

Natalie Woodward  
Department of English

Reading Holocaust Literature as a  
Creaturely Poetics

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Royal Holloway, University of London

Natalie Woodward

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### DECLARATION OF AUTHORSHIP

I, Natalie Woodward, hereby declare that this thesis and the work presented in it is entirely my own. Where I have consulted the work of others, this is always clearly stated.

Signed  \_\_\_\_\_

Date 28.04.2016

### ABSTRACT

This thesis offers creaturely readings of Holocaust literature, where a creature as defined by Anat Pick is ‘first and foremost a living body – material, temporal, and vulnerable’. I also use the concept of creatureliness to approach animal suffering: a question which many authors have compared to the Holocaust. In Chapter One, I analyse moments in Holocaust testimonies where survivors compare themselves, their situation or their perpetrators to animals. In Chapter Two, I analyse *Beatrice and Virgil* by Yann Martel. This novel gestures towards a creaturely poetics as Foer compares human victims of atrocity during the Holocaust with animal suffering and vice-versa. I read it through two models of creatureliness offered by Anat Pick and Eric Santner in order to gauge which model best suits my thesis. In Chapter Three, I move forward using Pick’s model of creatureliness to analyse two novels by J. M. Coetzee: in *Disgrace*, Coetzee traces a shared sense of vulnerability and affliction between humans and animals in Post-Apartheid South Africa, and in *Elizabeth Costello* the protagonist directly compares animal cruelty to the Holocaust. In my final chapter, I analyse *Eternal Treblinka* by Charles Patterson and ‘The Letter Writer’ by Isaac Bashevis Singer as two, contrasting ways by which authors compare our treatment of animals to the Holocaust, and see how well both forms fit with Michael Rothberg’s multidirectional model of memory. This allows me to question whether it is desirable or even possible to apply a multidirectional ethics to all creatures. Overall, this thesis questions how and why creatures are depicted in literatures of atrocity (particularly the Holocaust), and how and why we might choose to read literature through a creaturely prism.

# Reading Holocaust Literature as a Creaturely Poetics

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## Introduction

In his Holocaust testimony, *If This is a Man*, Primo Levi describes his interview with Dr Pannwitz, who tests Levi on his knowledge of chemistry. Levi focuses on the look which passes between them:

that look was not one between two men; and if I had known how completely to explain the nature of that look, which came as if across the glass window of an aquarium between two beings who live in different worlds, I would also have explained the essence of the great insanity of the Third Germany.<sup>1</sup>

Despite being the same species and, for the purposes of the interview, sharing the same language as the Nazi doctor, Pannwitz regards Levi as separate from the human race. The closest thing of this world to which Levi can compare it is the look between that of a man and a fish in an aquarium: separated not only by species but also by medium. The fish is scaled, cold-blooded, exists out of air and – in this case – is taken out of its natural habitat to be scrutinised under the voyeuristic gaze of humans. Levi believes that the look may be metonymic for the ‘great insanity of the Third Reich’, as a system which dehumanised Jews and, as such, allowed perpetrators to murder millions of humans whilst countless more bystanders allowed the atrocity to continue.

Many activists for animal rights and authors in Animal Studies have taken a comparison such as this and turned it on its head to argue that, if humans were treated like animals during the Holocaust, it stands to reason that animals are treated like Holocaust victims. Authors who have considered this view in philosophy, literary criticism or works of

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<sup>1</sup> Primo Levi, *If This is a Man and The Truce*, trans. Stuart Woolf (London: Abacus, 2009), pp.111-112.

fiction include, but are not limited to, Jacques Derrida, Charles Patterson, Karen Davis, J. M. Coetzee and Isaac Bashevis Singer. In most cases, the authors are aware that such a comparison is cause for ethical concern. In *Elizabeth Costello*, for example, the protagonist gives a lecture arguing that factory farming is comparable to the Holocaust and receives a letter from an audience member who argues that her comparison is intolerable.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, in 'The Holocaust and the Henmaid's Tale', Karen Davis prefaces her comparison between the Holocaust and animal cruelty with an extended discussion on the nature of metaphors: 'when the oppression of one group is used metaphorically to illuminate the oppression of another group, justice requires that the oppression that forms the basis of the comparison be comprehended in its own right'.<sup>3</sup> She understands that the comparison has been criticised, but argues on a logical plane that it is only right to consider both sides of a metaphor, as otherwise the function of a metaphor is intrinsically flawed.

To apply this line of thought to Levi's comparison between himself and a creature at an aquarium is to implicate the human race in a level of 'insanity' comparable to that of the Third Reich. By this logic, the Third Reich (rather than the look shared between the doctor and Levi) may even become metaphor for the 'insanity' of the human species who kill animals for food, pay to see them in an aquarium, or turn a blind eye to the practices of factory farming. It does not take long to follow this logic to the conclusion that non-human and human animals exist on the same ethical plane and, as such, must be given equal rights. It is easy both to see how this concept causes offence, and how it might be ridiculed. For example, Adam Roberts considers the comparison between animal cruelty and the

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<sup>2</sup> J. M. Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello* (London: Vintage, 2003), p.94. This will be abbreviated to *EC* within the text and all subsequent references are to this edition.

<sup>3</sup> Karen Davis, 'The Holocaust and the Henmaid's Tale' (New York: Lantern Books, 2005), p.4.

Holocaust in his novel *Bête*, which is based on the idea that animals should be given equivalent rights to humans. Although Roberts speculates some positive outcomes of this ethical turn, there are numerous other examples where situations descend into a farcical dystopia, such as when a human and his dog win a court case to be allowed to engage in a sexual relationship.<sup>4</sup> With this example in mind, an argument for ‘insanity’ can be made on both sides of the debate.

An effective text to help unpick the intricacies of this debate is one which I shall analyse more thoroughly in Chapter Three: *Elizabeth Costello*. In Coetzee’s novel, Elizabeth Costello understands that a comparison between the Holocaust and animal cruelty polarises people and stops them from engaging with the seed of an idea which was put forward initially: be that a debate on the nature of metaphor, concern for animal welfare, or a desire to reapproach the Holocaust from a new angle. Costello feels that she is implicated in a genocidal species and cannot understand how humans can be so loving and yet so cruel, and her family cannot understand why she engages with animal questions on such a personal level. The result is an impasse reached by both, and it is difficult to see how the debate can progress on such divisive grounds. Yet, in *Elizabeth Costello* Coetzee uses his fictional space to allow both the debate and the implications of this debate to play out. The novel is first and foremost a work of fiction and, as such, its implications in ethico-political fields should be read through that prism. More so than philosophical treatises, *Elizabeth Costello* approaches the question of the animal, and especially the comparison between animal cruelty and the Holocaust, without the same risk of polarisation faced by Costello herself. As Anat Pick recognises in her analysis of ‘The Lives of Animals’ (the novella

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<sup>4</sup> Adam Roberts, *Bête* (London: Goliancz, 2014), pp.44-45.

embedded in *Elizabeth Costello*), it is 'not just a confounding text, but a text about the state of being confounded'.<sup>5</sup> In other words, the debate for whether or not our treatment of animals is comparable to the Holocaust is less of a focus of Coetzee's text than the literary presentation of a character who is moved by this belief.

Moreover, Coetzee's use of the Holocaust in this comparison may not simply be for dramatic effect and polarisation; it may also gesture towards the impasse reached by Costello and her family. In this sense, the Holocaust is compared to animal suffering on a literal plane, but may also symbolise what Cora Diamond terms the 'difficult reality' of Costello's – and our – thinking of it.<sup>6</sup> To explain a difficult reality, Diamond refers to Ted Hughes' poem, 'Six Young Men', where Hughes gestures towards the sublime feeling one might feel when looking at a photograph of young men, full of life, who since have died. This is also an example to which I return in Chapter Three, but for the purpose of clarification, the difficult reality is not simply coming to understand the fact that these men appear alive when they are not; it is also the realisation of one's own exposure to death having been faced with something at once so full of life and yet so vividly dead. As Diamond explains: 'What interests me there is the experience of the mind's not being able to encompass something which it encounters. It is capable of making one go mad to try, to bring together in thought what cannot be thought'.<sup>7</sup> This 'madness' is equal to the 'insanity' of the Third Reich as outlined by Levi, or the impasse felt by Costello. In all three cases, one must resort to figurative language or philosophy to try and explain the inexplicable: respectively, the 'contradictory permanent horrors' felt by witnessing the young men; the look from behind

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<sup>5</sup> Anat Pick, *Creaturely Poetics* (New York: Columbia University Press), p.9.

<sup>6</sup> Cora Diamond, 'The Difficulty of Reality and the Difficulty of Philosophy', *Philosophy and Animal Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), pp.43-89.

<sup>7</sup> Diamond, 'The Difficulty of Reality', p.44.



glass between two beings of different worlds at Auschwitz; and the Holocaust-like atrocity faced by the animal kingdom (and, as such, Costello herself, who feels the animality of her body the older she gets).<sup>8</sup>

Therefore, comparing animal cruelty to the Holocaust and vice versa not only serves to highlight impossible likenesses between the two atrocities, but also gestures towards this feeling of inexplicability. James Young summarises some key ideas offered by scholars on why the Holocaust resists understanding and, subsequently, realistic literary representation. These include Frederick Hoffman's assertion that the intrinsic violence in atrocity destroys structures seeking to contain it; Terrence Des Pres' suggestion that Holocaust survivors' experiences 'are so horrible that they actually resist the fictionalizing that [...] informs most remembering'; and Saul Friedländer's argument that 'beginning with the First World War and culminating in Auschwitz, reality itself became so extreme as to outstrip language's capacity to represent it altogether'.<sup>9</sup> Although each interpretation is unique from the others, all recognise that the Holocaust cannot be contained in structures which seek to represent it. Therefore, to compare other atrocities to the Holocaust as a series of events which reached beyond the limits of our understanding, is to exemplify the difficult reality one might also face in light of other traumatic events. With regard to animal suffering, the difficult reality is extended because of the species barrier which exists between humans and other animals. It is this combination of factors – a comparison of atrocities, their representation in literature, as well as literature's representation of the difficult realities they present – which I analyse at length within this thesis.

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<sup>8</sup> Ted Hughes, 'Six Young Men', *The Hawk in the Rain* (London: Faber and Faber, 1957), p.55. Quoted in Diamond, 'The Difficulty of Reality', p.44.

<sup>9</sup> James E. Young, *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust: Narrative and the Consequences of Interpretation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), p.16.

Michael Rothberg writes about the differences between remembering one atrocity in light of another, and remembering one atrocity at the expense of another in his text *Multidirectional Memory*.<sup>10</sup> This might also be used to help explain the ethical concerns when comparing atrocities more generally. Rothberg contrasts ‘competitive memory’ – the idea that one atrocity should be remembered above another – with ‘multidirectional memory’. Whereas the former causes polarisation on the scale experienced by Costello, the latter widens the discursive field whereby atrocities might be traced through one another and, as such, remembered simultaneously. This may be exemplified by the difference between saying that animal cruelty is worse than the Holocaust, and the idea that there might be similarities between the two atrocities which can be brought to the fore through a closer inspection of both. A further merit of this multidirectional approach, beyond finding commonalities between the two, is the fact that where one atrocity traces the other, both are memorialised in the fabric of the other. It is the difference between screen memory defined as one memory blocking or ‘screening’ another from view, and screen memory defined as looking through a screen from one atrocity to the other, both separate but touching at the point of perception. This image also helps to work through difficult realities: instead of reaching an impasse as would be caused by one event blocking, screening or overwhelming all else, one may look through this screen to other events which are similarly impossible to comprehend. One may then trace similarities between these impasses, much in the same way as Coetzee can explore the state of being overwhelmed through his connections with Elizabeth Costello whilst remaining at an authorial distance from – being ‘screened off’ from – the character.

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<sup>10</sup> Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009).

This thesis offers an exploration into the issues and concepts outlined above. I analyse animal metaphors in Holocaust Literature in order to ground the comparison within survivor testimonies, before engaging with Holocaust Literature on a broader scale. This includes works of fiction that both explicitly and implicitly draw upon the Holocaust to explore other forms of suffering, and particularly animal suffering, as well as works of non-fiction such as *Eternal Treblinka* by Charles Patterson which directly compares our treatment of animals to the Holocaust. However, the focus of this thesis is not to ask whether or not a comparison is appropriate; it is primarily to analyse the representation of such comparisons within literature and, as such, ask why different forms are more appropriate than others, and interrogate the role of literature in the debate. For, as Hayden White suggests,

contemporary critical theory permits us to believe more confidently than ever before that 'poetizing' is not an activity that hovers over, transcends, or otherwise remains alienated from life or reality, but represents a mode of praxis which serves as the immediate base of all cultural activity.<sup>11</sup>

White claims that poetizing does not necessarily deflect from reality but may itself form 'a mode of praxis'. In other words, literature has a responsibility which reaches beyond the page to directly engage with and build upon worldly events. Where this thesis analyses representations of animal suffering within Holocaust literature, it also considers how literature might change perceptions with regard to our treatment of vulnerable beings, and as such what it means for literature to be read as a creaturely poetics. This is a term which I

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<sup>11</sup> Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), p.126.

analyse at length in Chapter Two but which may loosely be defined as literature or a mode of thought that considers the shared vulnerability of all bodies, above and beyond anthropocentric philosophising.

Holocaust literature bears a responsibility to authors and readers, especially in testimonies where survivor accounts not only allow victims of atrocity to work through their traumatic experiences, but also accounts for much of our historical understanding of the Holocaust. Therefore, this is an example of worldly literature as 'a mode of praxis which serves as the immediate base of all cultural activity'. Consequently, where literature draws comparisons between the events of the Holocaust and other atrocities, it must balance its responsibility to not deflect from the realities of the Holocaust, with a cultural enquiry into other events which might become worldly through this comparison. This is why a multidirectional approach is vital, as it traces one event through another without disengaging with either. Reading Holocaust literature as a creaturely poetics is therefore suitable because it encourages a praxis which engages with living, vulnerable bodies on a multidirectional plane, and specifically questions the role of literature in moving beyond a mere representation of these bodies to an ethical involvement with them.

This is because, creatureliness, as suggested by Anat Pick, is a state of temporal, bodily vulnerability which exists in all living creatures inclusive of humans and other animals. It accounts for 'the permutations of necessity and materiality that condition and shape human life' even when other aspects of our humanity have been stripped back.<sup>12</sup> Pick argues that creatureliness is what was left of Holocaust victims' humanity when every effort was made to dehumanise them. She argues it should not be considered a loss of humanity

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<sup>12</sup> Anat Pick, *Creaturely Poetics*, p.5.

that *Muselmanner* were stripped to this bare state, but rather it should be accepted as an intrinsic and sacred part of our humanity which we share with other animals. By extension, a creaturely poetics is a mode of praxis which engages with our shared creatureliness with other, vulnerable bodies. As creatureliness exists beyond language, it is difficult to access through literature. However, as this thesis argues, there are ways in which authors might gesture towards creatureliness in their novels, such as in *Beatrice and Virgil* where Yann Martel depicts two animal characters trying to communicate suffering, or in 'The Letter Writer', where Isaac Bashevis Singer's magical realist style encourages a reading whereby the protagonist's bond with a woman may be paralleled with his affection for a mouse. Indeed, these are two texts which I analyse at length within this thesis, the outline of which is as follows.

In Chapter One, I engage with the animal-Holocaust comparison as it is best recognised: through testimonies where survivors compare themselves, their treatment or their perpetrators to animals. This chapter is the least theoretical of the four as the focus is not on creatureliness as a concept but rather as a way of communicating atrocity perpetrated on humans, by humans. This chapter splits into further sections which consider how choosing different animal species affects the comparison. The animals on which I choose to focus are common sites of comparison within Holocaust testimonies: insects, vermin, dogs and pigs, as well as group metaphors, specifically flocks and herds. Splitting the chapter into analysis of different species not only allows me to highlight differences between the survivors' choice of metaphor, but also similarities. Chiefly, the similarity which unites all of the species is the use of animal metaphor to imply dehumanisation. If the survivor compares him or herself to an animal, it usually implies that they are treated as

subhuman, and if they compare perpetrators to animals it often connotes a lack of humanity. This is especially relevant to later chapters in which I analyse creatureliness more explicitly, where a key component of creatureliness as outlined by Pick is the awareness that what happened during the Holocaust did not fall outside the definition of what it means to be human. Indeed, Pick insists that ‘the Holocaust performed a violent unraveling of human identity, disclosing human contingency and the genocidal impulses inherent in striving for human perfection’.<sup>13</sup> This is to say both that there is something intrinsically human about the willingness to dehumanise others, and that in being dehumanised there is something which remains human, but in a creaturely sense, within the victim: no matter what the species – insect, vermin, dog, pig or human – there remains a bodily vulnerability common to all.

Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* would, in obvious ways, fit with this chapter’s focus on animal metaphors in Holocaust testimonies.<sup>14</sup> For example, the fact that Jewish people are drawn as mice conveys their vulnerability, especially in the presence of German – and so often Nazi – cats. Moreover, Spiegelman explains his choice of animal metaphors in *Metamaus*, which would allow me to dictate rather than speculate the reasons behind his graphic representations.<sup>15</sup> However, Spiegelman’s graphic novel does not feature within the chapter for the following reasons: first and foremost, animal symbolism in *Maus* is already explored extensively within the field of Holocaust Literature; a tiny but significant proportion of which are referenced here.<sup>16</sup> As such, in order to add to the wealth of ideas

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<sup>13</sup> Pick, *Creaturely Poetics*, p.6.

<sup>14</sup> Art Spiegelman, *The Complete Maus* (London: Penguin Books, 2003).

<sup>15</sup> Art Spiegelman, *Metamaus* (New York City: The Viking Press, 2011).

<sup>16</sup> Richard De Angelis, ‘Of Mice and Vermin: Animals as Absent Referent in Art Spiegelman’s *Maus*’, *International Journal of Comic Art* (Spring 2005), pp.230-249; Michael A. Chaney, ‘Animal Subjects of the Graphic Novel’, *College Literature*, 38:3 (Summer, 2011), pp.129-149; Andreas Huyssen, ‘Of Mice and Mimesis: Reading Spiegelman with Adorno’, *New German Critique*, 81 (Autumn, 2000), pp.65-82; Andrew Loman, “‘Well

already offered by scholars, I would have to dedicate a large portion of this chapter to the study of *Maus*. This would limit the number of testimonies I could analyse, which in turn would undermine the aim of Chapter One to gesture towards the vast number of Holocaust testimonies in which authors use animal imagery. As well as this, Spiegelman's representation of his father's testimony includes these animal metaphors where Vladek's original recordings do not. They have been applied both retrospectively to Vladek's story, and – at times – in order to convey Art's own identity crisis. Even when *Maus* does not depict scenes from Vladek's time in Auschwitz, the mouse metaphor persists partly in order to retain a sense of artistic continuity within the novel. These tropes are so different from other uses of animals within Holocaust testimonies that, as discussed, they demand too much analysis separate to that of other testimonies to fit into this chapter.

Chapter Two analyses reciprocal metaphors in *Beatrice and Virgil* by Yann Martel. Here, the Holocaust and animal suffering allegorise one another in Martel's metatextual novel. Following on from Chapter One's exploration into depictions of humans as vulnerable and dehumanised creatures, this chapter introduces the concept of creatureliness as defined by Anat Pick and Eric Santner. Whereas Santner approaches creatureliness from an anthropocentric angle – necessarily so, one might argue, being as we are human – Pick calls for a way of reading which gestures towards the vulnerable body we share with other animals. *Beatrice and Virgil* often blurs the boundaries not only between representation of the Holocaust and animal cruelty but also and subsequently between human and animal characters (two main characters are talking animals, for example), and therefore it is

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Intended Liberal Slop": Allegories of Race in Spiegelman's *Maus*, *Journal of American Studies*, 40:3 (December, 2006), pp.551-571; Michael E. Staub, 'The Shoah Goes On and On: Remembrance and Representation in Art Spiegelman's *Maus*', *MELUS*, 20:3 (Autumn, 1995), pp.33-46.

difficult to gauge which model best fits the text. Nonetheless, the key question in the play within *Beatrice and Virgil* is how the two animals can speak about the atrocities they experienced. They find ways to approach the conversation and even ways to bear its burden more easily, but ultimately they fail. It is this exploration into the failure of language to represent reality, and specifically a bodily, creaturely reality, which allows me to conclude that Pick's model of creatureliness is more relevant to a thesis which focuses on the incommunicability of suffering and the impasse experienced when comparing atrocities.

Moving forward using Pick's model of creatureliness, and in the spirit of comparing atrocities, I closely analyse two novels by J. M. Coetzee in Chapter Three: *Elizabeth Costello*, where the title character compares the Holocaust to animal cruelty, and *Disgrace* which is set in post-Apartheid South Africa but often parallels the vulnerability of South Africans with the animals that surround them. In *Disgrace* Coetzee uses Holocaust imagery and even the term *Lösung* – or 'solution' – to describe the plight of the humans and animals of Post-Apartheid South Africa. Whereas the majority of this thesis considers explicit comparisons of the Holocaust to other atrocities, *Disgrace* allows me to consider the effects of implicitly referencing the genocide to allude to other atrocities. This chapter also allows me to analyse Pick's concept of creatureliness more thoroughly, as the focus shifts from using fiction to compare models of creatureliness, as in Chapter Two, to using one model to analyse other works of fiction. Therefore, the works of Simone Weil – which are influential to Pick's understanding and application of creatureliness – also feature prominently in Chapter Three, especially in an extended discussion of the secularisation of grace. Indeed, in *Disgrace*, David Lurie, who disgraces himself throughout the novel, eventually learns to attend to the suffering and even the deceased bodies of animals, which Coetzee depicts as



an act of grace. Elizabeth Costello, on the other hand, is more sympathetic to animals throughout Coetzee's novel. Yet, she finds it difficult to reach the same levels of attentiveness as Lurie, whose only real engagement with other animals before the novel was through eating them. Analysing these novels side-by-side and under a creaturely lens allows me to consider both how fiction can develop characters who learn to live a creaturely existence, as in *Disgrace*, and how it might engage with the difficult realities of a creaturely poetics, as that which brings Elizabeth Costello to an impasse in her work as an author, as well as in her life as a vulnerable, ageing woman.

This thesis' final chapter introduces Michael Rothberg's *Multidirectional Memory* as a key theoretical text alongside *Creaturely Poetics*. Here, I consider how well a creaturely poetics fits with a multidirectional ethics, considering Pick's stance that creatureliness unites humans with other animals. To explore this, I consider Charles Patterson's *Eternal Treblinka*: a text which, from its title, seems to posit that factory farming is more atrocious than the Holocaust (thereby committing to a competitive model of memory) but which may actually adhere to a multidirectional ethics as outlined by Rothberg. Patterson's title is taken from 'The Letter Writer': a short story by Isaac Bashevis Singer which employs magical realist tropes as well as being a work of Holocaust fiction. I consider how these two strands of genre affect the comparison its protagonist, Herman, makes between animal suffering and the Holocaust, during his eulogy to a mouse. Finally, I question whether or not displacing Singer's quotation to entitle a work of historical non-fiction may be considered ethically suspect, at least in the sense outlined at the beginning of this introduction, or whether – by engaging with a creaturely poetics through Singer's fiction and applying it to reality –

Patterson affirms that poetizing indeed 'represents a mode of praxis which serves as the immediate base of all cultural activity'.

Overall, this thesis seeks to engage with a creaturely poetics through literatures of atrocity and specifically Holocaust literature. As creatureliness and Holocaust Literature come together at the point of structurelessness, incomprehension and wordlessness, there are moments of impasse where authors can only gesture towards difficult realities, or analyse the effects of the impasse itself on characters who seek to engage. Where Chapter One offers a broad but basic insight into animal metaphors used in Holocaust literature, subsequent chapters build in theory from Anat Pick and Eric Santner in Chapter Two, to Simone Weil in Chapter Three, through Michael Rothberg in Chapter Four. Each theory builds upon the last without deflecting, as philosophising often does, from the ubiquitous figure at the heart of this thesis: the creaturely body.

## Chapter One

### 'Man in the crevices and depths of his true nature': Comparing Humans to Other Animals in Holocaust Testimonies

#### *Introduction*

Animal metaphors are often used in Holocaust testimonies. They have many different purposes depending on how they are used: to convey the prisoners' feelings, to convey the prisoners' physical state, to paraphrase their perpetrators and to exhibit acts of inhumanity, and subsequently to convey the victims' treatment at the hands of the Nazis. Moreover, there are many different types of animals used metaphorically in Holocaust testimonies and each one comes with its own set of associations. To highlight this, I have split my chapter into four sections: insects, vermin, dogs and pigs, and one further section which discusses the group metaphors 'flock' and 'herd'. Each section focuses on how and why that specific animal is used in Holocaust testimonies. In each section, I show how animals are used both as symbol and as such. This corresponds to identifying with animals on a symbolic plane such as when prisoners are treated as animals, and identifying with animals on a literal plane such as when they are treated as animals are treated. In other words, prisoners sometimes compare themselves to animals to symbolise traits such as dirtiness or greed, but at other times they make a direct comparison between their treatment and the treatment of animals. To highlight the difference I shall use an example which is not specific to any particular animal. Primo Levi clarifies his identification with animals rather than

animals as symbol, when he differentiates between eating like an animal (i.e. eating in a disgusting manner) and simply eating as an animal would eat:

The Kapo comes to us periodically and calls: '*We hat noch zu fressen?*' He does not say it from derision or to sneer, but because this way of eating on our feet, furiously, burning our mouths and throats, without time to breathe, really is '*fressen*', the way of eating of animals, and certainly not '*essen*', the human way of eating, seated in front of a table, religiously. '*Fressen*' is exactly the word, and it is used currently among us.<sup>17</sup>

The Kapo uses this term 'without derision or sneer', showing how Levi believes the word '*fressen*' is used not to insult but rather to describe. It is a new word – a camp word – in that its previous meaning (an animal's specific way of eating) has been transposed to mean something different (the way humans can eat as animals eat). Eating comes with a set of traditions which have been cast aside in these new conditions. Whereas, previously, eating may have included ritualistic elements (take, for instance, the symbolism of Passover), now eating loses all of its symbolic meaning and becomes the physical act of ingesting. '*Essen*', which connotes humanity, tradition, the ritualistic elements of presenting, eating and remembering a meal, becomes '*fressen*': the transport of food from plate to stomach. Therefore, in this case prisoners identify with animals in a way that is specifically non-symbolic.

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<sup>17</sup>Levi, *If This is A Man* and *The Truce*, p.82.

Although this chapter is driven by testimony rather than theory, it is important to clarify both what is meant by animal metaphors and why they are of concern. Of particular interest is George Lakoff and Mark Johnson's text *Metaphors We Live By*, so called because its authors show how metaphors shape our thoughts and ultimately our actions on a day to day basis, even without us realising it. For example, some animal metaphors in Holocaust testimonies are explicit where others are less so. Take, for instance, the difference between the following three uses of dogs in testimony:

With no spoons the women bent over the common tin like dogs around a bowl.<sup>18</sup>

The *Meister's* barks are already turning into growls.<sup>19</sup>

Can one liken these dogs to men? No – and again No.<sup>20</sup>

The first is an explicit comparison between women and dogs eating, the second is an example of where a dog is evoked through associated language such as 'barks' and 'growls', and the third is an example where 'dogs' is first and foremost an insult connoting inhumanity. Lakoff and Johnson explore how such metaphorical language is a key to cultural understanding:

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<sup>18</sup> Giuliana Tedeschi, *There is a Place on Earth: A Woman in Birkenau*, trans. Tim Parks (London: Lime Tree, 1993), p.7.

<sup>19</sup> Robert Antelme, *The Human Race*, trans. Jeffrey Haight and Annie Mahler (Marlboro: The Marlboro Press, 1992), p.58.

<sup>20</sup> Mr. Brukarz, 'My Experience In The Concentration Camps Dachau and Buchenwald', retrieved from Mrs Brukarz (London: Wiener Library, Document Reference: P.III.h No.67 Dachau, 1954), p.4.

The most fundamental values in a culture will be coherent with the metaphorical structure of the most fundamental concepts in our culture. [...] In general, which values are given priority is partly a matter of the subculture one lives in and partly a matter of personal values. [...] In addition to subcultures, there are groups whose defining characteristic is that they share certain important values that conflict with those of the mainstream culture. [...] Individuals, like groups, vary in their priorities and in the ways they define what is good or virtuous to them. In this sense, they are subgroups of one. Relative to what is important for them, their individual value systems are coherent with the major orientational metaphors of the main-stream culture.<sup>21</sup>

Here, Lakoff and Johnson explain that things we may take as being either fundamentally true or valuable are often expressed metaphorically, and show that, through analysing the metaphors we use, we can examine what it is we value and whether it is coherent with mainstream values or whether it is specific to ourselves. For example, taking the above quotation, 'can one liken these dogs to men?', the word 'dog' is used as an insult to connote inhumanity. The fact that it is an insult shows that, as a society, we value dogs less than people. This means that the metaphor is a comment both on the perpetrators and, more implicitly, on our attitudes towards dogs. This becomes even clearer in the section exploring pig metaphors, as pigs are non-kosher and therefore when 'pig' is used as an insult it is

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<sup>21</sup>George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (London: University of Chicago Press, 2003), pp.22-24.

insulting both on the fundamental, mainstream concept that animals are lesser than humans, and also on a sub-cultural level.

However, there are also many ways in which different species of animal are used to connote the same characteristic. As discussed, comparing someone to an animal might connote a level of inhumanity whether that animal is a dog, rat, pig, or another animal. On the other hand, this same observation may lead to the opposite conclusion: that as humans are compared to any number of animals, there is something intrinsically animalistic in what it means to be human, and that this comes to the fore during events such as the Holocaust where humans are pushed to their limits. Paradoxically, this assumes that what we might consider 'inhuman' is an inherent part of the human condition. This, in turn, would suggest that there is a common bond which exists between humans and other animals and, as such, that comparing humans to other animals may reveal something about our humanity. This is an idea which I trace throughout this thesis, as I move on to analyse reciprocal metaphors – where humans are not only compared to animals but also vice versa - and consider how common bonds between humans and other animals are represented in literature.

A focus on literature is one of the fundamental ways in which this thesis is separate from other texts that trope animality and the Holocaust. For example, Boria Sax dedicates an entire section of *Animals in the Third Reich* to analysing different animals in the context of Nazi Germany: in 'The Symbolism of Animals in Nazi Germany', he analyses animals symbolically, showing, for example, how Aryans were to model themselves on wolves.<sup>22</sup> However, he does not refer in detail to Holocaust testimony, but rather focuses on historical moments such as the writing of new laws pertaining to animals, or societal interest in such

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<sup>22</sup> Boria Sax, *Animals in the Third Reich: Pets, Scapegoats, and the Holocaust* (New York: Decalogue Books, 2009), pp.45-98; pp.72-80.

theories as evolution. By analysing animal metaphors through a close reading of Holocaust testimonies, this chapter gauges both how we might consider animals in relation to ourselves and how they are used to consider others on a conceptual plane. Although this thesis focuses on the Holocaust as a limit case for the representation of humans, and also as an event which necessitated shifts in literary representations of atrocity and the suffering body, it offers an exploration into the representation of animals in literature more widely, and specifically the ways in which humans trace elements of their humanity in other animals through literature. However, in order to move forward in this vein, Chapter One offers a consideration of the use of animals as symbol of inhumanity – or perhaps the ‘inhumane’ strand of humanity – in Holocaust testimonies.

### *Insects*

Insect metaphors appear in many Holocaust testimonies and serve to highlight feelings of powerlessness and insignificance amongst prisoners. In other cases, victims identify with insects en masse, which conveys feelings such as loss of identity and dispensability. Such metaphors agree with ideas of insects in comparison with ourselves, which further shows how the metaphor is used not only to present the dehumanisation process inflicted on prisoners, but sometimes to anthropomorphise insects. This duality at once shows how prisoners were considered by perpetrators and how they considered themselves. In other words, it highlights how they were conscious of the process of dehumanisation.



Louis de Wijze exemplifies this duality in his testimony *Only My Life*, where twice he compares aspects of Buna concentration camp to an anthill. In this first example, de Wijze describes a factory in which prisoners believe there to have been thirty thousand workers:

The factory grounds are now teeming with people. It looks like an anthill. Even the organization at Buna resembles that of an industrious ant colony. Everything is structured down to the most minute detail. There are guards, and there is a strict discipline to control the masses. However, there is a big difference: Ants are instinctively forced to work and sacrifice themselves for the greater good, up to the point of mass suicide. We, on the contrary, who are endowed with our own free will and feelings, are working because we have been enslaved by an aggressive minority.<sup>23</sup>

De Wijze recognises that there is a stark difference between appearance and reality: the teeming factory grounds may look like an ant colony, and the intense work being carried out may be comparable to the inner workings of an anthill, but whereas ants have an innate compulsion to work tirelessly for 'the greater good', these prisoners are forced against their will to work for the enemy. Moreover, de Wijze notes that ants often work towards mass death, whereas prisoners work on pain of their individual deaths, knowing that many of their fellow workers will have succumbed to theirs even by the following day. Using the word 'enslaved', de Wijze furthers the divide: unlike cattle and pets, ants are not domesticated animals, so any analogy between slavery and domestication cannot be made.

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<sup>23</sup> Louis de Wijze, *Only My Life: A Survivor's Story*, trans. Victor de Wijze (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), p. 48. Later, de Wijze compares the camp to an anthill to describe the prisoners' excitement over imminent evacuation, p.100.

Instead, it is the prisoners' enslavement which makes them appear to be working as ants, yet it is this enslavement (and their consciousness of it) which simultaneously denies the analogy.

Martha W, a Sinti woman who was deported to Belzec, gives an interview with Karen Guth where she also compares her surroundings to an anthill. In this part of her testimony she is waiting to be taken to the camp:

*Im Mai, ich glaube, es war der 16. Mai 1940, haben sie uns alle abgeholt und zum Fruchtschuppen im Hafen gebracht(Hamburg). So richtig genau erinnere ich mich gar nicht mehr. Ich weiß nur, dass da so furchtbar viele Leute in dem Schuppen waren. Da war es wie so in einem Ameisenhaufen, so viele Menschen, die durcheinander liefen.*

In May, I think it was 16 May 1940, they came to pick us up and brought us to the fruit warehouse in a harbour of Hamburg. I really do not remember myself properly. I only know that there were an awful lot of people in the warehouse. It was like being in an anthill, so many people were confusedly running around.<sup>24</sup>

Unlike de Wijze's account, Martha's testimony is in the past tense and she is more aware of her memory's limitations. She describes the warehouse as being like an anthill not because of the order but rather because of the disorder. Therefore, the simile is used to highlight a completely different element of her experience: whereas Wijze counts himself as a part of

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<sup>24</sup> Martha W, 'The Story of Martha W', <[http://www.deathcamps.org/belzec/romamarthaw\\_de.html](http://www.deathcamps.org/belzec/romamarthaw_de.html)>, (1 January 2006). My own translation.

the structure, Martha stresses the incomprehensibility of her situation. 'It was like being in an anthill' does not necessarily imply that she considers herself an ant in the simile. Rather, it is likely that her simile highlights the confusion she would feel were she to be put in an anthill as herself: herself 'being' in an anthill. This reading is supported by the fact that she cannot remember herself properly: the people are like ants because their faces are indistinguishable; she notes only how busy and confused everyone seemed en masse. This stark difference between two seemingly similar similes shows the complexity involved in using animals figuratively. Both recognise a separation between the animals and the people to which they are compared (Wijze explicitly notes the difference in free will and feelings between people and ants, and Martha notes only the confusion she would feel should she herself be put into an anthill), but they each use ants to exemplify opposite qualities: Wijze for order and Martha for disorder. This shows that we use animal metaphors not to evoke the qualities of an individual species, but rather the qualities we perceive them as having. In the above examples, Wijze's conception of order and Martha's conception of disorder are placed upon ants, therefore ants come to symbolise order and disorder, respectively. From this it is easy to see how dehumanisation is dangerous from a conceptual perspective: if you begin to see people as animals, then they become reflections of your idea of that animal. If prisoners are compared to insects by their perpetrators, then it is only so long before these perpetrators may begin to see them as small, identical and ultimately exterminable.

Primo Levi also uses an ant metaphor in *If This Is a Man*. He describes the suffering of prisoners in Auschwitz, focusing not only on their physical suffering during the day but also their feverish suffering during the night. Here he describes reality interwoven with nightmares, the two barely distinguishable as the content of the latter is based on the cruelty of the former:

So our nights drag on. [...] One wakes up at every moment, frozen with terror, shaking in every limb, under the impression of an order shouted out by a voice full of anger in a language not understood. The procession to the bucket and the thud of bare heels on the wooden floor turns into another symbolic procession: it is us again, grey and identical, small as ants, yet so huge as to reach up to the stars, bound one against the other, countless, covering the plain as far as the horizon; sometimes melting into a single substance, a sorrowful turmoil in which we all feel ourselves trapped and suffocated; sometimes marching in a circle, without beginning or end, with a blinding giddiness and a sea of nausea rising from the praecordia to the gullet; until hunger or cold or the fullness of our bladders turn our dreams into their customary forms.<sup>25</sup>

Here, the comparison to animals is explicitly symbolic. Unlike ants marching, incognizant, Levi calls their movement a 'procession', which connotes a ceremony. Although Levi compares prisoners to ants, this also confirms their humanity, as it is only through consciousness that they can understand the animal comparison on a symbolic plane. It is unclear whether Levi is using this metaphor to describe the time he spends asleep or awake, so interwoven are these states that during sleep he wakes up at 'every moment'. Therefore, to touch upon a more psychoanalytical reading, the ant metaphor here is somewhere between the conscious and the unconscious. It is the idea of ants as creatures which are small (perhaps connoting insignificance), grey and identical (a loss of identity), marching

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<sup>25</sup> Primo Levi, *If This Is a Man - The Truce*, p. 68.

endlessly (a procession to the death), to which the prisoners are compared through Levi's metaphor. Although these ideas of the ant may remain, the physical comparison is fleeting at best: soon his scientific background allows him to identify that the nausea he feels rises from the praecordia – a part of the anatomy which we do not share with insects. In his 'shapeless' dreams, Levi imagines himself not into the form of an ant but rather into his idea of what these creatures signify.

As shown, insect metaphors and similes are quite common in Holocaust testimonies to describe people en masse, as insects such as ants individually form part of a much larger colony. Another type of insect which is sometimes used to evoke large numbers is the fly. However, unlike the examples of ant metaphors above, flies seem most often to be used in the turn of phrase 'they died like flies'. For example, Louis de Wijze describes the high death rate of prisoners as winter comes: 'Our ranks are rapidly getting thinner. The first victims of the bitter cold are from Mediterranean countries. Not used to this extreme weather, they fall like flies, dozens at a time'.<sup>26</sup> Similarly, Paul Trepman uses the fly simile to evoke a succession of quick deaths in Majdanek due to the extreme measures of its acting commander:

Within six months, Anton Tuman had killed off 65,000 Russian prisoners. This is how he had done it: He had them fed with special "soups" consisting entirely of grass, water, and great amounts of salt. After drinking this brew, the prisoners got so thirsty that they drank huge quantities of cold water. The result was that before long they contracted dysentery and died like flies.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> de Wijze, *Only My Life*, p.92.

<sup>27</sup> Paul Trepman, *Among Men and Beasts*, trans. Shoshana Perla and Gertrude Hirschler (London: Thomas Yoseloff Ltd, 1979), pp.168-169.

Whereas the examples of ants in figurative language each highlight different qualities one may attach to their idea of an ant, the fly simile is less abstract. To die or to 'drop like flies' is a common phrase, used to describe anything dying quickly and in large numbers. It refers simply to the short lifespan of flies and this is used directly to describe the physical transience of others. Whereas being orderly or disorderly, significant or insignificant, are judgements people may attach to ants as they choose, the lifespan of a fly is a more concrete measurement and as such the simile is relatively straightforward. As is clear, both of the above examples are used for this purpose. However, although the simile seems to be little more than a turn of phrase, its context suggests a deeper reading. It is possible that de Wijze and Trepman employ it both in order to convey the vast number of deaths and also the triviality of each one. In particular, Trepman writes that 65,000 prisoners died within half a year, which already shows both the high death rate and the quick succession of these deaths. If the phrase's only function is to reiterate these facts then it is tautological. It is probable, therefore, that Trepman uses the phrase to highlight how normal these deaths became and therefore how the human value of prisoners was negated in Majdanek.

Nearing the end of her testimony, Guiliana Tedeschi uses another insect simile to describe the hunger and exhaustion felt by women who had been led on a long march without sustenance. Although her simile is not a turn of phrase like the above example, it too is used primarily to describe the physical state of these women:

Bodies collapsed exhausted on the stony earth or damp soft grass, shivering from the cold and fever. Every hope of being fed was gone and the women got down like grasshoppers on the edge of the fields where small tender broccoli

plants were growing or in the meadows where already-blooming sunflowers offered their leaves and the hearts of their buds.

But even after ten days of fasting, marching, and cold, lifting a clod to take a seed potato was still a crime of such gravity that a *Posten* might simply finish you off with a bullet in the head.<sup>28</sup>

The grasshopper simile is used to describe the shape of the women's bodies as they crouch by the fields. Their small size and thin, angular legs reflect the starving frames of these women. However, unlike the ant or fly similes above, there seems to be no abstract connection between the grasshopper and these prisoners: the simile simply evokes the creature's physical appearance. At most, there is a grim irony inherent in the simile: whereas grasshoppers are known to eat vast amounts of vegetation (the locust, for example), these women are forbidden to eat even a seed potato.

In the examples above, survivors use insects figuratively to invoke both the idea of that insect (what they signify to the author) and the physicality of the insects (what they look like or how they live). Whereas it seems ants are used more for their abstract qualities, perhaps because they live in colonies, flies are often used in a turn of phrase, and other specific insects may simply be employed to highlight a physical state. However, insect metaphors are often nonspecific, such as in the following examples:

In the melee with Hans, my basic instinct for survival had somehow made it possible for me to summon both the physical and emotional fortitude necessary

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<sup>28</sup> Giuliana Tedeschi, *There is a Place on Earth*, p.211.

to overcome him. For that moment, brutalized by the circumstances, I had been more animal than human. Now, with Hans no longer around to pose a threat to me, I felt more “human.” During the day, I was able to move about the camp without fear of a confrontation in which Hans would crush me like an insect, in the way I’d seen him beat others to death in similar situations.<sup>29</sup>

Every movement of the shovel and every stroke of the puck was pointless and machinelike; like an insect trapped between smooth surfaces, your spirit slipped down and down, finding no hold, nothing stable.<sup>30</sup>

Like miserable, defenseless insects dimly outlined in the mist, the women take their places, bending down along a line lost in the fog at both ends. [...] Those who scream are not the insects. Insects are mute. [...]

Daylight on the marsh where insects with eyes full of terror labor to the point of exhaustion.

The spade grows increasingly heavier.

The carriers bear the handbarrow lower and lower.

It is day on the marsh where insects in human form die.<sup>31</sup>

Due to the nonspecificity of ‘insect’, it would be fair to suppose that the most common use of the comparison is in an abstract sense. Nonetheless, both Deutsch’s and Tedeschi’s

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<sup>29</sup> Naftali Deutsch, *A Holocaust Survivor: In The Footsteps Of His Past* (Jerusalem: Mazo Publishers, 2007), p.85.

<sup>30</sup> Giuliana Tedeschi, *There is a Place on Earth*, p.161.

<sup>31</sup> Charlotte Delbo, *Auschwitz and After*, trans. Rosette C. Lamont (London: Yale University Press, 1995), pp.46-48.



similes seem to be based on the physical properties of insects: to crush someone like an insect implies small size and physical weakness, and 'an insect trapped between smooth surfaces' could refer to any number of insects who cannot get a grip on glass, for instance, and try endlessly to find a way up. However, similar to the phrase 'to drop like flies', crushing someone like an insect can refer not only to the physical ease of killing insects but also the moral ease. Insects are plentiful, they are small and often they are considered pests. Whereas there are organisations supporting the prevention of cruelty to animals, there are no such recognised protests against cruelty to insects. To crush someone like an insect implies that the act requires no retribution. Deutsch killed Hans primarily in order to keep himself alive, but in recalling his act and its brutality it re-enables him to live as a conscious being, aware of more than simply life and death: 'Now, with Hans no longer around to pose a threat to me, I felt more "human."' Similarly, Tedeschi's quotation is not making a simple comparison between the physical qualities of insects and people. Rather, she uses a physical description of an insect in order to convey her far more abstract feelings of despair. The fact that insects cannot despair is irrelevant as she is referring to the symbolism of the insect's fall, rather than the fall itself.

Of all the figurative depictions, however, Delbo's exhibits the most complex relationship between the physical and the symbolic. Insects may be comparably defenceless compared to other, larger forms of life, but they cannot be 'miserable'. Moreover, they are not mute although many have calls too faint for human ears to pick up. It is also hard to imagine an insect's eyes being 'full of terror', as they are so often small, black and expressionless. Therefore, Delbo's extended metaphor seems not to refer to insects as such but rather to insects as symbolic. However, the nonspecificity of these life-forms not only highlights their distance from living things, but also creates an uncanny effect as the women

have become 'insects in human form': like Gregor Samsa in Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, the distinction between the physical and the symbolic is effaced.

In his diary and testimony from Bergen-Belsen, Abel J. Herzberg contemplates the values of humanity in the face of the atrocities he has witnessed. Regarding the evident pride of an SS man who leads defenceless women and children to their deaths as though they were already insentient, Herzberg uses animals figuratively to describe the feelings of prisoners towards such perpetrators:

Here we see this man, face to face, in his true light. We – and I believe this to be our historical, our eternal, experience – encounter him in his nakedness, far away from the path of civilisation, there where he feels no embarrassment. He gives rein to his passions. He does what his heart desires, he pursues the lust of his soul, and we are his spoils and his sacrifice. We Jews see man in the crevices and depths of his true nature. We see him as the fly sees the spider, as a roe deer sees the panther.

And we even managed not to hate him. Instead, out of a most profound love for mankind and out of a vital urge and a philosophy of life, that could not be surpassed or tempered, we gave him a rule of life. Out of an all too great mercy for mankind we gave him the principle of accountability and retribution so that he might control himself.

However, it was made into a kind of 'love' and 'mercy' which, from a psychological point of view, meant the enfeebling of accountability – and therefore became acceptable to him.

And when one sees how men, big strong men, send women and children on transport, shouting, cursing, raging, or when one has seen just once how the SS man transports corpses with a cigarette in his snout, unmoved as if he is transporting manure – no, worse – as if he is transporting bricks, then one knows: this is man. *Ecce homo!*<sup>32</sup>

Herzberg's account of this man and many like him leads him to contemplate the philosophical nature of life and the difference between man and animal. He explicitly refers to some life forms: the fly and the spider, the roe and the panther, and these represent the predator-prey relationships which have been uprooted from nature and performed in Nazi camps between perpetrators and victims. Starting with the relationship between the fly and the spider Herzberg shows how, although an analysis of insect metaphors helps to elucidate some thoughts and feelings specific to the symbolism and physicality of insects, these life forms still belong in the philosophical sphere of 'the other', inclusive of all animals. Herzberg works his way up the animal kingdom from the fly to the spider, to the roe to the panther, and finally – in Bergen Belsen – to the human. Terence des Pres recalls a lecture given by Hannah Arendt, in which she speaks of the accountability of killing:

In a lecture at the New School (New York, 1974), Hannah Arendt remarked that it is easier to kill a dog than a man, easier yet to kill a rat or frog, and no problem at all to kill insects – "It is in the glance, in the eyes." She means that the perception of subjective being in the victim sparks some degree of identification

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<sup>32</sup> Abel J. Herzberg, *Between Two Streams: A Diary from Bergen-Belsen*, trans. Jack Santcross (London: I.B. Tauris Publishers, 1989), p.141.

in the assailant, and makes his act difficult in proportion to the capacity for suffering and resistance he perceives. Inhibited by pity and guilt, the act of murder becomes harder to perform and results in greater psychic damage to the killer himself.<sup>33</sup>

Insect metaphors best represent the lack of identification between the victim and the perpetrator. Insects are so completely 'other' that it is hard to recognise anything of ourselves within them. As shown, when authors of Holocaust testimony refer to themselves as insects, it is often to present the physical and symbolic metamorphosis that they underwent: they became thinner, weaker and less easy to tell apart. This SS man with the 'cigarette in his snout' seems so unfazed by their murder it is as though they were less than insects, less even than manure (which might evoke some revulsion), but bricks. The relationship between people breaks down as people are killed like prey and perpetrators kill as though they were predators.

