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'Penser commence peut-être là': Proust and Derrida on Animals, Ethics, and Mortality

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‘PENSER COMMENCE PEUT-ETRE LÀ’:  
PROUST AND DERRIDA ON  
ANIMALS, ETHICS, AND MORTALITY

*The Human Animal*

In *A la recherche du temps perdu* animal features are frequently ascribed to humans.<sup>1</sup> Already in the *ouverture*, the narrator compares his state of somnolence to ‘le sentiment de l’existence comme il peut frémir au fond d’un animal’ (I (1987), 5), and it is this ‘simplicité première’ (I, 5) of the animal-like state of liminal self-awareness that becomes the receptacle for the experience of involuntary memory. Moreover, hardly any of the other characters in the novel make it to the end of *Le Temps retrouvé* without having been associated with particular animals. The Guermantes family is repeatedly compared to birds,<sup>2</sup> Françoise reminds the narrator of ‘une guêpe fousseuse’ (I, 122), and when Albertine lives with the narrator, he comments on her annoying habit of entering ‘par toutes les portes ouvertes chez moi comme un chien’ (IV (1989), 488). In *Le Temps retrouvé* the aged members of the faubourg Saint-Germain remind the narrator of ‘baleines’ (IV, 521), and he himself is described as an ‘étrange humain’ who is, when awaking, ‘immobile comme un hibou’ (III (1988), 371). The limits between human and animal are fluid. A writer is compared to an ‘amateur d’ichtologie humaine’ (II (1988), 42), and in *Sodome et Gomorrhe* the narrator observes that a human can undergo constant transformation into ‘un homme, un homme-oiseau, un homme-poisson, un homme-insecte’ (III, 8). These zoological comparisons are also often presented as caricatures that emphasize particular character traits and thereby allow the narrator to classify others as part of a larger biological species, such as, for example, when he and his grandmother are introduced to the snobbish Princesse de Luxembourg, who treats them like ‘des bêtes sympathiques qui eussent passé la tête vers elle, à travers un grillage, au jardin d’Acclimatation’ (II, 59).<sup>3</sup> This zoomorphism frequently produces an undeniably comic effect that is often linked to an underlying social commentary,<sup>4</sup> but there is also another undertone to the Proustian human/animal relation.

<sup>1</sup> Marcel Proust, *A la recherche du temps perdu*, ed. by Yves Tadié and others, 4 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 1987–89); references to this edition are hereafter integrated into the text.

<sup>2</sup> Bird imagery is also applied to Gilberte, Albertine, and the *petite bande*. See Victor E. Graham, *The Imagery of Proust* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1966), pp. 115–18.

<sup>3</sup> André Benhaïm’s article ‘Proust’s Singhalese Song (A Strange Little Story)’, in *The Strange M. Proust*, ed. by André Benhaïm (London: Legenda, 2009), pp. 57–70, relates this episode to Mme Blatin’s revealing exchanges with a Singhalese man in the Jardin d’Acclimation (II, 125–26) and thereby contributes to a discussion of ethics, alterity, and animal imagery in Proust, without, however, relating this to questions of mortality and physical suffering.

<sup>4</sup> See most recently Pascal Ifri, ‘Humour et métaphores animales chez Proust’, *Contemporary French and Francophone Studies*, 4 (2012), 535–42. Ifri explores the comic effect of attributing

Two scenes in particular suggest a more complex ethical structure, namely Françoise's killing of a chicken in *Combray* and the noticeable accumulation of animal metaphors in passages that describe the narrator's grandmother's illness and subsequent death in *Le Côté de Guermantes*. While the former scene has been read largely as an illustration of Françoise's sadistic cruelty,<sup>5</sup> criticism has often concentrated on the latter passage's imagery that pertains to mythology and statuary. What deserves our renewed attention, however, is how closely Proust's use of animal imagery is linked to physical suffering, vulnerability, and mortality in both scenes, and how it thereby questions the ethical implications of the distinction between human and animal.<sup>6</sup> This article sets out to examine the ways in which Proust's text might contribute to philosophical debates in which it is argued that animals need to be more firmly integrated within ethical considerations. My contention here is to scrutinize Proust's use of animal imagery in connection with the physical suffering and death of another and to ask how this discourse informs and reinvigorates debates about alterity that have been explored in Derrida's *L'Animal que donc je suis*.<sup>7</sup>

Literature and philosophy have long analysed the relationship of humans and animals, and this relationship has been particularly relevant to contemporary, predominantly Anglo-American, debates about vegetarianism and animal ethics, such as, for example, in the—arguably very different—works of Peter Singer, John M. Coetzee, Stanley Cavell, Stephen Mulhall, or Jonathan S. Foer's best-seller *Eating Animals*.<sup>8</sup> In recent decades animals have also become

animal features in the light of social criticism; however, he also highlights the tragic nature of that effect, 'un rire tragique, comme celui de Molière' (p. 535).

<sup>5</sup> This is not to say that sadism is understood as the only character trait attributed to Françoise in this scene, as Astrid Winter points out in *Die Figur der Françoise in Marcel Prousts 'A la recherche du temps perdu'* (Marburg: Tectum, 2003). However, the scene has been read as an illustration of Françoise's character rather than of the human/animal relation in Proust's novel.

<sup>6</sup> In her study *Écriture et imaginaire de la mort dans l'œuvre de Marcel Proust* (Paris: Champion, 2007) Aude Le Roux-Kieken devotes a perceptive chapter to animal imagery which announces death and ageing, and also assesses the imagery of birds in connection with Albertine's death. However, she bypasses the philosophical questions that the connection between animal metaphors and human suffering foregrounds (pp. 247–338). When Le Roux-Kieken does address 'suffering' in her study, this is in connection with statuary images and *durcissement* (pp. 368–73). For an article exploring the links between animality and desire see Florence Godeau, 'Quelques réflexions sur l'animalité dans *A la recherche du temps perdu*: de l'hybridité de "l'être de fuite" à l'impossible domestication du désir', *Bulletin Marcel Proust*, 61 (2011), 63–72. For a general analysis of the representation of animals in Proust, though unconnected with mortality, see Sigbrit Swahn, 'Le Bestiaire de Proust', *Studia Neophilologica*, 80 (2008), 236–42, and Anne Simon's entry 'Bestiaire' in the *Dictionnaire Marcel Proust*, ed. by Annick Bouillaguet and Brian Rogers (Paris: Champion, 2004), pp. 139–41. A perspicacious article that takes into account philosophical perspectives on the human/animal distinction in Proust is Raymonde Coudert, "'Sale(s) Bête(s)' et autres animaux de la Recherche', *Textuel*, 45 (2004), 197–216.

