage in Carolus Linnaeus' *Systema Naturae* in 1758; that is 145 years after Whitaker wrote about the opossum). For Whitaker the possown was a remarkable

animal, more like a creature from a fictional text - the “traveller’s tale” he mentions and refuses - than natural history. In fact, a creature very like Whitaker’s possum might be found in just such a fictional traveller’s tale half a century later. In *Paradise Lost* (1667) John Milton relates Satan’s journey from Pandemonium to Paradise and tells of Satan’s encounter with the half-woman, half-serpent, Sin, at the gates of Hell:

about her middle round
A cry of hell hounds never ceasing barked
With wide Cerberian mouths full loud, and rung
A hideous peal: yet, when they list, would creep,
If aught disturbed their noise, into her womb,
And kennel there, yet there still barked and howled,
Within unseen. (Milton 1968: II, lines 653-659)

These “hell hounds” are the monstrous product of the incestuous rape of Sin by her son Death, and, as Sin herself narrates:

These yelling monsters that with ceaseless cry
Surround me, as thou sawest, hourly conceived
And hourly born, with sorrow infinite
To me, for when they list into the womb
That bred them they return, and howl and gnaw
My bowels, their repast; then bursting forth
Afresh with conscious terror vex me round,
That rest or intermission none I find. (Milton 1968: Book II, lines 795-802)

The source for this image that is suggested by Alastair Fowler, the editor of the finest modern edition of *Paradise Lost*, is Guillaume de Salluste Du Bartas’ *Du Bartas his devine weekes and workes*, first published in English in 1605. Here is written:

I feare the beast, bred in the bloodie Coast
Of *Canibals*, which thousand times (almost)
Re-whelpes her whelpes, and in her tender wombe,
She doth as oft her living brood re-toomb. (Du Bartas 1605: 201-2)

This animal, named in the margin as the “Chiurca”, is located, for Du Bartas, with the cannibals; and cannibals, more often than not in this period, were believed to live in the New World. The chiurca carries with her not the life-giving properties of the familiar bear, who licks her whelps into shape (Du Bartas 1605: 16), but rather the deathly qualities of the grave-like womb.

It is unsurprising in these terms that we can trace a direct link between the zoological novelty described by Alexander Whitaker and the mythological horror represented by John Milton. If animals are seen through the categories that already exist in, and organise the world, and if there is no category into which to place a strange creature then it is impossible to make sense of, to place, that creature and as a response the line between the natural and the supernatural, between animal and monster, might be traversed. It is as if when the facts appear to exceed the possibility of comprehension there are two choices: one, the category of the anomalous (a class of the unclassifiable) is invoked (this emerges again in a later reading of the opossum discussed below); or, as in Whitaker’s and Du Bartas’ work, fiction is invoked. The possum, or chiurca, becomes a symbol of the cannibalising nature of the New World; an image of the self-destructive

nature of sin in a world in which apparently natural and - importantly - civil constructs such as marriage are constantly breached in the uncivilised anarchy that many Europeans saw when they looked at the native peoples of the New World (see Cummings 1999).

Eventually both further empirical examination and the creation of a new classification allow the strange new creature to be placed within the realm of what is known. The wild, you might say, is caged within the taxonomy of the civil. But, of course, the mere existence of a category does not help to make sense of the exterior world in any simple terms. Classification does not simply label; as Friedrich Nietzsche argued in the second-half of the nineteenth century, categories construct meaning; they do not simply help to understand the already-existing fact:

If I make up the definition of a mammal, and then, after inspecting a camel, declare 'look, a mammal,' I have indeed brought a truth to light in this way, but it is a truth of limited value. That is to say, it is a thoroughly anthropomorphic truth which contains not a single point which would be 'true in itself' or really and universally valid apart from man. (Nietzsche 1979: 85)