However, despite the fact that insect metaphors are used to degrade humans, there is something more compelling about Herzberg's comparison between perpetrators and prisoners to a panther, dog, spider and fly: this pantheon at once highlights the difference between humans to these creatures, and it highlights their similarities by linking them together in a predator-prey analogy. Similarly, Arendt's argument that it is easier to kill insects than it is to kill humans might not only be an observation but a challenge: if killing an insect is one step easier than killing a frog, and killing a frog is one step behind killing a dog, and finally if killing a dog is one step away from killing a human, perhaps all are linked

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<sup>33</sup> Terence Des Pres, *The Survivor: An Anatomy of Life in the Death Camps* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), p.61.

through being graded in a system of ease of killing, from one to the other. Indeed, despite the fact that this chapter continues to move through different species of animal metaphors in Holocaust literature, each of which introduces new connotations and implications, some tropes such as vulnerability and degradation prove common to each species and, indeed, the humans to whom they relate.

### *Vermin*

Vermin metaphors are far less common in Holocaust testimonies than insect metaphors, although when they do appear they are used in illuminating ways. Robert Antelme, for example, uses vermin metaphors in his testimony *The Human Race* to present his perpetrators' vision of their prisoners. He uses them to imaginatively enter into the mindset of a Nazi and explain the mechanisms of dehumanisation that underpinned this ideology. However, matters are complicated by the way Antelme's vermin metaphors blur the line between oppressor and victim; between what the SS may have been thinking and what Antelme himself projects onto his animal symbols. Accordingly, the vermin metaphor has key elements in common with the way people might regard animals symbolically: Antelme transfers his ideas onto how he imagines the SS to think, just as people in general transfer their stereotyped ideas of animals onto individual animals – vermin as pestilential, mice as frightened, cats as predatory. In this section, a discussion of Antelme's vermin metaphors leads into an exploration of mouse symbolism in Holocaust testimonies.

Robert Antelme documents a conversation between a Hitler Youth and a member of the SS, where the boy can understand neither how Antelme and other political prisoners

could be considered enemies of the state, nor why they should be kept alive when they appear subhuman:

What reasons can the Führer have for leaving such ugly guys alive? When there's a pail of soup in the middle of the courtyard, they all jump on it, they holler, they push each other. *Scheisse, Scheisse!* When men aren't any more disciplined than that, how can you argue that they deserve to live? Enemies of Germany, these guys? They're not enemies, they're vermin. Germany can't have enemies like that. Do they think anything? The SS man makes a face when I ask him about them, sometimes he laughs. And he answers *Scheisse*.<sup>34</sup>

Despite the fact that Antelme was deported and imprisoned due to his involvement in the French Resistance, this youth cannot identify him as an enemy of Germany due to his changed appearance and desperation for food. The irony that they were imprisoned due to being enemies of Germany, and this imprisonment is the reason for their changed appearance, is lost on the boy, who denies their identity as either political prisoners or human beings. Rather, the youth sees him and other political prisoners as vermin, by which he means subhuman and pestilential. The youth even wonders whether the prisoners can think: a question which implies he does not see them as cognizant. His choice of animal metaphor, 'vermin', is unspecific. Instead of calling them rats or mice (or any other animal considered vermin), it refers to his earlier comment on lack of discipline: vermin are considered pests which are hard to control.

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<sup>34</sup> Robert Antelme, *The Human Race*, p.77.

In a chapter entitled 'The Uniqueness and Normality of the Holocaust', Zygmunt Bauman compares the Nazi's elimination process to a gardener's vision for a perfect garden. Bauman's focus on the importance of order and beauty makes his analogy particularly applicable to this youth:

Some gardeners hate the weeds that spoil their design – that ugliness in the midst of beauty, litter in the midst of serene order. Some others are quite unemotional about them: just a problem to be solved, an extra job to be done. Not that it makes a difference to the weeds; both gardeners exterminate them. If asked or given a chance to pause and ponder, both would agree; weeds must die not so much because of what they are, as because of what the beautiful, orderly garden ought to be.<sup>35</sup>

Bauman's analogy is appropriate for two reasons: weeds in a garden spoil a preconceived, ordered idea of beauty, which is similar to the Hitler Youth's conception of the prisoners as ugly and undisciplined; furthermore, both use figurative language to explain or excuse a process of extermination. Whereas Bauman explains the mindset behind modern genocide using a gardening analogy, wherein a gardener rids his terrain from weeds, the youth considers the prisoners as vermin and therefore excuses his ideas of extermination by dehumanising them. This supports Bauman's analogy because it sees extermination as a creative rather than destructive process: the youth wants not to rid Germany of her

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<sup>35</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, 'The Uniqueness and Normality of the Holocaust', *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989), pp.91-92.

enemies, but rid her of ugliness and disorder – qualities which he projects onto the idea of vermin.

This is the first mention of prisoners as vermin in *The Human Race* but, within only twenty-two pages, Antelme uses the vermin metaphor a further three, separate times. However, rather than imagining them from a perpetrator's perspective, as above, Antelme shifts his narrative voice. In the following two examples, he writes in the second person narrative:

The SS man watches us, his legs straddled, his calves tensed, his riding crop in his hand, the death's-head cap above his eyes.

“Poor asshole. You don't see a thing. If right now I could take you by the scruff of the neck and shake you, the first thing I would want you to get into your head is that I, me, I have a bed at home, that I have a door I can lock, and if anyone wants to see me he rings the door-bell. [...] And those are girls, like German girls, for whom men would have been willing to die, whose images have been fixed on photographs that are right now being looked at in warm houses – girls who are now old women in zebra outfits, just like this vermin that you see before you.<sup>36</sup>

Were we to go and find an SS and show Jacques to him, to him we could say:

“Have a look, you have turned him into this rotting, yellowish creature. You have succeeded in making him what you think he is by nature: waste, offal. Well, [...]”

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<sup>36</sup> Antelme, *The Human Race*, pp.78-79



you have enabled him to make of himself the strongest, the most complete of men, the surest of his powers, of the resources of his conscience, of the scope of his actions. [...] With Jacques you never won. You wanted him to steal. He didn't steal. You wanted him to kiss the kapos' asses in order to eat. He wouldn't do it. You wanted him to laugh in order to look good when a *Meister* was beating some guy up. He didn't laugh. [...] Your conscience is at rest. 'We were right, just look at them.' No one is so deluded as you, and you're deluded by us, who are leading you to the very end of your error. [...] We'll let ourselves be taken the whole way to death, and you'll only see the vermin who are dying.<sup>37</sup>

In both quotations, Antelme adopts an accusatory tone, imagining what he would say to a member of the SS were he not to be killed for speaking out. Throughout the quotations, he imagines how he could show his perpetrators the individuality of prisoners and prove to them how each one deserves to be treated with respect. The repetition in 'I, me, I' shows Antelme affirming himself as unique rather than as a faceless prisoner amongst the masses. Similarly, Antelme contrasts the physical appearance of Jacques to his sense of morality: where the SS would not expect a 'rotting, yellowing creature' to retain any ethical standards, Jacques is proof that treating someone as less than human may make them appear less than human, but it does not always succeed in making them act in what he perceives as being a subhuman manner (but what is actually, as proven by limit cases such as the Holocaust, indeed a human manner).

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<sup>37</sup> Antelme, *The Human Race*, pp.88-89.

In both examples it seems as though Antelme's defiant, private monologues celebrate a thriving humanity behind the transformed faces of prisoners. It seems as though the energy of his desires to shake an SS by the scruff of the neck surpass the exhaustion of his body. Indeed, until Antelme reaches his 'vermin' metaphors, it seems as though his testimony celebrates individual examples of resistance against the SS. However, in both cases the 'vermin' metaphor creates a sense of bathos, which reminds readers of the prisoners' futile situation. The metaphor serves to highlight that, even if the hypothetical resistance were to take place, the prisoners would still be seen as vermin by the SS. In the first example, the girls for whom men would die remain vermin to their captors; in the second, any sense that the prisoners have deluded the SS and as such any sense that they retain the power to choose their fate, is rendered obsolete as they die in their masses, and the SS – deluded or not – see only vermin dying. Therefore, in these examples, 'vermin' is used in direct contrast to the humanity previously presented. It encapsulates ideas of anonymity, physical ugliness, and the lack of individuality.

Aside from one example where Antelme uses 'vermin' in its literal sense – to describe the lice in prisoners' beds – the final appearance of the word is when Antelme describes his factory *Meister's* contrasting attitude towards prisoners who speak his language and those who do not.<sup>38</sup> Here, Antelme comments on how the *Meister*, Bortlick, speaks to the *Vorarbeiter*, a Polish prisoner who uses his time to make toys for Bortlick's children:

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<sup>38</sup> Antelme, *The Human Race*, p.112.

Bortlick is speaking with the one who speaks his language and whose hands are skilled. Such a man cannot have anything in common with the slaves who do not speak his language, whose hands are not skilled, who are thin. They are nothing but vermin, though vermin of a prized variety, the vermin that they pursued for years, that they never until now have had such a close view of, vermin that's right here, in this factory, that they live in close proximity with, that they preserve, a treasure of evil.<sup>39</sup>

Similar to the Hitler's Youth, above, Bortlick defines what is worthy of human life in strange terms. The man with whom he can hold a conversation, who uses his skills to make toys for Bortlick's children, is not considered vermin, in contrast to the other prisoners. Unlike the Hitler's Youth example, however, this is not a transcription of a conversation or even an imagined conversation. This is an example of Antelme imagining the *Meister's* point of view. He imagines himself through the eyes of the *Meister*, as vermin. The tense in which he writes is conditional: 'such a man *cannot* have anything in common with the slaves who do not speak his language' (my italics), which implies that Antelme goes so far as to imagine the *Meister's* justification for his actions: Bortlick defines humanity on his own terms so as to draw a line between his favoured prisoner and the others en masse, who appear to him as 'vermin'.

This attitude was not uncommon in Nazi Germany, and in fact Himmler's speech at Posen on 4 October 1943 draws attention to the probability that Germans were likely to find an exception to the common enemy, in this case 'the Jew':

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<sup>39</sup> Antelme, *The Human Race*, p.98.

It's one of those things it is easy to talk about – 'The Jewish race is being exterminated', says one party member, that's quite clear, it's in our program – elimination of the Jews, and we're doing it, exterminating them'. And then they come, 80 Million worthy Germans, and each one has his decent Jew. Of course, the others are vermin, but this one is an A1 Jew. Not one of all those who talk this way has witnessed it, not one of them has been through it. Most of you know what it means when 100 corpses are lying side by side, or 500, or 1000. To have stuck it out and at the same time to have remained decent fellows, that is what has made us hard.<sup>40</sup>

Like the *Meister* in Antelme's testimony, who favours the *Vorarbeiter* due to his personal connections with the man but sees the rest of the workers as 'vermin', Himmler identifies the Jews en masse as 'vermin', but understands how Germans may feel a particular affinity to individual Jews, and how they may consider them separate to the others. However, also like Antelme's example, Himmler shows how the Jews-as-vermin metaphor can become unstuck: whereas Antelme imagines Bortlick convincing himself that the other prisoners 'cannot' be like the *Vorbeiter* by attaching more moral significance to language and skills than he does to simply being human, Himmler shows how the Nazis wanted to consider the Jews en masse as 'vermin' but still recognised the impossibility of anyone facing 1000 human bodies (regardless of race) and remaining unfazed. If these people were vermin, then there would be little problem of extermination on this mass scale. As it was, many

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<sup>40</sup> Heinrich Himmler in a speech at Posen, October 4, 1943. Quoted in: Office of United States Chief of Counsel for Prosecution of Axis Criminality, *Nazi Conspiracy and Aggression, Volume 4* (United States Government Printing Office, 1946), p.563.

Nazis found the extermination process harrowing. Over a year before he gave this speech, even Himmler was said to be suffering 'from visions in connection with the shootings of Jews that he himself had led'.<sup>41</sup>

Antelme further draws attention to this contradiction. By repeating 'vermin' four times in quick succession, it seems as though he imagines the *Meister* convincing himself that these prisoners are less than human. After all, if the vermin metaphor was accurate, it would imply that the prisoners were pests, but here the prisoners are working for the SS rather than against them. They are kept as trophies of the strength of the Nazi party, and therefore they should symbolise power and oppression: two qualities which one does not typically associate with vermin. Moreover, the final four words (or in the original Spanish, three: '*tesoro del Mal*'), are telling in their ambiguity: it is unclear as to whether the prisoners are the evil or the treasure. If they are 'evil' then evil's treasure must be the skills they supply, but the ambiguity is such that the evil referred to may be the evil of the SS: the prisoners are the treasure belonging to evil. If this is the case, perhaps Antelme shifts from imagining the Meister's thoughts back to his own judgement of the situation. This would highlight the impossibility of fully understanding another's perspective; an impossibility which is parallel to humans using animal metaphors as if to suggest they understand the natural thoughts of different species (as discussed with regard to insects, above, this thought process immediately reminds one that they are a human thinking their way into another's body). Otherwise, Antelme continues to imagine Bortlick's thought process, and this would suggest that he thinks the perpetrators understand that they are not culling vermin as though they are weeds, but exterminating humans as though they are vermin.

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<sup>41</sup> Grawitz to Himmler, March 4, 1942, Nürnberg document relating to party organisations 600. Reprinted in Christopher R. Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (London: Penguin Books, 2001), p.25.

This is in direct opposition to Antelme's earlier use of the 'vermin' metaphor, where he captured the futility of prisoners resisting their dehumanisation. Instead, his final use of vermin metaphors ends on an ambiguity which ironically foregrounds his unambiguous resolution in *The Human Race*: 'there is no ambiguity: we're still men, and we shall not end otherwise than as men'.<sup>42</sup>

Antelme's extended vermin metaphor makes his testimony exceptional. He transcribes how he imagines his perpetrators to think, and therefore the metaphor is repeated to show how he believes they consider their victims. Although this is speculative, the metaphor is not random, but historically appropriate due to the fact that Nazis' adversaries were often depicted as vermin in propaganda. This is especially relevant for Jews, though of course Antelme is not included in this category. The most striking of these is the "documentary" 'The Eternal Jew', which, as described by Art Spiegelman:

portrayed Jews in a ghetto swarming in tight quarters, bearded caftaned creatures, and then cut to Jews as mice – or rather rats – swarming in a sewer, with a title card that said "Jews are the rats" or the "vermin of mankind".<sup>43</sup>

Such propaganda was used to dehumanise Jews in order to make them appear dirty, pestilential and exterminable: the qualities we attach to the idea of 'vermin'. However, most testimonies are less conjectural, therefore apart from referring to literal vermin such as lice and rats, the metaphor is not common. Instead, some survivors use animal metaphors specific to animals one may associate with vermin, such as mice. More examples will follow,

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<sup>42</sup> Antelme, *The Human Race*, p.219.

<sup>43</sup> Art Spiegelman, *Metamaus* (London: Viking, 2011), p.115.

but this first quotation begins in the retelling of a story told to Trude Levi by her friend Alice, a persecuted Hungarian Jew, after the Second World War had ended. They worked together in an office. The boy in the story is the son of a man who took his life, and Levi worries that Alice felt herself too involved in the fiction:

One day his little son was sitting on the kerbside with a friend and said that before his father had died he had told him an exciting oriental story about a little mouse. The mouse lived with his family and was very happy except for one thing. Whenever he saw birds flying he too wanted to fly. His wish was granted and suddenly he could fly. He was so happy! He flew among the birds and saw all the wonderful things that birds see high in the sky – the cities, cathedrals, forests and castles. It was marvellous, but it became rather lonely. So the mouse learned the language of the birds in order to be able to converse with them. But even though he could now speak to the birds, he was obviously not really a bird and, unintentionally, the birds made him feel that he was not really one of them. The mouse now became homesick and thought how lovely it would be if he could tell all the other mice of all the wonderful things he had seen. And so he went home and the mice were happy to see him, but he soon felt that he was no longer really one of them. And he felt very sad.

Alice became quite involved with this story, kept telling everyone about it and somehow re-enacting it as if she were principally involved. I became worried about her. [...] I had a premonition that something had happened to her, and this seemed to be confirmed when the following day she did not come to the office. About half-way through the morning the telephone rang and I

instinctively knew that it was news of Alice. She had opened the gas-tap and was dead. I was very distressed but not surprised. Once again the Holocaust had taken its toll. Alice, a Jewess, born in Hungary, because of persecution, felt unwanted there. She emigrated to Paris, but could not feel at home there either, like the little mouse.<sup>44</sup>

This metafiction within Levi's testimony takes on the qualities of a fable in both length and character, as many fables feature animals. However, unlike most fables, there is no clear lesson to be learned. The mouse in the story seems to love his family, to be grateful for his granted wish, to be hard-working (he learns the language of the birds), and to be true to his roots (after he has felt the exhilaration of flying, he wants only to share the story with his family). As such, there is no moral reason for his feelings of rejection at the end. Alice feels involved in this story, and Levi connects it to her suicide. Although her friend was never tortured in a concentration camp, her race meant that her family was persecuted and felt the need to uproot themselves in order to avoid an even more dreadful fate. Although unmentioned in Levi's narrative, it is more than likely that many of Alice's extended family were fatally persecuted, due to the wide-reaching effects of the Nazi extermination process. As such, like the mouse, Levi imagines that Alice must have felt isolated and misunderstood. Such feelings are common amongst Holocaust survivors, and Primo Levi recounts a nightmare where he returns home from Auschwitz to tell everyone his story, only for them to disbelieve him or even show their disinterest. Once awake, his friend Alberto confides that 'it is also his dream and the dream of many others, perhaps of everyone'.<sup>45</sup> Dreams

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<sup>44</sup> Trude Levi, *A Cat Called Adolf* (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 1997), pp. 88-89.

<sup>45</sup> Levi, *If This Is A Man – The Truce*, p.66.



often have fabulous qualities, but – like the story of the mouse – it does not mean that they do not affect people in sometimes cruel and personal ways. Camp life was so unimaginable that survivors were genuinely worried that they would not be believed. Indeed, Trude Levi admits that her testimony was doubted by many who heard it.<sup>46</sup> Therefore, when she compares her friend to the little mouse, the connection between the two is more than fabulous. Her friend may have felt akin to the mouse in ways which are associated with its species: its smallness and its fear of larger predators, for example. And yet she may also feel connected with the mouse in ways which are more specific to the story: her feelings of rootlessness, the unfairness of her fate and the fact that she can find no meaning for her past. The Holocaust, like the fable, bore no lessons for its victims.

Although mice are often considered vermin, it is clear from this fable that stories or metaphors about individual mice do not always pertain to this classification. Rather, ‘vermin’ connotes a negative human relationship with the species: mice become vermin when they are considered pests to humans. In the story, however, the mouse has no relationship with humans. Moreover, as it has fabulous qualities, only the physical form of the animal is a mouse, whereas the mouse itself harbours feelings akin to a person’s. Therefore, ‘vermin’ is used in a derogatory sense, hence its lack of mention in most survivor testimonies, whereas individual animals like mice are commonly presented outside of this identification bracket. Illustrating this are more quotations about mice:

I keep still as a mouse.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Levi writes of a time when she gave a talk about her experiences in Auschwitz to a Jewish audience in South Africa, when responses included one woman who said: “My poor dear girl, I am sure you had a hard time but surely your imagination has run away with you a bit?” – Trude Levi, *A Cat Called Adolf*, p.98.

<sup>47</sup> De Wijze, *Only My Life*, p. 149.

Whole families were deprived of their citizenship rights and hid out in dark corners like frightened mice.<sup>48</sup>

The pogrom sounds drew closer, moved away again, came from right under my window, and once more echoed from a distance. It was as though someone was playing a cat-and-mouse game with me.<sup>49</sup>

Let her go in peace and if by any chance  
there is incarnation which she did not believe in  
to be a spoilt cat would have been her wish.  
A cat with its independent nature, sleek  
handsome and playful but not a hunter  
that catches birds and mice,  
just curled up in someone's lap, beloved  
She would even oblige by purring her thanks.<sup>50</sup>

These quotations use mice as either metaphors or similes in order to convey qualities one associates with these animals. Mice are small, less predatory than rats, and even less so than cats. Therefore, the fact that survivors use them to convey their own feelings of fear, smallness and victimisation is unsurprising. De Wijze keeps 'still as a mouse' in order that the Nazis do not notice that he is attempting to stay behind on their death march

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<sup>48</sup> Trepman, *Among Men and Beasts*, p.37.

<sup>49</sup> Werner Weinberg, *Self-Portrait of a Holocaust Survivor* (London: McFarland & Company Inc., 1984), p. 57.

<sup>50</sup> Levi, *A Cat Called Adolf*, p.167.

(unfortunately this does not work). He is therefore acting as prey avoiding its predators. Similarly, Trepman sees families huddled together, their physical positions remind him of small animals backed into a corner and their hopeless situation remind him of prey hiding from its predator. This predator-prey relationship is made even more explicit when Weinberg is hoping not to be attacked during Kristallnacht, as Nazis march through his town destroying the shops and homes of fellow Jews. The 'cat-and-mouse game' may be a turn of phrase, but its meaning does not deter too far from its roots in the animal kingdom, where cats are considered the typical predator to mice. This cat-mouse relationship is used once more as the final words in Trude Levi's testimony, as her poem documents her desire to live as a cat, without cares and in a loving home, though specifically not a cat-as-predator, simply a cat-as-pet. Knowing Alice who felt so akin to the mouse in her father's tale, and being a victim of the Holocaust herself, it is obvious why Levi would not want to be the sort of cat which kills mice.

Trude Levi wants to live like a cat, but her definition of a cat denies the predatory part of the animal's nature: the same part which is explicitly used to highlight Weinberg's feelings of victimisation in the previous quotation. Similarly, mice are often considered vermin, but in all of these examples it is not the qualities of vermin which are expressed, but the physical quality of being small metaphorically used to connote helplessness, or the natural order of mice-as-prey used to connote feelings of victimisation. Analysing vermin and specific types of vermin therefore allows one to understand the duality involved in using animal metaphors: they at once pertain to our relationship with these animals and the characteristics we perceive these animals as having, far more even than the actual qualities of that animal. No one can possibly understand the feelings of a mouse trapped in a corner facing a cat, though we imagine that feeling to be akin to our understanding of fear. It is this

distance between humans and animals, and the lack of understanding shared between our species, which makes them so easy to use as figures onto which we may press our own ideas and definitions. This highlights one of many reasons why dehumanisation in an abstract sense is so dangerous: if perpetrators start to see their victims as animals, then they too might begin to understand them by their own definitions. However, as shown with Himmler's Posten speech and Antelme's understanding of his *Meister's* relationship with individual prisoners, this desired effect of an extermination regime cannot be entirely successful when, outside of abstractions, perpetrators know that their victims are human.

### *Dogs*

Dog metaphors are used in Holocaust survivor testimonies to describe both the victims and their perpetrators. Holocaust survivors, treated as slaves, perhaps refer to the idea of a dog as a domesticated creature, whereas for perpetrators the metaphor alludes to their inhumane treatment of prisoners. At other times, the metaphor refers to a more abstract idea, such as when Primo Levi describes his memories before camp attacking him like a dog. In every case the metaphor is further pertinent due to the fact that SS worked alongside their dogs and often set these animals on prisoners for punishment, to maintain order or simply for entertainment.

Both Abel Herzberg and Robert Antelme use dogs figuratively, but with different effect. After writing that a camp commandant is a 'bitch' for having forbidden laundry to be

allowed to dry – using an animal metaphor as a standard insult – Herzberg refers to the prisoners' situation through the analogy of a dog:<sup>51</sup>

The women are desperate. Where is one meant to hang the nappies and the children's laundry, now that it is winter and it pours with rain every day?

And most of them have diarrhoea and keep soiling themselves. Oh, the gloom, the darkness, the intolerable filth in the huts. People lying the whole day in a dark hovel where one would not leave a dog.<sup>52</sup>

Herzberg does not directly compare the prisoners to dogs, but rather shows how their treatment is inhumane by alluding to the treatment one might expect to give a dog. The prisoners are presented as human with human needs and wishes – the wish to hang laundry out to dry – but it is in the nonfulfilment of these wishes that they are denied basic, humane treatment. As this quotation comes shortly after calling the camp commandant a 'bitch', it is made further clear how, by treating the prisoners with less respect than dogs, it may still be the perpetrators who are comparable to animals, rather than the prisoners they treat as such.

Robert Antelme's simile also refers to dogs kept by humans, but he uses the simile to highlight the prisoners' feelings of anticipation at the prospect of receiving more food for Christmas: 'we become excited, we start taking liberties, like dogs on loosened leashes'.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Jack Santross, who translated Herzberg's diary into the English version published and sold today, shared the same train journey with Herzberg and claims he 'felt all the pain and had experienced every torment described in [his] diary'. He also claims to 'have followed the original Dutch text as closely as possible'. For these reasons, it is fair to assume that 'bitch' is an accurate translation and can therefore be analysed alongside other dog metaphors in the text (Jack Santross, in: Herzberg, *Between Two Streams*, p.vii).

<sup>52</sup> Herzberg, *Between Two Streams*, p.166.

<sup>53</sup> Antelme, *The Human Race*, p.101.

Unlike Herzberg's analogy, this simile directly compares the prisoners to domesticated animals. Moreover, Antelme uses an animal simile to express prisoners in a relatively positive mood. So entrenched are feelings of powerlessness that the most freedom they can experience is comparable to a domesticated dog on a loosened leash. In both cases, the survivors use domesticated dogs figuratively to describe their treatment, but whereas Herzberg's analogy does not present the prisoners as animalistic despite their inhumane treatment, Antelme's simile directly compares prisoners to dogs despite the possibility of relatively humane treatment. The survivors therefore use dogs figuratively to opposite effect. This may be because of dual associations we have of dogs: as animals and therefore 'inhuman', but also as pets and therefore domesticated.

Like Antelme, Primo Levi uses an animal simile specifically with regard to domesticated dogs. Levi compares his working companion, Null Achtzehn – named after his concentration camp number even by fellow prisoners because he seems to have lost all traces of humanity – to a sledge dog which dies from exhaustion:

He has not even the rudimentary astuteness of a draught-horse, which stops pulling a little before it reaches exhaustion: he pulls or carries or pushes as long as his strength allows him, then he gives way at once, without a word of warning, without lifting his sad, opaque eyes from the ground. He made me think of the sledge-dogs in London's books, who slave until the last breath and die on the track.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Levi, *If This is a Man – The Truce*, p.49.

Here, Levi's description begins by highlighting not only how Null Achtzen's reactions seem less than human, but how he seems less astute even than some animals, specifically the draught-horse. Something 'rudimentary' has been lost from this prisoner: whereas even animals would stop before reaching their physical limits, Null Achtzen works to the point where his body can stand no more. The sledge dogs to which Levi compares his companion are fictional: they are specifically the dogs in *Call of the Wild* and *White Fang* by Jack London.<sup>55</sup> In the first of these novels, a domesticated dog is made to adapt to the wild, where the second is the story of a wild dog's journey to domestication. These are dogs whose instincts have been tamed, which perhaps explains why Levi compares Null Achtzen to these over real dogs. These fictional dogs have been written by a human into a story where they are tamed by humans. Similarly, Null Achtzen has been imprisoned and his name has been taken from him. He works to the point of utter exhaustion for those who stripped him of his humanity, and his story as prisoner will be remembered only in a testimony which refers to him not by his name but as a number. On one occasion, Levi works with Null Achtzen and, as they are forced to stop working to let wagons pass, he has a few moments to let his thoughts escape from the immediate demands of concentration camp life. Once the wagons have passed, his situation and his incognizant partner remind him once more: 'We are only tired beasts'.<sup>56</sup> Perhaps here is where Levi confirms that Null Achtzen's inhumanity is a direct result from his situation, and that he too is part of this process of dehumanisation.

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<sup>55</sup> Jack London, *Call of the Wild* and *White Fang* (Ware: Wordsworth Editions, 2004).

<sup>56</sup> Levi, *If This is a Man*, p.50.

Levi compares Null Achtzen to a dog, but one which is fictional. Similarly, he later compares himself and other prisoners to dogs but shows how his simile is dichotomous. Here, he describes the end of a lunch break in winter, when prisoners dread their return to work in pitiless conditions:

Oh, if one could only cry! Oh, if one could only affront the wind as we once used to, on equal terms, and not as we do here, like cringing dogs.

We are outside and everyone picks up his lever. Resnyk drops his head between his shoulders, pulls his beret over his ears and lifts his face up to the low grey sky where the inexorable snow whirls around: *'Si j'avey une chien, je ne le chasse pas dehors.'*<sup>57</sup>

Resnyk is Levi's Polish bed companion who speaks very good French despite it not being his first language. His sentence roughly translates to: 'If I had a dog, I would not chase it outdoors', and presumably refers to the fact that the prisoners have been forced outside in extremely cold and relentless weather.<sup>58</sup> Therefore, although Levi compares the prisoners to 'cringing dogs', Resnyk shows how most humans would not treat their dogs in such a cruel manner. As such, the dogs to which Levi refers are not necessarily dogs per se, but the dog as symbol of something lesser than humankind. Humans, who can choose to face the wind 'on their own terms' or leave it to be warm inside, have the advantage over dogs which are expelled to the elements, but Resnyk confirms that it would take a cruel dog-owner to subject his pet to such conditions. As such, Levi shows how the prisoners are not to the

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<sup>57</sup> Levi, *If This is a Man*, p.76.

<sup>58</sup> My own translation.



Nazis as dogs are to men, but rather how they are treated with even less regard for compassion.

Although Levi compares himself and other prisoners to animals in order to evoke their degradation or inhumanity, other examples show how the animal comparison is not necessarily demeaning, but rather evocative of simpler times. For example, Charlotte Delbo describes the final struggles of one prisoner by recalling memories of other deaths, dignified despite the fact that those dying or dead were animals; these presumably being the only instances of death experienced by a younger Delbo, before she became saturated in it through her time in Birkenau:

Her back hunches, shoulder blades protruding through the worn fabric of her coat. It's a yellow coat, like that of our dog Flac which had grown thin after being ill, and whose whole body curved, just before he died, looking like the skeleton of a bird in the Museum of Natural History. This woman is going to die.

She no longer looks at us. She is huddling in the snow. His backbone arched, Flac is going to die – the first creature I ever saw die.<sup>59</sup>

Delbo focuses on the physical aspects of this woman's suffering when she compares her to the dog Flac: her back, the shape of her body, her protruding bones. The coat she wears seems to jolt Delbo's memory of her dog, but it is more likely this woman's condition before death which recalls the image. The animal metaphor is two-fold: Delbo remembers the

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<sup>59</sup> Delbo, *Auschwitz and After*, p.27.

death of her dog, which she had thought – perhaps at the time – made him seem like the skeleton of a bird. This prisoner, therefore, is reduced to the physical remains of one who is dead. The metaphor is not specific to Flac, as it first seems, but to dead animal matter.

Death as equaliser is conveyed in the last two sentences, where the image of her huddled in the snow is immediately followed by the death of the dog. The final remark ‘- the first creature I ever saw die’ seems to relate simultaneously to this woman and to Flac. In dying, she has become the dog that had become the bird.

There is sadness in this quotation, but what renders it unique is its separation from the Holocaust. Of course, this woman’s imminent death is due to the cruel conditions in which she has lived, but Delbo’s description, in its generalisation, seems almost peaceful: an anonymous obituary. In a world governed by death, Delbo writes of an individual death as though it equates to all others; as such she seems to pay her respects to every death through this one, and to this one through every death. Although she identifies this woman with animals, it is this process of identification which renders her humane: whereas the SS killed millions in order that they be forgotten, Delbo memorialises this death along with countless others. She bears her death until such a time as she can write it down, which is to remember it. There is little to suggest that Delbo expected she would live to write down her memories (early in her testimony she writes that ‘Madness must have been the final hope of those who entered there’), but in finally doing so she expresses a very humane sense of mourning for this woman and others like her.<sup>60</sup> The motif of returning resounds through Delbo’s Testimony (‘None of Us Will Return’), but through this memory she returns momentarily to a time before the camp when her dog died, and a time before that – before

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<sup>60</sup> Delbo, *Auschwitz and After*, p.19.

she was born – when a bird memorialised in a museum also died. In this sense, she identifies the prisoner with animals not to degrade her, where the animal would be a symbol for a lesser, more exterminable, thing, but rather to remember her, where the animals are not symbols but memories of real, living things.

Another example of a survivor recounting an incident where she was called a dog comes from the story of Martha W, when she was rounded up with other Sinti people before being deported to Belzec:

*Die Polizisten, die zur Bewachung mit uns gekommen waren, die standen wie die begossenen Pudel da, als sie die SS sahen und wie sie hörten, wie der SS-Kommandant, das war so ein kleiner Mann, der stand mit der Peitsche da und schrie gleich "Wenn ihr nicht gehorcht!". Ach, was er alles gesagt hat. Er hat gesagt, wir wären wie Hunde und so werden wir auch behandelt. Das war so schrecklich.*

[Translated reads:]

The policemen who were guarding us stood like poodles when they saw the SS and heard the SS commandant, a small man standing there with a whip in his

hand, shouting: “If you do not obey!” Oh, and what else did he say? He called us dogs and we were treated as such. That was so terrible.<sup>61</sup>

Martha uses two dog similes, but to different effect. Whereas she recalls the SS commandant calling her a dog, she compares the policemen to a specific breed of dog – the poodle. The insult is general because the commandant uses it to demean prisoners. In calling them dogs they became easier to treat as such. However, one does not typically treat a dog with such cruelty. Therefore, the dog to which the commandant refers is symbolic as that which is less than human. Conversely, Martha describes the policemen as poodles, which refers to their relative meekness next to the commandant: poodles are stereotypically mild and effeminate. They look very different to the Nazis’ favoured dog, the German Shepherd. Therefore, whereas the commandant uses the dog simile as an unspecific insult used to degrade prisoners, Martha uses the dog simile to recall a specific characteristic of the policemen.

In *Metaphors We Live By*, Lakoff and Johnson explain how figurative language not only reveals certain aspects of the comparative object, but also conceals other aspects:

The very systematicity that allows us to comprehend one aspect of a concept in terms of another [...] will necessarily hide other aspects of the concept. In allowing us to focus on one aspect of a concept [...], a metaphorical concept can

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<sup>61</sup> Martha W, ‘The Story of Martha W’, my own translation.

keep us from focusing on other aspects of the concept that are inconsistent with that metaphor.<sup>62</sup>

Having previously shown how metaphors are used to highlight particular qualities, Lakoff and Johnson here show how the chosen metaphor can also hide other qualities due to the fact that our interpretation is skewed towards the metaphorical object rather than the object of comparison. In this sense, the commandant may compare the prisoners to dogs in order to fit them with his conception of an animal. It highlights their insubordination but conceals their humanity, which encourages him to treat them in accordance with the simile's boundaries. On the other hand, calling the policemen poodles highlights their meekness but may conceal many other qualities, such as those which might distinguish one policeman from the other. This is not to say that the simile is ineffective. Rather, it helps convey the scene as Martha remembers it: it happened many years ago and, as Martha herself says elsewhere in her testimony, and as quoted above, 'I do not remember myself properly'.

Other survivors also refer to their captors as dogs, both to describe and also to deride them. For these different uses, the metaphors highlight and conceal relative characteristics. In the following examples, dog metaphors are used to describe the tone of orders given by SS:

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<sup>62</sup> Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors*, p.10

The guard rants and raves like a rabid dog.<sup>63</sup>

They're speaking German, everything's okay. This time the guy won't get punched. The *Meister's* barks are already turning into growls.<sup>64</sup>

Against that handshake there was nothing that could prevail, neither the barking of thousands of SS troops nor the whole apparatus of ovens, dogs, and barbed wire, nor famine, nor lice.<sup>65</sup>

In the examples from de Wijze and Antelme's testimonies, the chosen language refers to the manner in which their perpetrators communicate with prisoners. For de Wijze, the simile directly compares the guard to a dog – specifically one which is rabid – whereas in both of Antelme's examples the perpetrators are not compared to dogs as such, but their voice is referred to as a 'bark'. This implies that orders given are animalistic, either in tone or meaning (owing to language in camps being Babelic). In both cases, the figurative language refers to how the language used was not understandable: de Wijze's *Meister* spoke not only like a dog – already inferring that he was incoherent – but a dog which is rabid: a diseased state which brings about violence and madness. In the first example from *The Human Race*, Antelme describes the *Meister's* angry shouts as barks and he is relieved when they turn to scowls or – figuratively – growls. Here, the metaphor is embedded within

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<sup>63</sup> de Wijze, *Only My Life*, p.126.

<sup>64</sup> Antelme, *Human Race*, p.58.

<sup>65</sup> Antelme, *Human Race*, p.75.

the words 'bark' and 'growl'. The Meister's anger is different to the shouts of those outside of camp and in a civilised community because – as with a mad dog – the anger of perpetrators did not have to be controlled due to social conventions. It could be unleashed on prisoners without reason or justification. Similarly, Antelme describes the contrast between the Reinlander who shook his hand and other members of the Lager who treated him with contempt. In that handshake was a level of respect. It acknowledged Antelme as a human being, for a moment at least on an equal level with the Lager. Antelme believes that the Reinlander approached him with the sole purpose of shaking his hand: 'That morning he had obviously had to come to us to shake hands; he'd arranged to do it as soon as he'd got to the factory'.<sup>66</sup> Antelme continues:

He hadn't so much come to encourage us as to share in our power. ... Any human relationship a German were to enter into with one of us was the sign itself of a deliberate rebellion against the whole of the SS order. One could not do what the Rhinlander had done – could not, that is, behave as a man towards one of us – without thereby classifying oneself historically. By denying us as men the SS had made us historical objects that could no longer in any way be the objects of ordinary human relations. These relations could have such consequences, so impossible was it just to think of establishing them without being aware of the enormous prohibition against which once had to rebel in order to do so.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Antelme, *Human Race*, pp.74-75.

<sup>67</sup> Antelme, *Human Race*, p.75.

The handshake was not merely a sign of equality, but of superiority, because it symbolised rebellion against tyranny. In creating relationships which crossed over from the Lager to the prisoners, the hierarchy was overturned and common humanity overrode distinctions based on race or other arbitrary categorisation. Therefore, Antelme sees this handshake in direct opposition to the ‘barking of thousands of SS troops’ because, by sharing in it, he felt empowered. Through this action, he feels more humane than the troops who bark their orders like dogs.

The above descriptions are more descriptive than derogatory, but in his short testimony, Mr. Brukarz refers to perpetrators as dogs numerous times, each highlighting their inhumanity:

Such an unhappy experience as this torture happened to me, when after gruelling work I fell unconscious. I was brought before the dog Grunewald (commandant) and asked why I had refused to work. To this nonsensical question I could give no answer, and so he pronounced sentence – “Treehanging”.<sup>68</sup>

[Herr Wachtmeister] asked me why I had come to him. “Because you called me” was my answer. “You lie”, he said, and gave me a blow, which knocked me

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<sup>68</sup> Brukarz, ‘My Experience’, p.2.



backwards into the pit. “Now out of it” he bellowed. I sprang out in haste. [...] Yet this performance was put about ten times: like a fool I jumped in and out – and this hound grinned.<sup>69</sup>

We were stone-breaking when he was ordered by a “Death-headman” to run to him. What he asked him I could not hear but I heard his bellowing command: “March, march”. My friend obeyed the command and the cowardly dog shot a bullet into his head. The excuse, - attempting to escape. Comment, - superfluous.<sup>70</sup>

Yet another horrible sight is to be seen. A column passes by – broken men – they carry a band on the arm which is written (bloed) “insane”. They carry a heavy burden of stone, one follows the other; they can hardly move it. No pity – a “Death-Head” moves amongst them and cruelly whips them forward. Can one liken these dogs to men? No – and again No.<sup>71</sup>

Twice Brukarz refers to the perpetrators simply as ‘dogs’, once ‘cowardly dog’ and once specifically a ‘hound’. Brukarz’s testimony is short: it is not written as a novel but written, presumably, just to bear witness to atrocity. As such, Brukarz is repetitive and his anger exhibits itself in the text. ‘Dog’ here is simply an expression of contempt at cruel and

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<sup>69</sup> Brukarz, ‘My Experience’, p.3.

<sup>70</sup> Brukarz, ‘My Experience’, p.3.

<sup>71</sup> Brukarz, ‘My Experience’, p.4.

cowardly behaviour. Brukarz explicitly uses it to mark the difference between men and beasts, who punish for no reason and torture even the insane. The one time when he is more specific in his description, when he calls Herr Wachtmeister a 'hound', may refer to a hound's hunting ability, or the fact that a notable breed is the blood-hound. Overall, however, the comparison of these perpetrators to dogs is on a symbolic plane rather than a comparison to the animals as such: it is used simply to display what could be perceived as their inhumanity.

Dogs are used both to describe prisoners and to describe the SS, and also used from one side to the other in the manner of insults. However, Primo Levi also uses a dog simile in order to communicate a more abstract thought. When he is recovering in Ka-be he is thankful that he does not have to work tirelessly outdoors, but shows how this short period of relative relief allows him to recall times outside of the camp, and his physical exhaustion while working is replaced by the mental exhaustion of remembering once more what it is to be a man: 'the pain of remembering, the old ferocious suffering of feeling myself a man again, which attacks me like a dog the moment my conscience comes out of this gloom'.<sup>72</sup> It is ironic how the memory of being a man is described as attacking Levi like a dog: so entrenched is he in the inhumanity of the SS and the inhumane treatment of the prisoners, that memories of times before his imprisonment have been suppressed out of disbelief or exhaustion. Given time to relax, they surface and attack him with a sense of nostalgia and mourning. The memories do not seem to be offering relief or hope, but conversely anger and hopelessness. On such an abstract plane it could be presumed that the dog is symbolic, but the image suggests otherwise: the pain of remembering seems comparable to the pain

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<sup>72</sup> Levi, *If This is a Man – The Truce*, p.148.

of a dog's attack, as it is so often that one must turn to figurative sayings in order to describe pain – an idea to which I return in Chapter Two.

Dogs are used to highlight specific qualities in fellow prisoners, such as their mistreatment, and also used to describe the cruelty of SS. They are also paraphrased by survivors from the abuse they received at the hands of their perpetrators, when they were called dogs in order to feel dehumanised. Sometimes, the metaphor is more specific to a breed of dog, such as the poodle to describe meekness, or the hound to represent bloodthirstiness and the ability to hunt. Primo Levi also uses a dog simile to represent his mental anguish at remembering a time before he was treated like a dog by those who are also comparable to dogs (where the former implies degradation and the latter inhumanity). Levi's simile is made further pertinent by the fact that he was at a constant threat of being attacked by dogs, as it was common for SS to set their dogs on the prisoners. For example, Giuliana Tedeschi describes one such attack on her fellow prisoner: 'when her arms get tired, they bend. The *Posten* sets the dog on her: "*Hoch! Hoch!*" Presumably, the sound made is the dog attacking the prisoner, but Tedeschi writes it such that the sound is ambiguous. It could either be the dog or the *Posten* shouting orders for the dog to attack. This best displays the breakdown of humanity in the camps, and how it is translated into testimony through animal metaphors. Yet, the "inhumanity" of guards and the depersonalisation experienced by prisoners may well be evoked by using dog metaphors, but as is implied through the sheer number these figurative comparisons, these traits are common enough to assume that they are not inhuman at all, but on the contrary that they are displayed amongst human beings who are pushed – and who push – to their limits. In this sense, they display less an inhumanity than a human capacity for what ostensibly may

be referred to as 'animality', if that term is to imply bestial characteristics either rising to the fore in Nazi guards, or being exposed in prisoners. As such, comparisons to dogs reciprocally evoke animality and humanity and, therefore, one might argue that the two are not so far apart. As with the ambiguity highlighted by Tedeschi, the viciousness displayed by camp dogs chiefly serves to mirror the vicious commands of their human owners.

### *Pigs*

Pig metaphors are used by Nazis to insult their prisoners. Owing to the stereotype of pigs as dirty, the metaphor is often used to highlight the difference in appearance from the well-dressed SS and unwashed prisoners. Other stereotypes attached to the pig are laziness and greed. Nazis used pigs to describe prisoners who were not working hard enough, though in Holocaust testimonies the hypocrisy of such insults is also shown, owing to the exhausting labour undergone by prisoners instead of their Nazi overseers. As such, 'lazy pig' is also used by prisoners to describe Nazis, though never to their faces. Comparing prisoners to pigs to highlight their greed is most often used between prisoners, as it would be not only hypocritical but absurd for Nazis to call prisoners 'greedy pigs' when they are offering such insufficient portions of food. The insult is specifically degrading when it is used to describe Jewish prisoners, as pork is non-kosher. Therefore, in such cases, 'pig' also has connotations of impurity. Although these are the most common uses of pig metaphors, this section also highlights exceptions where they are used in other, singular occurrences.

Trude Levi writes of her first days at Hessisch-Lichtenau , an outcamp of Buchenwald, where at first conditions were relatively 'marvellous'. However, these conditions soon changed:

We were given clean clothes, even underwear, which we did not have until then. There was a bathroom with clean bowls and plugs. Unfortunately, some inmates could not resist taking the soap and the plugs with them and did not keep the bathroom very clean. As a result the camp commandant decided that we were pigs and shut off first the warm water and later the bathroom as well most of the time.<sup>73</sup>

Prisoners may have been transferred to this camp from one which had far less concern for prisoner hygiene, and stole soap and plugs perhaps to keep in order to trade for food. Such behaviour was not allowed in camps, but it kept prisoners alive and continued nonetheless. Therefore, although these prisoners were treated comparatively well, they stole what they could in case conditions turned. Therefore, although Levi writes that water was turned off and they were considered pigs 'as a result' of stealing soap and subsequently leaving the bathrooms messy, this in turn was probably as a result of being treated as less than human by SS elsewhere. Interestingly, this order of blame is brought out in Levi's earlier notes for her testimony, when she went by the name of Gertrud Deak:

During the first four days we could sleep, eat and wash and sing to our hearts' content. Life seemed to be a paradise. On the fifth day the shower-rooms were locked and we were told that as we are pigs, we did not keep them clean enough and we therefore did not deserve to have showers at all.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Trude Levi, *A Cat Called Adolf*, p.14.

<sup>74</sup> Gertrud Deak, 'A woman survives Auschwitz and the Death March' (London: Wiener Library, Document Reference: 054-EA-0977), p.10.

Whereas her published material implies that the prisoners were considered pigs because they did not keep the bathroom clean, here she supposes that the SS thought they did not keep the bathroom clean because they were pigs. The extract from *A Cat Called Adolf* infers that it was their dirty behaviour which incurred punishment, but her notes suggest that it was the prejudice of camp commandants against Jews which were, to their minds, proved correct by the dirtiness of the shower-rooms.