<sup>7</sup> Jacques Derrida, *L'Animal que donc je suis* (Paris: Galilée, 2006). All further references to this book will be given parenthetically in the body of the text.

<sup>8</sup> For a selection of various works centred around non-human animals and ethics see (in

a more important topic in Continental, particularly French, philosophy—Elisabeth de Fontenay's *Sans offenser le genre humain: réflexions sur la cause animale* is only one of the most recent examples.<sup>9</sup> What interests me here, however, is less the practical implications of an ethical debate, but rather how the close connection that Proust establishes between animal and human suffering questions the terms by which human and animal come to be distinguished. A brief detour via Emmanuel Levinas's surprising marginalization of the animal will allow me to outline why Derridean thought breaks with earlier philosophical approaches by prioritizing the question of animal suffering and mortality. Proustian depictions of human and animal suffering can be usefully juxtaposed with Derridean thought on animals, this article claims, because *A la recherche* links the ethical implications of the human/animal relation to an ontology of physical suffering. It thereby exposes a different and perhaps more philosophically complex representation of animals than its frequently comic metaphors and their social commentary might lead us to assume.

### *Dogs and Cats*

In the wake of the Second World War, French critical discourses have emphasized our responsibility to respect, maintain, and grant otherness. Levinas's work inaugurates this continuing effort to situate ethical responsibility in an encounter with otherness.<sup>10</sup> Such an encounter with what he terms the 'visage d'autrui' elicits an inevitable ethical response in human beings.<sup>11</sup> It is within this context that animals have started to take on an ever more important role, since the figure of the animal as the epitome of the radical Other pushes questions of alterity to the limits of an often anthropocentric framework. Since respect for otherness is the imperative at the core of Levinas's ethics, it would

(chronological order) Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation* (London: Pimlico, 1995); John Maxwell Coetzee, *The Lives of Animals* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001); Stanley Cavell and others, *Philosophy and Animal Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008); Stephen Mulhall, *The Wounded Animal: J. M. Coetzee and the Difficulty of Reality* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009); and Jonathan Safran Foer, *Eating Animals* (New York: Little, Brown and Co., 2009).

<sup>9</sup> For a collection of writings by French theorists commented on by contemporary Anglo-American philosophers see *Animal Philosophy: Ethics and Identity*, ed. by Matthew Calarco and Peter Atterton (London: Continuum, 2004). Contemporary works that examine the status of the animal with a particular emphasis on French literature and philosophy include Elisabeth de Fontenay, *Le Silence des bêtes: la philosophie à l'épreuve de l'animalité* (Paris: Fayard, 1998); ead., *Sans offenser le genre humain: réflexions sur la cause animale* (Paris: Michel, 2008); Dominique Lestel, *L'Animalité: essai sur le statut de l'humain* (Paris: L'Herne, 2007); id., *L'Animal est l'avenir de l'homme: munitions pour ceux qui veulent (toujours) défendre les animaux* (Paris: Fayard, 2007); Jean-Marie Schaeffer, *La Fin de l'exception humaine* (Paris: Gallimard, 2007); and Anne Simon's CNRS project ANIMOTS, where intersections between literature and philosophy are considered: <<http://animots.hypotheses.org>> [accessed 3 September 2015].

<sup>10</sup> See Emmanuel Levinas, *Totalité et infini: essai sur l'extériorité* (Paris: Kluwer Academic, 1971).

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 43. For a discussion of the 'visage' see particularly the section 'Le visage et l'extériorité', pp. 203–83.

seem that the animal—as fundamentally Other—should share in this understanding of alterity. And yet, the little textual evidence that we have suggests that Levinas—despite the memorable story about the dog Bobby which he tells in *Difficile liberté*<sup>12</sup>—is reluctant to extend the significance of the face to the animal.<sup>13</sup>

In this story about Bobby, Levinas recounts that as a Jewish prisoner of war in Nazi Germany he found himself with other inmates in a forest commando unit. Protected by French uniforms from the worst of Nazi violence, the inmates were nonetheless treated as ‘une quasi-humanité, une bande de singes’.<sup>14</sup>

Et voici que, vers le milieu d’une longue captivité — pour quelques courtes semaines et avant que les sentinelles ne l’eussent chassé — un chien errant entre dans notre vie. Il vient du jour se joindre à la tourbe, alors que, sous bonne garde, elle rentrait du travail. Il vivotait dans quelque coin sauvage, aux alentours du camp. Mais nous l’appelions Bobby, d’un nom exotique, comme il convient à un chien chéri. Il apparaissait aux rassemblements matinaux et nous attendait au retour, sautillant et aboyant gaiement. Pour lui—c’était incontestable—nous fûmes des hommes.<sup>15</sup>

Even if suffering does not enter directly into the discussion here, as Levinas does not attribute qualities to the dog that would enable it to empathize with the inmates, the dog is the only being that protects the humanity of the human–animals that the inmates have become. Bearing this story in mind, it is therefore surprising that when asked in a later interview whether he thought that an animal can have a face, Levinas turns, as Matthew Calarco notes, ‘agnostic’:<sup>16</sup> ‘The human face is completely different, and only afterwards do we discover the face of an animal. I don’t know if a snake has a face. I can’t answer that question.’<sup>17</sup> He does, however, concede that animals suffer, and yet it is only because ‘we, as humans, know what suffering is that we can have this [ethical] obligation [to the animal]’.<sup>18</sup> Even if Levinas does not a priori exclude animals from the realm of the ethical, they constitute a grey zone in his ethics, and whereas suffering and mortality throughout his work are

<sup>12</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, ‘Nom d’un chien ou le droit naturel’, in *Difficile liberté* (Paris: Michel, 1976), pp. 199–202.