Such a recognition - that the way in which we classify animals is not part of the natural order but is a human imposition on the natural world and is central to our understanding of that natural world - is commonplace, and is understood by those who perform the classification. In 1698, for example, the English anatomist Edward Tyson anatomised a female opossum and noted:

since it is an animal sui generis, and in several parts has a great resemblance to those of different species, I think a denomination might be best given to it, from that particular in which it is most distinguished from all others; which is that remarkable pouch or marsupium it has in the belly; into which, on any occasion of danger, it can receive its young: whence it may properly be denominated Marsupiale Americanum; and it seems best referrible to the vermine kind, as far as may be judged from this specimen, which is a female. (Tyson 1809: 248-9)

Tyson acknowledges that a new way of classifying is required because the animal before him challenges the classification system that he uses by its merging of so many different species; by its refusal to fit comfortably into only one class. And it is important that, for Tyson, the opossum is not simply to be regarded as imitative, despite its likeness to numerous other animals (it is likened, in his anatomy, to a pig, a human, a monkey, a squirrel and a cat). On the contrary, Tyson argues that the opossum is "an animal sui generis"; that is, it is peculiar, of its own kind. For this reason the *unique* nature of its pouch, rather than the shared nature of so many of its other features, forms the basis for the classification. Here the taxonomy is being made to fit the New World into the old, and as such it reveals the limitation - the Eurocentrism - of the old world's system of classification. (For later debates about the nature of the opossum and other marsupials see Ritvo 1997: 5-15)

The nature of the impact of such shifts in classification on human understanding is, I think, worth revisiting, and another moment from the seventeenth century will illustrate the point I wish to make. In 1680, eighteen years before his anatomy of the opossum, Edward Tyson performed another dissection for the Royal Society; this time of a "Porpess". For Tyson, writing more than seventy years before Linnaeus' classificatory system, the natural world was at its most straightforward organised around three key classes: creatures of air, land and water. The porpoise is a creature of the water and is

therefore a “fish”. It is with these apparently unquestionable facts in mind that Tyson performs his anatomy, and takes note of the oddities that he is seeing:

The structure of the *viscera* and inward Parts have so great an Analogy and resemblance to those of Quadrupeds, that we find them here almost the same. The greatest difference from them seems to be in the external shape, and wanting feet. But here too we observed that when the skin and flesh was taken off, the fore-fins did very well represent an Arm, there being the *Scapula*, an *os Humeri*, the *Ulna*, and *Radius*, the bones of the *Carpus*, the Metacarp, and 5 *digiti* curiously joynted; the Tayle too does very well supply the defect of feet both in swimming as also leaping in the water, as if both hinder-feet were colligated into one, though it consisted not of articulated bones but rather Tendons and Cartilages. (Tyson 1680: 16-17)

Tyson continues his anatomy, looking at the animal’s internal organs: kidney, bladder, stomach etc. He then turns to what is, clearly, the most troubling part of this fish’s anatomy:

This leads me to the Examination of the *Organs of Generation* in this Animal, which no less than the other parts did extremely imitate those of Quadrupeds; and even in the whole dissection I could easilier imagine I was cutting up a Dog, a Swine, a Calf or any other terrestrial Brute, than an inhabitant of the watery Element. (Tyson 1680: 26)

What, Tyson seems to be wondering, am I seeing? Is this a fish or a quadruped; a creature of the water or the land? Historian of science, F.J. Cole, writing in 1944, is clear on Tyson’s intellectual failure here:

after carefully reviewing evidence which demonstrated conspicuously that the porpoise *must* be a mammal, Tyson nowhere has the courage to declare that it is *not* a fish, for once attaching more importance to habitat than to structure. He says he should *like* to think it was a mammal, but further than this he did not go. (Cole 1944: 201)

It is, I think, Cole’s terminology that is problematic here. Clearly Tyson did not have the category ‘mammal’ to use in 1680 because it had not yet been created and so Cole’s assertion that Tyson “should *like* to think it was a mammal” is wrong. But Cole is surely right to note that Tyson stares at the possibility of a new class of creature but refuses to acknowledge it. The porpoise, despite all the evidence to the contrary, remains a fish, simply because it lives in water.