As well as her experience in camp, Levi documents her first experience of being compared to a pig in an incident when she was a young child and other children treated her with hatred:

They immediately began to call me 'dirty Jewish pig' and pelted me with stones. By the time my father came out I was bleeding and weeping. I did not understand why I had been attacked because I knew I was not dirty, nor was I a pig. A pig was an animal. What did the word Jewish mean? When Father explained about a people who were often hunted and not always tolerated in many lands, I declared I was going to be Jewish from then onward.<sup>75</sup>

It is such prejudice as this which foregrounds the concentration and death camps, and also the conditions within them. These conditions forced prisoners to steal soap and confirmed to the minds of SS that the showers were kept unclean because Jews were indeed 'dirty pigs'. Unable to understand how a pig could be used as an insult on an abstract plane, a

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<sup>75</sup> Trude Levi, *A Cat Called Adolf*, p.47.

younger Levi simply knew that she was not an animal and therefore should not be treated as one. Moreover, she did not even identify herself as Jewish and yet she was attacked for her race and its stereotype. Little changed later on when she was incarcerated on the same grounds.

This highlights how, although 'pig' is often used as an insult to imply dirtiness, the prejudice against Jews presupposed their condition: they may have been called 'pig' because they were dirty, but they were dirty because of the conditions in which they were kept, and they were kept in such conditions because of prejudice based on no more than racist hatred. Conditions were such that food provided was often, in the words of Eugene Heimler, 'not fit for pigs', and it is clear that prisoners were treated inhumanely: another reason as to why some began to physically appear as less than human.<sup>76</sup>

Robert Antelme describes a scene in which a fellow prisoner is called a pig and treated as less. Antelme's use of scare quotes shows how he finds the insult not only inappropriate but also ironic as, through their inhumanity, the perpetrators are the ones adopting bestial behaviour:

One of the police has seen him. "That pig over there! Get up! Clean it up!" The guy who's crouching doesn't move, he just moans; [...] his pants have remained on the ground, and they drag in the shit. There aren't any tears in his eyes, but his face is crying. The policeman, who has cheeks, and a club, stands over the "pig," who has no cheeks. The "pig" clutches his stomach and crouches again;

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<sup>76</sup> Eugene Heimler, *Night of the Mist* (London: The Bodley Head, 1959), p.34.

but the other guy's hand isn't there anymore, and he falls back into the shit. [...]

The guy who has fallen into the shit is dragged out of it by the policeman.

"Go wash yourself, you pig."

The "pig" leans against the wall, his head lying on his shoulder.<sup>77</sup>

Although the victim is dirty, this is because he does not have the strength to lift himself out of the filth. The SS calls him a pig, but whereas pigs are typically fat, here the victim has a sunken face and the perpetrator is described as the one 'who has cheeks'. Through this contrasting depiction of the perpetrator, and by his use of scare quotes, Antelme points out how little this prisoner resembles a pig. He shows that the insult is based on prejudice, but also how – through such prejudice – this man has been reduced to falling into his own faeces: an act which pigs may stereotypically enjoy, but which reduces this man if not to tears then to a state of shame and sadness - 'there aren't any tears in his eyes, but his face is crying'.

Pigs are stereotypically dirty animals, but other traits one may associate with them are greed and laziness because of their large size, both of which are also alluded to in survivor testimonies. Pigs are also considered greedy because they are not fussy over what to eat, hence why the prisoners' food is often compared to pigswill.<sup>78</sup> In a couple of reported incidents, prisoners call one another greedy pigs because of how one has stolen food from the other:

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<sup>777</sup> Antelme, *The Human Race*, pp.282-283.

<sup>78</sup> See: Solomon Gross, *Silent Sun* (London: Cornwall Books, 1992), p.50; Heimler, *Night of the Mist*, p.34, Herzberg, *Between Two Streams*, pp.9-10, Tedeschi, *There Is a Place on Earth*, p.101.



“Damn it, that pig is eating all our soup!” Ranting and raving, my comrades storm at me. I’m being pushed and shoved. Their clenched fists are right in front of my eyes. Somebody spits in my face. Full of shame, I stay back.<sup>79</sup>

It is disgusting that the decent rations provided by the SS should be stolen by these swine [the Blockaltester].

The other became enraged. ‘O you ape, you big imbecile!...’<sup>80</sup>

And, in a rare instance where the ‘swine’ metaphor is not used in an entirely derogatory sense:

Later that evening, Altschul received a nice piece of cake from Lehman, ate most of it on the spot, walked over to Lehman again and asked him, with a broad smile, “Could I have another piece, please?” Lehman looked at him, and half-jokingly said, “You swine, don’t you ever have enough...”<sup>81</sup>

In de Wijze’s case, stealing other prisoners’ food makes him comparable, in their opinion, to a pig not only because he has eaten above his share but also because he has acted in accordance with his hunger over his sense of morality. De Wijze feels ‘full of shame’ over what he has done, showing how he has retained some ethical standards, but there is no doubt that his act is considered abhorrent in an environment which makes food synonymous with life. Nonetheless, comparing him to a pig seems ironic when such a

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<sup>79</sup> de Wijze, *Only My Life*, p. 145.

<sup>80</sup> Heimler, *Night of the Mist*, p. 48.

<sup>81</sup> Gross, *Silent Sun*, p. 94.

metaphor is usually used to infer overeating and de Wijze's act was a direct result of starvation. Heimler, on the other hand, writes of a prisoner who believes that it is the Blockaltester rather than the SS which leave them with insufficient food. Still unaware of the extent to which the SS threaten their destruction, he chooses to believe instead that prisoners of higher rank are responsible for their starvation. They are 'swine' because – to his mind – they are eating not only their own 'decent rations' but also others'. A more experienced prisoner insults his naiveté, calling him an 'ape' – implying a lower level of intelligence than a human being. Gross' account of a prisoner receiving cake from one in favour with the SS is more of a friendly jibe than an insult, though it still keeps its roots in the stereotype of pigs being greedy, hence Lehman calls Altschul a 'swine' for his insatiable appetite.

With regard to laziness, both victims and perpetrators compare each other to pigs, but it seems more common for SS to use metaphor, compared to similes used by victims to describe the SS. For example, Louis de Wijze notes three separate occasions when he and other prisoners were called 'lazy pigs'.<sup>82</sup> On the other hand, Abel Herzberg writes that der Röte Muller is 'a sort of dressed up piglet, lazy as a pig on a hot day' and comments that the SS en masse are 'first and foremost lazy, lazy as pigs'.<sup>83</sup> Whereas in a simile the comparison is made explicitly, a metaphor makes the comparison implicit. Both infer that pigs are lazy (as a species, pigs are not lazy; the fact that they are stereotypically so is an example of humans anthropomorphising animals), but the difference is that where prisoners explicitly compare the SS's behaviour to that of pigs, the SS imply that there is something of a pig implicit in a Jew's laziness. Moreover, as with the comparison of prisoners to dirty pigs,

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<sup>82</sup> de Wijze, *Only My Life*, pp.94, 110, 136.

<sup>83</sup> Herzberg, *Between Two Streams*, pp.35, 42.

where the comparison is often undermined by irony or hypocrisy, the metaphor 'lazy pigs' seems tautological: here, if the pig is a symbol for laziness, then why call someone a 'lazy pig'? This implies that it is not merely the Jews' laziness which is considered implicitly pig-like, but the Jewish people themselves. The simile 'lazy as pigs' only emphasizes the SS' laziness, but 'lazy pigs' infers that the prisoners are both lazy and pig-like.

This dual nature of the pig metaphor is what makes it so insulting and therefore common in Holocaust testimony. Not only does calling someone a pig or swine imply that they are subhuman, but it also implies that they are dirty, smelly, lazy or greedy. Furthermore, as pigs are not a kosher animal, using the insult on Jewish prisoners makes it even crueller. Although there are many examples where 'pig' has been used as an insult against prisoners, the following three highlight how it can be used when the insult is not specific to particular stereotypes of a pig, such as dirtiness, greediness or laziness as outlined above:

"You have committed a great sin. You pigs have desecrated the bodies of your own dead brothers. You have exploited their death for your own profit, to smuggle food into the camp. Where are your morals, your sacred teachings, you children of the Bible?"<sup>84</sup>

On the instructions of Wiedemann, I had to construct shelves for car tyres in the cellar and to do this I had to use wooden planks which were 15cm. longer than the height of the room. There was nothing I could do, but to saw off the surplus

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<sup>84</sup> Trepman, *Among Men and Beasts*, p. 171.

15cm. [...] Suddenly Wiedemann came into the cellar and saw how the ends were being sawn off. He became furious and went for me with his fists and feet, lifted one of the shelves up and hit me on the head, arms and back. I only heard the words: "You Swine can't you erect the planks as they are?"<sup>85</sup>

Just as the *Kapo* in charge and the German guard were getting ready to give Bernard a thorough thrashing, the German carpenter in charge of the whole operation saw what was coming. He ran over quickly, yelling, "I want that cursed Jew for myself! This is my territory and my responsibility and I want to teach this swine a lesson he will never forget. Rest assured he will never steal again!" A heavy knobbed branch in his hand, he grabbed Bernard and pulled him into a nearby shed, locking the door behind him. Quietly he said, "Scream as loud as you possibly can." Then he proceeded to hit everything in sight, ripped Bernard's shirt and pants, told him to cry and crawl out on all fours. It worked like a charm. His skin was saved. It could be done! All one needed was to come across a man where there were so few men!<sup>86</sup>

Paul Trepman describes the behaviour of Anton Tuman. This commandant oversaw how the prisoners were starved and yet, when they used the bodies of those already killed by the Nazis to harbour food, he calls them pigs for desecrating their comrades' corpses. The hypocrisy seems lost on Tuman, who then uses this excuse to torture the supposedly guilty prisoners: he starved them for three days and nights, making them stand outside, before

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<sup>85</sup> Moses Sapir, 'Evidence against the SD-Hauptscharführer Wiedemann' (London: Wiener Library, Document Reference: P.III.h No.1011d).

<sup>86</sup> Gross, *Silent Sun*, p.56.

chucking them in ice cold water and pushing their heads beneath until they died. Calling the prisoners 'pigs' implies that they are acting unethically, but also against their nature owing to the status of pork as non-kosher. However, his evil methods of control and punishment earned him the nickname 'the Beast of Majdanek', where ostensibly 'beast' separates him from mankind owing to his blatant disregard for morality, but also from usual animal metaphors owing to his cognizant desire to commit such evil acts. Whereas Tuman's insult seems considered, chosen as being the animal which would cause most offence for Jewish prisoners, Wiedemann calls his victim 'swine' in a fit of rage.<sup>87</sup> In this sense, the insult is used simply to insult and degrade. His anger is unprovoked, as Moses Sapir confirms that he had been set an impossible task and did the best he could with the materials to hand: he could not erect the planks as they were and therefore the insult was not only extreme but unwarranted. It was accompanied with violence against Sapir and it seems that in this case – as in many others – 'swine' is simply the first insult which came to mind. Perhaps for all of the above reasons, the German carpenter in Gross' testimony calls Bernard 'swine'. It is a common enough insult, yet its implications make it particularly forceful and degrading. In an effort to emulate the anger of SS so as he can save Bernard, the carpenter uses an insult which would mask his humane intentions from the Kapo and guard.

So far, this section outlines the main uses of pig metaphors in Holocaust literature. Mostly, the pig metaphor is used to insult Jewish prisoners because of the stereotype of pigs being dirty, lazy and greedy, or because pig meat is considered impure. However, there are some examples which do not fit into these categories. For example, Louis de Wijze recalls a time when he smuggled a watch into camp by hiding it in his anus. Later, this could be used

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<sup>87</sup>As the German for pig is 'schwein' – translated as either 'pig', 'hog' or 'swine', I feel that the difference between chosen translations to 'pig' and 'swine' are negligible, hence why I have not explored the difference.

as a bargaining tool to earn more food or to be set to less demanding work. The watch made him walk unnaturally: ‘With my buttocks squeezed together, I walk by them, in an effeminate manner. “Look,” one guard says to the other, “that one walks like a scorched pig.”’<sup>88</sup> Here, the insult is perhaps more degrading because it is spoken between guards rather than directly to de Wijze, which implies that the pig comparison is deeply entrenched and not simply used to deride prisoners but also to describe them. However, this may simply be a case of de Wijze’s odd gait and have little to do with de Wijze’s Jewishness. Another example which stands out from more common comparisons is where Naftali Deutsch turns against Hans – a sadistic criminal who had previously whipped him – and describes the sound when he attacks his oppressor as being like a squealing pig:

Hans tripped and fell down on his face and that I’d thrown a large pot of boiling water or soup over his head, causing him to squeal like a pig. I remember how Hans was squealing and I remember grabbing a meat axe and whacking Hans with it. I’d “made him one head shorter.” I knew he would not experience the miracle of resurrection.<sup>89</sup>

Here, Deutsch seems to focus on the sound as he remembers Hans’ screams and then the act of grabbing and using a meat axe, as if the memories are not only connected by the order of events but also by association between the pig and the butchering. The panic subsides as Deutsch follows this memory with his black humour. In the short time it took for Deutsch to kill Hans, he reduced the criminal to a pig, probably for the simple reason that

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<sup>88</sup> de Wijze, *Only My Life*, p. 123.

<sup>89</sup> Deutsch, *A Holocaust Survivor*, p. 80.

Hans' shouts sounded like squeals, but perhaps also because, in his fear, he managed to kill a man with such little thought, it was as if it was not a man but an animal.

Although the insult 'pigs' or 'swine' is far more common from perpetrators towards their victims, here follow two examples where the victims insult their perpetrators with the same metaphor:

"They've gassed two hundred men in the *Sonderkommando*, the damned pigs! [...]"<sup>90</sup> (GT, 140)).

'a German plane has opened fire on us. [...] "you swine!" I shout, shaking my impotent fist'.<sup>91</sup>

Unlike examples where perpetrators call their victims 'pigs', often to degrade or assert authority over them, here the insults are given out of earshot of their targets. Tedeschi's example calls them 'damned pigs', where 'damned' has metaphysical overtones and, unlike prisoners called pigs, at immediate danger of being treated as one, here there is no threat made on the life of the perpetrators. Similarly, Schnur describes his fist as 'impotent' because neither his insult nor his gesture could be noted by the pilot. In these cases, 'pig' seems simply to be an insult implying base morality and inhumane treatment.

As pigs are stereotypically dirty, lazy and greedy, and as they are a non-kosher animal, they are commonly used in Holocaust testimonies, most often when relaying stories of individual insults from perpetrators to their victims, but also between prisoners and

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<sup>90</sup> Tedeschi, *There is a Place on Earth*, p. 140.

<sup>91</sup> Harry C. Schnur, 'Bombs and Barbed Wire', *Pegasus Devocatus* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1992), p.197.

sometimes even from victim to perpetrator. Unlike insects metaphors, or even vermin and dog metaphors, pig metaphors are not commonly used in a self-reflective sense. This is probably because the testimonies are written predominantly by Jewish people who would not simply compare themselves to an animal they reject from their culture. As this is the case, pigs are perhaps the best example of using the animal as such to highlight different, physical qualities of those being compared, rather than using the animal as a concept for more abstract feelings, such as loneliness. Perhaps this is also because pigs are not small creatures like insects or vermin – which are often used to convey feelings of helplessness – and nor are they household pets such as dogs, which are often used in an abstract sense because of the close relationships humans forge with these animals in particular. Instead, pigs are repeatedly used as a common insult, and this sometimes means that it is hard to decipher whether or not it is used thoughtlessly or with specific intent.

#### *Group metaphors: Flocks and Herds*

Although animal metaphors are usually specific to one species, the most common of which are explored above, survivors also use group metaphors to describe prisoners en masse. Of these, testimonies usually refer to flocks or herds of prisoners, as if referring to sheep or cattle. Although sometimes sheep and cattle are specified, there are also many instances where they are not, and these suggest that prisoners feel they have lost any sense of individuality within a group. Unlike specific animal metaphors, describing a group as a herd or a flock does not suggest many particular character or physical traits, such as



dirtiness for pigs, but rather highlights a group sense of domesticity, and comments on behaviour and treatment of prisoners en masse rather than selecting individual cases.

*'A flock of huddling beasts'*

Giuliana Tedeschi recalls a time when she and other prisoners were forced to watch two girls hanged for playing a part in the destruction of a crematorium and gas chamber: 'A woman soldier, those unnatural beings that Nazi Germany had bred, herded us forward with threats and shouts like a flock of refractory sheep' (GT, 170). Primo Levi too writes about the hanging of a man who took part in such sabotage.<sup>92</sup> Levi describes himself and other prisoners as an 'abject flock', assenting to this man's execution through doing nothing to protest it.<sup>93</sup> The man calls out before he is hanged: '*Kamaraden, ich bin der Letz!*' (Comrades, I am the last one!) and indeed, walking past the man's body, Levi feels strongly that 'there are no longer any strong men among us, the last one is now hanging above our heads'. He damns his perpetrators for causing this docility within the flock:

To destroy a man is difficult, almost as difficult as to create one: it has not been easy, nor quick, but you Germans have succeeded. Here we are, docile under your gaze; from our side you have nothing more to fear; no acts of violence, no words of defiance, not even a look of judgement.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> Owing to the fact that both Levi and Tedeschi were incarcerated in Auschwitz, and that both recall a crematorium being blown up at a time nearing the end of their confinement in the camp, it is probable that all three hangings were for the same offence.

<sup>93</sup> Levi, *If This Is A Man – The Truce*, p.155. Translated from 'gregge abietto', literally 'abject flock'.

<sup>94</sup> Levi, *If This Is A Man – The Truce*, p.156.

Both Tedeschi and Levi refer to themselves as part of a flock, which implies that they have lost their individuality. However, whereas Tedeschi describes herself as being part of 'a flock of refractory sheep', Levi chooses to describe his group as an 'abject flock'. The difference here implies that Tedeschi and the female prisoners objected to being herded forward, but Levi feels so depersonalised that he acts in accordance with his orders and does not protest or pass noticeable judgement on the atrocity. This is supported further by the lexical context of the quotation: 'I like to think that from the midst of us, an abject flock, a voice rose, a murmur, a sign of assent. But nothing happened'. Levi's choice of 'assent' rather than 'dissent' is interesting, as he would not like to think that a prisoner would approve of the hanging. Rather, it could mean that he would like to think of someone assenting to feelings of humanity. Instead, they are 'abject' which can mean something outside of the body. Similarly, Levi gives in to the fact that he and prisoners are docile under the 'gaze' of the Germans, not able even to pass 'a look of judgement'. To Levi, the prisoners are like animals, forever under the gaze of humans. Although Tedeschi's reaction seems less orderly, the refractory prisoners are still compared to sheep, which implies that despite their unwillingness to step into line, they still did not offer any signs of moral outrage.

Levi next uses a sheep metaphor for when sick prisoners decide whether to stay in Auschwitz or leave with the others on a march. Convinced that he would be killed were he to stay, Levi wants to follow his instincts of fear, only feels too sick to do so: 'I would probably also have followed the instinct of the flock if I had not felt so weak; fear is supremely contagious, and its immediate reaction is to make one try to run away'.<sup>95</sup> Here, Levi shows how the flock metaphor chiefly alludes to feelings of fear. A flock of sheep stay

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<sup>95</sup> Levi, *If This Is A Man – The Truce*, p.160.

together in order to find protection in numbers, but it is this same sense of fear which allows them to acquiesce to orders from their masters. Just so, prisoners stay together so as not to appear solitary, which could lead to being singled out for punishment. In this sense, prisoners were not simply drawn together into one unified mass by their perpetrators, but also chose to do so in order to avoid further persecution. Losing one's individuality and often one's humanity in the camps was a defence tactic caused by feelings of fear, and yet this is what many argue to be a chief reason for their being led to their mass deaths.

In his diary from 1942, Emanuel Ringelblum questioned how it was that the Jews 'went like lambs to the slaughter' without rebelling against their fate. Ringelblum concludes that their exhaustion had 'defeat[ed] the will to struggle'.<sup>96</sup> This serves as a reminder that it is not only writers of fiction, literary criticism or even testimony which have this resource, but also historians. The quotation implies that resistance against evil is human rather than animal-like and further suggests that, in losing the energy to resist, Holocaust victims were comparable to animals. However, this is contradicted by the quotation from Levi, as he insists that it was his exhaustion which actually stopped him from following the flock. Far from losing the energy to resist, it was losing the energy to comply which led to Levi staying where he was - with the other sick prisoners: an act which ultimately saved him from the death march which killed so many others.

Other victims refer more directly to this idea of being led to slaughter. Gerda Klein's answer lies not in the animality of prisoners, but rather the inhumanity of the Nazis: 'Why did we walk like meek sheep to the slaughter-house? Why did we not fight back? [...] Because we had faith in humanity. Because we did not really think that human beings were

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<sup>96</sup> Emanuel Ringelblum, *Diary and Notes from the Warsaw Ghetto*, in Hebrew (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 1993), pp.382-383.

capable of committing such crimes'.<sup>97</sup> Although Klein refers to herself and fellow prisoners as 'meek sheep', her 'faith in humanity' undermines the animal metaphor because it implies an ethical conscience which had not escaped prisoners despite their dreadful treatment; it implies equality at least on a species level between victims and perpetrators. Trude Levi resists the metaphor even further due to her quiet resistance with other prisoners in her factory when they worked together to make sure that they produced faulty weapons for the Germans: 'Because of these activities, I resent the allegations that we Jews went like lambs to the slaughter'.<sup>98</sup> Clearly, it was not always in stereotypically heroic ways that victims resisted their fate. As shown by Primo Levi's account of fear causing prisoners to flock together, if there are few accounts of prisoners breaking from their orders it is because doing so would have stood them apart from other prisoners and subsequently led them to an almost certain death. Rather, many prisoners worked together in small ways, risking their lives nonetheless, to resist. Once more, not giving in to feelings of fear, Trude Levi asserts her individuality and can claim that she did not lose any elements of what she might consider her humanity. Such individual acts stand her outside of 'the flock'.

For some victims, the fact that they did not resist was because they could not resist. In this sense, being herded into a single flock was inevitable owing to the regime of terror inflicted by the Nazis. In her testimony, Eugene Himmler recognises one of her sister's friends being sexually abused by a Kapo. Once a happy young girl, Marta now appears diseased, desperate, 'something half-way between a human being and a beast'.<sup>99</sup> Himmler recalls Marta's tragedy, when she was taken with her father and mother for investigation by Nazis, who tortured them for details of hidden property, which resulted in her mother's

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<sup>97</sup> Gerda Weissman Klein, *All But My Life* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1957), p.89.

<sup>98</sup> Levi, *A Cat Called Adolf*, p. 22.

<sup>99</sup> Himmler, *Night of the Mist*, p.54.

death and her own great physical suffering. A converted Christian, her father leans over their bodies and overhears a Rabbi speaking: 'with batons and bayonets, with their twisted cross and their crooked laws they will herd us together into a single flock'.<sup>100</sup> Although less pertinent in Jewish theology than in Christianity, the flock as a religious symbol is here inverted, much like the swastika as a twisted cross. The Rabbi insists that it is not their own inhumanity which causes them to be herded together like sheep, but rather their humanity: that such humanity evident in a religious people will inevitably be upturned through the violence and crooked laws of their perpetrators. There is undoubtedly truth in the Rabbi's prediction, for if Jewish people were inferior as one might consider animals to be, then there would be no cause for the Nazis to subject them to such degrading and dehumanising treatment.

It is clear that the flock metaphor is used in many different, albeit similar, ways throughout Holocaust testimonies. It refers to feelings of retrospective shame, such as when Primo Levi and Giuliana Tedeschi look back to how they offered little or no moral resistance to the cruelty of the Nazi party. They considered themselves sheepish: a flock of people manipulated by fear into a group of compliant prisoners. Another instance where Tedeschi uses a sheep metaphor is early on in her testimony, when she describes prisoners' feelings of disgust at their situation, felt most strongly when they are in the semiconscious state of being between sleeping and waking: 'Nausea at the sight of all that awkward, suffering humanity, ragged and dirty, reduced to a flock of huddling beasts'.<sup>101</sup> Owing to her description of the flock as 'ragged and dirty, reduced [to] huddling', it would seem that here too the flock is associated with shame. It is also, seemingly paradoxically, used to indicate

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<sup>100</sup> Heimler, p.60.

<sup>101</sup> Tedeschi, *There Is a Place on Earth* p.3.

humanity, such as when Klein insists that her and others' willingness to follow instructions was based on a preconceived understanding of ethics shared between one human and another, or when the Rabbi from Himmler's testimony foresees the coming together of his people into a single flock owing to the chaos of the Nazi regime, which overturned all moral bases. However, it is also used, albeit rarely, in figures of speech, and in such cases it is probable that these are not unique to testimonies of atrocity but are simply colloquialisms. An example of this can be found early on in Trude Levi's testimony: Describing a time when she compulsively laughed at her Grandmother falling over, Trude Levi understands that she 'was thought by the family to be a heartless girl and something of a black sheep' (*T.L.*, p. 35). Here, 'black sheep' is used in a proverbial sense, where the black sheep is one who stands out from her group. Its focus is more on colour than on species and in the context of an atrocity fuelled by race logic this could be read as somewhat pertinent, although this is unlikely. Nonetheless, it is an example where animal metaphors are used in a comparatively less significant sense: an example where they appear in everyday language rather than specifically a language pertaining to atrocity.

*'The murky common herd'*

Primo Levi indicates that prisoners' feelings of fear caused them to 'flock' together, and in the same account he describes the eyes of two prisoners who would rather risk death on a march from Auschwitz than stay behind with the sick few: 'their eyes were like those of terrified cattle'.<sup>102</sup> Over time, 'cattle' has been used to mean many different things: livestock

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<sup>102</sup> Levi, *If This Is a Man – The Truce*, p.160.

from sheep to pigs, of or belonging to a stable, or even as a contemptuous name for one's enemy or slave. Although this latter definition would be interesting to analyse, Levi most likely uses it to mean domesticated, bovine animals - as this is the most common use of the word recently. As such, the simile perhaps compares the two prisoners to two cows apart from their herd. This would be appropriate considering the pair's desperation to join the others on the march. Moreover, in accordance with Hannah Arendt's quotation that it is easier to kill smaller animals than larger ones due to the size of their eyes, Levi may choose to compare these prisoners to cattle as it is their eyes on which the simile focuses, so choosing a group of animals with large eyes conveys their wide-eyed terror.

Despite this example and the fact that prisoners often refer to the cattle cars in which they were transported, the cattle metaphor is uncommon in testimonies. However, when it is used, it is usually to convey feelings of subordination as prisoners are rounded up like a herd by their perpetrators. In this sense, the cattle metaphor is used to connote domesticity in large numbers:

The SS is herding us like cattle.<sup>103</sup>

'a train from Vught pulled in, discharging nothing but women and children. [...]

Tuesday morning the whole shipment was sent to Poland. Here, they were

dragging themselves in, goaded through the hall like cattle'.<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> de Wijze, *Only My Life*, p. 153.

<sup>104</sup> Herbert N. Kruskal, "Two Years Behind Barbed Wire': Factual Report of a Dutchman Describing His Experiences Under the German Oppression', Jerusalem: January 1945 (British Library: reference number X.705/1516), pp.11-12.

We sat pressed as close as possible to one another, a frozen, scarcely breathing mass of refugees whom fate had brought together and was now herding into the unknown like so many head of cattle.<sup>105</sup>

I heard the wild shouts and curses of the Nazi beasts. [...] The first attack on the ghetto lasted no longer than five minutes; yet it seemed very much longer as the Jews scurried about like driven cattle, the Nazi killers in their smart uniforms pursuing them like packs of hungry wolves.<sup>106</sup>

In two of the above examples, the prisoners are 'herded', in one they are 'driven' and in the other they are 'goaded', but aside from subtle differences these amount – in these cases – to the same thing: they are being controlled. Moreover, due to the domestication of cattle, the simile conveys feelings of helplessness. Twice here Trepman uses cattle to describe prisoners: they are 'herded' by fate 'like so many head of cattle', where head refers to the traditional farming phrase used to indicate numbers; and they scurry in their group like 'driven cattle' pursued by 'hungry wolves', exemplifying a predator-prey relationship. As cattle have no understanding of fate, this first comparison highlights the refugees' feelings of confusion and displacement as they are herded by an unknown force further into an unknown future. Later in his testimony, the animal metaphor is extended to embrace the Nazis who are like a pack of wolves hunting cattle. The idea of cattle scurrying implies that here the refugees are more panicked than before, as shapeless fate has been replaced by wild animals: a threat to any farm and its livestock.

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<sup>105</sup> Trepman, *Among Men and Beasts*, p.29.

<sup>106</sup> Trepman, *Among Men and Beasts*, p.107.



However, these are rare instances where prisoners' appearance is compared to cattle. More often, and inclusive of two examples above, prisoners refer to themselves as a herd, or as being herded by the Nazis:

The miles go by, not a soul in sight apart from our sad herd.<sup>107</sup>

And yet I have seen people who [...] acted differently towards their fellow beings. [...] When I think of them, I see them as people rising high above the murky common herd.<sup>108</sup>

'Again, we are herded together. Now it's our turn to be loaded on the trucks'.<sup>109</sup>

'They herded us onto the ramp at the station'.<sup>110</sup>

'Once a week, usually on Wednesdays, they herd us to the bath house'.<sup>111</sup>

'At five o'clock we were herded to roll-call'.<sup>112</sup>

'The sentries push us forward, herd us together'.<sup>113</sup>

'herded into railway cattle-trucks'.<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> Tedeschi, *There Is A Place On Earth*, p. 199.

<sup>108</sup> Herzberg, *Between Two Streams*, p. 11.

<sup>109</sup> de Wijze, *Only My Life*, p. 12.

<sup>110</sup> Chris Webb, *Belzec: The Death Camp Laboratory* (A H.E.A.R.T. & Holocaust Historical Society Publication), p.60.

<sup>111</sup> Herzberg, *Between Two Streams*, p.43.

<sup>112</sup> Herzberg, *Between Two Streams*, p.205.

<sup>113</sup> Antelme, *The Human Race*, p.30.

<sup>114</sup> Levi, *A Cat Called Adolf*, p.32.

'herded out into the dark'.<sup>115</sup>

'on the third day we were all, herded together and were told that we were going to be taken to another camp'.<sup>116</sup>

Even without using 'cattle', the word 'herd' is associated with animals. However, it is not bound so tightly to the idea of one type of animal, and this is highlighted when Tedeschi personifies the herd by her use of the word 'sad'. Moreover, Herzberg describes prisoners en masse as a 'murky common herd', but insists that some prisoners rise from that categorisation. This implies that 'herd' is used to connote a lack of moral understanding and individuality: something which some prisoners managed to avoid - despite conditions which drove many to depersonalisation. These few assert themselves as retaining a sense of their humanity through acts of kindness and selflessness. Furthermore, 'herd' connotes a mass identified by its group rather than by individuals within it. When the word shifts from herd to 'herded', it implies subordination – that someone is taking charge – unlike 'crowding' which suggests individuals choosing to group together. In this sense, 'herding' is most appropriate, as victims were under threats to carry out orders. 'Herding' therefore implies a relationship between the group and its master: the relationship between prisoners and their captors is made clear within the word, and it is compared – indirectly or otherwise – to the relationship between a farmer and his livestock.

'Herding' also implies that the prisoners are being moved, and this is true for many uses of the word. In particular, it attaches a commercial value to the prisoners: as livestock

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<sup>115</sup> Tedeschi, *There is a Place on Earth*, p.87.

<sup>116</sup> Deak, 'A woman survives Auschwitz and the Death March', p. 5. (Later – Trude Levi)

are to farmers, here prisoners are to their perpetrators. Therefore, when they are being transported, it is as though they are animals on the way to be slaughtered:

‘Patients of all degrees were herded together and pushed, packed and crammed into cattle wagons. Uncontrollable cases were doped with an injection and then pressed into the jumble inside the cattle wagon’.<sup>117</sup>

‘It was here that the transport wagons stopped, that their human cargo herded together from all over Europe was unloaded’.<sup>118</sup>

They drove people out of the cars with whips and rifle butts. The cars had doors a meter above the ground, and all those being herded out, young and old, had to jump. They broke arms and legs during this, having to jump to the ground’.<sup>119</sup>

These examples, as well as the quotation from Kruskal’s testimony, above, use words such as ‘uncontrollable cases’, ‘shipment’ and ‘cargo’ to describe the prisoners indirectly, referring to them in commercial terms rather than humane ones. ‘Human cargo’ is almost an oxymoron because ‘human’ is used as an adjective and ‘cargo’ is the noun: one implies life and the other lifelessness. It is as though they appear human but are, essentially, incognizant. Moreover, the description of young and old prisoners jumping out of the cattle cars and breaking bones is remarkably similar to the realities of livestock being pushed out of cattle cars and trampled over on their way to slaughterhouses.

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<sup>117</sup> Kruskal, ‘Two Years Behind Barbed Wire’, p.10.

<sup>118</sup> Tedeschi, *There is a Place on Earth*, p.93.

<sup>119</sup> Rudolf Reder, *Belzec* (Oswiecim, Brzenka Panstwowe Muzeum 1999), pp.117-119.

Although describing prisoners in commercial terms is inhumane, in many ways it overestimates the value of the victims to their perpetrators. Whereas cargo is shipped as part of a commercial exchange, resulting in material profit, prisoners were shipped to death camps for no reason other than their destruction. Robert Antelme describes what he imagines the SS to be thinking when he sees the straw prisoners must sleep on. Antelme imagines that it is thought of as too good for them, because it is meant for livestock:

The SS man surveys the damage – contemplates the straw. It was plentiful, honest, meant for German cows on the neighbouring German farm, cows that give milk for German children – a correct German circuit. We have brought a pestilence into this straw; during the orgy we have laughed.<sup>120</sup>

The idea of Jews enjoying the comparable luxury of the straw distresses the SS man, as he ‘surveys the damage’ of prisoners using for comfort what should be put to more practical use. Jews contravene the idea of a ‘correct German circuit’ where livestock are an essential part of its upkeep. In this sense, Antelme does not feel further degraded by having to live in the same conditions as a cow, but rather he describes it as a relative privilege. In a similar vein, Werner Weinberg offers a unique account of his journey in a cattle car:

At the ramp itself, a surprise was to underline our privileged status when we heard the order: “Fifty prisoners to a box car!” Normally, on transport, that number was eighty to a hundred. This difference meant that we would be able

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<sup>120</sup> Antelme, *The Human Race*, p.33.

to sit on the floor and – taking turns – even stretch out. ‘(The use of the term “cattle cars” in much of the Holocaust literature unnecessarily conveys the idea of additional degradation. A prisoner with any transport experience preferred box cars to passenger cars because wooden benches and baggage nets, far from being a convenience, became instruments of torture in the shoving and turmoil and uninhibited scramble for self-preservation)’.<sup>121</sup>

Like the straw in Antelme’s testimony – insufficient and degrading in normal circumstances but preferable to sleeping arrangements in the camps – Weinberg notes that, with the cramped and degrading conditions being what they were, travelling in a cattle car was preferable to being herded into a passenger car. In these instances, the question is not whether the circumstances are degrading (as that is irrefutable), but whether they are practical or even relatively respectable. Therefore, in these instances, being treated as an animal is better than being treated as a prisoner.

Indeed, in a personal report on his flight from Holland to England at the close of the Second World War, Harry Schnur testifies to his appalling treatment at the hands of an English Colonel, who associated Nazis and German Jews as the same, common enemy. This example shows how, although Holocaust testimonies are saturated in animal metaphors, these metaphors are also used to convey feelings of degradation and subjugation more generally. Here, Schnur considers his situation and concludes that he is being treated with even less respect than cattle:

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<sup>121</sup> Werner Weinberg, *Self-Portrait of a Holocaust Survivor*, pp.87-88.

The hold is dimly lit by a feeble bulb. We are lying on the bare iron floor, vainly trying to make our couch a little softer with the aid of some old sacks and scraps of canvas. I do not mind it much for myself, my heart is bleeding for the Old and Infirm, the women and children, locked up here like cattle. Like cattle? Cattle are better off than Jewish refugees: cattle represents a certain economic value and is protected by humane laws for the prevention of cruelty to animals.<sup>122</sup>

Having survived the Holocaust, Schnur finds himself in a similarly horrific situation as a German prisoner. Along with other prisoners, Jews and Gentiles, he is placed in a 'hold': the part of a ship usually reserved for cargo. This, along with the bare iron floor and generally inhumane conditions, prompts Schnur to compare his captivity to that of cattle. However, for similar reasons as discussed above, he corrects himself, understanding that cattle have a commercial value and are therefore treated with more respect than the prisoners. Perhaps he made the initial comparison in a symbolic sense, where cattle symbolises something subhuman or incognizant, but when he checks his comparison he finds that it is inadequate. Cattle may indeed be symbols of domestication, inhumanity or incognizance, but in real life they are treated with more dignity than him. He realises that cattle are protected by humane laws which force people to treat them according to at least some of their own ethical standards.

As with flock metaphors, 'herd' implies a group of similar, domesticated animals, and its use in Holocaust testimonies often implies a lack of individuality and a group sense of subjugation. 'Herded', on the other hand, is used most often to describe prisoners following

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<sup>122</sup> Harry C. Schnur, 'Bombs and Barbed Wire', p. 201.

the orders of their perpetrators, as they move together to avoid being singled out for punishment. In this sense, the relationship between 'herd' and 'herded' is similar to 'flock' and 'flocked', though where flock specifically infers sheep, herd is more ambiguous: a group noun or a verb which connotes domesticated animals forced together. In a similar vein, 'cattle' is more ambiguous than 'sheep', though usually it refers to bovine animals. Nonetheless, it also more heavily connotes domestication and is therefore more appropriate when describing unspecific feelings of subjugation and inhumanity.

### *Conclusion*

When Holocaust survivors use animal metaphors in their testimonies it can be for many reasons, among which some of the most common are: to describe their emotional state, to describe their conditions, in paraphrasing their perpetrators who have compared them to an animal, to compare their perpetrators to an animal, or simply in a common phrase such as when Tedeschi refers to herself as the 'black sheep' of her family. As well as the shifting contexts, the species of animal used changes the meaning of the metaphor: as shown, many of the traits connoted by insects are quite different from those of pigs. However, although the associations attached to different species dictate the metaphors' implications, there are some aspects of animal metaphors which are similar to one another. For example, metaphors imply a base connection between the two compared, whereas similes only tend to highlight specific traits. Therefore, when prisoners are called dogs, traits of dogs may be inferred but the insult is essentially that they are subhuman. This is similar for any animal, though it is true that some animals are selected over others due to their perceived inferiority (such as smaller animals like mice) or their cultural implications (such

as pigs for Jewish prisoners). On the other hand, similes are usually less degrading because they are based on aspects of the person being similar to that which one may perceive in an animal: if someone is dirty as vermin, then that limits the insult to one aspect – dirtiness – but does not necessarily infer a base connection between the animal and the human. Moreover, often these similes are as a result of anthropomorphising, such as the idea of pigs being greedy, so saying that someone is greedy as a pig may be little more than a stock-phrase insult.

Forced into cattle cars and transported to their deaths, there are some instances where prisoners find genuine reasons to compare themselves to animals on a literal plane (what I have elsewhere referred to as ‘animals as such’). Often, these comparisons are then denied, as survivors make the connection between their treatment and the treatment of animals only to undermine them, such as when de Wijze compares Buna to an ant-hill but understands that his working conditions are harsher because he is working against his nature, or when Weinberg compares his treatment to that of cattle being transported in a ship’s hold but claims that, as cattle have a commercial value, they are shown more humanity. Nonetheless, these are the sort of comparisons which are alluded to in texts comparing the Holocaust to animal cruelty: a topic which I shall draw upon further in Chapter Four. For the moment, however, it is important to keep in mind the fact that these comparisons are usually undermined in an ethical – if not a practical – sense. More often, prisoners compare themselves or others to animals on a conceptual plane, where animals are used as symbols for such ideas as pestilence or filth. In these cases, survivors may employ animal stereotypes to convey inhumane treatment or conditions, or they push further and allude to animals because it is impossible to convey the extent of their experiences using human language. This is applicable when Delbo writes: ‘It is this day on



the marsh where insects in human form die'. Although this chapter's focus is analysis of metaphors, the questions raised concerning the incommunicability of suffering, and the difficult realities of putting oneself in place of the other (either Holocaust survivors or animals, in this case), are central to the theoretical implications of this thesis and indeed guide much of the theory in the following chapters.

However, the main implication of this chapter has not been, as one might suppose, that humans were treated like animals and, as such, lost their humanity; nor is it that perpetrators acted in an animalistic manner towards their victims and therefore became less human. Rather, the scale of seemingly animalistic characteristics evoked in humans during the Holocaust attests to the fact that these characteristics are, in fact, implicit in humans. This is highlighted above in many examples, some of which include: Herzberg's analogy, where perpetrators and victims are compared to other predator-prey relationships in the animal kingdom; Himmler's speech at Posen, where killing Jewish people is simultaneously compared to killing vermin and considered a morally difficult task; and both Delbo's reciprocal comparison between a dying woman and other dead creatures, and Tedeschi's ambiguity as she describes the attack issued by a Nazi and carried out by a dog. In all cases, the boundaries between humans and other animals are unclear. Of course, there are differences between humans and other animals (as there are differences between those other animals, as highlighted through different sections, above), and this is best shown in examples where prisoners have to be dehumanised in order to fit with preconceived Nazi ideas of animality (as discussed, there would be no cause for dehumanising processes were the victims already inhuman). However, once these victims are stripped of individuality, and after perpetrators act in a manner considered inhumane, it is important not to lose sight of the fact that these people have not changed from human to

animal, but rather that they are testament to what remains when humanity is pushed to its limits. To call prisoners animals is to adhere to Nazi ideology, and to consider perpetrators animals is to at least partly excuse them of their actions. Instead, comparing both victims and perpetrators to animals at once highlights different aspects of their humanity which might be reflected in other animals, and suggests that there are elements of our humanity which we share with other creatures, such as instinctive behaviour and vulnerable bodies. As Herzberg writes when comparing a Nazi to other predators, this perpetrator is not a panther nor a spider, but he does indeed share their predatory characteristics: he is in fact a 'man in the crevices and depths of his own nature'. It is with this concept of shared creatureliness, as outlined in the Introduction, and through similarly literary comparisons between humans and other animals, that this thesis continues.

## Chapter Two

### 'A stage full of stories': Using *Beatrice and Virgil* to Compare Two Models of Creatureliness

#### *Introduction*

In *On Creaturely Life*, Eric Santner offers a different model and application of creatureliness from Anat Pick in *Creaturely Poetics*. Both models offer insight into what it could mean to be creaturely or to represent creatureliness in literature, but whereas Pick takes her cue from Cora Diamond and focuses more on creatureliness as a shared, bodily vulnerability between humans and other animals, Santner's definition focuses more on the human subject, and – in most cases – only includes animals in relation to humans, or animals which act against their natural instincts. Even when similarities arise between *On Creaturely Life* and *Creaturely Poetics*, such as when both highlight the importance of an ethicopolitical response to creaturely life, the authors disagree once more on the way that this response can be presented in literature. Indeed, Santner uses W. G. Sebald's oeuvre as '*an archive of creaturely life*' but understands that this archive is at once put forward and foreclosed by literature:<sup>123</sup>

Sebald's project is above all a literary one, not a political or even an ethical one in any straightforward sense. Whatever he achieves unfolds within the framework of an aesthetic experience that, though it may have political, ethical,

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<sup>123</sup> Eric Santner, *On Creaturely Life* (London: University of Chicago Press, 2006), p.xiii.

and even religious meanings and consequences, is an “intervention” in the world in only a very limited and particular sense.<sup>124</sup>

This contrasts to Pick’s understanding of a creaturely poetics as those works of literature or film which are aware of their foreclosing interiority and, as such, give an ethicopolitical response not only to our treatment of fellow creatures, but also to the function of the arts (predominantly literature and film) in disseminating a creaturely agenda beyond deflective philosophising. For example, and as I shall explore at further length in Chapter Three, Pick draws upon J. M. Coetzee’s ‘The Lives of Animals’ as a novella which does not simply promote ‘arguments for or against animal rights, but the possibility that philosophical arguments as such are a form of evasion – what Diamond [...] calls deflection’.<sup>125</sup> This difference between the guiding principles of *On Creaturely Life* and *Creaturely Poetics* is best represented through their titles: whereas Santner’s text offers an intricate portrait on the subject of creatureliness, especially through Rilke, Benjamin and Sebald, Pick’s text focuses on ways of writing or filming which may themselves impart a creaturely agenda.

In this chapter, I shall use both models of creatureliness to analyse *Beatrice and Virgil* by Yann Martel.<sup>126</sup> Martel’s novel is a metatextual maze and, as such, I shall outline its plot for the purpose of clarification later on: The novel’s protagonist, Henry l’Hôte, is an author who tries and fails to get his flip-book about the Holocaust published. Shortly afterwards, a taxidermist asks for Henry’s help writing a play called ‘A 20<sup>th</sup> Century Shirt’. This play, which the taxidermist claims is about habitat destruction, features a donkey called Beatrice and a howler monkey called Virgil: two animals which are also mounted within the

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<sup>124</sup> Santner, *On Creaturely Life*, pp.134-135.

<sup>125</sup> Pick, *Creaturely Poetics*, p.9.

<sup>126</sup> Yann Martel, *Beatrice and Virgil* (London: Canongate Books, 2011). All subsequent textual references are to this edition.

taxidermy. The play is highly symbolic (to the extent that it would be impossible to stage) and features scenes in which the two animals discuss how they might begin to explain the atrocities that happened to them: atrocities which they call 'The Horrors'. Henry is intrigued and agrees to help the taxidermist with some of the more abstract sequences, such as when Beatrice tries to describe Virgil's howl. Consequently, fragments of the play are interspersed throughout Martel's novel. Henry immediately sees parallels between the subject of 'A 20<sup>th</sup> Century Shirt' and the Holocaust, but the taxidermist refuses to admit any hidden meaning. After a period of absence from the taxidermy in which Henry's pets are put down and his wife gives birth, Henry returns. The play reaches a violent end and Henry is suspicious that the taxidermist concentrates on victimisation with no hint of repentance from the perpetrators or retribution for the two murdered animals. Subsequently, Henry believes that the taxidermist is a Nazi collaborator whose play masks his own atrocities during the Holocaust, and decides to leave the taxidermy for good. The taxidermist stabs Henry and burns down the taxidermy with the animals inside. Henry wakes up in hospital to find his creative block lifted, and writes his version of events, which we might take to be the same in content as *Beatrice and Virgil*. The novel ends with thirteen 'games' which Henry also writes in hospital, which take the form of twelve hypothetical situations pertaining to what personal choices victims might have had to take during the Holocaust. The final 'game' is left blank.

Martel both uses the Holocaust to approach animal suffering, and uses animal suffering to approach the Holocaust. He employs these seemingly reciprocal metaphors and, as such, uses his fiction as a medium through which to discuss suffering on a large – indeed, an inter-species – plane. Despite the fact that the taxidermist insists his play

is about animal extinction, he also writes that his ‘story has no story. It rests on the fact of murder’ which, in its non-specificity, suggests that reciprocal metaphors are employed to allow comparisons to be drawn between the suffering of humans and animals alike (*BV*, 170). As Martel embeds this fragmented play within his novel, he demonstrates the limits of fiction – and storytelling in general – in communicating the unspeakable.