<sup>13</sup> Matthew Calarco explores this paradox, namely that ‘although Levinas himself is for the most part unabashedly and dogmatically anthropocentric, the underlying logic of his thought permits no such anthropocentrism’, in his chapter ‘Facing the Other Animal: Levinas’ in *Zoographies: The Question of the Animal from Heidegger to Derrida* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), pp. 55–78 (p. 55).

<sup>14</sup> ‘Nom d’un chien’, p. 201.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 202.

<sup>16</sup> Calarco, *Zoographies*, p. 68.

<sup>17</sup> ‘The Paradox of Morality: An Interview with Emmanuel Levinas’, conducted by Tamra Wright, Peter Hughes, and Alison Ainley, trans. by Andrew Benjamin and Tamra Wright, in *The Provocation of Levinas*, ed. by Robert Bernasconi and David Wood (London: Routledge, 1988), pp. 168–80 (pp. 171–72). The interview was first published in English.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 172.

related to the face of the Other, animals play a decidedly marginal role in this conception of ethics.<sup>19</sup>

In *L'Animal que donc je suis* Derrida remarks on this oddity in Levinasian thought, which, as he argues, constitutes 'le lieu d'une grave inquiétude' for him (p. 30).<sup>20</sup> He claims that the anthropocentric nature of Levinas's 'visage' thereby epitomizes a trend within Continental philosophy which Levinas shares with Kant, Heidegger, and Lacan, namely the tendency to understand the animal as a 'théorème' and thereby to refuse to take the experience of seeing an animal and of being seen by an animal into account (p. 32). *L'Animal que donc je suis* can be understood as an attempt to extract philosophical thinking about animals from such an anthropocentric framework and thereby paves the way for an ethics of alterity that would include non-human otherness. There is for a start no such thing as 'the animal' for Derrida. When discussing the feeling of shame arising from being naked in front of his cat, he specifies: 'Je dois le préciser tout de suite, le chat dont je parle est un chat réel, vraiment, croyez-moi, *un petit chat*. Ce n'est pas une figure du chat. Il n'entre pas dans la chambre en silence pour allégoriser tous les chats de la terre' (p. 20). Derrida is not interested in speaking of 'the animal', 'une appellation que des hommes ont instituée, un nom qu'ils se sont donné le droit et l'autorité de donner à l'autre vivant' (p. 43), and unlike Levinas, for whom 'the being of animals is a struggle for life. A struggle for life without ethics',<sup>21</sup> the gaze of this particular cat, and the otherness that emanates from this gaze, is sufficient to qualify animals as beings which must be taken into ethical consideration.

This does not mean, however, that Derrida denies a distinction between animal and human. On the contrary, 'ce regard dit "animal" me donne à voir la limite abyssale de l'humain: l'inhumain ou l'anhumain, les fins de l'homme, à savoir le passage des frontières depuis lequel l'homme ose s'annoncer à lui-même' (p. 30). What Derrida questions is therefore not the human/animal distinction *per se*, but the grounds on which this distinction is established.<sup>22</sup> Derrida proposes that many classical philosophers have argued that the *ability* to think and respond rather than merely react is what distinguishes human and non-human animals, and his goal is to question the certainty with which this line between reaction and response has been established (*Animal*, p. 172). His insistence on animal vulnerability and mortality is therefore an attempt

<sup>19</sup> See Peter Atterton, 'Ethical Cynicism', in *Animal Philosophy*, pp. 51–61; Laurence Simmons, 'Shame, Levinas's Dog, Derrida's Cat (and Some Fish)', in *Knowing Animals*, ed. by Laurence Simmons and Philipp Armstrong (Leiden: Brill, 2007), pp. 27–42.

<sup>20</sup> See also Derrida, 'Violence et métaphysique: essai sur la pensée d'Emmanuel Levinas', in *L'Écriture et la différence* (Paris: Seuil, 1967), pp. 117–228.

<sup>21</sup> Levinas, 'The Paradox of Morality', p. 172.

<sup>22</sup> See Michel Naas, 'Derrida's Flair (For the Animals to Follow...)', *Research in Phenomenology*, 40 (2010), 219–42 (p. 233).

to reframe this reaction/response dichotomy. Referring to Jeremy Bentham, Derrida claims that 'la question *préalable* et *décisive* serait de savoir si les animaux *peuvent souffrir*' (p. 48, emphasis original). This constitutes a crucial reversal of the question at stake, and yet it does not mean that Derrida aims to merge human and animal identities. What is crucial, according to Derrida, is rather that animal suffering *precedes* these concerns about reaction/response, as it is not an 'ability' but rather an 'inability not to'. Animals, like humans, are incapable of preventing their mortality. The result of this argument does not call into question the human/animal distinction, but questions why *logos* should be prioritized as a distinguishing feature by proposing an alternative mode of ethical thinking that emanates from mortality:

Là se loge, comme la façon la plus radicale de penser la finitude que nous partageons avec les animaux, la mortalité qui appartient à la finitude même de la vie, à l'expérience de la compassion, à la possibilité de partager la possibilité de cet im-pouvoir, la possibilité de cette impossibilité, l'angoisse de cette vulnérabilité et la vulnérabilité de cette angoisse. (p. 49)

#### *The Language of Chickens, Rabbits, and a Mourning Mother*

The numerous ascriptions of animal characteristics to humans in *A la recherche* might lead us to believe that Proust undoes a distinction that Continental philosophy, according to Derrida, has tried to uphold. Through my reading of two passages from *A la recherche*, I would like to argue first, that there is no evidence that the accumulation of animals in Proust's text leads to any practical implications of applied ethics, and second, that *A la recherche* does not theoretically question, but nonetheless shifts and subtly challenges the human/animal distinction by presenting physical suffering as a mode of being shared by animal and human. Proust never extracts any practical implications from the human/animal relationship, and like Derrida, he never 'undoes' the animal/human distinction, and yet, his positioning of mortality as the common denominator of human and animal life blurs the clarity with which this distinction is drawn in the first place.