A parallel moment of observation and what we might term the observer’s categorical blindness can be found almost seventy years earlier in William Shakespeare’s play *The Tempest* (1611). Here, Trinculo, a survivor of the tempest of the title, arrives on the ‘new world’ of Prospero’s island and comes upon the monstrous slave, Caliban, half-hidden under his cloak. Just as the Spanish and English colonialists in the New World debated the nature of the natives - were they human or not? (see Hanke 1959; and Pagden 1982) - so Trinculo wonders what it is he sees lying before him:

What have we here, a man or a fish? Dead or alive? - A fish, he smells like a fish; a very ancient and fish-like smell; a kind of not-of-the-newest poor-john. A strange fish! (Shakespeare 1988: 2.2, 24-27)

The myths of the monstrosity of the inhabitants of faraway lands had travelled across history from Pliny in the first century C.E. and inform Trinculo's assessment of the being he sees lying before him (see Friedman 1981). Writing in the mid-fourteenth century, for example, Sir John Mandeville stated of one group of islands he has apparently visited (it is more likely that he, if there was a single individual who was Mandeville, read lots of books than that he actually did any travelling):

There is a race of great stature, like giants, foul and horrible to look at; they have one eye only, in the middle of their foreheads. They eat raw flesh and raw fish. In another part, there are ugly folk without heads, who have eyes in each shoulder; their mouths are round, like a horseshoe, in the middle of their chest. In yet another part there are headless men whose eyes and mouths are on their backs. (Mandeville 1983: 137)

It is this kind of being that Trinculo *expects* to see, and it is this myth of monstrous humans that informs his question, "What have we here, a man or a fish?" But, as Trinculo's investigation of this strange being continues the failure of the classificatory system he is using to make sense of this new world is made clear: "Legged like a man," he exclaims, "and his fins like arms!" (Shakespeare 1988: 2.2, 33-34) If this creature has legs like a man, and has fins that look like arms, doesn't that mean that he has legs and arms, and no fins at all? Doesn't it mean that the creature Trinculo is observing is simply a human? In fact, the monster Trinculo sees is not the creature on the ground but the creature in his own imagination. It is the point from which the observation has taken place that is the problem; it is Trinculo's categorical blindness that has created the monster.

2. *The Historicity of Viewing*

Why this foray into early modern intellectual history? My aim in introducing this special issue is to highlight a theme common to all of the essays that follow, and to underline an assumption shared by all of the writers whose work is included in this issue. The brief history of the European interpretation of the inhabitants - human and animal - of the New World reinforces, I think, the importance of context in the interpretation of any human encounter with an animal. It might seem absurd to us that observers would assume that the opossum's young crawled back up into her *womb*, but that is perhaps not only because we have made technical advances that make observing such animals easier; it is also, surely, because we have the category 'marsupial' to think with. The link between Whitaker's empiricism and Milton's poetry is made because both men - although there were fifty years between them - were thinking with very similar categories: and a pouch - a kind of *external* womb - was not something they had encountered before.

It is this kind of understanding that I think can be traced in all of the six essays included in this issue. The context these writers focus on can be historical - *when* the encounter took place; it can be intellectual - *how* the encounter was understood to happen; or it can be geographical - *where* it took place. Whichever framework is addressed, the encounter with the animal can only be understood through an understanding of its context. This sounds straightforward, but the implications of such a statement are, perhaps, worth pausing over. One way of outlining the issues at stake is to turn to another moment when context was cited as significant; not to the early modern period once again, but to early modern studies.

In his seminal essay, “The Circulation of Social Energy” (1988) the New Historicist critic Stephen Greenblatt argued for the importance of history in the reading of literary texts and he sets out seven “abjurations” for the critic:

1. There can be no appeals to genius as the sole origin of the energies of great art.
2. There can be no motiveless creation.
3. There can be no transcendent or timeless or unchanging representation.
4. There can be no autonomous artifacts.
5. There can be no expression without an origin and an object, a *from* and a *for*.
6. There can be no art without social energy.
7. There can be no spontaneous generation of social energy. (Greenblatt 1988, 12)