Furthermore, Martel approaches this unspeakability through allegory, which is ironic considering how allegory is conventionally used to clarify rather than mystify. His method is further unconventional because of its reciprocity, as is evident from some of the following approaches to defining allegory:

‘The word *allegory* from *allo* “other” and *agoria* “speaking”’.<sup>127</sup>

‘The standard definition of “allegory” is to say one thing and mean another.

Allegory has always demanded that we think otherwise’.<sup>128</sup>

‘Allegory is a method of double meanings that organizes utterance (in any medium) according to its expression of analogical parallels between different networks of iconic likeness’.<sup>129</sup>

‘On the whole, when we speak of *allegory* we refer to an enlightening or witty analogy between two things, both of some complexity, but one of less importance than the other’.<sup>130</sup>

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<sup>127</sup> Francesca da Rimini, ‘Personification and Capture’, *Allegory and Violence*, ed. Gordon Teskey (New York: Cornell University Press, 1996), p.1.

<sup>128</sup> Brenda Machosky, ‘Introduction: A Protean Device’, *Thinking Allegory Otherwise*, ed. Brenda Machosky (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), p.7.

<sup>129</sup> Angus J. S. Fletcher, ‘Allegory Without Ideas’, *Thinking Allegory Otherwise*, ed. Brenda Machosky (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), p.10.

<sup>130</sup> da Rimini, ‘Personification and Capture’, p.2.

In all cases, above, allegory is defined as that which approaches the other: in its basest linguistic translation, 'other speaking' implies that, while talking about one subject, another is inferred. It is often the case that this 'other speaking' uses an Other, such as animals, to approach a more urgent subject. This supports da Rimini's definition of allegory, which highlights that, in allegorical stories, one half of the allegory is usually less important than the other: often the case will be that the inferred other will be the most important (*Animal Farm* is a good example of such an allegory). However Machosky and Fletcher's definitions are more flexible: they do not imply that allegory is necessarily one-sided. Fletcher in particular focuses on 'parallels' between the two sides of an allegorical story, the one highlighting 'iconic likeness' in the other. In this sense, as with metonymy, the chosen allegory is not only important as a point of reference (in *Animal Farm* we understand that Napoleon is an allegorical representation of Stalin), but also as a method of displaying particular traits and 'likenesses' (the stereotype that pigs are greedy may translate to Stalin's rise to power). However, in *Animal Farm* the political subject matter is clear, and the animals seem to take on the role of characters in a fable. To better support Fletcher's reciprocal definition of 'allegory', Martel not only draws parallels between animal cruelty and the Holocaust in order to approach the Holocaust, he also uses the Holocaust to approach animal cruelty. However, Martel breaks down this allegory as he draws these subjects together not in order to know more about one or the other, but rather to uncover their shared trait of unknowability.

This allegorical method makes *Beatrice and Virgil* an optimal text through which to explore Santner and Pick's models of creatureliness. Indeed, owing to the reciprocal nature of Martel's metaphor, the opening sentence in *Creaturely Poetics* is likewise applicable to

his novel: ‘this is a book neither strictly about humans nor about animals’.<sup>131</sup> A play which features talking animals, and a taxidermy which displays animal bodies re-formed by humans offer two arenas in which human-animal distinctions and power-relations can be contested; and the fact that these arenas are situated in a postmodern novel which plays with the boundaries of form (as well as subject) implies that Martel invokes literature as crucial to the exploration of more material matters. In other words, *Beatrice and Virgil* may contribute to a creaturely poetics as outlined by Pick.

However, Martel’s novel might also encapsulate Santner’s definition of creatureliness which, although not directly opposed to Pick’s, concentrates less on the constant materiality of the creature and more on the material aspects of a human creature which might be pulled into spectrality during what Santner terms ‘historical fissures’:

The opacity and recalcitrance that we associate with the materiality of nature – the mute “thingness” of nature – is, paradoxically, most palpable where we encounter it as a piece of human history that has become an enigmatic ruin beyond our capacity to endow it with meaning, to integrate it into our symbolic universe. Where a piece of the human world presents itself as a surplus that both demands and resists symbolization, that is both inside and outside the “symbolic order” – for Benjamin, this is the unnerving point of departure of the allegorical imagination – that is where we find ourselves in the midst of “natural history.” What I am calling creaturely life is a dimension of human existence

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<sup>131</sup> Pick, *Creaturely Poetics*, p.1.



called into being at such natural historical fissures or caesuras in the space of meaning.<sup>132</sup>

Here, Santner refers to Benjamin's 'allegorical imagination', which is key to understanding his own concept of creatureliness and, crucially, how this concept fits (or does not fit) with *Beatrice and Virgil*. Bainard Cowan paraphrases Benjamin's thoughts on allegory as that which is 'pre-eminently a kind of experience [which] arises from an apprehension of the world as no longer permanent, as passing out of being [...]. Allegory would then be an expression of this sudden intuition'.<sup>133</sup> Therefore, Benjamin's understanding of allegory is at once experience and the expression of it: it is both the process of transforming experience into signs, and it is the signs themselves. Unlike Fletcher's definition of allegory, above, two networks are not pulled together in lieu of their iconic likenesses. Rather, the network is an ever-expanding allegory made up of experience, which is itself an iconic likeness of reality: it encapsulates the process of signification which accompanies all experience, as experience itself is significant. As such, the 'point of departure' from this allegorical imagination is when experience cannot be signified, perhaps because it falls outside of the network. In many ways, this relates to Badiou's concept of 'fidelity' – an idea I discuss in Chapter Four – where one must make a moral decision to act upon an unprecedented event, yet because the event is unprecedented there are no models of morality upon which you might act. For Badiou, your ethical decision at once expands and collapses your preconceived model of morality; so too for Benjamin, this 'historical fissure' demands and resists symbolisation offered by the network of allegorised experience. For Santner, creaturely life is exposed at

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<sup>132</sup> Santner, *On Creaturely Life*, p.xv.

<sup>133</sup> Bainard Cowan, 'Walter Benjamin's Theory of Allegory', *New German Critique*, 22, (Winter, 1981), p.110.

these moments because they cause our networks of meaning – built as they are on preconceived notions of humanity – to collapse.

In *Beatrice and Virgil*, Martel's use of allegory is three-fold: he draws upon fictional narratives of the Holocaust and animal atrocity as stories which might allegorise one another in the manner outlined by Fletcher; he gestures towards the 'caesuras in the space of meaning' by writing characters who themselves arrive at 'an unnerving point of departure from the allegorical imagination', such as when Beatrice and Virgil fail to describe what happened to them during 'The Horrors'; and he also writes about *the process of writing about* this unnerving point of departure, through Henry's (and, at a further remove, Martel's) metatextual narrativisation. Indeed, later in 'Walter Benjamin's Theory of Allegory', Cowan comments on the grammatological function of allegory, whereby

the very concept of experience – designating as it does “the relationship with a presence” – becomes “unwieldy” and must be replaced by a term which gives notice that the mind in encountering reality is already writing, even at the zero-point of the encounter. [Such reasoning] would seem to designate the allegorical view of the world as a kind of writing.<sup>134</sup>

Therefore, in the sense given by Santner through Benjamin, Martel engages with the struggle of writing about encountering reality, where reality departs from the allegorical imagination, and where allegorical imagination is itself a kind of writing. This idea underpins creaturely poetics as outlined by Pick, where literature engages directly with difficult

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<sup>134</sup> Cowan, 'Walter Benjamin's Theory of Allegory', p.112.

realities (a concept I explore further in Chapter Three), to the extent that it may be considered a difficult reality in and of itself.

In this chapter, I explore Santner's concept of creatureliness through *Beatrice and Virgil* by highlighting how some of the key aspects of *On Creaturely Life* also apply to Martel's novel. For example, the dimension of undeadness which Santner relates to W. G. Sebald's fiction can also be traced through the taxidermist and his profession, as he takes the dead and makes them appear alive. The taxidermist also abuses this power over his creaturely subjects and I shall discuss how this might be represented through Virgil's tail. This adheres to Santner's notion of creatureliness as a process of a master or 'sovereign' subjecting the creature to a transformative force: in this case, the taxidermist ostensibly cuts off but certainly re-attaches Virgil's tail in order that his master-narrative (the play) overwrites the creature's lived experience. Furthermore, Santner also agrees with Julia Lupton's analysis of *The Tempest's* Caliban as a creature who speaks through its woundedness and I apply this to Beatrice and Virgil, especially through the motif of Virgil's howl. Finally in this section, I analyse the novel's frantic climax as an 'excess of creaturely corporeality': a phrase which Santner uses to describe passages in Sebald's *The Rings of Saturn*, and which can also be applied here to explore the boundary of human-animal worlds through the vulnerable bodies of Henry, the taxidermist and the animals within the taxidermy.

As this section of the chapter ends with the closing sequences of the novel, so the second section begins. Through a creaturely lens, and taking my cue from Anat Pick's *Creaturely Poetics*, I consider how Henry's creative imagination unlocks when he is wounded in hospital. Like W. G. Sebald's narrator in *The Rings of Saturn*, Henry's exposure to an

excess of corporeality leaves him physically exhausted but mentally stimulated, and his creative block is lifted. Indeed, this second section focuses more on the narrativisation of creatureliness: how *Beatrice and Virgil* is not simply a novel which engages with creatureliness as outlined by Santner, but how it may also contribute to a creaturely *poetics*. Moreover, I consider how Pick's analysis of creatureliness is similar in important ways to Santner's, but also how it focuses less on a human dimension of creatureliness and more on creatureliness as an inherent part of all bare life: human and animal alike. I believe this is an important factor when analysing a novel which deals with a reciprocal metaphor between humans (the Holocaust) and animals (cruelty and dehabitation), as it allows me to explore how the body is represented in literature, irrespective of species. Indeed, there are a few ways in which Santner's model is limited for this thesis as an exploration into reading Holocaust literature as a creaturely *poetics*, so I also use this section to explain why, in chapters two and three, I move forward using Pick's model exclusively.

### *On Creaturely Life*

As I outlined in the introduction to this thesis, both the Holocaust and animal suffering demand and resist symbolisation. This is partially because, as James Young writes, 'it is almost as if violent events – perceived as aberrations or ruptures in the cultural continuum – demand their retelling, their *narration*, back into traditions and structures they would otherwise defy'.<sup>135</sup> Here, 'aberrations or ruptures in the cultural continuum' is comparable to the 'natural historical fissures' as described by Santner. The history and

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<sup>135</sup> James Young, 'Interpreting Literary Testimony: A Preface to Rereading Holocaust Diaries and Memoirs, *New Literary History*, 18:2 (Winter 1987), p.404.

culture which produced the Holocaust does not have the literary conventions to be able to contain the events in language and, moreover, the violent events themselves resist symbolisation. Animal suffering similarly resists symbolisation because animals do not use language. They are not 'mute' – as Santner describes nature – but they are inarticulate. In this sense, the animal suffering–Holocaust allegory could be said to adhere both to Fletcher and Benjamin's models, respectively: the two subjects are pulled together through their likenesses, where these include shared narratives of violence and an inability to communicate atrocity; and they are each used as the transformative sign of the other, as the incommunicability of animal suffering is used to signify the incommunicability of the Holocaust and vice versa. As allegories are typically used to clarify rather than to draw attention to 'opacity and recalcitrance', in *Beatrice and Virgil* it seems it is the 'unnerving point of departure of the allegorical imagination' that is itself allegorised.

Indeed, to take Virgil's tail as an example: here is a tail which has been cut off from a real howler monkey, stitched back on by the taxidermist, and made to represent the tail of a howler monkey named Virgil. It at once symbolises a tail and is one, and in this sense, it is similar to Benjamin's model of allegory. Therefore, it may also symbolise the process of writing allegory, though this idea adheres more to a creaturely poetics than to an analysis of creaturely life as outlined by Santner. Looking in closer detail at Virgil's tail, it seems at odds with the taxidermist's usual meticulousness that it should be so obviously stitched on, exposing 'a stitch, a suture, that circled the base of the tail'. Henry goes on to describe the tail as 'purple, medical, horrible' (*BV*, 153). Usually, the taxidermist works with pride to make his mounted creatures seem perfect as if alive, writing that 'there is no excuse for bad work. To ruin an animal with shoddy taxidermy is to forfeit the only true canvas we have on

which to represent it, and it condemns us to amnesia, ignorance and incomprehension' (*BV*, 95-96). The work on Virgil's tail is suspiciously 'shoddy', and the taxidermist never offers any explanation as to why he imagines it was cut off initially (it would make little sense for the scientific team, transporting the monkey from its habitat, to disable their subject).

Therefore, the taxidermist's work on Virgil condemns us to 'amnesia, ignorance and incomprehension' as the bodily evidence suggests an act that may never have taken place in the howler monkey's lifetime. Ostensibly, therefore, the taxidermist cut off the tail himself and reattached it to fit with his story of Virgil in 'A 20<sup>th</sup> Century Shirt'.

If this theory is to stand up as more than mere speculation, then an obvious question is 'why'. James Young explains how the destruction of bodies is only the first step in destroying a race, where reimagining the past and manipulating memory constitutes the final steps:

The Nazis had intended the destruction of the Jews to be total: they were to have been removed from history and memory. [...] ending with Hitler's plans for a museum in Prague to the extinct Jewish race, it grows clear that if the first step toward the destruction of a people lay in the blotting out of its memory, then the last step would lie in its calculated resurrection.<sup>136</sup>

When Henry decides that the taxidermist is in fact a Nazi collaborator, he assumes that the taxidermist must find some redemption in a job which allows him to 'take the dead and make them look good'. Henry asks, 'how was that for murderous irrationalism neatly packaged and hidden?' (*BV*, 190). If we are to agree with Henry, then Virgil's tail is symbolic

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<sup>136</sup> Young, *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust*, p.189.

of the taxidermist's effort to justify his evil past. Like Hitler's plans for a museum of the extinct Jewish race, Virgil's tail – perhaps cut off by, but certainly reattached by the taxidermist – serves as a 'calculated resurrection' of the past, to justify the taxidermist's actions. And like the museum, which was to contain genuine Jewish relics, Virgil's tail is the genuine tail of the howler monkey, stolen from its habitat by scientists and reformed by the taxidermist. In agreement with Young's assertion that 'calculated resurrection' is the final step in a process of extermination, Dirk Rupnow explains how the process of memorialisation in Prague bore a direct link to the murder of the Jewish race:

Religious ritual objects were torn from their everyday uses, just as the people who used them were torn from their lives. If there has always been an alliance between museums and death, it was closer and more immediate in Prague: Musealization facilitates murder. [...] The relationship between deportation and this museum work was not only a metaphor but also a reality: Objects accumulated at the Prague museum, such as the eyeglasses and suitcases on display in Auschwitz today.<sup>137</sup>

The growth of relics reflected the deportation and ultimate deaths of the Jewish people who once used them: the museum's religious objects symbolised the death of Judaism, yet also embodied that death because they were collected and displayed by those who carried out the deportations and killings; the eyeglasses were at once metaphor for the death of a people, and were the literal remains of those who once animated them. In a similar way, Virgil's tail both symbolises the atrocity committed on animals by the humans who

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<sup>137</sup> Dirk Rupnow, 'Annihilating – Preserving – Remembering: The "Aryanization" of Jewish History and Memory During the Holocaust', *Knowledge and Space 4: Cultural Memories – the Geographical Point of View*, eds. Peter Meusburger, Michael Heffernan, Edgar Wunder (Springer: London, 2011), p.195.

exterminate them, and embodies it as it was crudely reattached – if not cut off – by a man who understands shoddy taxidermy to be the first step towards ‘amnesia, ignorance and incomprehension’.

Not only does Virgil’s tail symbolise and embody the reciprocal metaphors for atrocity within Martel’s novel, it is also evidence of Virgil’s creatureliness as outlined by Santner, where he draws upon Lupton’s essay on Caliban to gesture towards a definition of the term “Creature” as ‘not so much the name of a determinate state of being as the signifier of an ongoing *exposure*, of being caught up in the process of *becoming creaturely* through the dictates of divine alterity’.<sup>138</sup> In the terms outlined here, Virgil is not a creature because he is a vulnerable animal, but because the taxidermist dictates the workings of his body and, as such, exposes him to ongoing force. It is this which renders him creaturely. This creatureliness is displayed in Beatrice and Virgil both as mounted animals and as characters in the play, because in both cases the taxidermist dictates their lives from a position of ‘divine alterity’, as he has an outside control over their bodies and their stories. These bodies – and once again Virgil’s tail is the best example of this – are literally reformed to reflect the taxidermist’s master-narrative.

In his discussion of annihilation and creatureliness, Eric Santner highlights a passage in *The Rings of Saturn* where bodily evidence is similarly reimagined. The passage describes how Rembrandt’s famous painting of the surgeon’s guild includes a distinct, bodily irregularity: where the master surgeon exposes the muscles and tissues of a deceased thief called Aris Kindt, the subject’s hand is unproportionally large and anatomically inverted. Santner quotes the narrator in Sebald’s novel, who suggests that the hand ‘signifies the

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<sup>138</sup> Santner, *On Creaturely Life*, p.28.



violence that has been done to Aris Kindt. It is with him, the victim, and not the Guild that gave Rembrandt his commission, that the painter identifies'.<sup>139</sup> Like the taxidermist, whose profession it is to minimise evidence of bodily harm on the animals he receives, Rembrandt has been commissioned to paint a scene which is anatomically perfect. Both "fail" to do so. Perhaps this is because, as the narrator suggests, the artist wishes to draw attention away from viewing the body under a scientific light, and chooses instead to focus on the bodily harm being inflicted upon it. This would suggest that Virgil's tail, like Aris Kindt's hand, signifies the violence that has been done to him. However, and as discussed, unlike the hand in Rembrandt's painting which is only deformed in the painting, Virgil's tail at once signifies and embodies that violence. Santner continues to trace creatureliness in Sebald by explaining 'the shifts in meaning of the word "creature" from denoting the entire domain of *nature* qua God's creation to what "borders on the monstrous and unnatural"'.<sup>140</sup> In this case, it is Virgil's 'monstrous and unnatural' tail, 'purple, medical, horrible', which renders him creaturely (*BV*, 153).

Virgil's tail is: evidence towards the taxidermist's search for redemption through his profession, symbolic of the process of extermination through musealization, metonymic for the abuse carried out on animals by humans, and evidence of Virgil's ongoing creatureliness. Furthermore, as the analogy of animals and Holocaust victims is suggested throughout the text, it is metonymic for the abuse carried out on Holocaust victims by other humans. To employ metonymy and symbolism in such an interwoven manner makes the analogy inscrutable: Virgil's tail does not merely stand in for abuse of Holocaust victims, it also

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<sup>139</sup> W. G. Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*, trans. Michael Hulse (London: Vintage Books, 2002), p.17. Quote in Santner, *On Creaturely Life*, p.107.

<sup>140</sup> Santner, *On Creaturely Life*, p.107.

embodies it. However, whereas metonymy is often used to make something more conceivable – in substituting a whole for a more digestible part – here, the uniqueness of Virgil's tail and the ambiguity over how or why it was cut off and reattached means that the metonymy is not a simplification device, such as that outlined by George Lakoff:

Metonymy is one of the basic characteristics of cognition. It is extremely common for people to take one well-understood or easy-to-perceive aspect of something and use it to stand either for the thing as a whole or for some other aspect or part of it.<sup>141</sup>

As Virgil's tail is difficult to understand (both because it is ambiguous when or why it was removed and reattached, and because it is a unique physical trait), it does not help us to understand animal suffering or Holocaust victimisation. Rather, it highlights our unsurpassable gap in comprehension in a way that focusing on Virgil's eyes or nose might not. This is because metonymy is more complex than a mere referential device, as explained in a later text by Lakoff and Mark Johnson: Metonymy 'also serves the function of providing understanding. For example, [...] there are many parts that can stand for the whole. Which part we pick out determines which aspect of the whole we are focusing on'.<sup>142</sup> The part on which Martel focuses is Virgil's tail: 'a tail with a grip like a constrictor's coil, yet with a deftness of touch that allows him to move a pawn on a chessboard with it'; a tail which has been cut off, reattached and moulded in such a manner that it both is and is not Virgil's tail (BV, 82). It is the physical part of him which best determines the aspect of the whole Martel focuses on: the inconceivability of the suffering body.

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<sup>141</sup> George Lakoff, *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things: What Categories Reveal about the Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), p.77.

<sup>142</sup> Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, p.36.

Moreover, the tail – and the mounted animals more generally - is the part of *Beatrice and Virgil* which most clearly encapsulates the ‘dimension of undeadness’, which Santner describes as ‘the space between real and symbolic death, which [he takes] to mean the ultimate domain of creaturely life’.<sup>143</sup> To help explain ‘undeadness’, Santner turns to Walter Benjamin. On the topic of souvenirs, relics and other symbols which might be taken to represent an original object, experience, place or time in history, Benjamin writes:

The souvenir is the complement to “isolated experience” [*des “Erlebnisses”*]. In it is precipitated the increasing self-estrangement of human beings, whose past is inventoried as dead effects. In the nineteenth century, *allegory withdrew from the world around us to settle in the inner world*. The relic comes from the cadaver; the souvenir comes from the defunct experience [*Erfahrung*] which thinks of itself, euphemistically, as living [*Erlebnis*].<sup>144</sup>

Similar to the eyeglasses in Holocaust museums, which at once stand in for their owners and represent their deaths, Benjamin understands that souvenirs and relics gesture to a real experience, but ultimately embody both the passing of that experience, and even its initial being-towards-death. The life-like significance that one might attach to that souvenir is what makes it ‘undead’. This is applicable to the taxidermy, where the mounted animals appear alive. They are not undead simply because they are made to look alive when they are not, but because the taxidermist insists that ‘all the animals are alive – it’s time that’s stopped’

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<sup>143</sup> Santner, *On Creaturely Life*, p.xx.

<sup>144</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings Volume Four: 1938-1940*, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), p.183, in Santner, *On Creaturely Life*, p.80.

(*BV*, 66). They are undead because they are in a state which Santner, through Benjamin, calls 'petrified unrest'.<sup>145</sup>

One characteristic of 'undeadness' or the state of 'petrified unrest' is that the relic or the souvenir itself takes on a different life to the one it represents. For example, if someone visits an art gallery in order to take a photograph of an original piece of art, the photograph itself is the goal rather than the original, and therefore the art loses its significance. Similarly, in the taxidermy, the taxidermist mounts the animals not in order to preserve the originals, but to create newer and even more life-like versions. For example, the three tigers, which seem to be a family unit, are mounted as though under threat from another predator, and in this sense the tableaux is 'a stage full of stories' (*BV*, 61). Yet, the taxidermist tells Henry that although the female and cub were sourced from the same suppliers, the male was brought in from a zoo (*BV*, 65). One assumes that museum curators harbour an ethical consideration for their profession, so that they arrange items to form a story which most accurately reflects an historical period. This way, the period might be remembered and, to some degree, understood. In accordance with this theory, the taxidermist compares himself to an historian 'who parses through the material evidence of the past in an attempt to reconstruct it and then understand it' (*BV*, 96-97). However, where animals are involved, the stories are merely speculative: the male tiger, who naturally died of a heart attack in a zoo, is here ferocious and ready to fight in a scene which imitates its natural habitat. The taxidermist has reconstructed its life so that it appears nothing like the original. In a summary of his profession, the taxidermist speaks of treating and mounting 'articulated skeletons': the term given to reconstructed skeletons which are made to move

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<sup>145</sup> Santner, *On Creaturely Life*, p.81.

as a body would. This is an effective metaphor for his profession in general, as he rearranges the bodies of animals to articulate not their stories, but his own.

This technique recalls the arrangement of photographs besides text in *Austerlitz* by W. G. Sebald, which seemingly provides evidence for the story being told. For example, one photograph shows a young boy and the title character is told that it is a picture of him in 1939.<sup>146</sup> This is a real photograph, but the boy upon whom Austerlitz builds a hazy memory of his youth is unknown to Sebald. Indeed, he admits that most of the photographs were gathered not from archives but from junk shops and boot sales, and have nothing to do with the story except through the significance he attaches to them within his novel.<sup>147</sup> As Sue Vice argues, such a display 'constitute[s] a crossover between private and public memory'.<sup>148</sup> Santner draws upon Marianne Hirsch's concept of 'postmemory' to consider the crossover between private and public, or personal and impersonal memory, a term which alludes to

the peculiarities of the memory of events that hover between personal memory and impersonal history, events one has not lived through oneself but that, in large measure through exposure to the stories of those who did experience them, have nonetheless entered into the fabric of the self.<sup>149</sup>

Like Hitler's plans to build a museum in order to prefigure the nonexistence of the Jewish race, these photographs do not only illustrate Sebald's novel, but seem to justify it – even

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<sup>146</sup> W.G. Sebald, *Austerlitz*, trans. Anthea Bell (London: Penguin Books, 2011), p.258.

<sup>147</sup> Maya Jaggi, 'The Last Word', *Guardian* (21 December, 2001)

<<http://www.theguardian.com/education/2001/dec/21/artsandhumanities.highereducation>> (accessed 14 August, 2014, 18:39).

<sup>148</sup> Sue Vice, "'Yellowing snapshots": photography and memory in Holocaust literature', *Journal for Cultural Research*, 8:3 (2004), p.297.

<sup>149</sup> Santner, *On Creaturely Life*, p.xx.

foreground it – with evidence of its beginnings. Just so, the misappropriated tigers efface their life through their undeadly forms, and the tale of Virgil's end is reconstructed through the end of his tail.

Read in this light, the mounted animals are creaturely in a similar way to Frankenstein's monster, as all are bodies which have been stitched together and reanimated (literally in the monster's case, but through the taxidermist's stories for the animals). Indeed, Frankenstein is referenced within *Beatrice and Virgil*: whilst Henry looks around the taxidermy, he compares the head of an unfinished deer to 'a cervine version of Frankenstein' (*BV*, 73). This is interesting not least because of the common misconception that Frankenstein is the monster and not its creator: a mistake which one might have thought a published author such as Henry would not make. Moreover, the taxidermist might identify with the monkey as Rembrandt with the thief, but – unlike Rembrandt – he is also the one who works on the body of the victim. This forces a disturbing bond between victim and perpetrator, which is supported by the Frankenstein/Frankenstein's monster confusion. This is in keeping with Santner's concept of creaturely life which, although he insists is specifically human dimension, 'does indeed mark our resemblance to animals, but precisely to animals who have themselves been thrown off the rails of their nature'.<sup>150</sup> In other words, animals can only be creaturely so long as they no longer act instinctively as themselves, but are driven to act in ways which are unnatural. Both the taxidermist and his mounted animals are thrown off the rails of their nature as he takes control over their creation and therefore puts himself into a sovereign role, and they are skinned, stitched and fashioned into creatures which resemble their species but are no longer themselves. Martel

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<sup>150</sup> Santner, *On Creaturely Life*, p.144.

emphasises the proximity between creator and created, yet this proximity is precisely that which isolates them: it is what Santner may call their abandonment to a 'state of exception'.<sup>151</sup>

It is not simply in the taxidermy where the taxidermist over-identifies with his subjects, but also within 'A 20<sup>th</sup> Century Shirt'. Towards the end of the novel, he reads a passage where Beatrice describes how she was tortured by a group of men including one 'tall, raw-boned man' who, simply by this description, reminds Henry of the taxidermist (*BV*, 175, 181). The link between taxidermist and perpetrator is tenuous, but through Henry's narration we are led to believe that the taxidermist has written himself into the scene. If this is indeed the case, one may wonder how the scene relates back to his life and, moreover, why he has chosen to write from the victim's perspective. This is made more complex by the fact that it seems Beatrice is tortured for no particular reason: she is arrested, brutally tortured by men, insulted, kept in confinement and finally released. No questioning is mentioned, nor any reason for her arrest, treatment or release. In this, there seems no striking resemblance to common torture practices during the Third Reich, especially as it is Virgil who is identified as the subject of speciesism, so the parallel between hatred for howler monkeys and anti-Semitism should not apply to Beatrice. Much like the ambiguity surrounding Josef K's case in Kafka's *The Trial*, Beatrice's experiences seem to be unfounded and mystifying. However, unlike K, Beatrice does not question her arrest and torture, and instead understands that her persecutors 'were just doing their job' (*BV*, 179). This apparent lack of hatred towards the men could be because the scene is written by one of them: through hearing a victim excuse her perpetrator on account of his lack of overarching

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<sup>151</sup> Santner, *On Creaturely Life*, p.146.

responsibility, the taxidermist could be playing out the excuse so often heard with regard to Nazi persecution: if I had not done it, someone else would have taken my place.<sup>152</sup>

This attitude seems at odds with the idea of the taxidermist abandoned to a state of exception because it assumes that he is simply one of the masses. However, as Beatrice describes his face, she isolates him from her other torturers. In a discussion on how we perceive the masses, Santner uses Rilke's novel *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* to show how distinctions between people of a different social order breaks down when, for example, high society conceptualises the masses but one figure stands outside of this generalisation.<sup>153</sup> That figure at once demands symbolisation because he is one of his people and therefore might represent them, and resists it because one person cannot symbolise the multiplicity of the masses. Santner argues that to address this figure means that you are aware of your shared creatureliness. Therefore, as the taxidermist writes Beatrice's character, and makes Beatrice address him from a position of shared creatureliness, his play offers him the opportunity of 'redemption without remorse' (*BV*, 189). This is because Santner's concepts of redemption and creatureliness are in turn guided by Benjamin's, who 'suggests that redemption can be understood as a passage through and beyond the creaturely life materialized in [...] cringed bodies'.<sup>154</sup> In other words, creatureliness is exposed in a suffering body, and it is through this creaturely body that one might be redeemed. Therefore, the taxidermist redeems himself by identifying with

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<sup>152</sup> Here, I have paraphrased the excuse heard by many Nazis, such as Adolf Eichmann, about why they committed crimes against humanity. To give one example, in her seminal text *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, Hannah Arendt writes how the defence lawyers protested on the grounds 'that Eichmann was after all only a "tiny cog" in the machinery of the Final Solution'. Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, p.289.

<sup>153</sup> Santner, *On Creaturely Life*, p.xvi.

<sup>154</sup> Santner, *On Creaturely Life*, p.25.



Beatrice, whose creatureliness is exposed through torture and who, in turn, identifies with the taxidermist.

The 'cringed bodies' to which Benjamin refers include the prisoners in Kafka's *Penal Colony* where, as Santner explains, 'those in power use an archaic apparatus which engraves letters with curlicues on the back of guilty men'.<sup>155</sup> It refers to those creaturely subjects whose bodies are distorted as a direct response to the powers of the sovereign: those who, as with some royalty, have power over their subjects even beyond the scope of the law. In *Penal Colony*, this is at once embodied and symbolised by the prisoners whose bodies literally bear the message of their persecutors. As Santner writes elsewhere when he describes Musselmanner, but it can also be applied to the 'cringe' inherent in some forms of creaturely life including the prisoners in *Penal Colony*: 'What remains [...] at this zero-degree of social existence, [is] something like the direct embodiment of signifying stress—the becoming flesh of the "state of emergency" of sociosymbolic meaning'.<sup>156</sup> In other words, their bodies reflect (or, more appropriately, 'embody') their subjectification by those whose powers exceed the normal capacity of the law. In *Beatrice and Virgil*, Beatrice is marked by her 'cringe': her painful neck, which was injured whilst she was tortured (*BV*, 176-180). Moreover, and as a more direct comparison to *Penal Colony*, Beatrice's back is also used to display a message. However, in Beatrice's case, the words are not engraved on her back by perpetrators (at least not directly, though it could be argued that as the taxidermist writes the scene he is responsible for them). Instead, they are written with Virgil's fingertip (*BV*, 147). The words do not symbolise the animals' subjectification, but in fact make up a list of

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<sup>155</sup> Santner, *On Creaturely Life*, p.25.

<sup>156</sup> Eric Santner, 'Miracles Happen: Benjamin, Rosenzweig, Freud and the Matter of the Neighbor', in Žižek, Slavoj, Eric L. Santner and Kenneth Reinhard, *The Neighbor: Three Inquiries in Political Theology* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005), p.100.

'items' which may help the animals talk about what happened to them during 'The Horrors'. This list is called 'The Horrors Sewing Kit', which possibly alludes to how communicating their experiences might help to heal or at least "patch up" their traumatic pasts. However, the words do impart a different message: as it is impossible to read a list drawn on fur by a fingertip, this list embodies and symbolises the impossibility of communicating the suffering body.

In the final scene of 'A 20<sup>th</sup> Century Shirt', Beatrice holds out her hoof to Virgil as they are being killed, and Virgil's tail is cut off. Despite the gap between their species the pair come together at a moment of intense suffering and share compassion. Elaine Scarry argues that the triumph of pain is in its 'unsharability', in the fact that it brings about an 'absolute split between one's sense of one's own reality and the reality of other persons', yet these two share their final moments of intense suffering, understanding not the specificity of one another's pain, but rather aware that the pain of the other is so atrocious as to be incomprehensible.<sup>157</sup> They share its incomprehensibility and unite to express concern and gratitude for one another. They understand the uniqueness of pain, but share compassion nonetheless and, as such, Beatrice and Virgil defy their torturers, even as their bodies are destroyed. The Horrors' Sewing Kit on Beatrice's back was written with the knowledge of its effacement, so when it is wiped clean by the boy who kills the animals at the end of the play there is nothing lost. In fact, the wordlessness which is left behind as the boy walks off stage and carelessly throws Virgil's tail behind him is embodied in Beatrice, who is at once the body of a donkey and a cleaned slate.

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<sup>157</sup> Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), p.4.

This scene between the two animals does not depict empathy, as that would assume that Beatrice and Virgil know what the other experiences. Rather, it reveals the animals' neighbour love for one another. Santner approaches a definition of 'neighbor love' with an analysis of one of Freud's patients whose strange facial expression revealed unconscious desires, thoughts or feelings which, for their very 'otherness', provoked a feeling of horror in the psychologist, yet some understanding that these unconscious driftings were part of what made this man as human as Freud himself. 'Neighbor love', in this context, involves 'the difficult task of turning toward such a face, of becoming responsive, answerable to the new ethical material [...] it manifests'.<sup>158</sup> In a similar way, Beatrice and Virgil turn towards one another and reach out to share something of that mutual unshareability because they have an ethical responsibility (and desire) to respond to (and love) the other. Santner returns to a similar theme in his thesis, where he analyses Sebald's 'spectral materialism' in *Austerlitz*:

In Sebald's universe, one's subjective involvement with another human being is not simply a function of some sort of spiritual affinity; it depends, rather, on the degree to which one participates, at first unknowingly, in what I have referred to as their "spirit world." We are, as it were, in proximity to the "neighbour" when we have entered the enigmatic space of his or her hauntedness. What is at issue in such proximity is, in other words, not empathy in the usual sense. One is not so much trying to see the world from someone else's point of view as trying to

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<sup>158</sup> Santner, *On Creaturely Life*, p.xiii.

register the blind spots of that point of view and to unpack the stresses condensed in this blindness.<sup>159</sup>

This may also be applied to Beatrice and Virgil in the final scene of 'A 20<sup>th</sup> Century Shirt' as the inconceivability of the other's pain might be considered 'blind spots' in the narrative. Furthermore, the term Santner gives to writing about such neighbourly attention – 'spectral materialism' – captures the enigmatic drive of the play as a whole: the animals' desire to contain and therefore to talk about their experiences. Indeed, the invisible words on Beatrice's back are material only as a trace of what they signify, and this itself is signified by their invisibility, or, their 'spectrality'.

Santner identifies something creaturely not only in the plot of *Austerlitz* but also in Sebald's writing style, which he defines as 'creaturely expressivity'.<sup>160</sup> As Sebald engages with the 'material spectrality' of neighbourly love within *Austerlitz*, it may be said that there is something in Sebald's expression – something within the textuality of the novel – which is itself creaturely. Similarly in *Beatrice and Virgil*, Martel's metanarratives allow the text to struggle with its own 'blind spots': the taxidermist's frustration at not being able to describe Virgil's howl, for example, or the frantic dénouement which verges on farcical. Indeed, within five pages, Henry comes to the rash decision that the taxidermist is a Nazi collaborator, gets stabbed, and the taxidermy goes up in flames with the taxidermist and animals inside (*BV*, 189-193). Without the metatextuality which frames the novel, this sequence is melodramatic at best. However, as we later learn that Martel's novel is itself a reframed version of Henry's post-traumatic memories of events, we may judge it in a new

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<sup>159</sup> Santner, *On Creaturely Life*, p.58.

<sup>160</sup> Santner, *On Creaturely Life*, p.xiii.

light, accounting for the ‘blind spots’ which may surface in the novel of a man who muddles up literary references (Frankenstein/ Frankenstein’s monster) and whose most recent novel is considered unpublishable. Comparably, Santner highlights a sequence in *The Rings of Saturn* which documents sea spirits, hogs with a death drive, and a copulating man and woman who appear to the narrator as a sea monster. Santner surmises that ‘the entire sequence [...] seems to trace the migration of an excess vitality that persists at the boundary of the animal, human, and spirit world’.<sup>161</sup> Sebald’s narrator – like Martel’s – bears similarities to the author himself, but his collapse at the beginning of the novel may warn readers that he is prone to an excess of emotion. In both cases, the ‘excess’ of vitality and creatureliness is itself a gesture towards how a novel might engage with creatureliness. This may be the closest Santner gets to grappling with what Anat Pick terms a ‘creaturely poetics’, which encapsulates not only the depiction of creatures in literature and film, but also how writing or film-making themselves can gesture towards creatureliness.

### *Creaturely Poetics*

Of course, Santner does engage with creatureliness through literature: creatureliness in Rilke’s poetry and Sebald’s oeuvre are a central concern of his thesis, and he wagers that an exploration into creatureliness is ‘most productive when undertaken in the company of poets’.<sup>162</sup> However, his primary concern is that ‘the site for such investigations [into the ‘unconscious mental life’ of the superego] is the threshold where life takes on its specific biopolitical intensity, where it assumes the cringed posture of the

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<sup>161</sup> Santner, *On Creaturely Life*, p.186.

<sup>162</sup> Santner, *On Creaturely Life*, p.35.

*creature*'.<sup>163</sup> In other words, Santner's definition of creatureliness is dependent on the unconscious driftings of the superego, as that which is not led by instinct but by drive. This also affects how creatureliness may be explored in literature: poets are better able to explore creatureliness, argues Santner, because they are more attentive to the unconscious and ultimately inaccessible desires of others; they require 'a kind of heightened sensitivity to and preoccupation with the dimension of arresting opacity'.<sup>164</sup> This is why creatureliness for Santner is primarily a human condition and only applies to animals (who are typically led by instinct over desire) when they are removed from their natural state and made to act against their natures. For Santner, good literature and poetry may include a more truthful depiction of pleasurable pain (what Santner terms '*jouissance*' throughout his text), as those unconscious desires which work against instinct.

In this, there are similarities to Pick's creaturely agenda, but there also remains key differences. The following passage, taken from the conclusion to *Creaturely Poetics*, helps to outline some of the comparisons I shall draw out between the two texts:

I focused on works that take up the body as a way of *attending* (seeing, hearing, articulating, and responding to) the inhuman within and without. A creaturely poetics is the sum of this attention: the literary and cinematic forms that challenge the defensive inventory of humanism (consciousness, language, morality, dignity) and the anthropocentric critical idioms it gives rise to. The study brought together two distinct but intimately related projects: the theoretical refutation of humanism and anthropocentrism as impoverished

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<sup>163</sup> Santner, *On Creaturely Life*, p. 35.

<sup>164</sup> Santner, *On Creaturely Life*, p.41.

modes of confronting exposure and an attention to the reality of animal lives as the basis of cultural and ethical inquiry (*CP*, 192-193).

Like Santner, Pick highlights the importance of attending to others and creaturely otherness. She also understands that good poets and authors are well placed to gesture towards creaturely opacity in their chosen medium (be that poetry, novels or film). However, she builds on this idea by arguing that literary and cinematic forms may not simply reflect creatureliness as observed or felt by their authors, but may also challenge readers to reapproach these forms in a new, non-anthropocentric way. This differs from Santner's model of creatureliness, which is first and foremost a specifically human way of attending to others despite (or indeed because of) their recalcitrant, unconscious drives. Before the question of drive or instinct, Pick takes the vulnerable body as her beginning and end point. It is to this body which, she argues, a creaturely poetics might attend.

Therefore, reading *Beatrice and Virgil* as a creaturely poetics allows me to draw more on how Martel's literature gestures towards the body. This accounts not only for the presentation of the body (as I analysed above with regard to Virgil's tail) but how the form of Martel's novel shifts attention away from an anthropocentric interpretation of the creature in order to gesture towards the creature itself: its body, vulnerability, voice; the reality of its life as separate from (but 'intimately related' to) the literature which attends it. This is not to say that the half of the novel's reciprocal metaphor which considers the Holocaust is irrelevant when analysing through a creaturely prism. Quite the opposite, Pick argues that the Holocaust exposed humanity's essential creatureliness: the vulnerable body which was stripped of its identity, worked and starved to death proves that human beings are creatures too. Therefore, Pick's nonanthropocentric study is not dis-anthropocentric, but

simply suggests that poetry/ literature/ film should use its form to engage with all creatures (human and animal) on a level field, without a hierarchy of species and, as far as possible, with a metatextual awareness of the unavoidably 'human' prism through which the form is created and viewed.

Whilst reading *Beatrice and Virgil* through a creaturely prism as outlined by Santner, above, I paid particularly close attention to Virgil's tail as an aspect of the monkey which metonymically exposes the inconceivability of the suffering body. However, Virgil's howl is also metonymic, and exemplifies the difficulty involved in reading a creaturely poetics. This is because the howl is closer than the tail to representing the language which issues from the creaturely body, which makes it more applicable to Pick's thesis on creatureliness than Santner's. Virgil's howl is the reason the taxidermist asks Henry for his help, as the taxidermist himself could not describe it effectively. It is a howl which spans time as well as distance, 'recorded more than forty years ago in the jungles of the upper Amazon' onto an old cassette player, meaning that 'the sound quality isn't very good'. Indeed, Henry admits, 'it's hard to put into words' (*BV*, 83). Nonetheless, Henry tries to describe the howl by comparing it to other sounds, such as a herd of panicking swine and the heavy squeak of an axle, but nothing is an effective comparison except for 'the thing itself, in its raw purity': he ends the description, 'hearing is believing' (*BV*, 90).

In a passage which similarly gestures towards the incommunicability of pain, Jean Améry attempts to describe the pain he was subjected to at the hands of the Nazis. Ultimately, he concedes a defeat of language, and writes that the pain he experienced exceeded language's capacity to represent it:



It would be totally senseless to try and describe here the pain that was inflicted on me. Was it “like a red-hot iron in my shoulders,” and was another “like a dull wooden stake that had been driven into the back of my head”? One comparison would only stand for the other, and in the end we would be hoaxed by turn on the hopeless merry-go-round of figurative speech. The pain was what it was. Beyond that there is nothing to say. Qualities of feeling are as incomparable as they are indescribable. They mark the limit of the capacity of language to communicate.<sup>165</sup>

The howler monkey’s cry is not necessarily a sign of its pain or distress but, just as Améry concedes that pain is inexpressible, Virgil’s cry can only be approached by making comparisons to other sounds, which can never express ‘the thing itself’. For the taxidermist it is ‘the limit of the capacity of language to communicate’ and, as such, he includes the howl in ‘A 20<sup>th</sup> Century Shirt’, perhaps to express this sense of incommunicability:

Virgil: [...] Beatrice, how are we going to talk about what happened to us one day when it’s over?

*(Pause.)*

Beatrice: I don’t know

*(Letting go of Beatrice’s leg and falling onto all fours, Virgil begins to howl. The landscape and stage slowly fade to darkness to the sound of Virgil loudly expressing his outrage.) (BV, 112)*

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<sup>165</sup> Jean Améry, *At the Mind’s Limits: Contemplations by a Survivor on Auschwitz and its Realities*, trans. Sidney Rosenfeld and Stella P. Rosenfeld (London: Granta Books, 1999), p.33.

Virgil asks Beatrice the ‘key question’ of the play (*BV*, 133), and his response to the inability to express himself through words is this primal howl, as he returns to a more natural posture of a monkey on all fours. Animality therefore signifies the limits of communication: limits which are elsewhere approached through the inability to express physical pain (as with Améry).

The inability to communicate pain is at once symbolised by the animal’s cry and embodied by it, as Virgil cannot communicate the pain he went through during the Horrors using language. Even though he is given the capacity to talk in ‘A 20<sup>th</sup> Century Shirt’ – a quality which moves the play outside of the boundaries imposed by Realism – he is still restricted by the boundaries of art and language to express physical pain. Elaine Scarry argues that this is because physical ‘pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it, bringing about an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language’.<sup>166</sup> In order to express his outrage and pain, Virgil reverts back to ‘a state anterior to language’ and howls. As a talking animal, Virgil’s howl is at once symbolic (it symbolises the destruction of language) and realistic (the monkey howls). Reality supercedes language: as Henry admits, it is impossible to capture the essence of this howl in words. It is as though the taxidermist gives Virgil a voice in order to strip him of it.

Virgil’s howl is comparable to a scene in William Golding’s *The Inheritors*, which Anat Pick analyses in *Creaturely Poetics*. Pick summarises Golding’s second novel as follows:

Recounting the final days of a group of Neanderthals on the eve of their extinction at the hands of Cro-Magnon man, *The Inheritors* is quite literally a

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<sup>166</sup> Scarry, *The Body in Pain*, p.4.

story about ecology and evolution. The novel's central character is Lok, who with the rest of his tribe comes across a strange group of "new people." The encounter proves deadly. One by one the people are killed, until only Lok, the last of his kind, remains.<sup>167</sup>

Similarities between *The Inheritors* and *Beatrice and Virgil* include tropes of violence and the threat of extinction, as well as unclear boundaries between humans and other animals. One extract which encapsulates these similarities is when Lok stoops and howls to mourn the loss of his partner. This bears obvious similarities to Virgil's howl in *Beatrice and Virgil*:

Lok began to bend. His knees touched the ground, his hands reached down and took his weight slowly, and with all his strength he clutched himself into the earth. [...] The sound of mourning burst out of his mouth, prolonged, harsh, pain-sound, man-sound'.<sup>168</sup>

Pick focuses on this final description of the howl as 'man-sound'. Although Lok assumes an animalistic position and ejects a wordless noise, Golding uses this as evidence not of his distance from humanity but rather of his proximity to it. Pick argues that such 'man-sounds, or animalized speech' are the Neanderthal expressions through which the entire novel is channelled.<sup>169</sup> It is evidence of a shared narrative between all creatures which comes to the fore at moments of intense suffering or vulnerability. Similarly, Virgil's usual lucid speech is animalised as he howls, which at once reminds the audience that he is a howler monkey and taps into their perceived sense of humanity. 'The landscape and stage slowly fade to

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<sup>167</sup> Pick, *Creaturely Poetics*, p.52.

<sup>168</sup> William Golding, *The Inheritors* (London: Faber and Faber, 1964), p.213. Quoted in Pick, *Creaturely Poetics*, pp.56-57.

<sup>169</sup> Pick, *Creaturely Poetics*, p.57.

darkness' as the focus of the play is drawn away from the outside space and towards the liminal space shared by all creatures, projected by Virgil's howl.

Towards the end of 'A 20<sup>th</sup> Century Shirt', there is a sudden inclusion of human characters. There are people who torture Beatrice; there are people who force women to kill themselves and their children; these same people then turn on Beatrice and Virgil to brutally murder them. We may liken the perpetrators to animals, but this alleviates some agency; we may liken the victims to animals (and indeed two of them are animals), but this would seem to belittle their deaths. Instead, we might consider all characters creaturely. This reading is supported by Virgil's howl, as it is at once animalised speech and 'man-sound', and also by Henry's reaction to his wife giving birth to their son:

[S]he was reduced to a mucky animal who, after many pants, whimpers and screams, excreted from her body a pound of flesh, as the expression goes, that was red, wrinkled and slimy. The event couldn't have been more animal-like if the two of them had been in a muddy pen grunting. The thing produced, weakly gesticulating, looked half simian, half-alien. Yet the call to Henry's humanity couldn't have been louder or more radical (*BV*, 168).