The first passage is Françoise's memorable killing of a chicken at the very beginning of the novel in Combray:

Quand je fus en bas, elle [Françoise] était en train, dans l'arrière-cuisine qui donnait sur la basse-cour, de tuer *un poulet* qui, par sa résistance désespérée et bien naturelle, mais accompagnée par Françoise hors d'elle, tandis qu'elle cherchait à lui fendre le cou sous l'oreille, des cris de '*sale bête! sale bête!*', mettait la sainte douceur et l'onction de notre servante un peu moins en lumière qu'il n'eût fait, au dîner du lendemain, par sa peau brodée d'or comme une chasuble et son jus précieux égoutté d'un ciboire. Quand il fut mort, Françoise recueillit le sang qui coulait sans noyer sa rancune, eut encore un sursaut de colère, et regardant *le cadavre* de son ennemi, dit une dernière fois: '*Sale*



*bête!* Je remontai tout tremblant; j'aurais voulu qu'on mît Françoise tout de suite à la porte. Mais qui m'eût fait des boules aussi chaudes, du café aussi parfumé, et même... *ces poulets?* (I, 120, emphasis added)

This scene of voyeurism aligns an important variation in vocabulary. Derrida specifies that the animal he is talking about is 'un petit chat', and in a similar manner the narrator individualizes the 'poulet', which is opposed to Françoise's murderous frenzy and her pejorative generalization of the 'sale bête'. *Animal*, from the Latin *animus*, emphasizes the breathing and living quality that pertains to both animal and human, a being characterized as 'doué de certaines facultés'.<sup>23</sup> Instead of highlighting a similarity or even a certain endowment, *bête*, a word of more obscure origin and slightly earlier in use than *animal*, focuses on difference. It is defined as 'être appartenant au règne animal autre que l'homme' and has had a pejorative application as an adjective when applied to humans from early in its history.<sup>24</sup> I insist on terminology here, because the passage's chiasmic structure relies on climactic vocabulary shifts that put mortality at the very centre of its composition. At the heart of the passage is the 'cadavre' framed by Françoise's bloodthirsty screams, which are further framed by the 'poulet' at the beginning and end of the passage (in italics in the quotation)—with the crucial difference that the first evocation of the chicken still pertains to a living animal while in its second usage the word has come to signify dead flesh, nothing more than tasty meat on the narrator's plate.

The narrator acknowledges animal suffering in this scene, but this does not trigger a questioning of the human/animal distinction as such. Rather it accentuates what Susan Sontag terms the crucial distinction between acknowledging and actually protesting against suffering.<sup>25</sup> While it would be unjust

<sup>23</sup> See Centre National de Ressources Textuelles et Lexicales <<http://www.cnrtl.fr/etymologie/animal>> [accessed 5 September 2015].

<sup>24</sup> In *A la recherche* there are sixty-nine references to *animal* and seventy-eight references to *bête*: see Base textuelle Frantext <<http://www.frantext.fr/>> [accessed 12 June 2014]. This does not include particular animals that are mentioned, but it highlights that Proust has no particular preference. 'Bête' is usually used more pejoratively, consonant with the etymology of the word. The common English translation 'creature' is misleading as it does not capture the lack of reason etymologically associated with 'bête'. Moreover, while 'bête' emphasizes the difference between human and animal, 'creature' and 'créature' highlight 'l'homme par opposition à Dieu'. See Centre National de Ressources Textuelles et Lexicales <<http://www.cnrtl.fr/etymologie/bete>>, <<http://www.cnrtl.fr/etymologie/creature>> [accessed 5 September 2015]. The difficulty of translating *bête*/*bêtise*, and Derrida's own take on the word, are usefully discussed in *The Derrida Wordbook*, ed. by Maria-Daniella Dick and Julian Wolfreys (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), pp. 17–20 and 364–65. With regard to Derrida's privileging of the concept of nudity in his understanding of animals (*Animal*, p. 20), it is interesting to note that while most dictionaries of etymology insist on the obscure origin of the Latin *bēstia*, F. E. J. Valpy explicitly links it to the Latin *vestis*, 'as *bestiae* do not so properly feed as clothe men' (F. E. J. Valpy, *An Etymological Dictionary of the Latin Language* (London: Baldwin, 1828), p. 530).

<sup>25</sup> Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2003),

to equate the narrator's reaction with a complete 'failure of empathy',<sup>26</sup> what the narrator experiences is, at most, a faraway concern for the chicken. The narrator's wish to see Françoise dismissed does not push him towards vegetarianism or at least a changed relationship to his food. On the contrary, the meat's taste pertains to Françoise's more virtuous side, 'l'arôme de cette chair qu'elle savait rendre si onctueuse et si tendre n'étant pour moi que le propre parfum d'une de ses vertus' (I, 120), and, pursuing the moral and religious vocabulary, the cooked animal's delicious juiciness is compared to Christ's blood tasted during Mass. The animal's violent death is thereby presented as a necessary sacrifice to promote the narrator's pleasure, and, as he remarks, he is not alone in opting to pay this price in order to participate in the cruel ritual: 'en réalité, ce lâche calcul, tout le monde avait eu à le faire comme moi' (I, 120). Indeed, the narrator's entire family partakes and is complicit in the *arrière-cuisine* crime. And the execution's spatial banishment from the primary living space of the family further emphasizes that violence is acknowledged and yet hidden from the immediate moral sphere of those who thereby silently accept it. While the scene begins by depicting the narrator moved by animal suffering and willing to act on the dying animal's behalf, it ends with a confession of cowardice—or at least self-interest, whereby the previous acknowledgement of animal suffering heightens the cruelty at stake.