For Greenblatt, “social energy” is a primarily rhetorical energy by which literary materials, in particular, can be seen to succeed in their power: it is, he writes, “associated with repeatable forms of pleasure and interest, with the capacity to arouse disquiet, pain, fear, the beating of the heart, pity, laughter, tension, relief, wonder.” (Greenblatt 1988: 6) We might assume that such arousals are particular to fictions, and that the factual nature of the observation, classification and representation of animals would require a very different “energy”; but, as some of the essays that follow in this special issue show, reactions such as fear, pity and wonder remain central to the human response to animals; even when those responses are framed as ‘scientific’. Thus, where Greenblatt is writing of literature - in particular he is looking at the plays of Shakespeare - we can, I think, usefully adapt his ideas to think about human-animal relations. Where Greenblatt writes of art, we might think about the processes of observation, classification and representation. In this sense, we can transpose his abjurations for the literary critic into the following abjurations for the analyst of human-animal relations:

1. There can be no appeals to nature as the sole origin of the energies of the human observation, classification and representation of the natural world.
2. There can be no motiveless creation in the human observation, classification and representation of the natural world.
3. There can be no transcendent or timeless or unchanging observation, classification or representation of the natural world.
4. There can be no autonomous artifacts: all observations, classifications and representations are embedded in wider historical, social, intellectual and cultural structures.
5. There can be no observation, classification, or representation of the natural world without an origin and an object, a *from* and a *for*.
6. There can be no human observation, classification and representation of the natural world without social energy.
7. There can be no spontaneous generation of social energy.

But it is not simply that observations, classifications and representations of animals are to be embedded in their own histories. As Louis E. Montrose, another New Historicist critic, has proposed: “The post-structuralist orientation to history ... may be characterized chiasmically, as a reciprocal concern with the historicity of texts and the textuality of history.” (Montrose 1989: 20) For those of us interested in animals, we can

translate this to think about the simultaneous historicity of observations, classifications and representations and the textuality - the constructed-nature - of all encounters with the natural world. The representations of animals we are so familiar with, that come in so many areas of academic work - from biology and zoology through philosophy to literary studies, history, and film studies - are all constructions of their wider culture *and are also themselves constructing that culture*. Jacques Derrida argued that that human “Interpretive decisions (in all their metaphysical, ethical, juridical, and political consequences) ... depend on what is presupposed by the general singular of this word *Animal*” (Derrida 2002: 409): that it is the construction of this category (existing in absolute opposition to ‘human’) that has allowed for philosophy. We can likewise argue that it is through our observation, classification and representation of animals that so much of what we understand as culture, ideas, emotions have been created. We make animals, you might say, but animals simultaneously make us. As Cary Wolfe has argued: “the other-than-human resides at the very core of the human itself, not as the untouched, ethical antidote to reason but as part of reason itself.” (Wolfe 2003: 17)

It is for this reason that this special issue, “Viewing Animals” is important. The ways in which we look at animals - now and in the past and in the future - are central to the ways in which we live with them, think with them, use them. If, as Nigel Rothfels argues, ‘elephant’ can have such varied meanings, what is an elephant? A simple definition is hard to come by. If the responses of rabbits to the death of a companion are so varied, as Julie Smith shows, then doesn’t that, likewise, make any simplistic classification of rabbits problematic? But, the interest can be reversed: we can look at *interpretations* of human-animal relations as well. Jonathan Burt looks at John Berger’s seminal essay, “Why Look at Animals?” and finds in it an often ignored problematic historical and critical construction of both the past and the notion of looking. Brett Mizelle’s study of the display of animals in the early American republic reminds us that there were, in the past, very different ways of looking, and writing about looking at, animals. Moving us back to the present, Erica Sheen’s study of the debates surrounding the Disney live-action films *101 Dalmations* and *102 Dalmations* explores the ways in which viewing a fiction might – or might not - have an impact upon living with real dalmations. The final essay in this special issue - Charles Bergman’s - takes us beyond looking at animals, and asks about the status of remote radio telemetry on human relations with animals. What does it mean that, with this new technology, we can watch animals without even seeing them?

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