Giving birth is a primitive event, common to both animal and man, and it produces the same speechless newborn. Henry's wife 'pants, whimpers and screams' in agony, unable to formulate language. Yet this 'mucky... animal-like' scene fiercely pulls on what Henry believes is his humanity. He believes that the tenderness he feels toward his wife and newborn is something beyond animal capacity, and perhaps it is, but still this feeling is

directed towards a creature appearing ‘half simian’, more monkey than man, with no more reason, nor speech, than an animal. Indeed, in returning to Bentham’s famous question, ‘the question is not Can they reason? nor, Can they talk? but, Can they suffer?’, it is apparent that the call to Henry’s humanity, an instinctive protectiveness perhaps, along with a more figurative sense of love, can be directed towards a creature little more than ‘a pound of flesh’.<sup>170</sup> In a novel which so consciously plays with the boundaries between man and animal, Martel seems to ask what difference there lies between this child’s life and the lives of animals, and whether our sense of humanity should not be based on the elevation of man above beast, but rather how we ethically respond to the suffering of all creatures, be they man or animal.

Indeed, this is why *Beatrice and Virgil* is not simply a collection of fragments from ‘A 20<sup>th</sup> Century Shirt’, where we may infer the predominance of Holocaust or animal tropes, but a metatextual maze causing Henry to learn about himself through vulnerability in both the human and animal worlds: a creatureliness which saturates his artistic and personal life. As explained throughout this thesis, the atrocity experienced by many in the camps was so extreme as to ‘outstrip language’s capacity to represent it altogether’.<sup>171</sup> Henry is faced with the difficulties of representing the Holocaust when, at the beginning of *Beatrice and Virgil*, he is told that his Holocaust flip-book is unpublishable. Having failed to clearly explain what his book is about (it is ‘about a new choice of stories’, he had said; it is about addressing ‘the needs of ghosts’), he is left feeling frustrated and alone (*BV*, 15). While sitting in a park, he wonders ‘Would *anyone* care to have a stranger come up to them whispering

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<sup>170</sup> Jeremy Bentham, *The Collected Works of Jeremy Bentham: An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, eds. J. H. Burns and H. L. A. Hart (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), p.283. Quoted in: Weil, *Thinking Animals: Why Animal Studies Now?*, p.68.

<sup>171</sup> James E. Young, ‘Interpreting Literary Testimony’, p.405.

“Hitlerauschwitzsixmillionincandescent soulsmygodmygodmygod”?’ (BV, 19). This compact word (similar to the ‘one-long-words’ which Beatrice and Virgil later make up to help describe what happened to them) emphasises the near impossibility of talking about the Holocaust. It is Henry’s attempt to overlay language with the extremity which, at the same time, undercuts it. The repetition ‘mygodmygodmygod’ only hints at the omnipotence of suffering and atrocity experienced. In a similar vein, Anat Pick continues her study on creatureliness by considering Primo Levi’s *The Truce*, specifically when Levi describes the short life and death of an inarticulate, three year old boy – Hurbinek. Hurbinek, a ‘child of Auschwitz’, lacks the capacity to speak any known language, and instead makes his own sounds which no one understands. Levi notes only the look of desperation in his eyes, ‘a stare both savage and human’, as if Hurbinek wishes to speak out against his affliction but cannot.<sup>172</sup> The boy dies shortly afterwards.

Although their situations are completely different – Henry is an author with a wide vocabulary who lives in comfort and Hurbinek was an inarticulate victim of atrocity – both are unable to communicate the effects of the Holocaust through language. As Pick understands, ‘not finding the words is an expression of the kind of creatures we are. It is also an expression (and an experience) of our loneliness. In what sense, then,’ she asks, ‘is the Holocaust uniquely positioned outside language?’<sup>173</sup> It is difficult to put anything into words without missing something of the experience itself but, as with understanding another’s pain, articulating the unspeakability of the Holocaust is impossible: Levi cannot speak for Hurbinek and Henry cannot speak for the millions dead. Instead, Pick suggests, ‘speaking about the Holocaust is [a matter of] making language open to the excessive reality

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<sup>172</sup> Levi, *If This is a Man - The Truce*, p.197.

<sup>173</sup> Pick, *Creaturely Poetics*, p.30.

of the event'.<sup>174</sup> Primo Levi achieves this as he bears witness to Hurbinek and allows the boy's silence to permeate his own testimony; Martel achieves this as he places his main character at an impasse at the start of his Holocaust novel, and uses the remainder of his text to consider not the Holocaust itself but its 'excessive reality': a reality which is gestured towards in words and howls, and which is traced in the suffering bodies of Beatrice and Virgil. *Beatrice and Virgil* begins with Henry at a mental impasse: his book about the Holocaust is unpublishable and he finds himself alone in the park. It ends with Henry at a physical impasse: he has been hospitalised after the taxidermist stabs him. However, it is at this moment of vulnerability that he finds himself able to write again and, despite the fact that he believes the taxidermist was a Nazi sympathiser and his play may have been a way to mask his atrocities, it is this play and the story which unfolds around it which frees Henry from his creative block and allows him to write.

This creaturely reading is largely at odds with Laura Petersen's essay on *Beatrice and Virgil* and *Maus*, where she offers a similar reading of both texts, and argues that the animals are simply used as metaphors by which to approach the Holocaust afresh. Her reading is similar to, and indeed draws upon, Henry's description of how he used animals in his preceding novels:

The use of animals in his novel, he explained, was for reasons of craft rather than of sentiment. Speaking before his tribe, naked, he was only human and therefore possibly – likely – surely – a liar. But dressed in furs and feathers, he became a shaman and spoke a greater truth. We are cynical about our own species, but less so about animals, especially wild ones. We might not shelter

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<sup>174</sup> Pick, *Creaturely Poetics*, p.30.

them from habitat destruction, but we do tend to shelter them from excessive irony (*BV*, 29-30).

Petersen equates this use of animals to Martel's because of what she considers the novel's 'self-reflexive vein'.<sup>175</sup> It is entirely possible that Martel meant for Henry's earlier use of animals to foreshadow his own text but, read in a creaturely (and therefore ultimately a self-reflexive) vein, this interpretation is unlikely. Indeed, Pick regards Coetzee's 'The Lives of Animals' as a seminal text for showing how one might 'read through a creaturely prism' because – as discussed in my following chapter – its focal character, Elizabeth Costello, is not only moved by animal ethics but physically affected by them, and finds herself sharing something of their vulnerability, especially as she ages and becomes increasingly aware of her body. Despite the fact that Beatrice and Virgil are only mounted animals, animated through a fictional play, Henry forges a relationship with them by the end of the novel, and claims that he misses them 'with an ache that made itself felt even years later' (*BV*, 194). Like Elizabeth Costello, his feelings towards these creatures are felt physically, and their loss pains him. Therefore, there is little doubt that Henry does not use Beatrice and Virgil 'for craft' but feels sentimental towards the mounted animals by the end of the novel, as he admits never again being able to 'see a donkey without thinking of Beatrice and Virgil and feeling grief and misery' (*BV*, 195). Moreover, throughout his entire relationship with the taxidermist, he often queried the use of animals, suspecting all along that they had a metaphoric function and that the taxidermist was lying, or at least hiding something. Finally, the irony of this passage is made apparent when the taxidermist insists that 'A 20<sup>th</sup> Century

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<sup>175</sup> Laura Petersen, "We Are Story Animals': Aesopics in Holocaust Literature by Art Spiegelman and Yann Martel', *Aesopic Voices: Reframing Truth through Concealed Ways of Presentation in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> Centuries*, ed. Gert Reifarth and Philip Morrissey (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011), p.195.



Shirt' is indeed about habitat destruction (*BV*, 135). Petersen dismisses this reading as, at best, a 'contrived collapse' of the Holocaust metaphor by Martel but, whether or not the taxidermist's motives for writing his play were entirely false, they still brought issues of animal suffering and habitat destruction to the fore. Indeed, I further discuss the issue of comparing and contrasting atrocity in Chapter Four, but already it is clear that Martel's use of allegory gives weight to both sides of the comparison.

To better understand both how the animal-Holocaust metaphor in *Beatrice and Virgil* may be read as reciprocal (as opposed to a 'contrived collapse' of one side towards the other), and moreover how this can be represented in literature as a creaturely poetics, it is helpful to compare *Beatrice and Virgil* to Martel's earlier novel, *Life of Pi*. Despite nine years between their publications, there are many similarities between the two novels, the most significant of which is Martel's use of animals. During *The Life of Pi* a boy is shipwrecked and left alone with an orang-utan and a zebra (perhaps more appealing than a howler monkey and donkey), a hyena and a tiger. All except the boy and the tiger are killed. However, at the end of the novel, we are offered an alternative story where the animals are representations of the human survivors. Pi, who is associated with the tiger, is the only survivor left after the group kill and eat each other. Those interviewing Pi consider the alternative story to be more realistic but, considering neither story is relevant to their report on the shipwreck, they choose to accept the story with animals:

"In both stories the ship sinks, my entire family dies, and I suffer."

"Yes, that's true."

“So tell me, since it makes no factual difference to you and you can’t prove the question either way, which story do you prefer? Which is the better story, the story with animals or the story without animals?”

Mr. Okamoto: “That’s an interesting question...”

Mr. Chiba: “The story with animals.”

Mr. Okamoto: “**Yes.** The story with animals is the better story.”

Pi Patel: “Thank you. And so it goes with God.”<sup>176</sup>

To focus on ‘the better story’ seems to prioritise aesthetic judgement over the truth. Like the mounted animals in the taxidermist of *Beatrice and Virgil*, whose painful or unheroic deaths are transformed into fierce montages in order to capture something of life (even if not their own), here a traumatic story of murder and cannibalism is possibly disguised by wild animals, and cloaked in a veil of exoticism. Jenni Adams, who also quotes from this passage in her analysis of *Beatrice and Virgil*, refers to an earlier passage in *Life of Pi* when Pi considers the imaginative difference between being an atheist and an agnostic, and she writes that ‘the novel, in its closing stages, demands to be read one-dimensionally as an allegorical or fabular illustration of faith’s workings’.<sup>177</sup> Adams finds this comparable to *Beatrice and Virgil*, ‘ultimately orienting its readers in a single interpretive direction with the logically challenging revelation of the taxidermist’s guilt’.<sup>178</sup> In both novels, Adams argues, imagination requires a leap of faith, which rises out of troubled conscience: Pi imagines an atheist on his deathbed who finally opens his mind to the possibility of God; a miraculous journey with wild animals rises out of the boy’s trauma after possibly killing a man and not

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<sup>176</sup> Yann Martel, *Life of Pi* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2003), p.317.

<sup>177</sup> Jenni Adams, ‘A Howl and a Black Cat: Allegory, Nonsense and Ethics in Yann Martel’s *Beatrice and Virgil*’, *Journal of Literature and Trauma Studies* 1:2 (Autumn 2012), p.46.

<sup>178</sup> Adams, ‘A Howl’, p.44.

saving his mother's life; and the taxidermist ostensibly writes a play about animals to channel his guilt as a Nazi collaborator. The essential truth hidden within a story is as evasive as God himself, and we must give ourselves over to the story in an act of faith.

Yet, as with my reservations towards Peterson's analysis of *Beatrice and Virgil*, I do not believe that reading these novels is reductive to a singular dimension. Both novels offer alternatives to the animal stories and yet both are framed within fictional space of Postmodern literature: texts which recall themselves and their fictionality. Both are about a 'choice of stories' and, in both cases, the supposedly realistic choice is 'a horrible story', not only for its traumatic content but also for its bleak aesthetics: a magnificent journey with a tiger becomes a voyage of 'solitude'; a play about two animals who find ways to talk about their experiences becomes a script about how a Nazi can appease his conscience (*BV*, 15).<sup>179</sup> However, like in *Maus*, the animal stories offer a false sense of security, and seem to distance readers from atrocity in order that they approach it from a new angle, significantly – in the case of *Maus* and *Beatrice and Virgil* – without over-identifying with any Holocaust victims. Even in *Life of Pi*, the animal story does not seem to shield Pi from any pain as he reminds us that 'in both stories the ship sinks, my entire family dies, and I suffer'. Including animals may seem to deflect reality but, as Pi questions, 'doesn't the telling of something always become a story?' In other words, is realism not shattered the moment it is channelled into words and, if so, how can one choose between a fable which gestures towards the truth and a testimony which leaves much unspoken? In *Life of Pi* and *Beatrice and Virgil* we are asked to choose between a story with or without animals, but the fictional space of Martel's novels refracts these choices so that there is no clear, singular dimension

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<sup>179</sup> Martel, *Life of Pi*, p.311.

from which to read. Moreover, as both novels progress, the animals seem less anthropomorphised than the characters themselves seem creaturely. The tiger is no longer Pi's companion but a projection of Pi himself; Beatrice and Virgil are not only projections of the taxidermist's guilt, but vulnerable creatures whom Henry grows to love. A one-dimensional reading of either text risks disengaging with the reciprocal nature of these stories and sidestepping a creaturely reading of the texts.

Despite Adams' argument that the reader is channelled into a one-dimensional reading of both texts, she is aware of the complications which arise from metatextuality, and indeed writes that 'the novel might be read as itself highlighting the problematic nature of such readings'.<sup>180</sup> Although she explores these problems, she chooses to deprioritise them towards the end of her essay, and focuses instead on a more literal reading of *Beatrice and Virgil*: a reading which might be considered creaturely in that it ignores what Pick considers points of 'deflection', which might include a study on the difference between a story which includes animals and one which does not, as opposed to reading both stories through a similar, creaturely lens. Indeed, this is the one time in her essay where Adams references Pick. She asks:

What might a literal reading of Martel's *Beatrice and Virgil* look like? Such a reading might focus on the novel's striking and shocking evocations of corporeal suffering, particularly in the scene in which Beatrice describes her torture by humans. It might read corporeal suffering as not only representation's endpoint

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<sup>180</sup> Adams, 'A Howl', p.56.

but as a kind of asymbolic excess whose ethical and literary encounter might nevertheless result in a reparative sense of shared creatureliness[.]<sup>181</sup>

This 'literal reading' of *Beatrice and Virgil* could likewise be applied to *Life of Pi*, whereby the realistic, alternative story – and the readerly complications which arise from there being an alternative story – is ignored (as indeed it is ignored in Mr Okamoto's final report of the shipwreck).<sup>182</sup> As in *Life of Pi*, this reading allows us to give ourselves over to the story in an act of faith, reading it in order to believe it. However, this is where an integral difference between the two novels lies: whereas this reading works well enough for *Life of Pi*, it misses the essential point of *Beatrice and Virgil* as a work of Holocaust fiction.

Part of the Postmodernist appeal in *Life of Pi* is that, although one story seems more realistic than the other, both are fiction. This gives gravity to Pi's argument regarding the investigators' disbelief at his animal story: 'Love is hard to believe, ask any lover. Life is hard to believe, ask any scientist. God is hard to believe, ask any believer. What is your problem with hard to believe?'<sup>183</sup> We are asked to suspend our usual beliefs and engage with the imaginative story as a form of magical realism. However, in *Beatrice and Virgil* the same questions about truth, language and stories are explored, but they are framed by the Holocaust: an event which, in its scope of atrocity, is no longer hard to believe, but instead hard to imagine. We cannot give ourselves over to our imagination for risk of over-identification and, as discussed, individual experiences during the Holocaust are impossible to contain within language. Therefore, whereas the revelation in *Life of Pi* challenges readers to choose between his/her rational belief or belief in the magical realist world

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<sup>181</sup> Adams, 'A Howl', p.53.

<sup>182</sup> Martel, *Life of Pi*, p.319.

<sup>183</sup> Martel, *Life of Pi*, p.297.

created by Pi, the denouement in *Beatrice and Virgil* seems absurd and bathetic: the ostensibly real subject of the taxidermist's play is unimaginable as the story of two animals trying to talk about 'The Horrors', and Henry's stabbing and the taxidermy going up in flames causes the plot to spiral away from any realistic alternative.

In short, the distinguishing feature between *Life of Pi* and *Beatrice and Virgil* is that the latter is a work of Holocaust fiction and must be read as such. To recall Eaglestone, who argues that readers must approach Holocaust literature with a range of responsible questions in mind, 'the Holocaust and the texts that refer to it call for a 'Holocaust reading', an interpretation of cinders, which develops and bears these questions in mind'.<sup>184</sup> Moacyr Scliar's *Max and the Cats* was integral to the inspiration for *Life of Pi*. The novella tells an allegorical story about Nazism in which a Jewish refugee crosses the ocean with a jaguar in his boat, yet Martel ignores this crucial element of the story and waits until his following novel to attend to the Holocaust. Except as, perhaps, an absent referent, the Holocaust is deliberately ignored in *Life of Pi*, which allows readers to read it one-dimensionally. However, it pervades *Beatrice and Virgil*, to the extent that 'A 20<sup>th</sup> Century Shirt' – far from being a separated animal story as in *Life of Pi* – directly recalls it in a reference to 68 Nowolipski Street. There are indeed numerous similarities between the two novels: animal stories, metatextuality, more specifically the characters' insistence that they offer potentially corrupt evidence for their stories (the meerkat bones in *Life of Pi* and Virgil's tail in *Beatrice and Virgil*); moreover, the fact that both texts place a responsibility on their readers by offering a choice of stories. However, it is the reciprocity between animal and

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<sup>184</sup> Robert Eaglestone, *The Holocaust and Postmodern* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p.133.

human suffering in *Beatrice and Virgil* which both distinguishes it from its successful precursor, and calls more urgently for a creaturely reading of the text.

### *Conclusion*

The key point of departure from Santner's definition of creatureliness to Pick's is the latter's refutation that anthropocentrism must be the primary mode through which to access a creaturely poetics. Indeed, whereas Santner encounters 'the opacity and recalcitrance that we associate with the materiality of nature' through human history, and attends to the natural world through a process of symbolisation drawn out by humans, Pick attempts to gesture towards this opacity by turning away from the human gaze which integrates it into our symbolic universe.<sup>185</sup> The main difficulty in doing this stems from the fact that any work of art which attempts to display the creature is necessarily created and viewed through a human lens. To give a simple example: we cannot escape humanity when reading a text in our language. However, Pick challenges this hurdle as she suggests that a creaturely poetics must highlight such limitations, such as in *Elizabeth Costello* where the protagonist suggests that primates used for research purposes might follow their own sets of logic to complete tasks, rather than the ones we interpret them as following (*EC*, 72-74). The point being, here, is that a creaturely poetics as outlined by Pick allows for the possibility that our process of symbolisation is not only ethically flawed but also deflects reality. This gives rise to another aspect of a creaturely poetics: that the impossibility of turning away from a human gaze might itself reflect the opacity of nature.

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<sup>185</sup> Santner, *On Creaturely Life*, p.xv.

I have explored both models of creatureliness through *Beatrice and Virgil* by Yann Martel, and the best sites of comparison are Virgil's tail and his howl. Despite Pick's focus on the body and Santner's preoccupation with unconscious drives and expressions, I felt it would be more effective to use Santner's model of creatureliness to analyse the tail (body) and Pick's model to analyse the howl (voice). This is because Virgil's tail undergoes a more acute process of symbolisation within the novel, as it both belongs to the monkey but marks the process of symbolisation undergone through the process of taxidermy. On the other hand, Virgil's howl is an expression of his inability to communicate suffering through language, and therefore gestures towards the limitations of symbolisation. Clearly, both models have allowed me to explore creatureliness in *Beatrice and Virgil* and each has offered its own points of interest: shifting between two definitions of creatureliness, one of which accepts anthropocentrism in literature and the other which devalues it, has given me the opportunity to test how ingrained humanism is as a mode of confronting animal bodies, and question whether or not there is an alternative mode which allows the body to speak.

To help answer this question, it is useful to analyse these aspects of the novel, briefly, by using the opposite models of creatureliness: Pick's for the tail and Santner's for the howl. Whereas Santner's anthropocentric model allowed me to conclude that Virgil's creatureliness is a direct result of the taxidermist's force (physical and symbolic) over his body, Pick may start from the understanding that Virgil is a vulnerable creature simply for existing within such a body. However, she may go further. As she defines 'creature' as 'first and foremost a living body – material, temporal, and vulnerable', the dead, mounted and named figure of Virgil may no longer fit this specification (*CP*, 5). Instead, Virgil might



symbolise the humanist mode of interpretation, where his body (in the taxidermy) and story (in the play) are moulded to fit into a human gaze. This is similar to the primate in *Elizabeth Costello* whose actions are interpreted by scientists to fit an anthropocentric gaze, except for the fact that whereas Sultan maintains his creatureliness as a living body, Virgil's creatureliness died with him, as did the possibility of representing this creatureliness beyond the humanist mode of symbolisation (*EC*, 72-74). Virgil's tail, in this case, is the trace of his creatureliness. It is evidence that he was once a vulnerable body, and that no amount of meticulous taxidermy (or, so far as the metaphor goes: meticulous symbolisation) can deny the authority of that body to speak for itself.

Virgil's howl – the closest thing to his body 'speaking for itself' – as explored through Santner's model of creatureliness, also demands a new interpretation. Previously, I used this howl as evidence of a shared narrative of suffering which exists between all creatures. Using Pick's model, I explained how the sound of a body in pain is common to all creatures and that, ironically perhaps, the howler monkey's natural voice ties him most closely with the humans who interpret his body and otherwise force him to bear language. When I analysed Virgil's tail through Pick's model, directly above, I concluded that – through Pick – Virgil's body was not evidence of his creatureliness at all. Similarly, through Santner's anthropocentric model, Virgil's howl is perhaps the one part of his character which gestures towards the impossibility of symbolisation into a human order and, by that logic, it would also deny him a creaturely interpretation, were it not for the fact that it is written within an allegorical novel. This is because Santner applies creatureliness to animals where they are outside of their natural order and therefore resort to acting through drives rather than

instinct. As Virgil instinctively howls, this is not the moment which best displays his creatureliness through Santner's model.

In this regard, a better example of Virgil's creatureliness might be at the end of the play, where he lists items on the 'Horrors Sewing Kit' to distract from the fact that the boy is about to murder both him and Beatrice (*BV*, 182, 183). Whereas instinct might tell him to run, hide or howl, he is driven to hide within an excess of symbolic language. An aspect of Santner's model which may help to clarify this is his description of the creaturely dimension of the neighbour. This is the idea that we must respond to others despite the fact that their unconscious drives are outside of our powers of interpretation. Here, Santner defines his use of the term 'neighbor', through Franz Rosenzweig's text, *The Star of Redemption*:

As I understand it, Rosenzweig's work suggests that the only way to truly understand the concept of love of neighbor is to grasp what it means that he or she has an unconscious [...]. The being whose proximity we are enjoined to inhabit and open to according to the imperative of neighbor love is always a subject at odds with itself, split by thoughts, desires, fantasies, and pleasures it can never fully claim as its own and that in some sense both do and do not belong to it.<sup>186</sup>

According to this definition, a neighbour is someone whose desires we cannot access, and love of neighbour is the ethical decision to turn towards and respond ethically to that person. The reason the final scene of the play fits this concept of the creaturely dimension of the neighbour, and suggests 'the awakening to the answerability to the neighbor [and] to

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<sup>186</sup> Santner, *On Creaturely Life*, p.xii.

acts of neighbor love', is that Beatrice and Virgil formulate a language which is symbolic of their inability to express the horrors, and paradoxically use it as a language of compassion.<sup>187</sup> This is because it symbolises the idea that, despite their differences, they should engage in neighbourly love until the moment they die.

This paradox is useful to explore further, because it highlights a subtle difference between the two models of creatureliness explored in this chapter. There is something of an impasse between two important quotations which relate to the topic of the suffering body, which the concept of creatureliness helps to enlighten. One is Jeremy Bentham's dictum, concerning animals, 'the question is not, Can they reason? nor Can they talk? but Can they suffer?'<sup>188</sup> As Derrida writes, and Pick recalls, the answer is an "undeniable" yes.<sup>189</sup> As Bentham moves the debate away from empathising with animals on a moral or intelligible plane towards an empathy of suffering, Derrida's emphatic answer suggests that he does not go far enough. Indeed, perhaps it is misguided to even pose this as a question. It is possible to debate the nature of their suffering: a Heideggerian may consider an animal's suffering lesser as they are not included in concepts of *Dasein*, being-towards-death, and may not be able to self-reflect on their pains, but these are the sort of debates which, Pick would argue, deflect from the point: it is undeniably true that animals physically suffer. The other quotation which interests me, though it not explicitly linked to Animal Studies, comes from Elaine Scarry's study on physical suffering: *The Body in Pain*. Scarry considers the unsharability of pain, musing on the fact that one cannot ever grasp what it feels like for someone else to be in pain:

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<sup>187</sup> Santner, *On Creaturely Life*, p.91.

<sup>188</sup> Bentham, *Principles of Legislation*, p.283.

<sup>189</sup> Pick, *Creaturely Poetics*, p.10

When one speaks about “one’s own physical pain” and about “another person’s physical pain,” one might almost appear to be speaking about two wholly distinct orders of events. For the person whose pain it is, it is “effortlessly” grasped (that is, even with the most heroic effort it cannot *not* be grasped); while for the person outside the sufferer’s body, what is “effortless” is *not* grasping it [...]. So, for the person in pain, so incontestably and unnegotiably present is it that “having pain” may come to be thought of as the most vibrant example of what it is to “have certainty,” while for the other person it is so elusive that “hearing about pain” may exist as the primary model of what it is “to have doubt”.<sup>190</sup>

Scarry argues that being in pain is so personal, it cannot be comprehended in that moment by anyone except the person in pain. Here, her argument is similar to Derrida’s evaluation of the question ‘Can they suffer?’ He argues that ‘Can’ implies a being-able: the question is asking whether or not it is possible for an animal to be able to suffer; yet Derrida points out that suffering is an inability: “‘Can they suffer’ amounts to asking ‘Can they *not be able*?’”<sup>191</sup> Whereas Derrida highlights the inability of animals not to suffer, Scarry also focuses on the inability of others to understand another’s suffering. However, to return to the point of Bentham’s dictum, he asks us to consider animals outside of a moral sphere: his question asks us to empathise with them for our shared vulnerability. The impasse is such that pain is, by its nature, unsharable. Scarry argues that hearing about another’s pain is to have doubt, whereas Derrida insists that animals undeniably suffer. We are being asked to empathise with animals in the one manner that denies our empathy: our unique

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<sup>190</sup> Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain*, p.4.

<sup>191</sup> Jacques Derrida, *The Animal that Therefore I Am*, trans. David Wills, ed. Marie-Louise Mallet (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), p.28.

experiences of pain. For want of a better term, and owing to the paradoxical nature of these ideas, I define this shared experience of the unsharable as 'tangential empathy'.

Now, as Santner's model of creatureliness is based on drive rather than instinct, tangential empathy – displayed by Beatrice and Virgil at the end of 'A 20<sup>th</sup> Century Shirt' – must still be accessed through a process of symbolisation and therefore in a humanist mode, which somewhat undercuts the idea that we might empathise on a more multidirectional or 'tangential' plane. However, Pick's concept of creatureliness is one way of moving beyond the impasse: it is the shared vulnerability of animals and humans, which accounts for our not-being-able, that unites us as creaturely beings. In this respect, it was enlightening to analyse *Beatrice and Virgil* through Santner's model of creatureliness because it reminded me to consider how the intricate work of symbolisation, which Martel builds in metatextual layers, are inherently humanist. However, Pick's model inspired me to better explore the essential reciprocity between the animal / Holocaust metaphor within *Beatrice and Virgil*. This is because her model refutes the mode of reading the animal body through an anthropocentric prism, and as such might encourage authors of Holocaust literature and Animal Studies to engage with the creaturely bodies similar to us all. This not only constitutes an ethical turn because it attends to animals as real, vulnerable bodies as opposed to literary devices or the subjects of philosophical deflections on humanity; it also forms the basis of a cultural inquiry into representations of creaturely life – including our own – more widely, because it asks us to engage with the inhuman side to our humanity: the side which was exposed during the Holocaust, and that which we also share with other animals. It is for these reasons that I move forward using Pick's model of creatureliness to inform my thesis into reading Holocaust literature as a creaturely poetics.

### Chapter Three

#### 'The authority of the suffering body': Creatureliness in Two Novels by J. M. Coetzee

##### *Introduction*

This chapter offers creaturely readings of J. M. Coetzee's novels *Disgrace* and *Elizabeth Costello*. Although it is only in *Elizabeth Costello* that Coetzee directly compares animal cruelty to the Holocaust, his oeuvre fixates on creatureliness and draws upon atrocity, such as torture and Apartheid, to evoke a heightened understanding of vulnerability within his protagonists: from the Magistrate in *Waiting for the Barbarians* who empathises with the barbarians once he has been treated as one, to David Lurie in *Disgrace* who experiences a sort of secular grace working with the corpses of dogs only once he has been publically disgraced and then attacked in post-Apartheid South Africa. In both texts, the protagonists' empathy towards creatures is associated with their own fall into vulnerability from a position of relative power and safety. This is mirrored in *Elizabeth Costello* through the protagonist's age. Costello feels closer to animals the more she feels her body shutting down, growing tired and fragile, and this culminates in her controversial talk comparing the treatment of animals to the treatment of Jews in Nazi Germany.

However, in Anat Pick's discussion of creatureliness and the Holocaust, Pick not only considers animals and humans as sharing vulnerability, but as being intrinsically joined by it. Therefore, Coetzee's protagonists do not simply become closer to animals the more they fall into disgrace, but also become more aware of their humanity. Pick's first chapter, 'Humanity Unraveled, Humanity Regained', examines the 'unravelling of the human' during the

Holocaust, yet it is not contradictory to link that unravelling – that denouement of the human – with a greater understanding of what it is to be human.<sup>192</sup> As in the denouement of a novel, the plot becomes clearer as it unfolds. Indeed, David Lurie is not a fully reformed character by the end of *Disgrace* (for example, he still feels inappropriate sexual yearnings towards a young girl). His experiences have not enlightened him – they have not made him “more human” – but they have encouraged him to act more humanely towards fellow victims, including animals. This chapter considers how victimisation in Coetzee’s oeuvre lends itself to a creaturely reading, and how this creatureliness is mirrored in Holocaust literature such as – explicitly – *Elizabeth Costello* but also, through allusions and motifs, *Disgrace*.

Taking my cue from Anat Pick, whose *Creaturely Poetics* opens with a quotation by Simone Weil and draws on her throughout, I apply Weil’s writing on ‘Human Personality’ to Coetzee’s novels, especially *Disgrace*. In this essay, Weil considers what it is about ourselves which remains fundamentally sacred despite hardship and cruelty. She argues that those who experience great levels of inexplicable cruelty can become afflicted unless they turn their faces heavenward. In another example of her writing, taken from *Gravity and Grace*, she considers ideas of the self and how oneself must be given up to God in order to bear affliction. Inexplicable cruelty, affliction and a loss of identity are themes which can be applied to Holocaust Literature, but Weil might seem a strange choice to apply to an essay on creatureliness as she writes predominantly on humans and largely disregards animals. However, as Cora Diamond agrees in her essay on ‘Injustice and Animals’:

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<sup>192</sup> Pick, *Creaturely*, p.51.

Just as Weil's language responds to her sense of the life of human beings, and of the connection between that life and the Good, so the communicative pressure to extend talk of injustice to animals responds to a sense of their life, and a seeing of a connection between their lives and the Good. In both cases, the idea is that attention to these lives, seeing their connection with the Good, is capable of stopping us from treating them as props in our show.<sup>193</sup>

In this essay, Diamond argues that the lives of animals is an important issue when one considers ideas of justice and injustice, because giving animals loving attention means that one acts out of compassion rather than responding to a demand for rights. Simone Weil writes extensively on justice and injustice in comparison to rights in 'Human Personality', and Diamond argues that Weil's message can and should be applied to animals because 'those who most often have occasion to feel that evil is being done to them are those who are least trained in the art of speech'.<sup>194</sup> Just because animals cannot speak and therefore cannot demand their rights, they should not be treated 'as props in our show' but should become limit cases to our ideas on acting out of a sense of justice.

These ideas and themes are explored at length in Coetzee's oeuvre, but especially in *Disgrace* and *Elizabeth Costello*. In *Disgrace*, David Lurie loses his profession, honour and dignity, and becomes ever more vulnerable to the play of force in post-Apartheid South Africa. Eventually, he learns to bear affliction and live like a dog. Gradually, through this process of disgrace, he empathises with animals and learns to give them loving attention as vulnerable beings. In *Elizabeth Costello*, Coetzee's title character argues against having to

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<sup>193</sup> Cora Diamond, 'Injustice and Animals', *Slow Cures and Bad Philosophers: Essays on Wittgenstein, Medicine, and Bioethics*, ed. Carl Elliott (London: Duke University Press, 2001), p.136.

<sup>194</sup> Simone Weil, 'Human Personality', *Simone Weil: An Anthology*, ed. Siân Miles (London: Penguin, 2005), p.73.



make a case for animal rights and chooses instead to appeal to her audience's sympathetic imagination: to imagine oneself into the life of another creature and, as such, to sympathise with it and treat it with kindness. This level of sympathy and kindness can be interpreted as attention, a key subject on which Weil writes in her consideration of justice and injustice. Texts such as *Disgrace* and *Elizabeth Costello* are an important addition to studies on atrocities such as Apartheid or the Holocaust because they demand we turn our attention to vulnerable beings. Moreover, they explore the fact that giving our attention to afflicted beings is – although urgent – difficult and painful. I engage with this difficult reality as explored by Coetzee and, especially with regard to *Elizabeth Costello*, consider the role of literature in unravelling the paradox of a creaturely poetics: where creatureliness, or the reality of vulnerable, suffering bodies, is explored through the medium of fiction.

### *Creatureliness in Disgrace*

I

Set in post-Apartheid South Africa, *Disgrace* (1999) is a novel which draws upon a history of oppression against humans considered racially inferior and, in many senses, sub-human by white perpetrators.<sup>195</sup> Although Apartheid laws were passed under the premise that both black and white people would benefit from keeping within their racial group, it is clear that black people were given less rights than white people, little to no political recognition and access to inadequate public services. When the African National Congress brought an end to Apartheid in 1994, much work had to be done to unite a divided country.

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<sup>195</sup> J. M. Coetzee, *Disgrace* (London: Vintage, 2000). All subsequent textual references are to this edition.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission, or the TRC, was a political strategy which attempted to acknowledge past sufferings of the Apartheid, whilst promoting a future based on the concerns of forgiveness, social justice, and a movement toward equality. It offered complete amnesty for perpetrators if they told the truth about their crimes against humanity, but maintained that the perpetrators faced criminal prosecution if they refused to speak up. It also offered victims the chance to speak about how they had suffered under the Apartheid regime. The chairman of the TRC was Archbishop Desmond Tutu, whose book *No Future without Forgiveness* (also 1999) echoes the founding principles of the commission. How indeed could there be hope of forgiveness, or reconciliation, without victims hearing the truth and apologies from those who oppressed their families for decades?

Apartheid, like the Holocaust, was a regime which utilised dehumanisation as a method of persecution. It stands to reason that, as black people were given less human rights than white people, they were considered and indeed treated as subhuman. In a sense, the TRC was a strategy of re-humanising the oppressed black majority: its religious rhetoric attempted to make sense of the suffering which was endured, by asking victims to speak out and claim back dignity, compensation, and offer forgiveness in return. However, in *Creaturely Poetics*, Anat Pick draws upon Simone Weil to consider the difference between suffering as pain which makes sense and affliction as pain which does not. Moreover, Weil argues that affliction cannot be articulated. When read through a creaturely prism, these ideas challenge the foundations of the TRC as a method of moving forward through communication and reconciliation, towards re-humanising the afflicted in post-Apartheid South Africa:

*'affliction is something apart, specific, and irreducible. It is quite a different thing from simple suffering. It takes possession of the soul and marks it through and through with its own particular mark, the mark of slavery'.<sup>196</sup>*

*'Affliction is by its nature inarticulate. The afflicted silently beseech to be given words, but ill-chosen ones, because those who choose them know nothing of the affliction they would interpret'.<sup>197</sup>*

*'There is a natural alliance between truth and affliction, because both of them are mute suppliants, eternally condemned to stand speechless in our presence'.<sup>198</sup>*

Anat Pick writes that 'affliction is by far Weil's most suggestive contribution to the field of Holocaust studies' and I posit that this could be extended to include studies on atrocity more widely, including perpetration during the Apartheid.<sup>199</sup> In both cases, testimony is urgent yet both Holocaust and Apartheid testimonies are littered with lacunae where words cannot gesture towards the bare reality of the atrocities.

Taken from a testimony given at the TRC, a woman speaks out about the loss of a loved one: 'This inside me... fights my tongue. It destroys... words. Before he was blown up, they cut off his hands so he could not be fingerprinted... So how do I say this? – this trouble... I want his hands back'.<sup>200</sup> Marked by ellipses, her speech is helpless in the face of such a physical loss. She cannot put into words what these hands – 'mute suppliants'

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<sup>196</sup> Simone Weil, 'The Love of God and Affliction', *Waiting on God* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010), p.38.

<sup>197</sup> Simone Weil, 'Human Personality', *An Anthology*, p.85.

<sup>198</sup> Weil, 'Human Personality', *An Anthology*, p.88.

<sup>199</sup> Pick, *Creaturely Poetics*, p.30.

<sup>200</sup> Stanley Cohen, *States of Denial* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001), p.131.

marked with affliction – could testify. Furthermore, she faces the challenge of being able to fit a truthful and unique account of suffering into the conventions of a story. ‘People do not make up stories by themselves’, writes Arthur Frank, ‘storytellers have learned formal structures of narrative, conventional metaphors and imagery, and standards of what is and is not appropriate to tell.’<sup>201</sup> How can any victim keep a ‘formal structure’ when pain is, by its very nature, interruptive and uncontrolled? How can ‘conventional metaphors’ suffice? How can victims of Apartheid South Africa keep a ‘standard of what is and is not appropriate to tell’ when their treatment at the hands of much of the white community kept no moral ‘standard’ and fell unspeakably below the levels of what could be deemed ‘appropriate’? Indeed, ‘to locate these experiences in some familiar narrative, to ‘mediate’ or even normalize the atrocity’ is not suitable.<sup>202</sup> The act of fitting an account of suffering into the generic conventions of a story, so as the public can understand them, almost makes the abuse unexceptional. Primo Levi takes this further, writing, ‘perhaps what happened (The Holocaust) cannot be understood, because to understand is almost to justify’.<sup>203</sup> Affliction is senseless and, as a result, it is unjustifiable (‘to become affliction, suffering must cease to make sense, writes Pick).<sup>204</sup> In organising public hearings so as victims and perpetrators of abuse could share their stories, the TRC aimed to promote a future based on understanding, justice through amnesty and forgiveness, and perhaps even grace. However, moving forward was never going to be easy when the real victims – those who died due to the

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<sup>201</sup> Arthur W. Frank, *The Wounded Storyteller: Body, Illness and Ethics* (London: University of Chicago Press, 1997), p.3.

<sup>202</sup> Cohen, *States of Denial*, p.131.

<sup>203</sup> Primo Levi, *Memory and Mastery*, ed. Roberta S. Kremer (New York: State University of New York Press, 2001), p.141

<sup>204</sup> Pick, *Creaturely Poetics*, p.31.

Apartheid regime – are absent; when stories cannot give form to the silence of the absence of bodies.

It is affliction and the creatureliness of bodies which I explore in *Disgrace*, by analysing how Coetzee's novel tropes: spiritual and bodily ramifications of the TRC, and response and responsibility towards animal bodies. Both human and animal bodies are presented as creaturely in *Disgrace*, through vulnerability, affliction, and subsequently through inarticulacy ('affliction is by its nature inarticulate') and impersonality.

Impersonality is explored by Weil in her essay 'Human Personality': the same essay in which she sets out the limits of affliction. Defined by Weil, 'everything which is impersonal in man is sacred, and nothing else'.<sup>205</sup> The impersonal includes notions of the 'good': beauty, truth and justice; but never art, science and rights, respectively. Similar to the concept of Platonic ideals, art, science and rights can only ever aspire towards the higher forms of beauty, truth and justice, and this is why they can never be considered sacred. Weil links this to the idea of affliction by stipulating that the most impersonal (and therefore sacred) characteristic in every human being is the expectation 'that good and not evil will be done to him'.<sup>206</sup> If this is defied by unjust persecution, the place in one's heart or soul which nursed this expectation will cry out, causing great suffering. Weil continues:

In those who have suffered too many blows, in slaves for example, that place in the heart from which the infliction of evil evokes a cry of surprise may seem to be dead. But it is never quite dead; it is simply unable to cry out any more. It has sunk into a state of dumb and ceaseless lamentation.<sup>207</sup>

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<sup>205</sup> Weil, 'Human Personality', *An Anthology*, p.74.

<sup>206</sup> Weil, 'Human Personality', *An Anthology*, p.71.

<sup>207</sup> Weil, 'Human Personality', *An Anthology*, p.72.

It is these people who have been unjustly persecuted so often as to turn away from the sacred expectation that good and not evil will be done to them that we might consider to be afflicted. These people might include the *Musselmanner* who permeate Holocaust testimonies, who no longer resist their unjust suffering; those who cannot move forward in a spirit of reconciliation from the suffering they experienced during Apartheid; and – I argue – David Lurie by the end of *Disgrace*.

Moreover, although Weil explicitly focuses on ‘*Human Personality*’ (my emphasis added), Pick locates affliction in animals too, citing Weil who writes that ‘those who most often have occasion to feel that evil is being done to them are those who are least trained in the art of speech’.<sup>208</sup> In *Disgrace* animals are abused because no sense of justice is afforded them, so dogs are killed simply for being alive, and a goat is kept alive despite its agony simply for being the property of its human owner (*D*, 83). Yet, Lurie offers an example for how an animal can also understand, on the same basic level as a human, just and unjust suffering: ‘One can punish a dog [...] for an offence like chewing a slipper. A dog will accept the justice of that: a beating for a chewing [but] no animal will accept the justice of being punished for following its instincts’ (*D*, 90). Therefore, I shall apply Weil’s understanding of affliction to all creatures whereby, recalling Pick, ‘the creature [...] is first and foremost a living body – material, temporal, and vulnerable’.<sup>209</sup> As well as offering one important, albeit indirect, comparison between animal suffering and the Holocaust (which I explore in further detail, below), a creaturely reading of *Disgrace* sets the tone for this chapter on Holocaust

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<sup>208</sup> Weil, ‘Human Personality’, *An Anthology*, p.73.

<sup>209</sup> Pick, *Creaturely Poetics*, p.5.

metaphors in *Animal Studies* because it is the novel in which Coetzee best explores human and animal relations against a backdrop of atrocity and mutual affliction.

## II

*Disgrace* follows David Lurie, 'professor of communications' (*D*, 3) at a University in Cape Town. White, fifty-two years old and twice divorced, he has a rash affair with one of his students, Melanie, renamed by Lurie as 'the dark one' (*D*, 18), in which, at least once, his sexual advances borders on rape. The news gets out and he is summoned under an article which deals with 'victimization or harassment on grounds of race, ethnic group, religion, gender, sexual preference, or physical disability' (*D*, 39). He is called to a hearing, chaired by the Professor of Religious Studies (*D*, 47), where a committee attempts to drag from him not a legal plea of guilt, but rather a public confession or statement of his wrongdoing. One member, Desmond Swarts, is particularly pressing on this point (*D*, 51-54). Lurie's answers do not please the committee and he is asked to resign from his profession. Lurie leaves Cape Town and stays with his daughter, Lucy, in the countryside, where he agrees to help out on the land and in an animal welfare clinic. Before too long, Lurie and Lucy are attacked by a gang of black men. Lurie is set alight and locked in the bathroom while his daughter is raped and her dogs shot. Lucy refuses to tell the police of the sexual assault, despite her father's protests. She is left pregnant. As Lucy's black neighbours gain more power, her father feels stripped of his social standing. He becomes tied to the animal welfare clinic, helping to put down stray dogs and dispose of their corpses. He becomes the dog-man. The novel closes as Lurie puts down a dog which he has grown, perhaps, to love.

Immediately, one can find many allusions to the TRC, not least in Lurie's hearing where the chairman as Professor of Religious Studies can be seen as a parallel to Archbishop Desmond Tutu. One member of the committee, Desmond Swartz, shares the Archbishop's Christian name and, spoken aloud, his surname means 'black', reminding readers of a black/white dichotomy of which Lurie finds himself a part. The article under which Lurie is summoned deals with victimising others of a different sex or race, and although Lurie's deed falls more heavily under a victimisation due to sex, the fact that Melanie is darker skinned does not go unnoticed by the committee, who remind Lurie of the case's 'overtones' in such a time, and 'the long history of exploitation' which precedes him (*D*, 50, 53).

Excepting these specific details, a larger issue ties Lurie's case to the TRC, concerning the question of how he should be judged. The TRC was formed as a compromise to many parties' more extreme post-Apartheid wishes. The rising African National Congress would probably have preferred a Nuremburg type trial, whilst the ruling National Party would have preferred total amnesty for fear of retribution after their 46 year reign of racist oppression.<sup>210</sup> Archbishop Tutu's approach seemed to combine the two, offering amnesty for those who wished to humble themselves for forgiveness, their public confessions a contentious fusion of the sacred and the secular. In a situation where every slave-owner was in the wrong, pleading guilty or not guilty was not the problem: the question was of remorse. Ultimately, the aim was to move forward in a spirit of forgiveness, both from the victims of Apartheid and from God.

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<sup>210</sup> Thabo Mbeki, Nelson Mandela's deputy at the time of this speech, said in 1997 that 'within the ANC the cry was "to catch the bastards and hang them"'. Sourced by Jonathan D Tepperman, 'Truth and Consequences', *Foreign Affairs*, 81:2 (March-April 2002), p.133.



In *Disgrace*, Coetzee shows how these concerns do not easily unite; rather than the secular and sacred working together, Lurie's hearing seems to pull in two opposing directions. The committee at once advises Lurie to seek the help of a lawyer and a priest (*D*, 49). They do not accept his plea of guilt, but rather want an admission of wrongdoing which Lurie refuses to give because it would be 'beyond the scope of the law' (*D*, 55). At the same time, they only accept his challenge to the makeup of the committee in a legal sense, and wish not to concern themselves with what Lurie calls his 'philosophical reservations' (*D*, 47). Most strikingly, they want him to make a statement of contrition (where 'contrition' has decidedly Catholic connotations) by which they hope, from the words he uses, to 'divine whether it comes from [his] heart' (*D*, 54). The use of 'divine' is, of course, ironic. It is impossible for a human to 'divine' such a thing. This is in accordance with Anthony Holiday's critique of the TRC, as he too argues that its Christian and judicial elements were contradictory.<sup>211</sup> The essence of confession lies in the confession booth, or in the prayer. As such, supposing that one can identify the spirit of repentance is almost hubristic. As Lurie reasons:

I appeared before an officially constituted tribunal, before a branch of the law. Before that secular tribunal I pleaded guilty, a secular plea. That plea should suffice. Repentance is neither here nor there. Repentance belongs to another world, to another universe of discourse (*D*, 58).