This scene, however, is incomplete if its depiction of animal suffering is not juxtaposed with human suffering, which the following paragraphs elaborate with regard to Françoise's sadistic treatment of the Giotto-like kitchen maid. The chicken's slaughter itself might be read as reflecting the accepted methods of animal slaughter at the time, and it thereby might sustain the argument that Françoise's cruelty derives from an assumption either that animals cannot suffer or that their suffering is not comparable to human suffering. However, it is not only her accompanying commentary that illustrates a sense of delight in the animal's suffering, but also Françoise's heartless treatment of the kitchen maid directly linked to the scene, which emphasizes that more is at stake. The kitchen maid is 'très malade de son accouchement récent' (I, 120), and Françoise's refusal to help her when she is experiencing 'd'atroces coliques' (I, 121) is paradoxically accompanied by her being moved to tears when she reads about the theoretical description of the symptoms of the illness later on (I, 121). Then again, Françoise will drop everything if her grandson is 'un peu enrhumé du cerveau' (I, 122), and this inability to experience pity for anyone beyond her in-group highlights that in her selective cruelty—the

p. 40. While Sontag's discussion of the voyeurism at stake in our witnessing of pain—via photography—can be interestingly juxtaposed with this scene, the political context of her work and its focus on media representation are not primarily relevant here.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 8.

flip side of her ‘amour des siens’ (I, 122)—Françoise makes no distinction between animal and human. And this cruelty itself comes to be associated with a human–animal nature, when Françoise’s discriminatory behaviour, maternally protecting some and cruelly rejecting others, is compared to that of the ‘guêpe fousseuse’.<sup>27</sup> This complicates the earlier scene and the human/animal distinction, as Françoise’s cruelty towards the chicken no longer epitomizes a human lack of empathy towards an animal, but comes to represent a characteristic of her inherent animality.<sup>28</sup>

But despite the narrator’s admitting to his ‘lâche calcul’ in order to guarantee his weekly serving of chicken, the witnessed suffering does have a longer-term effect with regard to animal suffering. In *A l’ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs* the narrator does not attempt to preserve an animal destined to end on his plate, but urges Françoise to grant an ‘easier’ death to the rabbit she is preparing for M. Norpois:

Car j’avais fait promettre à Françoise, pacifiste mais cruelle, qu’elle ne ferait pas trop souffrir le lapin qu’elle avait à tuer et je n’avais pas eu de nouvelles de cette mort; Françoise m’assura qu’elle s’était passée le mieux du monde et très rapidement: ‘J’ai jamais vu une bête comme ça; elle est morte sans dire seulement une parole, vous auriez dit qu’elle était muette.’ Peu au courant du langage des bêtes, j’alléguai que le lapin ne criait peut-être pas comme le poulet. ‘Attendez un peu voir, me dit Françoise indignée de mon ignorance, si les lapins ne crient pas autant comme les poulets. Ils ont même la voix bien plus forte.’ (I, 475)

The humanization of the animal with this hypothetical attribution of language is responsible for the comic tone of this passage, and Proust pushes this even

<sup>27</sup> For critical readings of the ‘guêpe fousseuse’ that also take account of Proust’s comparison of this animal with himself in a letter to his publisher see Thomas Klinkert, *Bewahren und löschen: Zur Proust-Rezeption bei Samuel Beckett, Claude Simon und Thomas Bernhard* (Tübingen: Narr, 1996), pp. 99–106; A. Le Roux [Kieken], ‘La Guêpe fousseuse ou l’imaginaire entomologique de Proust’, *Bulletin d’informations proustiennes*, 31 (2000), 123–30; ead., *Écriture*, pp. 297–338. Brigitte Mahuzier also addressed this issue in a conference paper, ‘Proust, la guerre et la guêpe fousseuse’, 20th and 21st Century French and Francophone Studies Conference, University of California, San Francisco, 2 April 2011. Furthermore, Françoise’s character, which is described as combining sadism with selective empathy, evokes studies on hysteria and gender; see e.g. Janet Beizer, *Ventriloquized Bodies: Narratives of Hysteria in Nineteenth-Century France* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994).

<sup>28</sup> This is not to suggest, however, that the narrator looks disdainfully at Françoise’s animality. In *A l’ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs* he compares Françoise’s gaze to ‘le regard intelligent et bon d’un chien à qui on sait pourtant que sont étrangères toutes les conceptions des hommes’ (II, 11), yet it should be noted, as Edward J. Hughes does, that this, ‘while signalling a note of some condescension on the part of the Narrator, perhaps more importantly confirms his profound interest in the nature of Françoise’s consciousness’ (*Marcel Proust: A Study in the Quality of Awareness* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p. 73). Hughes quotes the full passage, in which the narrator, while first ascribing the features of a dog-like gaze to Françoise, then moves on to maintain that ‘she is still one of the straying, scattered members of the “famille sainte”, a long lost relative, so to speak, of the “plus hautes intelligences”’ (p. 73). Françoise’s lack of reason and reasoning capacities is thus not condescendingly dismissed, but instead highlights the narrator’s inherent ambivalence regarding his servant’s animality.

further when the narrator accepts the attribution of language to the rabbit, but confesses his general ignorance concerning the 'langage des bêtes'. Language, in this passage, seems to be primarily understood as those noises that precede death and give voice to suffering, but its comic register might lead us to align it with Wittgenstein's memorable remark, 'If a lion could talk, we could not understand it',<sup>29</sup> and its implication that a difference between human and animal does not necessarily mean that thinking or the use of language and *logos* can be denied to animals. Wittgenstein's contention, which is part of his private-language argument and its assumption that the meaning attributed to language is accessible only to a single subject, can be further related to Lacan, for whom language is always the discourse of the Other and thereby never fully accessible to the self. Wittgenstein excludes the Other from the language of the self and Lacan excludes the self from language, because it is the language of the Other, but both propose that a sense of meaning lies outside language itself. And the discussion between Françoise and the narrator concerning the rabbit's language further informs this argument, as the juxtaposition of the animal's resistance to death with its linguistic expression allows Proust to argue for a private sense of meaning that might lie in this verbalization of suffering, while the narrator, as advocated by Wittgenstein's phrase, is unable to grasp its content.