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<sup>211</sup> Anthony Holiday, 'Forgiving and Forgetting: The Truth and Reconciliation Commission', in *Negotiating the Past: The Making of Memory in South Africa*, ed. Sarah Nuttall and Carli Coetzee, pp. 43-56.

There can be little doubt that Lurie has done something wrong by sleeping with his student, but although he acknowledges his guilt in a legal sense, he does not confess a personal sense of guilt. Indeed, if it is personal, it cannot be publically confessed. If a public confession is called for, there can be no guarantee that the statement is from the heart.

However, Anat Pick argues that ‘articulating the encounter between these two incommensurable levels [the material world and the sacred] is the defining gesture of a creaturely poetics’ (*CP*, 186). Therefore, ostensibly Coetzee highlights Lurie’s contempt for religion in what the character believes should be secular proceedings, in order to encourage a creaturely reading of *Disgrace*. Although the gravity of his crimes are indisputably greater than Lurie’s, for the sake of a creaturely reading it is interesting to compare Adolf Eichmann’s trial for crimes against humanity with the character’s tribunal. In her report on the trial, Hannah Arendt writes that Eichmann:

stood accused on fifteen counts: “together with others” he had committed crimes against the Jewish people, crimes against humanity, and war crimes during the whole period of the Nazi regime and especially during the period of the Second World War. The Nazis and Nazi Collaborators (Punishment) Law of 1950, under which he was tried, provides that “a person who has committed one of these ... offenses ... is liable to the death penalty.” To each count Eichmann pleaded: “Not guilty in the sense of the indictment.”

In what sense then did he think he was guilty? [...] His lawyer, Robert Servatius of Cologne, [...] answered the question in a press interview: “Eichmann feels guilty before God, not before the law”.<sup>212</sup>

Both Lurie and Eichmann do not recognise religion’s place in a court of law. However, contrary to Lurie, Servatius insists that Eichmann feels guilty in a sacred sense rather than in a judicial one. Both admit that they are guilty before one or the other, but neither understands that there is a significant encounter between the sacred and the secular in their trials. Both Eichmann’s defense and Lurie defy their prosecutors on grounds including rights and art, respectively: ‘under the then existing Nazi legal system he [Eichmann] had not done anything wrong’; Romantic Professor Lurie defends himself on the grounds that he ‘became a servant of Eros’ (*D*, 52).<sup>213</sup> Both rights and art can only gesture towards what Weil deems the ‘impersonal’, as outlined above: justice and truth. Weil writes that one of the results of holding such faculties as art, science and rights above God, truth and justice ‘is summed up in Blake’s horrible saying: ‘Sooner murder an infant in its cradle than nurse unacted desires’’: a quotation which Lurie himself uses in support of his actions against Melanie, in the first half of *Disgrace* (*D*, 69).<sup>214</sup>

To best outline this discrepancy between rights and justice, Pick once more draws upon Weil to conclude that ‘since rights [...] are a euphemism for power, they can only yield victor’s justice’ (*CP*, 43). Accordingly, Servatius admits that Eichmann had committed acts “for which you are decorated if you win and go to the gallows if you lose”.<sup>215</sup> This ‘victor’s

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<sup>212</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (London: Penguin Books, 2006), p.21.

<sup>213</sup> Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, p.21.

<sup>214</sup> Weil, ‘Human Personality’, *An Anthology*, pp.74-75.

<sup>215</sup> Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, p.22.

justice', secular and mechanistic, contrasts to impersonal justice, which is sacred if not godly. Impersonal justice is based on the concept of obligations above rights. In 'The Needs of the Soul' – the first section of the longer work *The Need for Roots* – Simone Weil writes that:

a man left alone in the universe would have no rights whatsoever, but he would have obligations. [...] Rights are always found to be related to certain conditions. Obligations alone remain independent of conditions. They belong to a realm situated above all conditions, because it is situated above this world.<sup>216</sup>

Eichmann was obligated not to commit crimes against humanity even if he acted in accordance with his rights; Lurie is obligated to repent even if he does not believe in the conditions set out by his tribunal. Acting in accordance with one's rights may mean that you can avoid punishment, but acting in accordance with one's obligations means that – whether or not you are rewarded or punished for doing so – you have acted with an impersonal sense of justice.

One of the 'conditions' which accompanies rights is force. To recall Pick's quotation: 'rights are a euphemism for power'. Two further quotations by Pick and Weil, respectively, elucidate how this applies to Eichmann and Lurie:

'When, in the sway of force, one meets with weak or no resistance, it is easy to forget one's own essential vulnerability' (*CP*, 46).

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<sup>216</sup> Simone Weil, 'The Needs of the Soul', *An Anthology*, pp.106-107.

“when someone does not have the capacity to refuse, one is not going to look for a way of obtaining his consent” is not just Machiavellian but describes precisely the workings of interspecies justice (*CP*, 43).

Arendt writes that Eichmann ‘would have killed his own father if he had received an order to that effect’.<sup>217</sup> He was a weak-willed man who played a key role in genocide in order to gain power and, more significantly, because those with more power than him told him to do so. In Lurie’s case, the interplay of power and vulnerability is just as interesting. His crime against Melanie is never defined as rape, but it is clear that Lurie exerted force over a young woman who did not refuse, though clearly wished to. Whether or not this act would stand up in a court as rape, Lurie had an obligation not to commit it:

She does not resist. All she does is avert herself: avert her lips, avert her eyes. She lets him lay her out on the bed and undress her: she even helps him, raising her arms and then her hips. Little shivers of cold run through her; as soon as she is bare, she slips under the quilted counterpane like a mole burrowing, and turns her back on him.

Not rape, not quite that, but undesired nevertheless, undesired to the core. As though she had decided to go slack, die within herself for the duration, like a rabbit when the jaws of the fox close on its neck. So that everything done to her might be done, as it were, far away (*D*, 25).

Explicitly, Lurie narrates that he was met ‘with no resistance’ and so he has sex with her, forgetting that acting upon the force of his desire – as ‘a servant of Eros’ – leaves them both

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<sup>217</sup> Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, p.22.

vulnerable. Perhaps Melanie has the capacity to refuse but, whether it is because Lurie is her professor or for any number of other 'conditions', she feels unable to do so. Instead, she goes slack and lets Lurie exert his power over her. It is most telling that he compares her to animals: a mole, and then a rabbit at the mercy of a fox; later, to a bird (*D*, 32, 34). Even Melanie's averted gaze recalls Rainer Maria Rilke's eighth *Duino Elegy*: the poem which opens Eric Santner's study *On Creaturely Life*:

With all its eyes the natural world [*die Kreatur*] looks out

into the Open.

[...]

Or someone dies and *is* it.

For, nearing death, one doesn't see death; but stares

beyond perhaps with an animal's vast gaze.<sup>218</sup>

This open gaze, mirrored in Melanie's averted eyes and mental distance from her body, evokes the creature: sensory, vulnerable. These creatures are unable to refuse the power exerted on them by predators, such as humans, because they do not have voices. This is the sense of 'interspecies justice' of which Pick writes. Unlike impersonal justice, it relies on the condition that one may exert his force over another, simply because he can.

It is with something closer to a sense of impersonal justice that Lurie goes to visit Melanie's father towards the end of *Disgrace*. As a religious man, Mr Isaacs invites Lurie to

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<sup>218</sup> Rainer Maria Rilke, *Duino Elegies & The Sonnets to Orpheus*, trans. and ed. Stephen Mitchell (New York: Vintage Books, 2009), p.49.

his home in order to 'break bread' with his family (*D*, 167). After the dinner, and despite the clear discomfort of his wife and youngest daughter, Mr Isaacs encourages Lurie to speak further about his affair with Melanie, and eventually receives the apology for which he had been waiting (*D*, 171). Mr Isaacs pushes Lurie to ask himself what God wants from him, and Lurie replies:

As for God, I am not a believer, so I will have to translate what you call God and God's wishes into my own terms. In my own terms, I am being punished for what happened between myself and your daughter. I am sunk into a state of disgrace from which it will not be easy to lift myself. It is not a punishment I have refused. I do not murmur against it. On the contrary, I am living it out from day to day, trying to accept disgrace as my state of being (*D*, 172).

Despite Lurie's previously condescending attitude towards the comingling of the religious and the secular in his tribunal, here he speaks of godlessness in sacred terms: punishment and the acceptance of disgrace. He is 'articulating the encounter between these two incommensurable levels' (the material world and the sacred), in what Pick agrees 'is the defining gesture of a creaturely poetics' (*CP*, 186). Lurie acknowledges that his behaviour towards Melanie was sacrilegious and therefore deserving of punishment, even though he has no belief in God. Indeed, his disbelief in God is what makes his gesture so creaturely: he acts not in order to save his soul, but rather because he has come to believe that the body itself is sacred; that in using force against Melanie's vulnerable body, he acted disgracefully. Moreover, the force of his desire made him aware of his own vulnerability: a vulnerability which resurfaces when he sees and desires her younger sister. Indeed, after speaking to Mr Isaacs, Lurie prostrates himself in front of Mrs Isaacs and the schoolgirl:

With careful ceremony he gets to his knees and touches his forehead to the floor.

Is that enough? he thinks. Will that do? If not, what more? [...]

He meets the mother's eyes, then the daughter's, and again the current leaps, the current of desire (*D*, 173).

Weil's idea that 'to define force – it is that *x* that turns anybody who is subjected to it into a *thing*' is most appropriate in Lurie's case.<sup>219</sup> He is no reformed soul – he still yearns to take control of this young woman – but he hands power over to the women even as he seeks to force himself upon the most vulnerable of them. By supplicating himself, he acknowledges his vulnerability – his *thingliness* – despite (or perhaps because of) the force which compels his desire. In this sense, he remains constantly attuned to his own vulnerability and therefore respects the vulnerability of others. In other words, he relinquishes power in the moment that he feels forced (that forcefield around 'the current of desire') to exert it.

### III

Many factors have contributed to Lurie's respect for the vulnerable body, including the attack on Lucy's farm when he was powerless to help his daughter, as he was set alight and locked in a toilet. However, a true sense of impersonal justice is not when one is unable to exert his power on vulnerable bodies but rather when one is able and chooses not to do so. Weil discusses this in her essay on *The Iliad*, in which she describes the epic as 'the poem

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<sup>219</sup> Weil, 'The *Iliad* or The Poem of Force', *An Anthology*, p.183.



of force'. In it, she considers the force that men use over other men and, inescapably, the same force which bears upon them. The old saying 'he that takes the sword, will perish by the sword' is rarely more apt than in the *Iliad*, where force lays everyone bare.<sup>220</sup> In her analysis of Weil's essay, Pick notes that:

Justice is possible only in the form of a disturbance to the crushing impulses of power. This disturbance consists in the recognition of the reality of vulnerability and its relation to the sacred – a religious recognition. It alone can deliver justice or liberty that are not a mere reshuffling of power (*CP*, 46).

Here, Pick argues that it is in moments of reflection – reflection upon the fact that power is a double-edged-sword which at once turns others and yourself into a vulnerable body – that one can act with a sense of justice. This is why Lurie acts justly when he prostrates himself before Desiree: he reflects upon his desire for her but chooses instead to give up his power. For similar reasons, this is why Lurie acts justly when he takes care of the animals at Bev Shaw's clinic. Even when force has turned live dogs into things (they have become corpses), Lurie acts out of a sense of obligation and tends to these powerless bodies.

The process by which Lurie and Bev Shaw euthanize the dogs is creaturely, even though it exerts force over them. This is because they act out of love, which once more suggests that they treat these vulnerable bodies in a sacred manner, despite Lurie not believing in God:

Sunday has come again. He and Bev Shaw are engaged in one of their sessions of *Lösung*. One by one he brings in the cats, then the dogs: the old, the blind, the

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<sup>220</sup> Weil, 'The Iliad', *An Anthology* p.193.

halt, the crippled, the maimed, but also the young, the sound – all those whose term has come. One by one Bev touches them, speaks to them, comforts them, and puts them away, then stands back and watches while he seals up the remains in a black plastic shroud.

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*, 218-219).

Christian connotation saturates the text: the sessions are held on the Lord's day; the litany of animals brought in reads like a pantheon of suffering people waiting to be blessed by Christ; indeed, Bev Shaw 'touches them' one by one in a manner which seems as though she is looking to heal rather than to put to rest; the disposal bags are dignified with the term 'shroud'. The imagery does not stop with the dogs: there is a stoic and suffering goat which is evocative of the scapegoat (*D*, 82-83); Lurie wants to 'ask for forgiveness' after eating the flesh of Petrus' sheep, though he never specifies from whom (*D*, 131); elsewhere, Lurie describes Bev Shaw as 'not a veterinarian but a priestess' (*D*, 84). Therefore, it is no great leap to compare this above scene with Simone Weil's description of how only God's love can soothe afflicted souls:

Only by the supernatural working of grace can a soul pass through its own annihilation to the place where alone it can get the sort of attention which can attend to truth and to affliction. It is the same attention which listens to both of

them. The name of this intense, pure, disinterested, gratuitous, generous attention is love.<sup>221</sup>

The parallels between these two descriptions are evident: from the fact that both Coetzee and Weil redefine this level of complete attention as love, to the similar states of grace which Weil stipulates and Coetzee tropes through his novel's title and religious imagery. Yet, no religious allegory is told through this scene, which comes in the final chapter of a novel depicting brutal reality: sex abuse, shootings, post-Apartheid struggle despite the best intentions of the TRC, and a main character who explicitly does not believe in God.

Anat Pick writes similarly about religious imagery in the film *Au hasard Balthazar*, directed by Robert Bresson, in which the camera follows the life of a donkey who is exposed to trials and tribulations throughout his life. Pick argues that, despite religious imagery, Bresson is not directing an anthropocentric film which turns the suffering of a donkey into a lesson for mankind, but rather that he wishes to focus on a creature, its vulnerability and its suffering:

It [...] seems to me mistaken to regard *Au hasard Balthazar* as a religious allegory, with the donkey as the innocent Christ figure. Although the film contains much allegorical paraphernalia, Balthazar does not stand in for anything or anyone. He is quite literally the embodiment of creaturely suffering. A process of interpretation that replaces the donkey with the idea of a suffering humanity (or with Christ who suffers *for* humanity) with a view to a redemptive meaning of the animal's death at the end of the film does not do justice to

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<sup>221</sup> Weil, 'Human Personality', *An Anthology*, pp.91-92.

Bresson's insistence on blind necessity and chance as the world's operative modes, nor to the bleakness with which he views humanity (*CP*, 190).

As in *Disgrace*, *Au hasard Balthazar* simultaneously invites and resists allegorising. The donkey may seem to be a suffering Christ figure, but there is no trace of redemption at the end of the film: the final shot of the film shows Balthazar dead, just as the final line in *Disgrace* is Lurie giving up his favourite dog to Bev Shaw's clinic; a dog which Lurie 'bear[s] in his arms like a lamb', evoking Christ. Yet, biblically, this scene would be followed by one of resurrection, where here there is none. Instead, as in *Balthazar*, an animal is given up out of 'blind necessity': there are 'too many' of them, so they must be culled (*D*, 85). The typically forceful act of killing is carried out with love, so that it seems as though it is nature and its 'operative modes', rather than the two characters, which forces these creatures to term. Anat Pick considers how Weil's writings on Marxism might be considered creaturely, and her summary is most applicable to these two, final scenes:

Both power and justice are conceived nonanthropocentrically. Humanity's susceptibility to the inhumanities of force (gravity) and to the good (grace) has little to do with the faculties of reason or language. The material and the supernatural meet for Weil in the reality of vulnerable bodies whose oppression is not a crime against humanity but a violation of the sacred (*CP*, 48).

Here, 'gravity' and 'grace' denote the interplay between the sacred and the material. Pick argues that justice, as outlined above, is in relation to the impersonal part of ourselves. Acting justly, or in a good manner, means that one must reflect on our ability to exert force

on others not anthropocentrically, but rather with an appreciation of the sacred in material bodies. Therefore, Balthazar's abuse or the rapists shooting dogs in *Disgrace* should not be reconceived as an allegory for crimes against humanity, but it should be recognised as creaturely suffering and subsequently as a violation of the sacred'. Lurie and Bev Shaw act impersonally nonetheless because they are forced to kill these dogs, and choose to do so in a manner which respects the sanctity of their bodies – hence the religious imagery.

Although allegorising this suffering to fit with crimes against humanity counteracts a creaturely reading of *Disgrace*, Coetzee certainly allows both to be considered within his novel. For example, Lurie uses the term '*Lösung*' to describe the euthanasia killings of these animals. Previously, he defined this as 'sublimation' (*D*, 142) but a more apt translation would be 'solution': a term which is highly evocative of the Final Solution of Nazi Germany. Moreover, after the killings, Lurie takes the dogs' corpses to be incinerated, which further invites comparison to the Holocaust. The religious imagery during the killings, followed by a religious reference to the incinerator ('On the seventh day it rests' (*D*, 145)), seems to confound any direct comparison to the atrocity, but when one considers the religious gravity given to the term 'holocaust' this does not seem so strange. As Bruno Bettelheim highlights, 'the correct definition of "holocaust" is "burnt offering"'.<sup>222</sup> Undoubtedly, Coetzee recalls the Holocaust in *Disgrace*, albeit to a far less explicit extent than in *Elizabeth Costello* when parallels between animal cruelty and the Holocaust are explored at length. Not only does the term *Lösung* recall the genocide, but religious imagery fits with the original use of the word 'holocaust' for burnt offering, and the fire motif within *Disgrace*

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<sup>222</sup> Bruno Bettelheim, 'The Holocaust: One Generation Later', *Surviving and Other Essays* (New York: Vintage Press, 1980), p.92.

further fits with this term. For example, Lurie repeats 'burned, burnt' and once 'burnt up' three times within the novel: with Lucy, whilst reminiscing on teaching; after he has been set alight in the toilet; and finally when apologising for his affair to Mr Isaacs (*D*, 71, 97, 166). Bettelheim goes on to denounce the term as that which refers to the genocide of the Jews because 'using a word with such strong unconscious religious connotations when speaking of the murder of millions of Jews robs the victims of this abominable mass murder of the only thing left to them: their uniqueness'. Coetzee evokes the Holocaust to consider killing dogs in post-Apartheid South Africa, before which Lurie: was fired from his profession for sexual misconduct, was attacked, his daughter was raped and her dogs were cruelly shot. However, in doing so I do not believe that Coetzee is compromising the uniqueness of the Holocaust, nor any one of these events. Instead, Coetzee brings together the Holocaust, the Apartheid, animal cruelty and all of these other individual atrocities in order to consider the vulnerability of bodies shared by all creatures.

Coetzee couples this vulnerability with godlessness, leading to a novel about affliction. This is foregrounded by the title, *Disgrace*, where 'dis-' implies a turning-away-from, or simply an apartness. Therefore, 'disgrace' is literally the state of being apart from God. In 'Love of God', Simone Weil considers how important it is to remain facing God despite life's hardships: 'a blind mechanism, heedless of degrees of spiritual perfection, continually tosses men about and throws some of them at the very foot of the Cross. It rests with them to keep or not to keep their eyes turned toward God through all the jolting'.<sup>223</sup> She argues that those who are afflicted have turned their gaze away from God. In an

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<sup>223</sup> Simone Weil, 'The Love of God and Affliction', p.41. Quoted in Pick, *Creaturely Poetics*, p.32.

interview with Derek Attridge, Coetzee uses a similar metaphor to consider intimations of freedom as Weil uses to consider faith in God: 'I am someone who has intimations of freedom (as every chained prisoner has) and constructs representations – which are shadows themselves – of people slipping their chains and turning their faces to the light'.<sup>224</sup> Coetzee writes this shortly after considering duty as 'transcendental imperative', and an awareness of justice as something which 'transcends laws and law making'.<sup>225</sup> Similarities between this and Weil's work on obligation and justice are evident. Both consider absence as a force on humanity, though Weil understands God's presence as being contained within that absence, and Coetzee understands that it is a person's intimations toward freedom and justice that transcend these concepts' worldly absence. Moreover, Coetzee acknowledges that his novels are 'shadows themselves' of these intimations towards a higher force, meaning that they are at a further remove from truth: an idea he explores through the motif of the suffering body as that which cannot be represented in words.

It is this suffering, vulnerable body which unites humans and animals in Coetzee's novel (and oeuvre) where Weil considers only humanity. Lurie, Lucy, Melanie, along with countless animals, are subject to force within *Disgrace*. They all suffer bodily abuse at the hands of others. The Isaacs family, with their belief in God, and the TRC style proceedings through which Lurie is expected to pass, posit *Disgrace* as a humanist text in which the vulnerable suffer but maintain a sense of impersonal justice. In line with Weil's writing on God, justice and affliction, those characters are not afflicted because they remain transfixed by God 'through all the jolting'. However, Coetzee's godless characters: Lurie, Lucy and the

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<sup>224</sup> J. M. Coetzee, in J. M. Coetzee and David Attwell, *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews*, ed. David Attwell (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), p.341.

<sup>225</sup> Coetzee, *Doubling*, pp.340-341.

animals, are afflicted. They are truly 'creaturely' as their vulnerable bodies are in no way martyred in the name of a higher justice or truth. Nonetheless, Coetzee recognises something sacred in these characters: they accept affliction as a part of their lives, and they live according to it. This is shown nowhere better than when Lucy, pregnant after being raped, tells Lurie that she will give everything up in order to remain on the farm:

'Go to Petrus and tell him what I have said. Tell him I give up the land. Tell him that he can have it, title deed and all. He will love that.'

There is a pause between them.

'How humiliating,' he says finally. 'Such high hopes, and to end like this.'

'Yes, I agree, it is humiliating. But perhaps that is a good point to start from again. Perhaps that is what I must learn to accept. To start at ground level. With nothing. Not with nothing but. With nothing. No cards, no weapons, no property, no rights, no dignity.'

'Like a dog'

'Yes, like a dog.' (*D*, 205).

Lucy also accepts that she will become Petrus' property as his wife, simply in order to remain. Without giving up her farm and her name – even her baby – to Petrus, she knows that she will be driven out. As she and Lurie were attacked before, she would be attacked again, and she would be powerless to stop it. This is why she gives everything up. The similarities between this extract and Weil's writing on affliction are striking:



'Human thought is unable to acknowledge the reality of affliction. To acknowledge the reality of affliction means saying to oneself: 'I may lose at any moment, through the play of circumstances over which I have no control, anything whatsoever that I possess, including those things which are so intimately mine that I consider them as being myself. There is nothing that I might not lose. It could happen at any moment that what I am might be abolished and replaced by anything whatsoever of the filthiest and most contemptible sort.

To be aware of this in the depth of one's soul is to experience non-being. It is the state of extreme and total humiliation which is also the condition for passing over into truth'.<sup>226</sup>

Both Lurie and Weil highlight the humiliation which accompanies affliction; both suggest that those who are afflicted lose everything; the only difference is that where Weil writes that it is impossible for humans to acknowledge their affliction, Lucy accepts that her loss and humiliation is a part of her new life in South Africa. Lurie cannot accept this and, in the following chapter, he attacks one of Lucy's rapists after seeing the boy spy on his daughter. Lucy admonishes this attack and Lurie leaves with the final thought that 'Lucy may be able to bend to the tempest; he cannot, not with honour' (*D*, 209). It is this sense of honour which he retains and Lucy does not which drives him from the farm. At this point, Lurie is not ready to give everything up as Lucy does in order to 'pass over into truth' – which may be, in this case – accepting a new way of living.

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<sup>226</sup> Weil, 'Human Personality', *Anthology*, pp.90-91.

Perhaps this is why Lurie's last words in *Disgrace* are, with regard to the dog, 'I am giving him up'. Like Lucy, he learns that he must start again with nothing. Whether this passing over into truth is a sense of self-knowledge (Lurie must adapt to fit with a changing South Africa) or whether it is a natural sense of justice after the crimes of Apartheid (Lurie asks his daughter whether she keeps her baby in order to 'expiate the crimes of the past') is left ambiguous (*D*, 112). However, it is clear that they must both give up in order to continue living in post-Apartheid South Africa. Indeed, the next and final time Lurie sees Lucy in *Disgrace* she is 'the picture of health', in a peaceful scene of what Lurie considers recognisable 'beauty' (*D*, 218). Weil follows the above passage by considering how 'the spirit of truth and justice' are what allows complete, gratuitous attention and love to blossom, and this blossoming is that which is most purely beautiful: 'everything produced by a man in every sphere, when he is ruled by the spirit of justice and truth, is endowed with the radiance of beauty'.<sup>227</sup> She continues: beauty 'feeds only the part of the soul that gazes. While exciting desire, it makes clear that there is nothing in it to be desired, because the one thing we want is that it should not change'.<sup>228</sup> The scene in which Lurie describes Lucy amongst the flowerbeds is idyllic. He gazes at her, not wanting to break the 'spell' (*D*, 218). Aware of the sense that she is 'solid in her existence', Lurie describes his daughter as '*das ewig Weibliche*': the eternal woman, which echoes Weil's description of the beauty of truth and justice as being unchanging (*D*, 217-218).

Weil writes on subjects such as truth and justice through a humanist prism, but Coetzee explores these subjects with the knowledge that, in Pick's words, 'being human is

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<sup>227</sup> Weil, 'Human Personality', *Anthology*, p.92.

<sup>228</sup> Weil, 'Human Personality', *Anthology*, p.92.

grappling with what is inhuman in us'.<sup>229</sup> This is why Pick's understanding of creatureliness is more suited to *Disgrace* than Eric Santner's which is, loosely speaking:

a dimension not so much of a biological as of *ontological vulnerability*, a vulnerability that permeates human being as that being whose essence it is to exist in forms of life that are, in turn, contingent, fragile, susceptible to breakdown.<sup>230</sup>

Here, Santner argues that humanity is fundamentally implicated in the knowledge that we are creaturely beings. However, Pick turns this on its head: she argues that – in the wake of the Holocaust – 'the notion of crimes against humanity is the juridical trace of the coming to consciousness of humanity's *mortality*'.<sup>231</sup> In *Disgrace*, to bear affliction, one must accept the unravelling of humanity: like Lucy, one must give up what makes us human in order to bear affliction and live 'like a dog'. The only distinction between Lucy and a dog is not ontological; it is biological. In fact, in the peaceful tableaux with Lucy, she is joined by – or perhaps paired with – her bulldog: 'a patch of fawn on the path beside her' (*D*, 217). This, Lucy seems to be suggesting, is the only way to move forward after crimes against humanity (the Holocaust but also, in *Disgrace*, Apartheid and the constant threat of rape). To live through affliction is the condition in which she can pass 'over into truth', where truth is not contingent with God (as in Weil) but rather with a secular sense of eternity, undeterred by and accepting of her bodily vulnerability.

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<sup>229</sup> Pick, *Creaturely*, p.6.

<sup>230</sup> Eric L. Santner, *The Royal Remains: The People's Two Bodies and the Endgames of Sovereignty* (London: University of Chicago Press, 2011), p.6.

<sup>231</sup> Pick, *Creaturely*, p.37.

Therefore, creatureliness is explored in *Disgrace* through sacred attitudes towards the secular and an acceptance of affliction. Lurie, who once justified his actions by Blake's dictum 'to nurse unacted desires' later falls victim to the force of circumstances outside of his control and, afflicted, supplicates himself before the family of his victim, all the while nursing unacted desires towards Desiree. In accordance with Pick's definition of affliction as suffering which ceases to make sense, Lurie becomes the 'dogman' and saves 'the honour of corpses because there is no one else stupid enough to do it' (*D*, 146).<sup>232</sup> He attends to afflicted creatures by putting them down with complete attention and love. Finally, the creaturely body is epitomised by Lucy handing over everything which defines her to Petrus, in an act which allows her to survive and indeed blossom in post-Apartheid South Africa.

To explore creatureliness through an amalgamation of the sacred and the secular, and an acceptance of affliction, is to mirror the acts of the TRC, whose attitude was one of repentance, justice and working up from a state of base affliction through perpetrators recognising their crimes against humanity and victims issuing their forgiveness. Coetzee recognises that *Disgrace*, as a novel, cannot ever fully convey affliction because words cannot ever express the inarticulacy of the suffering body: The standard is the body. Whatever else, the body is not "that which is not" and the proof that it is the pain that it feels.<sup>233</sup> Coetzee defines stories 'by their irresponsibility: they are "that which is not"'.<sup>234</sup> By stating that 'the body is not "that which is not"', he suggests the body's adverse is the story. Therefore, to discuss the significance of affliction and the suffering body in Coetzee's fiction

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<sup>232</sup> Pick, *Creaturely*, 31.

<sup>233</sup> Coetzee, *Doubling*, p.248.

<sup>234</sup> Coetzee, *Doubling*, p.246.

seems paradoxical. As above, these representations of suffering are but ‘shadows themselves’. However, Simone Weil writes of how intimations of these truths are held in beautiful writing:

And it sometimes happens that a fragment of inexpressible truth is reflected in words which, although they cannot hold the truth that inspired them, have nevertheless so perfect a formal correspondence with it that every mind seeking that truth finds support in them. Whenever this happens a gleam of beauty illuminates the words.<sup>235</sup>

Inarticulate, creaturely affliction cannot be expressed, but Coetzee suggests this in his novel which contemplates: the paradox of a public confession (Lurie’s tribunal, mirroring TRC hearings); the impossibility of articulating the suffering body; and the sacred secularity of the impersonal, as that which – when all else is given up – remains. For all of these reasons, Coetzee gestures towards a creaturely poetics in *Disgrace*.

### *Creatureliness in Elizabeth Costello*

I

In her essay ‘The Difficulty of Reality and the Difficulty of Philosophy’, Cora Diamond draws upon Ted Hughes’ poem ‘Six Young Men’ and J. M. Coetzee’s novel *Elizabeth Costello* to help elucidate her thoughts on the difficulty of reality: a phrase which she borrows from John Updike and defines as ‘experiences in which we take something in reality to be

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<sup>235</sup> Weil, ‘Human Personality’, *Anthology*, pp.92-93.

resistant to our thinking it, or possibly to be painful in its inexplicability, difficult in that way, or perhaps awesome and astonishing in its inexplicability'.<sup>236</sup> In Hughes' poem, this difficult reality is epitomised in the photograph of six young, smiling men in 1914 who all died within the following six months. The difficulty here is an impasse one might feel in viewing a photograph so instilled with life, knowing – but not quite believing – that these men could seem so alive and yet no longer exist. Diamond focusses on the final stanza of Hughes' poem:

That man's not more alive whom you confront  
 And shake by the hand, see hale, hear speak loud,  
 Than any of these six celluloid smiles are,  
 Nor prehistoric or, fabulous beast more dead;  
 No thought so vivid as their smoking-blood:  
 To regard this photograph might well dement,  
 Such contradictory permanent horrors here  
 Smile from the single exposure and shoulder out  
 One's own body from its instant and heat.<sup>237</sup>

The contradiction of which Hughes writes is enough to 'dement' anyone who looks at the photograph and cannot reconcile the knowledge that no one was 'more alive' than these men, yet no one or nothing is now 'more dead'.

In *Elizabeth Costello* a similar impasse is reached by an old woman who cannot understand how people can eat meat. After delivering two lectures (which make up the

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<sup>236</sup> Diamond, 'The Difficulty of Reality', pp.45-46.

<sup>237</sup> Hughes, 'Six Young Men', *The Hawk in the Rain*, p.55.

majority of Coetzee's novella 'The Lives of Animals'), she breaks down in her son's car and admits:

I no longer know where I am. I seem to move around perfectly easily among people, to have perfectly normal relations with them. Is it possible, I ask myself, that all of them are participants in a crime of stupefying proportions? Am I fantasizing it all? I must be mad! Yet every day I see the evidences. The very people I suspect produce the evidence, exhibit it, offer it to me. Corpses. Fragments of corpses that they have bought for money (*EC*, 114).

Similar to Hughes, Coetzee highlights the madness Costello feels when confronted by this difficult reality. Diamond does not focus on this madness in her essay except to write that 'to attempt to think [this or any other difficult reality] is to feel one's thinking come unhinged'.<sup>238</sup> This is the 'difficulty of philosophy' to which she refers in her title. In other words, one must try not to deflect the thought or make sense of it through philosophical discourse, rather one should try to appreciate this difficulty as an inherent paradox with ideas of what it means to be human. A further difficulty arises through the fact that Elizabeth Costello is a character in a novel and, as such, her difficult reality is expressed through the fiction which circumscribes her reality. Specifically, her difficulty (the difficulty she faces rather than the difficulty of eating animals anyone else – such as Coetzee himself – might face) is an unreality. This further remove from reality is an angle which Diamond chooses not to explore at length, it not being a central issue in her paper, but one which I shall explore in more depth because of the literary focus of this thesis.

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<sup>238</sup> Diamond, 'The Difficulty of Reality', p.58.

Diamond's essay gestures towards many subjects explored by Simone Weil and therefore, at a further remove, Anat Pick in her *Creaturely Poetics*. These subjects include the senselessness (or madness) of affliction; the inability of the afflicted to explain their affliction and, therefore, the inability of anyone to listen to those who are afflicted; and beauty and goodness (which makes up a large proportion of the fourth section in Diamond's essay). This final subject seems contradictory with the horror of death and annihilation otherwise covered in Hughes' poem, Costello's lectures and the death camps, but in fact it is essential to thinking about the difficulty of reality. Diamond argues that acts of goodness in a bad place, such as individual acts of kindness during the Holocaust, are as difficult to comprehend as the evil committed in what seems to be a good society. However, I posit that the connection between beauty, goodness and difficult realities is even tighter. Indeed, the death of the six men in Hughes' poem would not seem so demented were they not smiling in the photograph; Elizabeth would not be so confused were she not to maintain normal relations and see 'human kindness' in the eyes of those she loves; the horrors of the death camps would not be so difficult to fathom were they not carried out in a world which seemingly values kindness, justice and beauty (*EC*, 115). In 'Human Personality' Weil shows us how these values are not as they seem and how, in fact, we are not confused by beauty and goodness but rather by such lesser concepts as art and rights. Indeed, Weil refers to truth and beauty as supernatural concepts towards which human beings must aspire. As they are supernatural, we must detach ourselves from our states of being in order to turn our faces towards them: 'To use them legitimately one must avoid referring them to anything humanly conceivable'.<sup>239</sup> She argues that if we can extend our notions of rights and

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<sup>239</sup> Weil, 'Human Personality', *Anthology*, p.97.



art to the realms of justice and beauty, then they would be ‘indispensable’ as the only cure to affliction.<sup>240</sup> Therefore, Weil’s essay is integral to understanding the relationship between the difficulty of reality and the difficulty of philosophy. These concepts are, in turn, integral to this chapter and the thesis at large because the reality of our own creaturely bodies is at odds with philosophising our humanity.

Diamond incorporates a quotation by Weil into ‘The Difficulty of Reality and The Difficulty of Philosophy’ but otherwise she is not a focus. Instead, Diamond draws heavily on Simone Weil in her essay ‘Injustice and Animals’ which considers the difference between rights and justice: a key subject in Weil’s essay ‘On Human Personality’ and which Diamond extends to include animals. Therefore, I shall consider both of Diamond’s essays in my creaturely reading of *Elizabeth Costello* as well as, more focally, selected essays by Simone Weil and *Creaturely Poetics* by Anat Pick. This allows me to explore Coetzee’s novel in two further sections which consider: creatureliness and the sympathetic imagination in Costello’s lectures, and the Holocaust and animal suffering in *Elizabeth Costello*. ‘Sympathetic imagination’ is a term used by Thomas Nagel in his essay ‘What is it like to be a bat?’, to which Costello refers in her lecture on ‘The Philosophers and the Animals’ and extends to consider how a lack of sympathetic imagination leads to such atrocities as the Holocaust and, ostensibly, eating animals. It involves putting oneself in the shoes (or the wings, or the hooves) of those whose realities we find difficult to perceive. It is useful to consider the sympathetic imagination, potentially as that which goes some way to overcoming the difficulty of reality, but possibly as that which leads to it because of the

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<sup>240</sup> Weil, ‘Human Personality’, *Anthology*, p.98.

madness Costello herself feels when considering the lives of animals in a world which seems to foster beauty and goodness.

II

Chapters Three and Four of *Elizabeth Costello* consist of two lectures which Costello delivers on the subject of animals: 'The Philosophers and the Animals' and 'The Poets and the Animals'. It also includes the context and response to these lectures: tensions during Costello's stay with her son and his wife Norma, the conversations in which Costello participates after her first lecture, and the interview with a philosopher called Thomas O'Hearne after her second lecture. These chapters were delivered by Coetzee over two days at Princeton University, in a series of lectures known as the Tanner Lectures. The purpose of the Tanner Lectures is, to this day, to reflect upon human values through academic learning.

Undoubtedly, Costello and by extension Coetzee deliver lectures which reflect upon human values, but these values are specifically with regard to non-humans. They are about our relationships with animals: in 'The Philosophers and the Animals' Costello's focus is how we eat animals, and in 'The Poets and the Animals' her focus is how we embody animals, through literature but by extension in our everyday lives. Her choice to deliver her lectures in this order is curious not only because she is an author and therefore reputed in the field literature rather than philosophy, but also because her opening lecture is more polemical and, indeed, divides her audience to such an extent that one honoured guest refuses to attend the dinner after her paper because of the comparison she draws between factory farming and the Holocaust (*EC*, 94). Furthermore, one might argue that her lecture on eating

meat would be more affecting were her audience to have listened the day before on how we might inhabit the bodies of fellow creatures through the sympathetic imagination in literature. Ostensibly, hearing about our abuse of animals after identifying with them could have driven home a more compelling message. However, when answering a question from the floor on what message she is giving, Costello stipulates that she 'was hoping not to have to enunciate principles' and tells the questioner to 'open your heart and listen to what your heart says' (*EC*, 82). Clearly, Costello does not deliver these lectures in order to change minds, but rather to open them to the possibility of change, and to consider the reality of a shared, creaturely life with animals. As her son says to Norma, who is furious after Costello's lectures, 'why not try to see her as a preacher, a social reformer, rather than as an eccentric trying to foist her preferences on to other people?' (*EC*, 113). In this light, her lectures seem more like a sermon than a manifesto, and the order in which she delivers them is chosen not for its rhetoric but for its urgency.

This style of social reform is evocative of Simone Weil, who wrote one of her most influential essays on the injustice faced by trade-union workers. However, 'Human Personality' does not 'enunciate principles' and neither is it explicitly about how trade-union workers suffer under the force of their employers. Rather, it outlines Weil's thoughts on the sacredness of every person who expects that good and not evil be done to him/her. This leads Weil on to discuss affliction and the part of a soul which cries out 'Why am I being hurt?' when evil is done to it.<sup>241</sup> Affliction, injustice and the inability to have one's voice heard were all pertinent to her cause, but Siân Miles notes how Weil's colleagues reacted impatiently to her work: 'They wanted her to write on 'something concrete, like trade-union

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<sup>241</sup> Weil, 'Human Personality', *Anthology*, p.87.

problems'. She was in fact doing precisely that, though her approach was radically different from what they had expected'.<sup>242</sup> Rather than writing about workers' rights, Weil chose to write about how rights themselves are inadequate in comparison to justice. Weil's colleagues may have wanted her to lay out a clear argument for the rights of workers, but Weil considered the inherent injustice in the system, where no amount of shifting the rights would tackle the fact that the situation itself was unjust. She gives an example to clarify her point:

Suppose the devil were bargaining for the soul of some poor wretch and someone, moved by pity, should step in and say to the devil: 'It is a shame for you to bid so low; the commodity is worth at least twice as much.'

Such is the sinister face which has been played by the working-class movement, its trade unions, its political parties, its leftist intellectuals.<sup>243</sup>

Here, Weil argues that the problem which needs to be overcome is not how much money workers are being paid for their toil, nor how many rights can be afforded them to make their load lighter; it is the injustice of treating these workers like commodity and asserting your force over them as such.

In a similar way, Costello refuses to 'enunciate principles' to the man who asks her to clarify whether or not the point of her lecture was to persuade the audience to close down factory farms, stop eating meat and stop animal experimentation (*EC*, 81). She refuses to do so because, in her second attempt at a reply:

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<sup>242</sup> Siân Miles, in Weil, *An Anthology*, p.70.

<sup>243</sup> Weil, 'Human Personality', *Anthology*, p.80.

I have never been much interested in proscriptions, dietary or otherwise. Proscriptions, laws. I am more interested in what lies behind them. As for Köhler's experiments [on animals], I think he wrote a wonderful book, and the book wouldn't have been written if he hadn't thought he was a scientist conducting experiments on chimpanzees. But the book we read isn't the book he thought he was writing. I am reminded of something Montaigne said: We think we are playing with the cat, but how do we know that the cat isn't playing with us? I wish I could think the animals in our laboratories are playing with us. But alas, it isn't so.

She falls silent. 'Does that answer your question?' asks the dean. The questioner gives a huge, expressive shrug and sits down (*EC*, 82).

Clearly, the questioner does not think that Costello has answered him well enough. Her response is tangential: it moves away from providing direct answers, towards wider considerations on the subject of the question. Once again, she chooses not to mould minds but to open them. Like Weil, she is less interested in the proscription for evil than to the society which needs a proscription; less interested in laws than in seeking the spirit of justice from which these laws should stem. She does not consider animal experimentation as something we should make more humane; she considers 'the experiments themselves [...] imbecile' (*EC*, 108). These are the things which 'lie behind' the conventional modes of philosophical thought. Diamond comes to a similar conclusion with regard to Costello's responses more generally:

In the life of the animal she is, argument does not have the weight we may take it to have in the life of the kind of animal we think of ourselves as being. She

sees our reliance on argumentation as a way we may make unavailable to ourselves our own sense of what it is to be a living animal.<sup>244</sup>

Here, Diamond recognises that some people might consider our ability to argue and debate an essential part of what makes us rational human beings, but highlights how Costello moves away from that mindset to consider us first and foremost as vulnerable creatures. This is clarified in Diamond's phrase 'the kind of animal we think ourselves as being': to *think* ourselves as being is a deflection from appreciating our sense of being, which lies beyond reason. In this sense, Köhler's book to which Costello refers is 'not the book he thought he was writing'. Presumably, Köhler thinks he is writing a scientific book based on evidence and reason. Perhaps Costello considers this book rather to be a book about force. Simone Weil wrote one of her most esteemed essays on the Iliad as a poem of force: she considers it a wonderful book, but believes it to be a mirror of society rather than the historical document we might take it as being.<sup>245</sup> Neither book is essentially about history nor science, but about force which, as defined by Weil, 'is that x that turns anybody who is subjected to it into a *thing*'.<sup>246</sup> In Köhler's case, the impetus behind his book is not the behaviour of chimps but rather the force exerted by humans over creatures, turning them into 'things': here, a scientific subject or – more cynical perhaps – a statistic. This is why the laboratory animals do not play with us: they are the things with which we play. In answering the man's question in this tangential way, Costello suggests that closing down factory farms or not

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<sup>244</sup> Diamond, 'The Difficulty of Reality', p.53.

<sup>245</sup> For 'dreamers [...] the *Iliad* could appear as an historical document; for others, whose powers of recognition are more acute and who perceive force, today as yesterday, at the very centre of human history, the *Iliad* is the purest and the loveliest of mirrors'. Weil, 'The *Iliad* or The Poem of Force', *Anthology*, p.183.

<sup>246</sup> Weil, 'The *Iliad*', *Anthology*, p.183.

eating meat is the solution to a problem which should not be there in the first place: a problem of force.

In a similar vein, perhaps *Elizabeth Costello* is not the novel Coetzee thinks, or suggests, it might be. That is to say, he understands that it cannot be any particular novel because it has at its core a philosophical void into which his main character attempts to draw us. Yet, it is framed as a work of fiction, and is read with all the expectations with which we approach one. This is a consideration which Diamond briefly but attentively explores:

Coetzee gives us a view of a profound disturbance of soul, and puts that view into a complex context. What is done by doing so he cannot tell us, he does not know. What response we may have to the difficulties of the lectures, the difficulties of reality, is not something the lectures themselves are meant to settle. This itself expresses a mode of understanding of the kind of animal we are, and indeed of the moral life of this kind of animal.<sup>247</sup>

Costello attempts to open the minds of those to whom she speaks. She does not try to persuade them to take up a cause, but rather to look within themselves for a creatureliness which is shared with animals. This, she imagines, is what lies behind a proscription for animal cruelty: an understanding that the basic play of force between humans and other animals is unjust. As such, the philosophical discussions we may have about animal rights and animal consciousness are not what we think them to be. Instead of changing how we treat animals, Costello argues that we should change our relationship with them. However,

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<sup>247</sup> Diamond, 'The Difficulty of Reality', p.56

to “argue” as such is not to argue, for that would be to participate in the very act of reasoning which we might consider distances ourselves from animals. Instead, she exposes her ‘profound disturbance of soul’ not as a philosophical conundrum but rather as what Diamond calls ‘a rawness of nerves’.<sup>248</sup> Her problem is physical; it is tied to her body. It involves understanding what it is to be a creature. The ‘complex content’ of which Diamond writes is the fact that Costello is not a physical presence but a fictional character, albeit one who stands in Coetzee’s shoes as he delivers these chapters at the Tanner Lectures. Perhaps *Elizabeth Costello* is a novel which opens our hearts as the title character hopes to achieve, or perhaps it is another of Coetzee’s novels which grapples with the impossibility of representing the body in literature, and therefore calls into question ‘the kind of animal we are’: that which attempts to reason our way outside of reason. Norma may snort at Elizabeth’s comment that she sometimes feels herself to be a corpse and, as such, is ‘alive inside that contradiction, dead and alive at the same time’, but the contradiction is more ironic, and much more complex, than at first it seems (*EC*, 77). Costello is a figment of Coetzee’s imagination and, as such, her body is undone by the fiction in which it finds itself a part. Hers is a difficult reality.

This difficulty is made more complex by the fact that Costello is an author who, like Coetzee, creates her own imaginative characters (though ultimately they are, of course, Coetzee’s). Her son believes that her gift as a fiction writer is to be able to think her way into the lives of the characters she writes:

my mother has been a man [...]. She has also been a dog. She can think her way into other people, into other existences. I have read her; I know. It is within her

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<sup>248</sup> Diamond, *The Difficulty of Reality*, p.47.



powers. Isn't that what is most important about fiction: that it takes us out of ourselves into other lives? (*EC*, 22-23).

Here, John highlights one of the demands of fiction: that we should identify with the characters. Moreover, he believes that his mother can 'think her way' into their existence. Through the authors' shared career and parallel lives, it is inferred that the same can be said for Coetzee and, by extension, we may question our own sense of identification with Costello. If the importance of fiction is to 'take us out of ourselves into other lives', Coetzee ostensibly frames his own thoughts on animal cruelty in fiction so that his readers sympathise with Costello or even share Coetzee's opinions through her. However, there is a further complexity which makes me believe this is not Coetzee's primary aim. The use of the words 'think' and 'power' in the above quotation may be fair with regard to Costello's fiction, but they are misleading when applied to the lectures she delivers at Appleton College. Perhaps they are the defining words which separate her most from Coetzee, who has power over his creative subject and who, perhaps, did not write the book 'he thought he was writing'.

For when Costello introduces the philosophy of Thomas Nagel into her talk it is not to show how one might think their way into the life of a bat, but how one might feel their way into its life (similarly with regard to at once being and not being a corpse). She insists that 'the knowledge we have' in these cases 'is not abstract' (*EC*, 77). To become a bat or a corpse one must sympathise with it and, as Costello says, 'sympathy has everything to do with the subject and little to do with the object'. Indeed, one must sense what it is to be a bat by understanding what it is to be: to live, to move, just as one does as a human being. Therefore, one sympathises with a bat on a bodily plane. Moreover, it is not Costello's

power which allows her to become a bat or a corpse, but the giving up of her power: it is her vulnerability as a living, aging body; it is the creatureliness they share.