The rabbit's silent submission to suffering and death—which Françoise attempts to understand as an acceptance of its mortality—also highlights the animal's being at a disadvantage when faced with human cruelty, and this Proustian alignment of language, silence, and noises can be usefully juxtaposed with Derrida's discussion of the dilemma that grows out of animal language and its human interpretation. On the one hand, he claims that he would give into his melancholy: 'si je m'engageais, pour entendre en moi, à surinterpréter ce que le chat pourrait ainsi, à sa façon, me dire [. . .] dans un langage de traces muettes, c'est-à-dire sans mots' (*Animal*, p. 37). On the other hand, to deny the search for a translation of the animal's language would mean to deny compassion and 'priver l'animal de tout pouvoir de manifester, du désir de *me* manifester qui que ce soit, et même de *me* manifester de quelque façon *son* expérience de *mon* langage, de *mes* mots et de *ma* nudité' (*ibid.*, emphasis original). This dilemma is irresolvable, as the animal is either humanized, thereby deprived of its otherness, or it is deprived of this otherness precisely because the possibility of human meaning is denied. Derrida's argument here is close to what he outlines as the dilemma inherent in mourning, namely that when we mourn we either deny the other his/her alterity by remembering them other than as they were, or we deny them our empathy by

<sup>29</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. by G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), p. 190.

failing to mourn.<sup>30</sup> That the animal discourse should relate so closely to this earlier aspect of Derrida's work is not surprising, as it is precisely the question of mortality and the physical and psychological suffering emanating from mortality that takes centre stage in Derrida's text on the animal. Thinking about the animal is essentially thinking about otherness, and the otherness encountered in an attempt to think about or with the animal is similar to the otherness that emerges in mourning or thinking about human death.

There is a curiously similar development which arises in a later section of *A la recherche*. Initially, the context is not a discussion of pain but a discourse on pleasure. When attempting to describe the unintelligibility of sounds expressed during an experience of sexual pleasure, the narrator digresses into the discussion of suffering:

quant au bruit qui sort d'une mère à qui on apprend que son enfant vient de mourir, il peut nous sembler, si nous ne savons de quoi il s'agit, aussi difficile de lui appliquer une traduction humaine, qu'au bruit qui s'échappe d'une bête, ou d'une harpe. (IV, 130–31)

The intensity of psychological suffering experienced by a mourning mother is compared to an animal noise that lies outside human translatability. Similar to Derrida's argument in *L'Animal*, this comparison explores not so much whether human and animal are distinguishable and if so on what terms: rather, it suggests that suffering overshadows the question of a human/animal distinction, and so the pain expressed in this noise becomes as unintelligible as animal sounds. 'Une traduction humaine' is therefore, as Proust writes 'difficile', or perhaps even 'impossible' as Derrida claims. And yet, a continuous effort to find a 'traduction humaine' is what Proust and Derrida call for.

Proust further adds to the complexity of translatability by pointing to the limitations of human sensory perception—in this case, the sense of hearing—which appears not always able to distinguish between different emotions or voices. While *logos* might therefore allow us to construct a human/animal distinction, our fallible perception is prone to undo it. The passage thereby also enriches the discussion of translatability: by adding music to the range of options to make sense of a certain 'bruit', Proust questions what distinguishes the musical from the human–animal sound, as both transcend intellectual accessibility. The association of animals, music, and a lack of *logos* is a theme already introduced in connection with the Vinteuil sonata, when it is pointed out that Vinteuil's supposed 'aliénation mentale' (I, 211) is apparent in certain passages of the sonata. Swann is somewhat confused by that observation:

car une œuvre de musique pure ne contenant aucun des rapports logiques dont l'altération dans le langage dénonce la folie, la folie reconnue dans une sonate lui

<sup>30</sup> See Jacques Derrida and Elisabeth Roudinesco, *De quoi demain...: dialogue* (Paris: Fayard and Galilée, 2001), pp. 257–58.

paraissait quelque chose d'aussi mystérieux que la folie d'une chienne, la folie d'un cheval, qui pourtant s'observent en effet. (I, 211)

While Proust's zoomorphism never endangers his anthropocentric framework, his use of animal imagery in connection with music comes to suggest that human intellectual capacities are dethroned when it comes to the aesthetic experience. And this triad of animal, human, and art also already figures in one of the earliest metaphors that encapsulates Proust's narrator's artistic vocation. Occupying the box-seat where Docteur Percepied's coachman usually stows poultry, the narrator famously exclaims after successfully 'translating' his impression of the Martinville steeples into writing: 'Je me trouvais si heureux, [. . .] que, comme si j'avais été moi-même une poule et si je venais de pondre un œuf, je me mis à chanter à tue-tête' (I, 180).<sup>31</sup>

#### 'Conte de la grand-mère'

Animal metaphors and the ascription of animal features to humans are frequent in *A la recherche*, and physical suffering, as we have seen, becomes a mode of being that the narrator acknowledges and even attempts to limit in animals. It is also a mode of being that humans share with animals. And it is the scene of the grandmother's illness and death, and the question of how witnessed suffering affects an ethical relationship with the Other, that sheds light on the complexities of the human/animal relation in the novel even if its general anthropocentric framework is maintained. Proust achieves this by refraining from proposing that humans are *like* animals (as in the case of the mourning mother, whose cries sound *like* those of an animal), and instead by postulating that the inherent animality of humans emerges in physical suffering. Through the experience of mortality, the features distinguishing human and animal are increasingly blurred. The narrator's curious emotional absence from the scene might thereby be understood not only as a shock emanating from the experience of seeing someone beloved die, but also from the ethical dilemma resulting from witnessing the other's animal nature.

The grandmother's illness and a growing physical experience of mortality are depicted as another *being* within the human:

C'est dans la maladie que nous nous rendons compte que nous ne vivons pas seuls mais enchaînés à un être différent, dont des abîmes nous séparent: notre corps. Quelque brigand que nous rencontrions sur une route, peut-être pourrions-nous arriver à le

<sup>31</sup> Coudert also links animal life/suffering to the narrator's nascent creativity in the scene containing the conversation about the 'langage des bêtes', as, like the dying rabbit, the narrator has not yet found the words to express himself. As she convincingly argues, it therefore comes as no surprise that the narrator's father accepts his son's literary vocation precisely during the dinner with Norpois following the slaughter of the rabbit ("Sale(s) Bête(s)" et autres animaux de la *Recherche*, p. 210).

rendre sensible à son intérêt personnel sinon à notre malheur. Mais demander pitié à notre corps, c'est discourir devant une pieuvre, pour qui nos paroles ne peuvent pas avoir plus de sens que le bruit de l'eau, et avec laquelle nous serions épouvantés d'être condamnés à vivre. (II, 594)

Physical suffering is presented as inherently othering the self that inhabits a malfunctioning body. What Proust proposes, however, is not that we share the experience of physical suffering and the realization of mortality with animals, as both humans and animals are physically vulnerable and therefore bound to experience physical suffering. What he suggests, unlike Derrida, is rather that when we experience physical suffering we are no longer fully human, because in illness the body emerges as so 'Other' that only a zoological metaphor can express the extent of otherness experienced from within. What is first qualified merely as 'un être différent' is later on equated more explicitly with a non-human animal, the 'pieuvre', and the image of the multi-armed creature cohabiting with the grandmother underlines the extent of alienation experienced in this passage. This is further highlighted in another evocation of the importance of language, this time no longer embedded within a comic register, but used to separate animal from human. A thief, however morally repulsive, still shares our language, unlike the multi-armed octopus confronted in physical suffering. And yet, this othering inhabitant knows the human body intimately: 'Ma grand-mère éprouva la présence, en elle, d'une créature qui connaissait mieux le corps humain que ma grand-mère, la présence d'une contemporaine des races disparues, la présence du premier occupant — bien antérieur à la création de l'homme qui pense' (II, 596).

In both preceding passages the body stages a crescendo of non-human otherness, but the grandmother's suffering becomes most pertinent when the boundaries between human and animal life become indistinct:

Courbée en demi-cercle sur le lit, un autre être que ma grand-mère, une espèce de bête qui se serait affublée de ses cheveux et couchée dans ses draps, haletait, geignait, de ses convulsions secouait les couvertures. Les paupières étaient closes et c'est parce qu'elles fermaient mal plutôt que parce qu'elles s'ouvraient qu'elles laissaient voir un coin de prunelle, voilé, chassieux, reflétant l'obscurité d'une vision organique et d'une souffrance interne. Toute cette agitation ne s'adressait pas à nous qu'elle ne voyait pas, ni ne connaissait. (II, 631–32)

The motif of metamorphosis at the beginning of this passage recalls the tale 'Le petit chaperon rouge' from Charles Perrault's *Contes*, published for the first time in 1697. In this version of the famous tale a young girl called 'le petit chaperon rouge' encounters a wolf in the forest on the way to visit her sick grandmother. The wolf is subsequently the first to arrive at the house, and the grandmother, who, as Perrault tells us, 'était dans son lit à cause qu'elle se trouvait un peu mal', is devoured by the wolf, which 's'alla coucher dans

le lit de la Mère-grand, en attendant le petit chaperon rouge'.<sup>32</sup> When the girl finally arrives at the house, she is surprised by her grandmother's appearance, only to find out after a number of questions remarking on the transformation of her body parts that she is no longer talking to her grandmother but to the wolf, which, having devoured the grandmother, has dressed up in her clothes in order to trick her. Proust's description of the narrator's grandmother in the passage quoted above presents a similar scenario: an animal has been substituted for the ill grandmother, yet this substitution is not immediately apparent. Rather, it is a substitution which is reminiscent of Freud's double in his text on the Uncanny,<sup>33</sup> as the grandmother's clothes are worn by the wolf and thereby preserve an likeness while hiding an essential otherness. Both passages make use of vocabulary describing dressing/undressing/disguise in order to voice the surprising metamorphosis that has taken place, and like the narrator, the girl is 'bien étonnée de voir comment sa Mère-grand était faite en son deshabillé'.<sup>34</sup>

Among the range of different folkloric versions that informed Perrault's story is one recurring model entitled 'Conte de la grand-mère', or 'La finta nonna' (the fake grandmother) in the telling title of an Italian version, which emphasizes that the grandmother, and particularly the metamorphosis from grandmother to animal, is crucial to the tale.<sup>35</sup> As Marina Warner observes in her study of fairy tales, Perrault's version further strengthens this aspect of the tale, as it is precisely this 'collapse' of human and animal identity that explains why the girl can no longer distinguish between her grandmother and the wolf.<sup>36</sup> Similarly, Proust's text also presents such a shift, when the narrator discovers that the human remnants of his grandmother become scarcer as her animal nature comes fully to the fore and she advances towards death.

This 'shift', 'collapse', or 'metamorphosis' can also be associated with Deleuze and Guattari's concept of 'devenir-animal', even if suffering or mortality is not foregrounded in their discussion of the concept in *Capitalisme et schizophrénie*.<sup>37</sup> Without going into the political or ontological implications of the seminal concept of 'becoming' in Deleuze and Guattari's work, what makes such a juxtaposition pertinent in the present context is their contention

<sup>32</sup> Charles Perrault, 'Le Petit Chaperon rouge', in *Contes*, ed. by Marc Soriano (Paris: Flammarion, 1989), pp. 254–56 (p. 255).

<sup>33</sup> See Sigmund Freud, 'The Uncanny', in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. by James Strachey, 24 vols (London: Vintage, 2001), xvii, 217–56 (pp. 234–36).

<sup>34</sup> Perrault, *Contes*, p. 255.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 117. For a variety of versions see the online dossier at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France: <<http://expositions.bnf.fr/contes/gros/chaperon/index.htm>> [accessed 10 July 2014].

<sup>36</sup> Marina Warner, *From the Beast to the Blonde: On Fairy Tales and their Tellers* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1994), pp. 181–83.