### III

It is with the sense of a shared creatureliness and in the spirit of sympathetic imagination that Elizabeth Costello makes her comparison between factory farms and the Holocaust. On a subject evocative of Bentham's dictum: 'the question is not, Can they reason? nor, Can they talk? but, can they suffer?', Costello challenges her audience not to ask: 'Do we have something in common – reason, self-consciousness, a soul – with other animals?', because looking for such abstract commonalities can deflect from the physical realities we share (EC, 79).<sup>249</sup> Moreover, asking such questions implies that we are searching from a position of difference: there is always a possibility that the answer will be that we share none of these things and, as such, we can only build a relationship with others which has at its foundation a complete lack of sympathy. Costello relates this to the Holocaust by considering how bystanders and perpetrators refused to sympathise with the victims:

The particular horror of the death camps, the horror that convinces us that what went on there was a crime against humanity, is not that despite a humanity shared with their victims, the killers treated them like lice. That is too abstract. The horror is that the killers refused to think themselves into the place of their victims, as did everyone else. [...] They said, "It must be the dead who are being burned today, making the air stink and falling in ash on my cabbages." They did

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<sup>249</sup> Bentham, *Principles of Legislation*, p.283.

not say, "How would it be if I were burning?" They did not say, "I am burning, I am falling in ash." (EC, 79).

Here, Costello separates two possible meanings for the word 'humanity'. The first, in relation to a 'shared humanity' between perpetrators and victims, refers to the fact that this was a crime committed by humans, on humans. The second, and the one which Costello believes is key to the term 'crimes against humanity', is the ability to act with kindness (where kindness is used 'in its full sense, as an acceptance that we are all of one kind, one nature') and sympathy: to be humane (EC, 106). Of the two, she considers the second less abstract, despite the fact that the first is with respect to a physical species divide and the second considers the seemingly more abstract characteristic of sympathy. This is because the first hinges upon how we consider the object (another race of people, or animals) and the second is reliant upon understanding the subject, that is: ourselves (how we feel and therefore how we *would* feel in certain situations). However, Costello takes this trajectory of thought even further: she does not only question 'how would it be' for subject to be object, but considers how it is for subject as object, as if there is no discernible difference between the two. In other words, she identifies with the other to such an extent as almost to convince herself of their inseparability.

In this sense, perhaps Costello over-identifies with others; perhaps her sympathy consumes too much. Just as Simone Weil died refusing to eat more than the ration afforded to the French during WWII, though her frail body was much in need of it, so Costello physically suffers from over-identifying with the dead and dying. Richard Rees writes the following passage in a letter about Weil's life, and much of it can also be applied to Costello: 'her selfless idealism and her extraordinary capacity for sympathy and pity and self-

sacrificing kindness stand out conspicuously in everything that is known about her life'.<sup>250</sup>

The term 'selfless idealism' is particularly relevant to Costello's cause because in sympathising and perhaps over-identifying with animals, she loses sense of her borders as an individual human being. She cares too deeply and, as such, feels physically affected by those animals with which she sympathises. 'There are no bounds to the sympathetic imagination', she says, and although she argues that the sympathetic imagination stems from a feeling of the fullness of being, she later admits to feeling lost amongst other humans; to longer know where she is (*EC*, 80, 114). Her own 'extraordinary capacity for sympathy' is exemplified when she considers the similarities between herself and Red Peter from Kafka's 'Report to an Academy':

Red Peter was not an investigator of primate behaviour but a branded, marked, wounded animal presenting himself as speaking testimony to a gathering of scholars. I am not a philosopher of mind but an animal exhibiting, yet not exhibiting, to a gathering of scholars, a wound, which I cover up under my clothes but touch on in every word I speak (*EC*, 70-71).

Here, Costello remarks that both she and Red Peter embody the words they speak. Peter does not speak his testimony but presents himself *as* testimony, where his words impart his body, and Costello comments on the idea of her woundedness presenting itself through her words.

However, the *inability* of words to be able to express pain is a common theme of Coetzee's oeuvre. For example, the final chapter of *Foe* (similarly ambiguous to the final

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<sup>250</sup> Richard Rees, in Weil, *Anthology*, p.49.

chapter in *Elizabeth Costello*) descends underwater into Friday's world: 'a place where bodies are their own signs'.<sup>251</sup> There are other examples besides: the tortured old man and the slave girl's scars in *Waiting for the Barbarians*; Elizabeth Curren's cancer in *Age of Iron*; Paul's amputated leg in *Slow Man*. However it is this quotation from *Foe* which most neatly mirrors Costello's claim to speak through her wounded body. This is because, unlike any of the other characters mentioned above, Costello is not visibly wounded or sick, so far as we can tell. Similarly, we are told that Friday's tongue has been cut out but this is never confirmed. This 'wound' of which Costello speaks is far more metaphysical and perhaps, like Friday, it is a mark of slavery. Certainly, Red Peter has become a slave insofar as he has been moulded into a slave of reason:

Now that I am here, says Red Peter, in my tuxedo and bow tie and my black pants with a hole cut in the seat for my tail to poke through (I keep it turned away from you, you do not see it), now that I am here, what is there for me to do? Do I in fact have a choice? If I do not subject my discourse to reason, whatever that is, what is left for me but to gibber and emote and knock over my water glass and generally make a monkey out of myself? (*EC*, 68).

If Costello's wound, which she covers up, is comparable to anything here it is surely the monkey's tail, which he hides from his audience: it is a bodily sign that he is not a being of reason but simply an animal. Costello's wound, besides a more obvious Freudian reading of her femininity, is the same thing: not a tail, but an animal body nonetheless. In giving her lectures on animals and the (often, lack of) sympathetic imagination in philosophy and poetry, she is caught within the paradox of reasoning, whereby she is expected to deliver a

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<sup>251</sup> J. M. Coetzee, *Foe* (London: Penguin Books, 1987), p.157.

reasonable argument but wishes to do so on the subject of creaturely bodies, her own included; creaturely bodies which stand outside of reason and as such are covered up and forgotten about when we consider our humanity. Like Friday, her body is its own sign, but like Red Peter, she is forced to dress it up: in argument – albeit that which does not enunciate principles – and reason.

Perhaps this paradox of reasoning is why she resorts to making parallels with the Holocaust. In an essay on Kafka, George Steiner considers the author at once a prophet, compelled to write about the inevitable, forthcoming collapse of humanity, and an artist depicting ‘the temptations of silence’ in his literature. Steiner’s words reflect the paradox of reasoning the unreasonable and speaking the unspeakable, and he exemplifies this with the Holocaust, through Kafka and Hoffmannstahl, both of whom Coetzee draws upon in

*Elizabeth Costello:*

The world of Auschwitz lies outside speech as it lies outside reason. To speak of the *unspeakable* is to risk the survivance of language as creator and bearer of humane, rational truth. Words that are saturated with lies or atrocity do not easily resume life. This apprehension was not Kafka’s alone. The fear of the erosion of the logos, of the gain of the letter on spirit, is strong in Hoffmannstahl’s *Letter of Lord Chandos*[.]<sup>252</sup>

Costello polarizes her audience by evoking the Holocaust so early in her proceedings to explain our treatment of animals. Yet perhaps she chooses to do this so as to immediately situate her talk outside of the realms of reason. Her words are ‘saturated with atrocity’ and,

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<sup>252</sup> George Steiner, *Language and Silence* (London: Faber and Faber, 2010), p.182.

as such, they lack impact. This is because the subject they evoke ‘lies outside speech’: they gesture towards the silent dead, just as Kafka’s ‘Report to an Academy’ gestures towards the same, inescapable atrocity. Indeed, Costello refers to Kafka as Red Peter’s ‘amanuensis’ – this creature’s secretary – ‘with a presentiment, a *Vorgefühl*, for the massacre of the chosen people’. Here, ‘*Vorgefühl*’ evokes Rilke – a poet to whom Costello returns – and his poem by the same name. The poem, written at the turn of the twentieth century, translates as ‘Presentiment’, and the narrator is an embodiment of this premonition. As Steiner calls Kafka’s works prophetic, the same might be said of this short poem, which begins:

I am like a flag by far spaces surrounded.

I sense the winds that are coming, I must live them

while things down below are not yet moving:

the doors are still shutting gently, and in the chimneys is silence;

the windows are not yet trembling, and the dust is still heavy.<sup>253</sup>

The silent chimneys and the heavy dust are, as Friday’s body, their own signs. They need no further explanation as they epitomize Steiner’s concept of language ‘as creator and bearer of [...] truth’. Costello evokes this as she evokes Kafka’s own ‘presentiment’, ostensibly in order to give her own talk the prophetic gravitas we can, in hindsight, give these other works. However, her talk falls flat; she ‘does not have a good delivery’ (EC, 63).

Perhaps, then, she evokes the Holocaust not in order to shock her audience into action, nor to prophecy some further fall from grace after our sinful treatment of animals,

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<sup>253</sup> Rainer Maria Rilke, ‘Presentiment’, *Rainer Maria Rilke: Translations from the Poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke*, trans. M. D. Herter Norton (London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1993), p.79.

but quite the opposite. Perhaps she includes this seemingly tasteless ('cheap', she admits) metaphor in order to epitomise her own feelings of being overwhelmed, just as we are overwhelmed when we consider the scale and inhumanity of the Holocaust (*EC*, 66). If this is the case, her choice to compare factory farming to the death camps is not a way to simply get attention for a cause, nor is it as blasphemous as might otherwise be assumed, but rather it is a way to evoke her own sense of helplessness, banality and being-overwhelmed in the face of the suffering she sees surrounds us. This is backed up once more by the fact that she does not want to 'enunciate principles' and by the fact that she acknowledges that the Holocaust taught us 'that we can do anything and get away with it; that there is no punishment' (*EC*, 80). In other words, her use of the Holocaust is not pedagogical, nor is it moralistic, but rather it is polarizing, contentious and unreasonable. It is perhaps the most overwhelming example of when human beings were turned, by great force, into things. As Anat Pick writes: 'if the Holocaust proves anything at all, it is that Jewish (and other) bodies are animal bodies' (*CP*, 51). Costello gestures towards her own animal body – her 'wound' – in two lectures which mirror the Tanner Lectures on human values. She uses the Holocaust as a paradigm of inhumanity where, as she stipulates, inhumanity is not an abstract concept but an inability to recognise the shared vulnerability of our bodies (*EC*, 79). Coetzee, who is tied to Costello as he speaks at the Tanner Lectures, gestures towards the authority of the body in an interview with David Attwell, and confesses to an almost identical state of confusion stemming from the fact that humans can have such little sympathy as to cause others to suffer:



It is not that one *grants* the authority of the suffering body: the suffering body *takes* this authority: that is its power. To use other words: its power is undeniable.

(Let me add, *entirely* parenthetically, that I, as a person, as a personality, am overwhelmed, that my thinking is thrown into confusion and helplessness, by the fact of suffering in the world and not only human suffering. These fictional constructions of mine are paltry, ludicrous defenses against that being-overwhelmed, and, to me, transparently so.)<sup>254</sup>

By referencing Kafka and Hoffmannstahl in his novel on creatureliness and the sympathetic imagination, Coetzee recalls and contributes to that school of thought which recognises what Steiner refers to as ‘the authority of silence’.<sup>255</sup> He adds to this by focussing on ‘the authority of the suffering body’ and brings these two authorities together through the presence of animals: animals which ‘have only their silence left with which to confront us’ (*EC*, 70). As Costello recognises, ‘Kafka saw himself and Red Peter as hybrids, as monstrous thinking devices mounted inexplicably on suffering animal bodies’ (*EC*, 75); and as Hoffmannstahl’s Lord Chandos writes in his letter to Francis Bacon, imagining a mother rat unable to stop her babies dying from the rat poison Chandos himself lay down,

it was much more and much less than pity [that I felt] – a vast empathy, a streaming across into these creatures, or a feeling that a flux of life and death, of dreaming and waking, had streamed into them for an instant.<sup>256</sup>

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<sup>254</sup> Coetzee, *Doubling*, p.248.

<sup>255</sup> Steiner, *Language and Silence*, p.183.

<sup>256</sup> Hofmannsthal, Hugo Von, *The Lord Chandos Letter and Other Writings*, trans. Joel Rotenberg (New York: New York Review Books, 2005), p.124.

Costello, Red Peter and Chandos are all fictionalised creatures who are overwhelmed by their sympathetic imagination: Chandos is overwhelmed to such an extent that he reaches a creative stasis; Red Peter is overwhelmed such that he inhabits the clothes of another species; and Costello is overwhelmed to the point of emotional collapse (*EC*, 114-115). At a further remove, Costello overwhelms her audience and us by referencing the Holocaust: arguably the most overwhelming event in our immediate history.

Costello may be a 'paltry, ludicrous defense' against Coetzee's state of being overwhelmed, but she is also aware of the paltriness of her words at the lectures. She admits to Thomas O'Hearne that her talk is insufficient to communicate the gravity of abused animal bodies:

It is not the mode of being of animals to have an intellectual horror: their whole being is in the living flesh.

'If I do not convince you, that is because my words, here, lack the power to bring home to you the wholeness, the unabstracted, unintellectual nature, of that animal being. That is why I urge you to read the poets who return the living, electric being to language; and if the poets do not move you, I urge you to walk, flank to flank, beside the beast that is prodded down the chute to his executioner (*EC*, 110-111).

Costello urges her sceptics to 'walk, flank-to-flank' with animals as they are processed to be slaughtered so as their sympathetic imagination can be jolted into understanding the urgency and wholeness of these animals' bodies: an urgency which is felt just as keenly as our own, despite the animals' lack of abstract thought. Diamond sees a similar vein of

thought in Weil's work on 'Human Personality', where Weil contrasts 'claims of fair entitlement' with 'the desperate cry that might be made by a girl being forced into a brothel'.<sup>257</sup> The cries of the girl and of the animals, in Costello's example, are not so different because, as Diamond explains, 'there is a kind of response in the face of what is done to them: a pain and revulsion that requires for its expression the language of injustice'.<sup>258</sup> In both cases, claiming one's rights (to eat animals, or to sexually exploit a girl) may seem acceptable until faced with the desperate cries and struggles of the thing itself, which evoke the sympathetic imagination through a response to injustice. Nonetheless, Costello recognises that certain poets such as Ted Hughes and, to an extent, Rainer Maria Rilke can move the sympathetic imagination. Hughes, who wrote 'Six Young Men', grapples with a difficult reality through that poem, but he also returns life to language in his poems on jaguars. Costello stipulates that this life is not the mere, ghostly survivance of language as outlined by Steiner, above, but rather something which she considers to be an 'electric' movement within the words: a gesture towards 'a different kind of being-in-the-world' (*EC*, 95). This is comparable to Rilke's prophetic poem, above. For different reasons, the words in both Hughes' and Rilke's poems capture something essentially truthful, and Costello believes that such poetry might stir sympathetic imagination where her words cannot.

As with regard to the paradox of witnessing the Holocaust, Costello admits that her urgent words lack impact because they cannot approach the reality of the cruelty we inflict on animals. Yet, she gives examples of poets who have succeeded where she cannot. This brings to mind Paul Celan, who contended that, despite the Holocaust overwhelming language, it is important to gesture towards that state of being overwhelmed through

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<sup>257</sup> Diamond, 'Injustice and Animals', p.121.

<sup>258</sup> Diamond, 'Injustice and Animals', p. 139.

language. There is something intensely personal about his poetry, which he touches upon in his Meridian speech. He says that poetry

holds its ground on its own margin. In order to endure, it constantly calls and pulls itself back from an 'already-no-more' into a 'still-here'. [...] This 'still-here' of the poem can only be found in the works of poets who do not forget that they speak from an angle of reflection which is their own existence. [...] This shows the poem yet more clearly as one person's language become shape and, essentially, a presence in the present.<sup>259</sup>

Celan's poetry is an act of language, an act tied unassailably to Celan himself. This is the strain of poetry which Costello believes can evoke the sympathetic imagination, because it works by understanding the subject first and foremost: by reflecting upon the poet's own existence. This is what Costello means when she says that Hughes 'is feeling his way towards a different kind of being-in-the-world' (*EC*, 95). Hughes does not attempt to inhabit another's mind through his poetry, but to inhabit another's body, using his sense of self to understand the movement and vulnerability of any creature. Coetzee also attempts this because he works from his own feelings of helplessness in the face of suffering to create Costello. He stands and delivers his chapters at the Tanner Lectures as she herself delivers her speeches on animals. As such, when Costello reads the following, it may as well be Coetzee speaking, where we replace Costello's novel and character with ones of his own oeuvre:

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<sup>259</sup> Paul Celan, 'The Meridian', *Collected Prose*, trans. Rosemarie Waldrop (New York: Routledge, 2003), p.49.

I wrote a book called *The House on Eccles Street*. To write that book I had to think my way into the existence of Marion Bloom. [...] *Marion Bloom never existed*. [...] If I can think my way into the existence of a being who has never existed, then I can think my way into the existence of a bat or a chimpanzee or an oyster, any being with whom I share the substrate of life (*EC*, 80).

Here, Costello recognises the fact that successful authors must struggle with a difficult reality in their professional lives, where the term ‘successful’ implies not how much one has profited from the profession, but – as with Coetzee and Hughes – how one has successfully thought their way into their characters’ existence. These characters must live on the page, yet they are inherently fictional constructs: as in ‘Six Young Men’, they must be at once ‘no more alive’ and ‘no more dead’ than anything or anyone; as in Costello who thinks her way into being a corpse and recognises that ‘for an instant, before my whole structure of knowledge collapses in panic, I am alive inside that contradiction, dead and alive at the same time’ (*EC*, 77). Through *Elizabeth Costello*, Coetzee grapples with his own difficult realities, both as an author and as a sympathetic person, overwhelmed by suffering. Indeed, one difficult reality reflects the other as Elizabeth Costello struggles with matters of existence, despite being a fictional construct. Perhaps this is why the first chapter of *Elizabeth Costello* is entitled ‘Realism’: at once it implies a literary convention and an attitude of what Anat Pick terms ‘creaturely exposure’ (*CP*, 29). It foregrounds the difficult reality of a sympathetic imagination, as explored in Coetzee’s novel.

### *Conclusion*

Although I have focussed on the two chapters in *Elizabeth Costello* which make up 'The Lives of Animals', Coetzee's entire novel is saturated in concepts and events which suggest a creaturely poetics. For example, Costello visits her sister Blanche who lives as a medical missionary and administrator at a hospital in Africa. While she is there, the sisters bicker about the purposes of humanities: Blanche takes a religious stand against them and Elizabeth extolls the virtues of the classics from a sympathetic but predominantly secular point of view. These discussions with Blanche mirror Elizabeth's lectures and debates on animals, therefore perhaps Coetzee suggests that there is something in these debates themselves which is important: an openness to engaging with a creaturely poetics in Elizabeth's case, and a willingness to engage with art on both a secular and sacred level in the case of Blanche. Simone Weil suggests that everything impersonal in a person is sacred, that is something which does not bear the stamp of her/his personality, and she continues: 'truth and beauty dwell on this level of the impersonal and the anonymous'.<sup>260</sup> Elizabeth gestures towards this truth as she over-identifies with others and loses hold of herself through a sympathetic imagination; Blanche thinks that those studying humanities are no longer 'animated [...] by the purpose of finding the True Word' and that they are therefore lacking in truth and beauty (*EC*, 122). She too loses her identity through her sacred aspirations, as she is a nun who goes by the name 'Sister Bridget'. Nonetheless, Coetzee makes these characters flawed: Elizabeth is overbearing and insecure where Blanche is a stubborn 'hardliner' (*EC*, 133). In these flaws we witness traces of their personalities. As Weil agrees: 'perfection is impersonal. Our personality is the part of us which belongs to error and sin'.<sup>261</sup> Therefore, Coetzee does not seem to suggest that Elizabeth or Blanche

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<sup>260</sup> Weil, 'Human Personality', *Anthology*, p.75.

<sup>261</sup> Weil, 'Human Personality', *Anthology*, p.75.

have reached a higher level pertaining to truth and beauty, but that it is the debates themselves (debates which can be read as largely impersonal due to the extent of the different opinions which are raised) which are important and gesture towards a creaturely poetics.

In her introduction to *Creaturely Poetics* and specifically the subject of animal rights, Anat Pick agrees that 'The Lives of Animals' (and therefore, to an extent, *Elizabeth Costello*) 'helped reorient philosophical discussions in animal ethics away from utilitarian, reason, and rights-based approaches [toward] creaturely thinking' (*CP*, 7). Indeed, Costello comes to face reasoned arguments against her sympathetic approach, such as the questions posed by O'Hearne, and she tries to steer her talk away from animal rights when an audience member questions her purpose and she refuses to 'enunciate principles'. By including this reasoned rebuttal to her talks, Coetzee not only reorients philosophical discussions, but offers a new method of response to the old arguments and, significantly, shows how this response often falls on deaf ears. In other words, he is aware of the difficulty involved in creaturely thinking, primarily because it involves engaging with the sympathetic imagination over reason, but also because it destabilises our identities as human beings. Actually, these reasons are not separate: to engage with our sympathetic imagination can mean that we identify with animals and therefore lose our grip on what sets us apart from them. The paradox is this: how can one reason away reason; how can one imagine the fullness of another's being without being aware of our own sense of being and, as such, be aware of one's humanity?

Costello addresses this difficulty when she derisively considers the standpoint of a philosopher who argues that because animals have no conceptual grasp on such matters as

death or absence, death and absence do not matter to them. The example cited is whether or not it is possible for a veal calf to miss its mother. Costello realises that this philosopher is not a man she would like to speak with,

not when reason is what underpins the whole long philosophical tradition to which he belongs, stretching back to Descartes and beyond Descartes through Aquinas and Augustine to the Stoics and Aristotle. If the last common ground that I have with him is reason, and if reason is what sets me apart from the veal calf, then thank you but no thank you, I'll talk to someone else (*EC*, 122).

Just as Pick draws upon but moves away from Eric Santner's concept of creatureliness as tied to humanity, and as in *Disgrace* when Coetzee's godless characters must disregard their humanity in order to bear affliction, so Costello chooses to separate her humanity into a humanity of reason and a humanity of the body: she wishes to empathise on a bodily plane rather than a theoretical plane and, as such, she has no desire to reason with a man who rejects the shared vulnerability of humans and other creatures. Where her sister, Blanche, is more of a Simone Weil figure who eats small rations and looks heavenward 'through all the jolting' of life, Coetzee writes Costello largely as a secular figure who has to balance her intolerance of reason with something other than the mysticism of God. Like Lucy and Lurie from *Disgrace*, Elizabeth Costello struggles to omit reason from her life in order to live a bodily existence.

However, unlike Lucy and possibly Lurie, Costello does not seem to be able to achieve this. As she is an author, she remains tied to literary conventions and therefore to traces of reason. Lurie has to step away from his life as a lecturer in order to give in to affliction, but Costello continues to define herself first and foremost as an author and, as



such, she reaches an impasse produced by this paradox of reasoning. This impasse is symbolised in the final chapter of *Elizabeth Costello*, where the author wakes into an ambiguous, purgatorial space and puts forward her case for reaching beyond a Kafkaesque gate – surely evocative of the gates of Heaven. Whether Costello has died here or not is unknown, but it is clear that she cannot pass through until she gives a truthful confession or statement of belief. This she feels unable to do because of her literary profession which, so she argues, means that she must ‘maintain beliefs only provisionally’ (EC, 195). ‘What if I am not a believer?’ asks Costello, ‘we all believe. We are not cattle’, replies the man at the gate, and later a judge replies: ‘without beliefs we are not human’ (EC, 194, 200). Here, belief is considered inherent to our humanity, but Costello argues that her ‘ideal self’ is ‘a secretary clean of belief’ (EC, 200). In other words, to truly take down the beliefs of her characters, she must not have her own stand in the way. This brings to mind Weil’s essay, *Gravity and Grace* in which she considers the idea of selfhood. Weil argues that we must destroy our individuality and claim to selfhood in order to bear affliction:

We possess nothing in the world – a mere chance can strip us of everything – except the power to say ‘I’. That is what we have to give to God – in other words, to destroy. [...] So long as we ourselves have begun the process of destroying the ‘I’, we can prevent any affliction from causing harm.<sup>262</sup>

Where Blanche aspires to give herself up to God in a manner coherent with Weil’s discourse, Elizabeth gives herself up to her profession. Like Lucy and Lurie in comparison with the Isaacs family, hers is a secular sacrifice. However, unlike the characters from *Disgrace* she does not give everything up in order to live solely as a body devoid of

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<sup>262</sup> Weil, ‘The Self’, *Anthology*, pp.99-100.

possessions; rather she gives up her beliefs in order to live solely as an author. Paradoxically, it is therefore this profession which at once unites and detaches her from the animals with which she sympathises.

This is because, where Lurie's sense of self is destroyed through affliction, he learns to live like a dog, but Costello keeps a full sense of her being in order to engage with her sympathetic imagination and therefore to imagine embodying other creatures. His giving up is dependent on affliction but hers is a professional and ethical choice, respectively:

To write [*The House on Eccles Street*] I had to think my way into the existence of Marion Bloom. [...] If I can think my way into the existence of a being who has never existed, then I can think my way into the existence of a bat or a chimpanzee or an oyster, any being with whom I share the substrate of life (EC, 80).

Her professional urge to give up any belief at once allows her to think her way into the life of other creatures and detaches her from living like one, for out of the same channel of thought she at once sympathises with real animals and creates characters which never existed. There is little doubt that she engages in creaturely thinking, but this thinking is itself limited by her authorial voice. Nowhere better is this shown than in the penultimate paragraph to the final chapter which, when compared with the closing paragraphs of *Disgrace*, highlights the difficulty faced by authors in approaching creaturely bodies:

She has a vision of the gate, the far side of the gate, the side she is denied. At the foot of the gate, blocking the way, lies stretched out a dog, an old dog, his lion-coloured hide scarred from innumerable manglings. His eyes are closed, he

is resting, snoozing. Beyond him is nothing but a desert of sand and stone, to infinity. It is her first vision in a long while, and she does not trust it, does not trust in particular the anagram GOD-DOG. *Too literary*, she thinks again. A curse on literature! (*EC*, 224-225).

Costello finds it impossible to get beyond the dog as symbol. It has appeared to her in one of her authorial visions. Perhaps, as she is a self-confessed 'secretary of the invisible', she thinks it has come to her in order that she might speak for it (*EC*, 199). However, she mistrusts the vision; she wonders whether the voice she would give it would truly be that of this suffering dog, or whether it would be that of God himself. Either way, she is a human and therefore unable to speak for it. The curse she puts on literature might be because of this paradox outlined by Weil: 'those who most often have occasion to feel that evil is being done to them are those who are least trained in the art of speech'.<sup>263</sup> The difficult reality here is that being a creature is to be marked with the vulnerability of existence (a vulnerability which Costello shares especially as she ages), but to be an author is to channel one's own existence into a fictional construct. This fictional construct, so much as it may appear to live on the page, is – to recall Coetzee's quotation on the suffering body – 'that which is not'.<sup>264</sup> It is in complete contrast to the creaturely body it seemingly depicts.

However, in *Disgrace* the final paragraphs do not highlight this difficult reality. Coetzee's authorial vision is not acknowledged as his fictional character Lurie has a real encounter with a creaturely body:

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<sup>263</sup> Weil, 'Human Personality', *Anthology*, p.73.

<sup>264</sup> Coetzee, *Doubling*, p.248.

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 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)

On first reading, and despite the religious connotation of the lamb simile, there is little doubt that this dog is more real than the one which appears to Costello. Simone Weil compares one who has his sense of self stripped from him to a dog, and the passage is strikingly similar to the bond felt between Lurie and his dog, above: 'He [...] in whom the 'I' is quite dead is in no way embarrassed by the love which is shown him. He takes what comes just as dogs and cats receive food, warmth and caresses'.<sup>265</sup> Paradoxically, a bond of kindness is forged between Lurie and the dog the moment the creature is given up to be killed. At a wider glance, this dog may symbolise Lurie giving up his 'I' in order to live through affliction. However, without the metanarrative highlighted by Coetzee in *Elizabeth Costello* it is simply a depiction of a man and his dog. The novel closes on this depiction of a creature being brought to silence.

In relation to creaturely thinking, perhaps this is the main difference between *Disgrace* and *Elizabeth Costello*: whereas Coetzee creates fictional constructs in *Disgrace* who are able to live like animals because they give themselves and their possessions up, he creates Elizabeth Costello to represent the paradox of a creaturely poetics. A creaturely

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<sup>265</sup> Weil, 'The Self', *Anthology*, p.102.

poetics is that which at once engages with the vulnerable body and detracts from it through literature. Engaging with a creaturely poetics is a difficult reality because it means that the text gestures towards the vulnerable body while remaining detached from it. Nonetheless, it is important to understand this difficult reality through literature. To reiterate one reason for this, as outlined by Weil and quoted above:

It sometimes happens that a fragment of inexpressible truth is reflected in words which, although they cannot hold the truth that inspired them, have nevertheless so perfect a formal correspondence with it that every mind seeking that truth finds support in them.<sup>266</sup>

Despite Blanche's disdain for the current state of the humanities, words can aspire to the truth and – as explored – this truth does not have to be religious, though it remains sacred. Moreover, another key reason for embracing a creaturely poetics is that, inspired by Paul Celan and paraphrased by Lawrence Langer, 'what dims the light of creation need not extinguish the lamps of language, though it may compel us to reconsider the sources of efficient illumination'.<sup>267</sup> This quotation concerns Holocaust Literature and, as shown through references to the Holocaust in both *Disgrace* and *Elizabeth Costello*, a similarly difficult reality is faced when considering creaturely poetics more generally. From both issue a painful urgency to convey truth through language, and this quotation acknowledges the role of literature in illuminating such difficult realities – as in Hughes, as in Celan, as in Coetzee – so as to reclaim realism as a literary convention which gestures towards the reality of our vulnerable existences.

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<sup>266</sup> Weil, 'Human Personality', *Anthology*, pp.92-93.

<sup>267</sup> Lawrence Langer, *The Holocaust and the Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975), p.15.

## Chapter Four

### Exploring Creatureliness as a Multidirectional Ethics

#### *Introduction*

This chapter uses Michael Rothberg's *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* to explore two different approaches to comparing the Holocaust and our treatment of animals. Rothberg posits that competitive memory, or the attitude that one atrocity is worse, more important or more deserving of recognition than others, should be abandoned in favour of multidirectional memory: loosely defined, memory which draws upon similarities between events in order to memorialise them simultaneously. Rothberg's subtitle shows how this concept can be applied to the Holocaust and colonization, but he encourages the act of multidirectional remembrance more widely. As animal exploitation is not something which is limited to the past, and because animals have no collective memories of which we can speak, I shall touch upon whether or not including animal cruelty in this web of memorialisation is ethically appropriate or even possible. However, the focus of this chapter is how authors in the fields of Animal Studies and Holocaust Literature approach the comparison between the Holocaust and animal suffering, whether their comparisons are competitive or multidirectional, and whether or not we can consider one approach more or less creaturely than the other.

Indeed, multidirectional memory acknowledges the shared vulnerability of persecuted groups, from Jewish victims of the Holocaust to black slaves during an age of colonization. Because recognising shared vulnerability is a key component of creatureliness as defined by Anat Pick, this would suggest that multidirectional memory is best articulated

through a creaturely poetics: a poetics which incorporates the silence inherent in the afflicted, creaturely body. As I have explored in Chapter Two, Pick is diligent to include animals at every step in her definition of creatureliness, but Eric Santner's use of this term is slightly different. Although his definition is not at odds with Pick's, he does not consider animals' creatureliness an essential part of his study. Rather, he is more interested in how humans recognise and depict such creatureliness which, he argues, is 'less a dimension that traverses the boundaries of human and nonhuman forms of life than a specifically human way of finding oneself caught in the midst of antagonisms in and of the political field'.<sup>268</sup> This definition recognises the fact that only humans can understand that their vulnerability is evidence of political force, which in turn highlights the fact that animals – although often creaturely themselves – cannot recognise their history of persecution. Pick might argue that this inability to recognise or voice their affliction is precisely what makes animals creaturely, but Santner is more interested in how humans articulate creatureliness. Now, when one considers that memorialisation is not only an act ('memory is the past *made* present', as defined by Richard Terdiman and quoted by Rothberg), but a socio-political act reliant on building from and forging collective memories in the public sphere, it is clear that animals have no part in their own memorialisation.<sup>269</sup> As such, it is the responsibility of humans to articulate their histories and make a case for theirs to be considered deserving of our attention, similar to atrocities including the Holocaust and colonization.

*Eternal Treblinka* by Charles Patterson is inspired by and dedicated to Isaac Bashevis Singer, a Jewish novelist and animal activist, who wrote in his short story 'The Letter Writer' that our treatment of animals equates to an 'eternal Treblinka'. Therefore, the first part of

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<sup>268</sup> Santner, *On Creaturely Life*, p.xix.

<sup>269</sup> Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory*, p.3.

this chapter focuses on Patterson's text as a seminal work in Animal Studies which compares the Holocaust to our treatment of animals. The second part of this chapter offers a creaturely reading of Singer's short story 'The Letter Writer'. Singer's family was uprooted and, in the case of some relatives, murdered by the Holocaust, and this is a lens through which his stories are written. As an animal lover and activist, many of his stories also feature animals prominently. Stories including 'The Letter Writer' combine these themes, leading to the comparison Patterson borrows to name his text. I posit that this connection is not coincidental, and agree with Singer's biographer, Janet Hadda, that 'most likely, [Singer's own] determination not to eat flesh was connected to post-Holocaust feelings of revulsion against human cruelty, misuse of power, and disregard for life'.<sup>270</sup> With this in mind, I analyse 'The Letter Writer' in light of its 'eternal Treblinka' quotation and question whether or not this quotation adheres to a competitive model of ethics (animal cruelty is worse than the Holocaust because it is 'eternal') or multidirectional (there is an implicit connection between our treatment of humans and animals, which implies that the Holocaust is eternally mirrored in such acts of violence as animal cruelty).

Up to this point, I have explored: the use of animal metaphors in Holocaust Literature, the use of reciprocal animal-Holocaust metaphors in literature, and Coetzee's use of creatureliness in *Disgrace* and *Elizabeth Costello*. This chapter focuses on Holocaust metaphors in Animal Studies, but moves on to explore the comparison between the Holocaust and animal suffering in fiction. Bringing in Rothberg's ideas on memory and memorialisation allows me to consider not only how creatureliness is explored in literature, as was largely the case in the previous chapter on Coetzee, but how authors attempt to

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<sup>270</sup> Janet Hadda, *Isaac Bashevis Singer: A Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p.142.



bring a concept so defined by its powerlessness, into the public sphere. Indeed, David Attwell draws upon essays by Michael Vaughan, Peter Knox-Shaw and Peter Kohler to assert that much of Coetzee's literature has been criticised for offering 'neither an analysis of the play of historical forces nor a moral anchor in the search for a humane response to colonialism and apartheid'.<sup>271</sup> Although there is much to dispute the idea that Coetzee's literature does – or should – address the context out of which it was written, *Multidirectional Memory* allows me to identify how arising themes and motifs in literature can become worldly. Although Rothberg's study offers a new lens through which to approach Holocaust Literature, I continue to draw upon Anat Pick and Simone Weil in order to engage in a creaturely analysis of both *Eternal Treblinka* and 'The Letter Writer'. Ultimately, I posit that both texts gesture towards a creaturely poetics, and that reading them through one another encourages a cross-disciplinary, and therefore multidirectional, approach to the contentious idea of comparing atrocities.

#### I - Charles Patterson's *Eternal Treblinka*

Upon visiting the US Holocaust Memorial Museum, Khalid Muhammad not only voiced his doubts as to the Holocaust's legitimacy, but also argued that it paled in comparison to the treatment of slaves throughout America's history: "the black holocaust was 100 times worse than the so-called Jew Holocaust. You say you lost six million. We question that but ... we lost 600 million".<sup>272</sup> This forms part of the opening quotation in Michael Rothberg's introduction to *Multidirectional Memory*, and it helps to clarify the

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<sup>271</sup> David Attwell, *J. M. Coetzee: South Africa and the Politics of Writing* (Oxford: University of California Press, 1993), p.1.

<sup>272</sup> Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory*, p.1.

subheading under which it appears: 'Beyond Competitive Memory'. In this context, competitive memory is the opinion that one atrocity surpasses another and, moreover, it promotes what Rothberg describes as a 'real-estate' mindset with regard to memorialising these events.<sup>273</sup> In other words, Muhammad does not only hold the opinion that slavery is worse than the Holocaust, but suggests that remembering the Holocaust comes at the expense of remembering the 'black holocaust'. The Holocaust Museum physically gets in the way of a museum which could memorialise slavery but, more importantly, he suggests that there is not enough space in the public's collective memory to remember both: we must choose, is the thrust of competitive memory, and therefore we must compete with other atrocities to prove how ours was the most atrocious, caused the most deaths, or lasted the longest amount of time.

It could be argued that Charles Patterson seems to commit to this model in *Eternal Treblinka*, where the title, quoted from Singer's short story, implies that our treatment of animals is worse than the fate of the Jewish people during the Holocaust. Whereas Treblinka was an active extermination camp for fifteen months, we continue to kill animals in vast numbers today, with no sign of stopping. Indeed, like Muhammad, Patterson includes death statistics which outnumber those associated with the Holocaust. For example, Patterson describes how, from the time they opened in 1865 until 1900, the Union Stock Yards in Chicago slaughtered 400,000,000 livestock. He adds: 'that number is a drop in the water compared to what's going on now. Today, American slaughterhouses kill that number of animals in less than two weeks'.<sup>274</sup> In a text which draws heavily on the murder

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<sup>273</sup> Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory*, p.2.

<sup>274</sup> Charles Patterson, *Eternal Treblinka: Our Treatment of Animals and the Holocaust* (New York: Lantern Books, 2002), p.58.

of approximately 6,000,000 Jews, the fact that Patterson refers to the deaths of 400,000,000 creatures as ‘a drop in the water’ is provocative: it is unclear whether or not, by merit of the events being compared throughout the text, Patterson considers the death toll of the Holocaust ‘a drop in the water’ compared to the staggering statistics which come from American slaughterhouses. If so, this suggests that the model of competitive memory as outlined by Rothberg fits Patterson’s writing. At this point, Patterson’s comparison could seem to be as such: animal suffering is like the Holocaust, except that it goes on forever and the death statistics are immeasurably higher.

However, there is already one key difference between Muhammad and Patterson: whereas the former forges his collective identity in a history of slavery – ‘we lost 600 million’, he asserts – Patterson does not identify with animals on the same level. Indeed, Patterson initially approached the question of animal suffering through a more personal connection with the Holocaust. His father died fighting the Nazis and, as Patterson admits in an interview with Biman Basu, ‘my intense interest in World War II and the Holocaust may have been my way of looking for my dead father and feeling connected to him’.<sup>275</sup> Furthermore, his first published book was entitled *Anti-Semitism: The Road to the Holocaust and Beyond*, and came out of his desire as a history teacher to introduce his students to the background and causes of the Holocaust. This title bears obvious similarities to Chapter Three in *Eternal Treblinka*, entitled ‘The Industrialization of Slaughter: *The Road to Auschwitz Through America*’. Where one text focuses on how anti-Semitism led to the Holocaust, the other considers how modern industry such as the production line produced

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<sup>275</sup> Charles Patterson, ‘Interview with Charles Patterson’, *Anil Aggrawal’s Internet Journal of Book Reviews* 2:1 (January – June 2003) < [http://anilaggrawal.com/br/vol\\_002\\_no\\_001/reviews/f\\_books/interview.html](http://anilaggrawal.com/br/vol_002_no_001/reviews/f_books/interview.html) > (accessed 3/3/15).

both the machinery and attitudes which allowed the Holocaust to happen. There is nothing in *Eternal Treblinka* to suggest that Patterson changed his mind about which of these paved the way to the Holocaust; rather, he posits that both anti-Semitism and the industrialisation of slaughter simultaneously play key roles in the developments which led to genocide.

Michael Rothberg asks: ‘what happens when different histories confront each other in the public sphere? Does the remembrance of one history erase others from view?’<sup>276</sup> A

competitive model of memory such as Muhammad’s would suggest that one history takes predominance over another, but multidirectional memory allows for more than one history to assert its claim over the present. Moreover, the multidirectional model allows for cross-overs between these histories which serve to highlight and even build upon one another. In the case of the roads leading to the Holocaust, Patterson shows how anti-Semitism and industrialisation are not altogether separate.

The figure whom Patterson shows to exemplify this crossover between anti-Semitism and industrialisation is Henry Ford. Here, Patterson explains how Ford applied the industrialisation of animal slaughter to manufacturing automobiles, which in turn influenced the Nazis’ methods of extermination:

In his autobiography, *My Life and Work* (1922), Ford revealed that his inspiration for assembly-line production came from a visit he made as a young man to a Chicago slaughterhouse. “I believe that this was the first moving line ever installed,” he wrote. “The idea [of the assembly line] first came in a general way from the overhead trolley that the Chicago packers use in dressing beef.” [...] Ford, who was so impressed by the efficient way meat packers killed animals in

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<sup>276</sup> Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory*, p.2.

Chicago, made his own special contribution to the slaughter of people in Europe. Not only did he develop the assembly-line method the Germans used to kill Jews, but he launched a vicious anti-Semitic campaign that helped the Holocaust happen.<sup>277</sup>

Following this, Patterson documents Ford's anti-Semitic propaganda and explains how it added to the growing hatred of Jews in Germany. Not only did Ford publish ninety-one articles based on the anti-Semitic text *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, but he also published anti-Semitic brochures and a now notorious compilation of his articles entitled *The International Jew* (a text which heavily influenced Art Spiegelman to represent Jewish people as mice in *Maus*, after Ford's text compared the Jewish race to vermin). This text also reached huge acclaim in Germany, where it was rebranded as *The Eternal Jew*.

Although Rothberg's concept of multidirectional memory focuses on how past events are remembered in the present, Patterson's awareness and analysis of the different paths which led to the Holocaust can also be considered multidirectional. For example, Patterson takes into account not only Ford's influential anti-Semitism, but also how he was influenced by slaughterhouses to revolutionise production-line industry.<sup>278</sup> One could either compare which of these had the most influence on the Holocaust (or, at least, which was the more symptomatic of the attitudes which led to the Holocaust), or one could analyse what these two causes have in common. This is not simply to say that the Holocaust had

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<sup>277</sup> Patterson, *Eternal Treblinka*, pp.72-73. Embedded quotation: Henry Ford, *My Life and Work* (London: William Heinemann, 1922), p.81.

<sup>278</sup> These biographical details are supported in Vincent Curcio's study on Henry Ford, where Curcio writes that 'Ford was perhaps more influential than any other Antisemite outside of Nazi Germany', and suggests that 'perhaps most influential of all [to the modern assembly line and Ford's development of it] was the meatpacking industry, which was like the assembly line in reverse, disassembling pigs into pork products' (Vincent Curcio, *Henry Ford* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp.xiii; 70).

more than one cause – this is an undeniable fact – but it is to interrogate the causes for any links between them, which may produce further insight into both. This approach seems to use Rothberg’s concept of multidirectionality without considering memory, but if researching anti-Semitism alongside the industrialisation of the meat industry exposes commonalities, it may produce a better understanding of the past in order to build collective memories in the present. Indeed, Rothberg agrees that memory can be reformed through a deeper understanding of histories which previously may not have been explored alongside one’s own:

what looks at first like my own property often turns out to be a borrowing or adaptation from a history that initially might seem foreign or distant. Memory’s anachronistic quality – its bringing together of now and then, here and there – is actually the source of its powerful creativity, its ability to build new worlds out of the materials of older ones.<sup>279</sup>

By exploring the victimisation of animals alongside anti-Semitism, Patterson attempts not only to shed light on both histories, but to build identities out of these seemingly disparate histories: to ‘build new worlds out the materials of older ones’.

This he achieves chiefly in two sections of *Eternal Treblinka*: in Chapter Three where, in his analysis of Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle*, he explores the shared identities of factory workers and the animals they process; and in Chapter Six where he includes the testimonies from animal advocates whose desire to help vulnerable creatures stem from their identification with (and in some cases, as) victims of anti-Semitism. Patterson’s analysis of

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<sup>279</sup> Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory*, p.5.

Sinclair's *The Jungle* shows how works of literature can help to establish connections between the lives of animals and humans. The comparison here is not between Jews and animals, but between animals and factory workers at the beginning of the twentieth century. Nonetheless, it introduces the idea of a shared history between oppressed groups of people and animals: an idea which Patterson then builds into his discussion of Henry Ford's influence leading up to the Holocaust. Sinclair wrote *The Jungle* to propagate his socialist beliefs and encourage a shift in the rights of factory workers, and especially immigrants, working in the United States. However, analysing the text from a creaturely angle suggests that Patterson implies a more fundamental shift in attitude towards both workers and animals is necessary to bring an end to these inhumane conditions.

Simone Weil wrote on a similar subject to Sinclair, and it is interesting to compare their approaches. Both experienced the conditions of factory work themselves (Weil more so than Sinclair, who learnt about the Union Stock Yards in a worker's disguise but mostly spent his time making notes). Both Weil and *The Jungle's* protagonist, Jurgis Rudkus, have hopeful expectations when they join the factory, which are quickly shattered. Rudkus is 'breathless with wonder' when he first witnesses life on the killing floor and naively believes that 'this whole huge establishment had taken him under its protection'.<sup>280</sup> However, after working there he soon sees the meat industry as 'the incarnation of blind and insensate Greed' and 'Capitalism made flesh'.<sup>281</sup> Similarly, Simone Weil writes in a letter to her friend that factory life does not provide the joy of honest labour as she had hoped, but rather that

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<sup>280</sup> Sinclair, *The Jungle*, ed. Gene DeGruson (Memphis: Peachtree Publishers, 1988), pp.26, 34

<sup>281</sup> Sinclair, *The Jungle*, p.283.

it strips workers of their identities and forces them to work as part of a soulless, mechanised whole:

What a factory ought to be is [...] a place where one makes a hard and painful, but nevertheless joyful, contact with real life. Not the gloomy place it is where people only obey orders, and have all their humanity broken down, and become degraded lower than the machines.<sup>282</sup>

She continues, this time highlighting the fact that factory life not only stripped her of humanity, but of the rebellious spirit which might have won it back:

What working in a factory meant for me personally was as follows. It meant that all the external reasons (which I had previously thought internal) upon which my sense of personal dignity, my self-respect, was based were radically destroyed within two or three weeks by the daily experience of brutal constraint. And don't imagine that this provoked in me any rebellious reaction. No, on the contrary; it produced the last thing I expected from myself – docility. The resigned docility of a beast of burden.<sup>283</sup>

In these quotations, Weil compares herself both to the machines with which she works and to 'a beast of burden', which is to say a domesticated animal: trained to carry out arduous work for its master. Despite how shocking these conditions seem, Weil was not alone in feeling objectified and bestialised by the work. Indeed, Hannah Arendt defines the difference of 'work' and 'labour' with the chief distinction that labouring often means 'to be enslaved by necessity': labourers do not have to be slaves in the common sense of the

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<sup>282</sup> Siân Miles, 'Introduction', in Weil, *Anthology*, p.25.

<sup>283</sup> Miles, 'Introduction', in Weil, *Anthology*, p.26.



word, but – like Weil and Rudkus – their bodily work often requires little skill and is necessary for survival. Arendt also draws attention to the term '*animal laborans*' in this context: humans who work under necessity's yoke, who are considered 'at best the highest, of the animal species which populate the earth'.<sup>284</sup> In other words, Arendt describes how labouring for the sake of survival means that you are a victim of force and, as such, you become animal-like.