<sup>37</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Capitalisme et schizophrénie: mille plateaux* (Paris: Minuit, 1980), pp. 285–380. See also James Urpeth, 'Animal Becomings', in *Animal Philosophy*, pp. 101–10.



that this 'becoming' is never 'mimetic'. 'Devenir-animal' is therefore neither simply an imitation in order to produce a comic effect nor an attempt to undo a nature/culture division. Rather, it is a meaningful and real process, which undermines the primacy of permanence without thereby suggesting that the animal is 'real': 'Le devenir-animal de l'homme est réel, sans que soit réel l'animal qu'il devient; et, simultanément, le devenir-autre de l'animal est réel sans que cet autre soit réel.'<sup>38</sup> This elaboration on 'becoming' is seminal for the scene of the grandmother's death, as 'becoming animal' equals 'becoming mortal' here, and the animal metaphors that Proust employs in the scene are no longer used to imitate or mock animal behaviour. On the contrary, they properly undo human identity without—and this is where we may return to Derrida—thereby producing a 'real' animal or theoretically questioning the human/animal distinction.

A crucial difference in *A la recherche*, however, is that the grandmother's 'devenir-animal' is motivated by her 'souffrance interne', which not only excludes the narrator but also seems to efface the narrator's presence for her. This moment, namely when the narrator remarks that the grandmother's behaviour in suffering is no longer directed towards her family but becomes a self-contained experience, is where the text becomes most interesting with regard to the questions raised earlier, illustrating what Derrida calls 'le passage des frontières depuis lequel l'homme ose s'annoncer à lui-même' (*Animal*, p. 30), the moment where human and animal identities, their convergences and divergences, become clear and yet blurred. Unlike the comic ascription of animal features in the *salons*, the witnessing of the grandmother's sudden turning into a being whose suffering disconnects her from the world highlights the idiosyncrasy of physical pain shared by human and non-human animals, and this is an 'argument' which powerfully blurs the boundaries between the two species without thereby undoing them. These boundaries become even less clear when Proust compares the grandmother's heavy breath to '[le] vent dans la flûte d'un roseau' and even a 'chant' (II, 636), thereby interweaving art and its comprehensibility into the transitioning from human to animal that takes place in pain. Like the harp in the earlier example, the noise of pain allows for a multiplicity of interpretations which ultimately outgrow the dichotomy of the human/animal distinction.

Calarco argues that Derrida, even while attempting to make us question that distinction, still upholds it, because in trying to unsettle the grounds on which we make this distinction his terminology confirms that he implicitly accepts these grounds. As Kelly Oliver has put it, Derrida's goal is rather to show that the animal/human opposition is too simplistic, and his project is to examine 'various liminal, threshold, and Janus-faced concepts to jam

<sup>38</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *Capitalisme et schizophrénie*, p. 291.

the machinery of binary oppositions so prominent in traditional metaphysics and philosophy more generally'.<sup>39</sup> Something similar seems to be at stake in Proust. The grounds on which limits or a hierarchy between animals and humans are established are not questioned, and the narrator never envisages preserving the chicken's or the rabbit's life, even if he attempts to limit their suffering. But Proust's text nonetheless responds to Bentham's and Derrida's emphasis on animal suffering—not, however, by questioning it, because the animals' ability to suffer is always taken for granted even if the chicken's suffering and that of the rabbit remain of little consequence. Instead, Proust turns the issue round by suggesting that the decisive question is what *human* suffering consists in, and how this question reframes our thinking about the relationship of human and animal. In fact, Proust seems to suggest that the inherent animal nature of humans, which physical suffering brings to the fore, ultimately makes Bentham's question seem redundant.

While this does not affect the anthropocentric framework that prevails in *A la recherche*, the radical nature of Proust's argument becomes most spectacularly clear when the narrator asks, after witnessing his grandmother's physical suffering: 'Mais si ce n'était plus qu'une bête qui remuait là, ma grand-mère où était-elle?' (II, 632). Again, the question here recalls the famous questioning of the wolf in 'Le petit chaperon rouge', and Perrault's collapse of human and animal identities. However, the question mark and sentence structure emphasize Proust's variation on Derridean ethics, because the 'bête' precedes rather than 'follows' the 'grand-mère'. At the centre of the passage is no longer the question of what animals have or have not in common with us, because physical suffering and the experience of mortality have left no place to think about human identity dissociated from the 'bête' that the 'grand-mère' has become. In common with Derrida, Proust's terminology here bears testament to a clear upholding of the human/animal distinction, but the seeming exclusivity of human or animal life is undone in the threshold experience of physical suffering. While the narrator's question suggests that an animal has replaced the grandmother entirely, the narrator immediately goes on to obscure such a full substitution as the passage moves on:

On reconnaissait pourtant la forme de son nez, sans proportion maintenant avec le reste de la figure, mais au coin duquel un grain de beauté restait attaché, sa main qui écartait les couvertures d'un geste qui eût autrefois signifié que ces couvertures la gênaient et qui maintenant ne signifiait rien. (II, 632)

Animal and human features melt into each other, making for fluid differences that undo simple binaries. Characteristic gestures and distinguishing marks

<sup>39</sup> Kelly Oliver, 'The "Slow and Differentiated" Machinations of Deconstructive Ethics', in *A Companion to Derrida*, ed. by Zeynep Direk and Leonard Lawlor (Oxford: Wiley, 2014), pp. 105–21 (p. 107).

remain, and yet they have been emptied of their content and become unreadable signifiers. By the end of the passage, 'la mort, comme le sculpteur du Moyen Âge' ends up rendering the grandmother in the 'apparence d'une jeune fille' (II, 641). But this does not efface the animal-like characteristics which her agonal state has brought to the fore. Rather, it encrypts these characteristics firmly within human identity, because death restores her primal state, 'une chaste espérance', 'un rêve de bonheur', and even 'une innocente gaieté' (II, 640–41)—everything that human life has taken away from her. Proust thereby does not ask what the animal is and how far it is different from the human, because key differences are always taken for granted. Instead, he pushes the argument in another direction by proposing to ask whether the human can define herself without having recourse to the animal. If being human results in becoming animal, then how can the human think of herself beyond the animal? Furthermore, how can the human decide which criteria inform the human/animal division if mortality brings to the fore an likeness of humans and animals, an likeness which, while not undoing their fundamental distinctiveness, questions the limitations of the categories applied? Derrida might be right: 'penser commence peut-être là' (*Animal*, p. 50).

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