By drawing upon Sinclair's novel, Patterson draws similar ideas to Arendt and Weil into the figure of the hog. As with Weil's machines, the hogs which are processed are the material with which the workers must toil; they are also beasts of burden in the sense that they are exploited for the sake of more powerful humans. However, unlike Weil's metaphors, these hogs are not a figure of speech, but creaturely bodies with whom Rudkus identifies:

a hog was just what he had been – one of the packers' hogs! Labor was their hog, and the public was their hog, and they themselves were the biggest hogs of all. They were businessmen; and business was business. What they wanted from a hog was all the profits that could be got out of him; and that was what they wanted from the workingman and that was what they wanted from the people. What the hog thought of it, and what he suffered, was not considered; and no more was it with the workingman, and no more was it with the purchaser of meat.<sup>285</sup>

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<sup>284</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), p.84.

<sup>285</sup> Sinclair, *The Jungle*, p.283.

Instead of thinking about three separate, exploited groups – the hogs, the workers and the public – Sinclair identifies a chain of events which tie all three together, not simply because the hogs were killed by the workers and eaten at the expense (and, it was found out, the health) of the public, but because all three were objectified by the Capitalists who stripped them of individuality and turned their lives into profit. In this sense, all three groups are creaturely because of the force exerted over their bodies by those with a higher power: the hogs' bodies are taken apart by the workers, whose bodies are used like machines to produce meat for the consumers, whose bodies ingest the diseased meat.

Where Upton Sinclair wanted to make a Socialist statement predominantly about the force exerted by capitalists over workers like Rudkus, Patterson notes that the public's response was predominantly to protest the third form of exploitation listed above: they demanded that the meat they ate was of a higher quality:

The public outcry over the diseased and rotten meat it was eating was so strong that within six months of the book's publication, Congress passed two new meat inspection laws – the Pure Food and Drug Act and the Beef Inspection Act. To Sinclair's great disappointment, however, the book's readers were more moved by his exposé of what went into the making of their meat than by his socialist message. [...] "I aimed at the public's heart," he wrote in his autobiography, "and by accident hit it in the stomach."<sup>286</sup>

Where Sinclair hoped that his novel would unite the meat-eating public with those who worked to produce that meat, against their Capitalist society which produced such

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<sup>286</sup> Patterson, *Eternal Treblinka*, p.64. Embedded quotation from Upton Sinclair, *The Autobiography of Upton Sinclair* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1962), p.126.

conditions, the public largely ignored his Socialist message. The comment in his autobiography shows how Sinclair wanted to open up channels of empathy and a shared sense of bodily vulnerability, but that the public were only concerned with their own exploitation.

However, a creaturely analysis of *The Jungle* might suggest that even Sinclair's intended message did not go far enough. Where Sinclair 'aimed at the public's heart' to deliver a Socialist message, a creaturely message might go back further to protest the original bodily abuse of the hog. Here, Rudkus depicts the hogs' rough treatment and even suggests that their bodily violation is no less obscene for their being animals:

Once started upon that journey, the pig never came back; at the top of the wheel he was shunted off upon a trolley, and went sailing down the room. And meantime another was swung up, and then another, and another – until there was a double line of them, each dangling by a foot and kicking in a frenzy – and squealing. The uproar was appalling [...] There would come a momentary lull, and then a fresh outburst, louder than ever, surging up to a deafening climax. [...] The most matter-of-fact person could not help thinking of the hogs, they were so innocent, they came so very trustingly; and they were so very human in their protests – and so perfectly within their rights!<sup>287</sup>

In this passage, Rudkus shifts his attitude towards the hogs: at first he pities them, then he identifies with them ('they were so very human in their protests') and then he seems to anthropomorphise them by bringing in the language of law: they were 'so perfectly within

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<sup>287</sup> Sinclair, *The Jungle*, pp.28-29.

their rights'. Sinclair's wording is interesting: these animals are being shackled and hung; evidently, they have no rights. Yet, judicial language is evoked, perhaps in order to convey the injustice being done to these creatures.

Later in the novel, Rudkus is incarcerated in jail for attacking his wife's boss, who had forced her to have sex with him under the threat that otherwise she and her family would lose their jobs and starve to death. Rudkus is overwhelmed by the injustice enacted on his family simply for having less power and money than the capitalists who forced him into a life of poverty. Similar to his revelation near the end of the novel that he had been a hog all along, here Rudkus is made aware that he is no more than an animal to those above him:

Ten thousand curses upon them and their law! [...] There was no justice, there was no right, anywhere in it – it was only force, it was tyranny, the will and the power, reckless and unrestrained! They had ground him beneath their heel, they had devoured all his substance; [...] and now they were through with him, they had no further use for him – and because he had interfered with them, had gotten in their way, this was what they had done to him! They had put him behind bars, as if he had been a wild beast, a thing without sense or reason, without rights, without affections, without feelings.<sup>288</sup>

Whereas, previously, Rudkus had anthropomorphised the hogs by speaking of their rights to protest, here he depicts his own affliction by comparing himself to beasts with no rights. Moreover, the language he uses to describe how the capitalists have treated him – they

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<sup>288</sup> Sinclair, *The Jungle*, p.142.

'ground' and 'devoured' him – are evocative of the meat-industry and the exploitation of animals for food.

The sense of injustice he feels and his awareness that he is a victim of force is reminiscent of Simone Weil's writing and, subsequently, Anat Pick's description of creatureliness. 'Both power and justice are conceived nonanthropocentrically' writes Pick, analysing Weil's writing on Marx, social relationships and force:

Humanity's susceptibility to the inhumanities of force (gravity) and to the good (grace) has little to do with the faculties of reason or language. The material and the supernatural meet for Weil in the reality of vulnerable bodies whose oppression is not a crime against humanity but a violation of the sacred.<sup>289</sup>

Previously, I analysed this quotation in relation to Coetzee's *Disgrace* but it is no less apt here: Pick shows how, although Weil's writing focuses on force exerted over humans, the ideas of force and justice is nonanthropocentric and therefore can be applied to any creature. The comparison Rudkus makes between the shackled pigs and humans, and the comparison between himself and a caged beast, are not necessarily anthropomorphic or dehumanising respectively. Rather, they both hark to a more fundamental sense of injustice being committed to vulnerable bodies. Moreover, when he considers how those powerful figures at the top consider both the hogs and himself as profitable material to be used up, the hogs are no less violated than he. Read in this light, Sinclair is disappointed that his readers focussed on their own exploitation rather than the exploitation of the workers, but he might have extended that disappointment to consider how the hogs were still not

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<sup>289</sup> Pick, *Creaturely Poetics*, p.48.

treated with a sense of justice, even after he unveiled the cruel acts of force committed by those at the top to those underneath, irrespective of species.

Indeed, to further interrogate Sinclair's disappointment under a creaturely light, one might ask how much would have changed if the public had not thought only of themselves but also of the workers' conditions, if these sympathies had not also extended to the hogs. As Weil recognises when she analyses Marx's repudiation of religion, 'when force changes hands, it still remains a relation of stronger to weaker, a relation of dominance. It can go on changing hands indefinitely, without a single term of the relation being eliminated'.<sup>290</sup> If Rudkus identifies that something inherently unjust is being enacted on the pigs, transferring power over to the masses under a socialist regime may mean that more people are treated justly, but it will not mean that the tyrannical force he experienced himself has disappeared, it merely will have shifted. Ostensibly, without a system in place which gestures towards the sacred ideals of justice for all creatures, there is still the possibility of atrocity. Indeed, one of two quotations Patterson chooses to introduce Part II of *Eternal Treblinka* – the Part which begins with this chapter on *The Road to Auschwitz* – is attributed to Theodor Adorno and illustrates this point by showing where the acceptance of force, even against animals, can lead: 'Auschwitz begins wherever someone looks at a slaughterhouse and thinks: they're only animals'.<sup>291</sup> Even though *The Jungle* is a work of fiction written before the

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<sup>290</sup> Simone Weil, *Oppression and Liberty* (London: Routledge Classics, 2001), p.149.

<sup>291</sup> Although this quotation is commonly attributed to Adorno, such as in Patterson, *Eternal Treblinka*, p.51, it does not appear in Adorno's published works. The closest quotation to this can be found in *Minimal Moralia*, where Adorno writes:

Indignation over cruelty diminishes in proportion as the victims are less like normal readers, the more they are swarthy, 'dirty', dago-like. This throws as much light on the crimes as on the spectators. Perhaps the social schematization of perception in anti-Semites is such that they do not see Jews as human beings at all. The constantly encountered assertion that savages, blacks, Japanese are like animals, monkeys for example, is the key to the pogrom. The possibility of pogroms is decided in the moment when the gaze of a fatally-wounded animal falls on a human being. The defiance with which he repels this gaze – 'after all, it's only an animal' – reappears

Holocaust in order to promote socialism, Patterson chooses to include it in *Eternal Treblinka* to highlight the ways in which those in power use force to strip creatures of their individuality and turn everyone into the same, creaturely subject: a process which Adorno also locates in Nazi extermination camps.

Moreover, *The Jungle* teaches us how slaughterhouses use force against their workers: a force which is not only mirrored in their use of animals, but intrinsically connected to it. Although this is a work of fiction, it is rooted in the real events Sinclair witnessed; and although the novel may now seem dated, it is evident that similar conditions continue in slaughterhouses today. Indeed, this is the subject of Charlie LeDuff's essay in *Zoontologies: The Question of the Animal* – a collection on Animal Studies edited by Cary Wolfe which includes contributions from academics who are working or have worked in the field, such as Wolfe himself and Jacques Derrida. The final chapter, comprising of LeDuff's essay, stands alone as the only one written by a non-academic. Much like Sinclair's experience while writing *The Jungle*, LeDuff is a journalist who investigated conditions in a slaughterhouse. Also like Sinclair, LeDuff's investigation focuses less on the animals being processed and more on the human workers. Nonetheless, it is included as the final chapter in *Zoontologies*, as if to end the book on an essay which reaches beyond academia or species barriers: both of which are key factors in engaging with *Creaturely Poetics*, where 'attitudes and actions [are] judged according to their orientation toward reality', and

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irresistibly in cruelties done to human beings, the perpetrators having again and again to reassure themselves that it is 'only an animal', because they could never fully believe this even of animals.

Here, Adorno acknowledges that dehumanising victims makes them easier to kill, and traces that attitude to the gaze between a dying animal and a human. Although Patterson, and others, capture a similar message in the phrase 'Auschwitz begins...', the original is less specific to the Holocaust and the meat industry.

Embedded quotation: Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from a Damaged Life*, trans. E. F. N. Jephcott (London: Verso, 2005), pp.112-113.

‘contact with the flesh and blood vulnerability of beings – whether human or not – is the nexus within the readings in [Pick’s] book take shape’.<sup>292</sup> LeDuff’s essay, entitled ‘At a Slaughterhouse, Some Things Never Die’ is an investigation into the racial divide in The Smithfield plant in North Carolina: ‘the largest pork production plant in the world’.<sup>293</sup> As the title suggests, the plant is working proof that racial segregation is alive today, and that it seems particularly pronounced in an environment which profits on exploiting the weak.

Although the article focuses on racial segregation, which I analyse below, one relatively short section describes the kill floor and the process of slaughter. It is worth quoting at length so as to see how similar conditions are to Sinclair’s observations, above, and also to set the scene for the other, human power relations at play within the slaughterhouse:

Kill-floor work is hot, quick and bloody. The hog is herded in from the stockyard, then stunned with an electric gun. It is lifted onto a conveyer belt, dazed but not dead, and passed to a waiting group of men wearing bloodstained smocks and blank faces. They slit the neck, shackle the hind legs, and watch a machine lift the carcass into the air [...]. The carcass is run through a scalding bath, trolleyed over the factory floor, and then dumped onto a table [...], men slit along its hind tendons and skewer the beast with hooks. It is again lifted and shot across the room on a pulley and bar, where it hangs with hundreds of others as if in some kind of horrific dry-cleaning shop. It is then pulled through a wall of flames and

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<sup>292</sup> Pick, *Creaturely Poetics*, pp.11, 3.

<sup>293</sup> Charlie LeDuff, ‘At a Slaughterhouse, Some Things Never Die’, *Zoontologies: The Question of the Animal*, ed. Cary Wolfe (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), p.183.



met on the other side by more black men who, stripped to the waist beneath their smocks, scrape away any straggling bristles.

The place reeks of sweat and scared animal, steam and blood. Nothing is wasted from these beasts, not the plasma, not the glands, not the bones. Everything is used, and the kill men, repeating slaughterhouse lore, say that even the squeal is sold.<sup>294</sup>

LeDuff combines factual evidence with evocative language to describe the scene, in a style similar to eye-witness accounts in *Eternal Treblinka*, such as when Sue Coe describes how a horse and her foal are abused on the kill floor.<sup>295</sup> Where simple description does not suffice, LeDuff relies on figurative language – the ‘horrific dry cleaning shop’ – which at once offers a familiar object of comparison (the dry cleaning shop) and strips the comparison of any familiarity (it is ‘horrific’). This suggests that work on the kill-floor is atrocious despite being unexceptional, and offers a fitting parallel to the main subject of LeDuff’s essay: the routine inequality, casual racism, ostensibly even the banal evil carried out every day at this plant, not against the animals (or, perhaps, not *just* against the animals), but against the workers.

Indeed, these workers are split into groups to carry out different jobs which are designated less on ability than on the workers’ races (a fact supported by a former director).<sup>296</sup> This promotes racism between the groups and discourages any solidarity between the workers, which in turn allows the predominantly white managers to exploit them. LeDuff lists the divisions as follows:

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<sup>294</sup> LeDuff, ‘At a Slaughterhouse’, p.188.

<sup>295</sup> Patterson, *Eternal Treblinka*, p.116.

<sup>296</sup> LeDuff, ‘At a Slaughterhouse’, p.195.

The few whites on the payroll tend to be mechanics or supervisors. As for the Indians, a handful are supervisors; others tend to get clean menial jobs like warehouse work. With few exceptions, that leaves the blacks and Mexicans with the dirty jobs at the factory[.]<sup>297</sup>

Power relations between the black and Mexican workers are further divided, with the Mexicans pushed to the lowest rung of the ladder, forced to put up with the worst jobs and racial abuse. In a system which is driven on nothing but capital, these workers are silenced through segregation, as one group is unprepared to stand up for the rights of another. Therefore, the slaughterhouse lore also applies to them: as no one raises their voices (in contempt for other workers and in fear of losing their jobs), it might be said that 'even the squeal is sold'.

Workers who deal with one part of the process are turned against others who deal with another part. In this sense, the hogs embody the segregation, both literally and figuratively, as the division of their bodies expose the division of labour and subsequently race. Anat Pick quotes Nancy Condee in her analysis of *Asthenic Syndrome*: a film which follows two characters who suffer from nervous exhaustion; and Condee's summary of how different spaces are linked by force can be applied not only to Pick's concept of creatureliness in general, but also to the specific system at work in this plant. Condee writes that the spaces are linked in a 'continuum as common sites for an ongoing discharge of aggression'.<sup>298</sup> As in *The Jungle*, a system of force is in place, where those in charge divide and conquer both their products (the hogs) and their workers. Moreover, Cary Wolfe

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<sup>297</sup> LeDuff, 'At a Slaughterhouse', p.184.

<sup>298</sup> Pick, *Creaturely Poetics*, p.123. Quotation from: Nancy Condee, *The Imperial Trace: Recent Russian Cinema* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p.123.

decides to include 'At a Slaughterhouse' as the final essay in *Zoontologies* which suggests that he believes this aggressive force can be discharged across the species divide. This in turn infers that the division of the hogs does not only embody the division amongst workers, but that it is intrinsically linked to it. This is similar to Patterson's argument in Chapter Three of *Eternal Treblinka*, 'The Industrialization of Slaughter: The Road to Auschwitz Through America': that the Chicago stockyards and American slaughterhouses foregrounded the Holocaust. Moreover, it is indicative of the attitude outlined in Patterson's fourth chapter: 'Improving the Herd: From Animal Breeding to Genocide': that eugenics, murder and ultimately genocide are discharged from similar acts of force committed against animals. In summary, LeDuff's essay on racial division in a slaughterhouse, and especially its inclusion in an anthology on Zoonthology, is similar to *Eternal Treblinka*, which includes extracts from Sinclair's socialist novel. In both cases, managers, overseers and investors put in place a system which discharges aggression from top to bottom, through workers and animals. In this sense, one cannot accuse Patterson of using a competitive model to compare animal cruelty to the Holocaust because he identifies that one is intrinsically linked to the other.

Patterson follows his section on *The Jungle* with a description of modern slaughterhouses (such as that described by LeDuff), and then of Henry Ford's contribution to the Nazi regime, which links factory work with the industrialisation of slaughter with, finally, the industrialised methods of genocide. In doing so, he does not only show how the three are linked by the common factor of industrialisation, but how this common factor encourages the tyrannical attitude which allows living creatures, both animal and human, to be reduced to things: like Simone Weil who was made to feel like the machines with which she worked; like the creatures in slaughterhouses who are 'only animals'; and like human

victims in concentration and extermination camps whose identities were taken away and whose bodies were processed into corpses. Rothberg compares different atrocities on more specific terms but reminds us that ‘too often comparison is understood as “equation”’ where his project ‘takes dissimilarity for granted’.<sup>299</sup> In the same vein, writing of these subjects one after the other does not mean that the Holocaust is being equated with factory work, it simply means that a common force can be traced between them. This is similar to one of the chief purposes of *Multidirectional Memory*: to discuss ‘the nonidentical, yet overlapping and equally conflictual legacies of the Nazi occupation and the unravelling project of colonialism’.<sup>300</sup> Colonialism and the Holocaust, like factory farming and the Holocaust (and, as Patterson argues in the beginning of *Eternal Treblinka*, like factory farming and colonialism) share an overlapping legacy of force, which allows each set of victims to be objectified in a comparable, but nonidentical, manner.

Moreover, this legacy of force – which can be traced through many atrocities – leaves in its wake a stream of creaturely bodies, all of which have been treated with injustice. The shackled hogs whom Rudkus believes are ‘perfectly within their rights’ to protest their suffering may not actually have rights as we understand them in a court of law, but their bodies are still protesting a higher injustice. Where Simone Weil might apply this ‘higher’ injustice to the workings of God, justice does not have to be a religious ideal. As discussed in Chapter Three, a creaturely poetics maintains that vulnerable bodies remain fundamentally sacred, even when the creatures who suffer injustice are godless or incapable of higher thought: even when they are animals. This is essential to understanding Rothberg’s concept of multidirectionality. Often, this idea is not limited to memory, such as

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<sup>299</sup> Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory*, p.18.

<sup>300</sup> Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory*, p.208.

when Rothberg shows how multidirectionality is a key method for understanding ethics. He calls for

a multidirectional ethics that combines the capacious open-endedness of the universal with the concrete, situational demands of the particular. An ethics of multidirectional memory involve creating fidelity (in the sense given that term by Alain Badiou's *Ethics*) with the multiple events and historical legacies that define any situation. A politics based on that ethical foundation will require a notion of transnational, comparative justice that can negotiate conflicting and sometimes mutually exclusive demands made on unstable and shifting terrain.<sup>301</sup>

As in Coetzee, who imbues the material world with the sacred, Badiou understands fidelity in a specifically secular manner. In *Ethics: On the Understanding of Evil*, Badiou attempts to impress on humans a sense of ethical responsibility, irrespective of the idea or promise of God. This sense of ethical responsibility comes to the fore during what Badiou terms an 'event', which is a moment at which something happens which forces humans to make a decision by supplementing their typical, base lives with a deeper understanding of truth. Indeed, he writes that since this event 'was excluded by all the regular laws of the situation [it] compels the subject to *invent* a new way of being and acting in the situation': this event must be unprecedented, therefore it calls for a decision based solely on a deeper understanding of truth and justice, rather than a decision based on tried and tested methods or rights.<sup>302</sup> Badiou's idea of fidelity is based on this decision because he argues

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<sup>301</sup> Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory*, p.22.

<sup>302</sup> Alain Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, trans. Peter Hallward (London: Verso, 2001), pp. 41-42.

that we must honour this decision by being truthful to it. That is, not only must we make an ethical decision based on truth, but we should treat this decision with fidelity and maintain it with the same urgency even after the event. He defines this notion of fidelity in the following way: ‘the decision to relate henceforth to the situation *from the perspective of its eventual [événementiel] supplement*’.<sup>303</sup> In other words, our ethical decision towards the unprecedented event makes us the subjects of truth, and we must henceforth regard that event from the perspective of the subject it caused us to become. Rothberg uses this definition of fidelity and applies it to his concept of a multidirectional ethics, whereby we must remain truthful to the decisions we make according to one event, and apply that new-found sense of truthfulness and justice to events which need similar attention. Rothberg considers Badiou’s concept of fidelity an ‘ethical foundation’ which should be applied transnationally and anachronistically, so that we might retain the fidelity of our decision – made as it was in the spirit of truth and justice – by applying it to other events which demand an ethical response.

In *Eternal Treblinka*, Patterson promotes a similarly ethical foundation by comparing our treatment of animals to the Holocaust. A comparison which may seem hyperbolic and disrespectful when viewed in a competitive light, especially by implying that animal cruelty is worse than the Holocaust because it is ‘eternal’, seems more reasonable under a creaturely gaze, where we might recognise the shared vulnerability of all creatures and act accordingly in the common spirit of justice. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the final part of Patterson’s text: ‘Holocaust Echoes’, beginning with Chapter Six: ‘We Were Like That Too’. Patterson describes the subject of this final part, where ‘the focus turns to bearers of

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<sup>303</sup> Badiou, *Ethics*, p.41.

opposed memories – Jewish and German – whose advocacy of animals has been influenced and in some cases shaped by the Holocaust’.<sup>304</sup> This is the Part of *Eternal Treblinka* to which Rothberg’s *Multidirectional Memory* is most applicable: it draws on the ‘opposed memories’ of Jewish and German people who have personal ties to the Holocaust in order to promote justice for animals, and therefore promotes a multidirectional ethics based on empathy. Indeed, Rothberg insists that memory is ‘often a spur to unexpected acts of empathy and solidarity; indeed multidirectional memory is often the very grounds on which people construct and act upon visions of justice’.<sup>305</sup> Badiou’s concept and Rothberg’s application of fidelity is most relevant here, where those who have made ethical decisions based on the Holocaust (an unprecedented ‘event’) remain true to those ethics by applying them elsewhere.

However, the Holocaust victims’ animal activism is rarely a case of remaining truthful to actions made during the event: more often, victims recall their passivity during the Holocaust – their or their family’s indecision and powerlessness – when they witness the powerlessness of other creatures. One such example is Marc Berkowitz who was forced to watch his family march into the gas chambers whilst he remained behind: a twelve year old selected for Dr Mengele’s experiments. Mengele forced Berkowitz and his twin sister ‘to undergo experimental spinal surgery. Today Berkowitz strongly opposes forcing animals to undergo similar experiments’.<sup>306</sup> In Berkowitz’ own words at a public meeting called together to defend Canada geese, “My mother doesn’t have a grave, but if she did I would dedicate it to the geese. I was a goose too.”<sup>307</sup> Here, Berkowitz commits to a

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<sup>304</sup> Patterson, *Eternal Treblinka*, p.139.

<sup>305</sup> Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory*, p.19.

<sup>306</sup> Patterson, *Eternal Treblinka*, p.141.

<sup>307</sup> Patterson, *Eternal Treblinka*, p.141.

multidirectional model of memory, where he not only recalls his own victimisation in the victimisation of the geese, but acts upon those feelings of empathy where previously he could not take action for himself.

This is further applicable to Rothberg's study, where he draws upon and discusses Freud's concept of 'screen memory' in relation to multidirectionality. Rothberg begins his application of screen memory by defining the term according to Freud's original analysis:

Freud tries to understand why some memories from childhood are preserved and others are not. [...] Freud determines that the banal memory of the everyday life is in fact a *screen memory*, "one that owes its value as a memory not to its intrinsic content, but to the relation obtaining between this content and some other, which has been suppressed. [...] The mechanism of screen memory thus illustrates concretely how a kind of forgetting accompanies acts of remembrance, but this kind of forgetting is subject to recall.<sup>308</sup>

For Freud, screen memory is a recourse which simultaneously allows one to remember and forget a certain event, by "screening off" the memory itself but recalling it through everyday life situations. For example, a child who was taken to the hospital in a taxi after falling over might screen off the memory of the accident in favour of the memory of the taxi journey. Nonetheless, she might find herself remembering the event whenever she rides in a taxi. Rothberg applies screen memory to multidirectionality because of its ability to recall an event by linking it with others which happen at different times or in different places:

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<sup>308</sup> Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory*, p.12-13.



screen memory is, in my terminology, multidirectional not only because it stands at the center of a potentially complex set of temporal relations, but also – and perhaps more importantly – because it both hides and reveals that which has been suppressed.<sup>309</sup>

Similarly, when Berkowitz considers animals used for experimentation, he recalls his childhood experiences during the Holocaust. However, instead of hiding this memory behind the geese, he reveals it, not only to himself but to others in order that they might also situate the animals' victimisation within a grander narrative of suffering. This shows that Berkowitz is not only aware of the similarities between the geese and himself, as one might recognise similarities between Lucy's rape and the Lurie's sexual exploitation of Melanie in *Disgrace*, but that he is prepared to acknowledge a shared history of violence between them, in a similar way to Lurie when he supplicates himself before the Isaacs, appearing to recognise that his own forceful behaviour was endemic of a culture which led to the force he and his daughter endured. To recognise a shared history between persecuted groups is what Rothberg promotes through a multidirectional ethics when he writes that

Awareness of the inevitability of displacement and substitution in acts of remembrance points toward the need both to acknowledge the conflicts that subtend memory and work toward a rearticulation of historical relatedness beyond paradigms of uniqueness.<sup>310</sup>

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<sup>309</sup> Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory*, pp.13-14.

<sup>310</sup> Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory*, p.14.

Memory is an act – it is ‘past *made* present’, Rothberg emphasises – and therefore Berkowitz actively and vocally brings his personal memories into the present in order that his audience’s collective memory of the Holocaust might henceforth associate the genocide and its history of violence with the plight of animals, and vice versa.<sup>311</sup>

In this final Part of *Eternal Treblinka* Patterson also includes excerpts from an interview between Israeli psychologist Dan Bar-On and a former doctor at Auschwitz. When Bar-On asks the doctor about how his work at Auschwitz affected his life afterwards, his reply not only shows clear evidence of someone who is screening the Holocaust behind banal moments in everyday life, but also how – disturbingly – these “banal” experiences still include the selection and killing of creatures:

I didn’t have any dreams. I had quite different experiences. It’s not the actual horror, the terrible fate of the people, that’s not it, you understand. It’s strange, but you get used to that. No, it’s the fact of the selection that I think of, like when I’m in the garden digging, and there are snails. Not that I can’t kill the snails, that’s no problem. But then there’s one that I miss, that I see and have to kill, to dig up and kill the last one. That’s what’s so unpleasant. Take this one snail out especially, and it’s such a disturbing, phobic experience. The notion that selection is continuing, going on. Or when I see cattle being transported.<sup>312</sup>

Rothberg’s focuses his study on comparisons between colonialism and the Holocaust and therefore deals with histories which are both traumatic. As such, when he applies screen memory to situations where one might compare colonialism to the Holocaust, he is aware

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<sup>311</sup> Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory*, p.3.

<sup>312</sup> Patterson, *Eternal Treblinka*, p.216. Quotation from Dan Bar-On, *Legacy of Silence: Encounters with the Children of the Third Reich* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), p.25.

that there is an obvious difference between Freud's conception and his use of the term: 'for Freud, screen memories stand in for and distract from something disturbing – either a traumatic event or an illicit, unacknowledged desire. [...] What is odd about Holocaust memory, however, is that such memory hardly seems innocent or comforting'.<sup>313</sup> This is also the case in the doctor's experience of killing snails: rather than hiding memories of selection behind a snail, killing the snail is itself a 'disturbing, phobic experience'. Therefore, multidirectional memory complicates our understanding of what is innocent or disturbing because it does not only function one way.

As in Chapter Two of this thesis, where I explore metaphors in *Beatrice and Virgil*, multidirectional memories prove reciprocal and, as such, one event is not hidden from view but rather viewed in light of another. Rothberg gives another example to highlight this point: there was a development in the collective memory of the Holocaust when France used torture methods during the Algerian War. Later, France started remembering these events in light of the Holocaust comparison.<sup>314</sup> This back-and-forth relationship between paralleled histories and our response to them is characteristic of multidirectional memory, and often leads to some unexpected soul-searching: as Rothberg agrees, 'these examples alert us to the need for a form of comparative thinking that, like memory itself, is not afraid to traverse sacrosanct borders of ethnicity and era'.<sup>315</sup> From the responses offered by Berkowitz and the Nazi doctor, above – and certainly in light of a creaturely poetics – there is a case to argue that 'species' might be added to this list of sacrosanct borders.

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<sup>313</sup> Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory*, p.16.

<sup>314</sup> Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory*, p.17.

<sup>315</sup> Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory*, p.17.

However, despite the multidirectionality provided by this model of screen memory, where the plight of geese and the selection of garden snails remind both victims and perpetrators of their experiences during the Holocaust, the reciprocity of these memories is limited when we consider traversing the borders of species. As Patterson shows, it is possible to trace a shared history of persecution between victims of colonialism, the Holocaust and animal atrocity. However, it remains impossible to access the collective memories of different species. It may be true that some animals have innate senses – a sort of inbuilt, ancestral memory – which determine migration patterns, mating grounds, or graveyards to which they return and die, but this is barely comparable to the collective memories we develop as humans. Rothberg paraphrases one of Maurice Halbwach's theories concerning collective memory, to give an understanding of the context in which he uses the term in *Multidirectional Memory*:

all memories are simultaneously individual and collective: while individual subjects are the necessary locus of the act of remembrance, those individuals are imbued with frameworks common to the collectives in which they live. The frameworks of memory function something like language – they provide a shared medium within which alone individuals can remember or articulate themselves.<sup>316</sup>

In his study *On Collective Memory*, Halbwachs insists that memory is not only an individual act but also and reciprocally a collective one: an individual's memory might disappear if she/he does not recall it with others who share in that memory. Indeed, Halbwachs observes that 'most frequently, we appeal to our memory only in order to answer questions

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<sup>316</sup> Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory*, p.15.

which others have asked us'.<sup>317</sup> With regard to those asking such questions, he continues: 'in order to answer them, we place ourselves in their perspective and we consider ourselves as being part of the same group or groups as they'.<sup>318</sup> This is not only how collective memories are formed, but also collective identities. Therefore, to engage in multidirectional memory one must similarly place ourselves in the perspective of other people, whose individual memories we do not share but whose collective identities are forged from similar patterns of history as our own. To borrow Halbwach's turn of phrase, we must place ourselves in their perspective and recognise ourselves as being part of the same history or histories as they.

Now, despite the fact that Holocaust victims and other persecuted peoples might share similar histories of violence with animals, it remains much more difficult to identify with animals on a similar plane; to 'place ourselves in [their] perspective'. Simone Weil writes extensively on affliction, as explored in Chapter Three, and one quotation proves particularly applicable to Halbwach's writing on collective memory: 'To listen to someone is to put oneself in his place while he is speaking. To put oneself in the place of someone whose soul is corroded by affliction, or in near danger of it, is to annihilate oneself'.<sup>319</sup> Whereas collective memory is identity-forming, identifying with one 'whose soul is corroded by affliction' is identity-destroying. Weil writes about afflicted humans, but our inability to listen to one who is truly afflicted can be applied to animals just as easily, especially as they are speechless. This complicates the idea of multidirectional memory, which seeks to open up avenues of conversation between different groups. Rothberg's key examples – the

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<sup>317</sup> Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, trans. and ed. Lewis A. Coser (London: University of Chicago Press, 1992), p.38.

<sup>318</sup> Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, p.38.

<sup>319</sup> Weil, 'Human Personality', *Anthology* p.91.

Holocaust and colonialism – promote a multidirectional discourse based on shared histories of violence but, although Rothberg considers how individual acts of empathy can channel this discourse, there remains an impasse when considering those groups whose affliction continues today, and especially those groups – such as animals – who are incapable of articulating collective memories as defined by Halbwachs. Individuals such as Berkowitz who have experienced atrocity may be able to *empathise* with animals, but without analysing multidirectional memory through a creaturely prism it is impossible to *identify* with them on collective or reciprocal plains as they cannot contribute to a multidirectional discourse. However, reading *Multidirectional Memory* through a creaturely prism offers a possible way to include animals in this discourse. After all, ‘creaturely life is material and vulnerable and so oriented toward life and not toward destruction’, writes Pick, therefore it seems paradoxical to assume that identifying with these creatures is destructive.<sup>320</sup> That is, it could only be destructive if one’s core sense of identity is based on more than creaturely life.

## II – Eternal Treblinka in ‘The Letter Writer’

*Eternal Treblinka’s* title is taken from a short story by Isaac Bashevis Singer called ‘The Letter Writer’, in which Herman Gombiner – the story’s protagonist – can be seen to lead a creaturely existence. When Singer writes of the food Herman eats or the energy he expends, he does so using the language of bare life, survival and necessity: ‘He had discovered that a human being requires very little. A half cup of milk and a pretzel could suffice for a whole day’; ‘his soul barely survived in his body’.<sup>321</sup> In such a sense, his is indeed

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<sup>320</sup> Pick, *Creaturely Poetics*, p.42.

<sup>321</sup> Isaac Bashevis Singer, ‘The Letter Writer’, trans. Alizah Shevrin and Elizabeth Shub, *Collected Stories* (London: Penguin Classics, 2011), p.253.

creaturely: a 'subject of necessity' as defined by Pick.<sup>322</sup> Herman also has creaturely sensibilities, whereby he 'wouldn't take a bite of meat if his life depended on it' and feels faint when he smells meat and fish from the neighbouring apartments.<sup>323</sup> He considers humans and animals as God's creatures, and in this providential sense he identifies with a mouse which has made his apartment her home. He names this mouse Huldah and considers her not as a worthless creature, but as evidence of a community of mice and, moreover, as a trace of God's work in the universe:

Can there be any greater wonder, Herman thought. Here stands a mouse, a daughter of a mouse, a granddaughter of mice, a product of millions, billions of mice who once lived, suffered, reproduced and are now gone forever, but have left an heir, apparently the last of her line. Here she stands, nourishing herself with food. What does she think about all day in her hole? She must think about something. She does have a mind, a nervous system. She is just as much a part of God's creation as the planets, the stars, the distant galaxies.<sup>324</sup>

Herman's own family are all dead, having been persecuted or murdered during the Holocaust, and there is some trace of empathy in his assumption that Huldah's family also lived and suffered which bonds these creatures together, as well as the idea that providence unites them. They are drawn together in these decidedly non-anthropocentric ways, where all creatures are evidence of God and suffering. Herman's soliloquy prompts us to read 'The Letter Writer' through a creaturely prism which, as defined by Pick, 'recognizes in culture more than the clichéd expression of the "human condition" but an expression of something

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<sup>322</sup> Pick, *Creaturely Poetics*, p.5.

<sup>323</sup> Singer, 'The Letter Writer', pp.253-254.

<sup>324</sup> Singer, 'The Letter Writer', p.264.

*inhuman* as well: the permutations of necessity and materiality that condition and shape human life'.<sup>325</sup> Herman identifies with the mouse because of their shared existence in the world, their shared vulnerability and their shared relation to God. As such, this "identification" is misleading, as it is less true that he identifies with her than that he identifies in her something of himself: a shared creatureliness which deserves his attention.

Attention, as discussed in Chapter Three, is a key mode for Simone Weil through which to respond to the body. Anat Pick quotes Sharon Cameron, who understands Weil's use of attention to mean 'regard without motive'. Cameron clarifies: 'Seeing like this – without identification – is seeing that resists 'reading''.<sup>326</sup> Just so, Herman regards this mouse and the mouse regards him. Herman understands that she must think inside her mouse hole, but he cannot imagine what. He does not assume to read the creature (though he thinks of her as being thankful for the food he leaves), and as such he cannot identify with her on anything more than a bodily plane, and by the knowledge that both he and she have histories of suffering, ancestors, and a God who has created them. When Herman becomes sick with pneumonia he cannot give Huldah the bodily attention she needs to survive, but even at the moment where he believes himself to be dying, she is at the forefront of his mind: 'it's the end, he thought. What will become of Huldah?'<sup>327</sup> This is reminiscent of a scene depicted in *Eternal Treblinka*, where Patterson quotes Aviva Cantor, 'a journalist, Socialist Zionist, feminist, and animal advocate who believes that patriarchy is the root cause of human oppression':

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<sup>325</sup> Pick, *Creaturely Poetics*, p.5.

<sup>326</sup> Sharon Cameron, *Impersonality: Seven Essays* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), pp.115-117.

<sup>327</sup> Singer, 'The Letter Writer', p.267.



Cantor writes about an incident, recalled by Rabbi Michael Weissmandel, which took place in Slovakia during the war: “While being shoved onto a deportation train, a Jew named Itzik Rosenberg called out to his non-Jewish neighbors, who were watching the scene with glee, ‘I beg you – go to my home and feed the geese. They have had nothing to eat or drink all day’.<sup>328</sup>

Like Rosenberg towards his geese, Herman feels responsible for Huldah, to whom he usually gives a saucer of water and cheese. In both cases, it is their own bodily affliction which stops them from giving these creatures what they need to survive. It is clear that both men are concerned for the wellbeing of the creatures, not with selfish motivations but simply because they regard them as deserving of attention.

Just as Herman gives Huldah attention, he receives it from Rose Beechman when he is dying of pneumonia. Rose corresponds with Herman, who offers understanding and support when she claims to speak with her grandmother from beyond the grave. However, Rose and Herman are not well acquainted when she visits him following a sign from her grandmother’s spirit. She has no material purpose for helping Herman, but she is willing and eager to do so, and asks for no repayment when he recovers.<sup>329</sup> When Herman is too weak to feed Huldah he asks Rose to give her a saucer of milk, and she obliges. Still, Herman presumes the mouse dead and considers himself a murderer for not taking care of her.<sup>330</sup> However, when he awakes to see that the mouse is alive he is

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<sup>328</sup> Patterson, *Eternal Treblinka*, pp.163-165. Embedded quotation: Aviva Cantor, *Jewish Women, Jewish Men: The Legacy of Patriarchy in Jewish Life* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1995), p.84.

<sup>329</sup> Singer, ‘The Letter Writer’, p.273.

<sup>330</sup> Singer, ‘The Letter Writer’, p.274.

filled with love both for the mouse and for the woman, Rose Beechman, who had understood his feelings and without question had obeyed his request and given the mouse some milk. “I am not worthy, I am not worthy,” he muttered. “It is all pure Grace.”<sup>331</sup>

Just as aggression can be discharged across the species barrier, and most strongly affects those who are already the most vulnerable (as shown in *The Jungle* and LeDuff’s essay), Singer shows that so too can gratuitous attention. Rose cares for Herman at his most vulnerable, who in turn cares for a vulnerable creature. Herman articulates this attention as ‘love’, and – as discussed in Chapter Three – loving attention is a key theme in Simone Weil’s essay on ‘Human Personality’, where she writes:

Only by the supernatural working of grace can a soul pass through its own annihilation to the place where alone it can get the sort of attention which can attend to truth and to affliction. It is the same attention which listens to both of them. The name of this intense, pure, disinterested, gratuitous, generous attention is love.<sup>332</sup>

Singer’s novel displays the forces named by Weil: supernatural workings, annihilation, grace, attention and love; through Herman’s belief in the occult and Rose’s correspondence with her grandmother, Herman’s nearly fatal pneumonia, and the care and attention which Herman, Rose and possibly Rose’s grandmother offer to creaturely bodies. It is this love – we might call it *caritas* – which fills Herman when he sees that Huldah has survived.

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<sup>331</sup> Singer, ‘The Letter Writer’, p.274.

<sup>332</sup> Weil, ‘Human Personality’, *Anthology*, pp.91-92.

To read 'The Letter Writer' through a creaturely prism, it is important to consider Herman's love for the mouse when re-approaching his eulogy for her. Indeed, before he sees that Huldah has survived, he convinces himself that he has killed her through not giving her enough attention. This passage offers the inspiration for Patterson's title:

"What do they know – all those scholars, all those philosophers, all the leaders of the world – about such as you? They have convinced themselves that man, the worst transgressor of all the species, is the crown of creation. All other creatures were created merely to provide him with food, pelts, to be tormented, exterminated. In relation to them, all people are Nazis; for the animals it is an eternal Treblinka. And yet man demands compassion from heaven."<sup>333</sup>

Immediately, Singer engages with a creaturely poetics: his rhetorical question, 'what do they know', suggests that philosophers divert their attention away from creaturely bodies, choosing instead to philosophise the significance of animals in relation to mankind. This is 'deflection': a term used by Cora Diamond and Anat Pick to identify moments when 'we are moved from the appreciation, or attempt at appreciation, of a difficulty of reality to a philosophical or moral problem apparently in the vicinity'.<sup>334</sup> In this case, the deflection is to convince themselves that man 'is the crown of creation' and, as such, creatures are not only inferior, but purposed to serve mankind: they cannot be afflicted because their suffering makes sense in the context of man's "need" for food, pelts and sport. Up to this point, Herman has not said anything contentious: his eulogy is evidence of a creaturely ethics as he is willing to admit that because of his neglect, the mouse has – so far as he knows – died.

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<sup>333</sup> Singer, 'The Letter Writer', p.271.

<sup>334</sup> Diamond, 'Difficulty of Reality', p.57; Pick, *Creaturely Poetics*, p.10.

This proves to be a difficult reality for Herman. However, the second part of this eulogy is more contentious, and moves this thesis on from the points regarding creatureliness and difficult realities as discussed in Chapter Three.

For measuring the suffering of one mouse against the lives of those who died during the Holocaust seems to trivialise their suffering: it appears to commit to the competitive model of memory, where the suffering of Holocaust victims is outweighed by the 'eternal' suffering of animals. Moreover, to compare all people to Nazis ostensibly accuses innocent people of atrocity, and normalises the atrocity committed by perpetrators. However, re-reading this passage following Herman's joy at seeing Huldah alive changes this reading. Lawrence Friedman argues that his outpouring of love undermines his 'eternal Treblinka' eulogy: 'at some risk of trivializing Herman's epiphany, Singer insists upon juxtaposing the sudden surge of love for Rose with the love for a mouse'.<sup>335</sup> Friedman implies that Herman's outpouring of love is evidence of his confused mind, and that his love for both woman and mouse in equal measure is unrealistic. He argues that Singer specifically juxtaposes Herman's relationship with the mouse and the woman, which in turn shows up his comparison between animal cruelty and the Holocaust as unfounded and even delusional. However, Anat Pick argues that there is no evidence to support the idea that Singer mocks Herman for his feelings:

nothing in ['The Letter Writer'] suggests that Herman's love for the mouse is more "trivial" or silly than, say, his belief in the occult or Rose's insistence that her dead grandmother speaks to her. To argue as much is to misrecognize the

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<sup>335</sup> Lawrence S. Friedman, *Understanding Isaac Bashevis Singer* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1988), p.211.

peculiarities of Singer's universe, in which shtetl humor and fairy-tale elements fuse with modernist mores, and where the Holocaust acts as an irrevocable cosmic intervention<sup>336</sup>

Here, Pick argues that Singer has coloured the lens through which we read this story, such that we should not ridicule the love Herman feels for Huldah. Herman's family was killed during the Holocaust, so Pick argues we must read 'The Letter Writer' as a work of Holocaust Literature, which demands a different reading from other works of literature. Moreover, Singer's stories often employ magical realism and it is common for his characters to receive visits from devils or spirits, meaning that what Pick terms the 'fairy-tale' elements of the story – Rose's grandmother, Herman's belief in the occult or even his relationship with a mouse – should not be read entirely through a realist prism. As such, Herman's comparison between animal suffering and the Holocaust is not straightforward, and therefore cannot immediately be said to commit to a competitive model of ethics, but requires a more complex reading which takes into consideration literary tropes and conventions associated with Holocaust fiction and magical realism.

First and foremost, these considerations demand definitions of 'magical realism' and 'Holocaust fiction'. William Spindler suggests that magical realism is employed in 'texts where two contrasting views of the world (one "rational" and one "magical") are presented as if they were not contradictory'.<sup>337</sup> Spindler's definition is useful not only because he states that the strands of magic and realism might interweave, but because he locates these strands in the context of a story: they are '*presented as if they were not contradictory*' (my

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<sup>336</sup> Pick, *Creaturely Poetics*, p.49.

<sup>337</sup> William Spindler, 'Magical Realism: A Typology', *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, 29 (1993), p.78.

italics). Friedman's analysis, above, argues that Singer juxtaposes Herman's love for the mouse and for the woman, but in the context of a story where love can be so strong it reaches beyond the grave (Rose's grandmother draws her from Kentucky to New York to visit Herman), this love is not contradictory. Indeed, in the prologue to her biography on Isaac Bashevis Singer, Janet Hadda acknowledges that 'witnessing aspects of Bashevis's life has made his fiction, even at its most bizarre, authentic and believable to [her]'.<sup>338</sup> In this sense, 'The Letter Writer's' magical realist qualities do not contradict its worldliness, as Singer's life and especially his family's ties with the Holocaust makes this style of writing no less realistic than others which try and fail to gesture towards overwhelming tropes such as love or atrocity. With this in mind, 'The Letter Writer' may also be considered Holocaust fiction: it is not set during the Holocaust but draws upon it in both literal and symbolic senses.

Herman's family have been murdered in the Holocaust, which means that it casts a shadow over the narrative, especially considering Herman's solitudinous and bare living conditions. In a more symbolic sense, Herman's appearance is evocative of the *Muselmann* in Holocaust testimonies, which is a point Anat Pick picks up on in her analysis of 'The Letter Writer' as a creaturely text: 'When Rose cares for the dying Herman, she is helping the one who, like the *Muselmann*, does not ask for help, who is very nearly beyond help'.<sup>339</sup>

*Muselmann*, the figures whom Primo Levi identifies as making up the backbone of the Nazi camps, were recognised for their state of existing between life and death.<sup>340</sup> However, more than this, Giorgio Agamben argues that 'the *Muselmann* is not only or not so much a

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<sup>338</sup> Hadda, *Isaac Bashevis Singer*, p.14.

<sup>339</sup> Pick, *Creaturely Poetics*, p.49.

<sup>340</sup> Levi, *If This Is a Man – The Truce*, p.96.

limit between life and death; rather, he marks the threshold between the human and the inhuman'.<sup>341</sup> Here, Agamben does not argue that these victims were stripped of their humanity (he recognises that that 'would be to accept the verdict of the SS and to repeat their gesture'), but rather that their harsh conditions unveiled a layer of their humanity which might not have been exposed before: a veil which we share with inhuman creatures.<sup>342</sup> Combining the magical realist and Holocaust tropes in Singer's fiction, 'The Letter Writer' provides a platform from which Singer can explore conflicting ideas concerning the human and the inhuman (where the category of 'inhuman' includes both Herman and the mouse). Where other genres may expose a paradox in the concept of a person being at once human and inhuman, the magical realist space allows conflicting ideas to flourish without contradiction, and its connection to the Holocaust exposes a difficult reality where human beings were turned into *Muselmanner*, who marked 'the threshold between the human and the inhuman'. Analysing 'The Letter Writer' as a realist text means that these contradictions are exposed as farcical, and the love Herman feels towards a mouse might trivialise his love for a fellow human; but analysing it as a work of magical realist, Holocaust fiction encourages a more creaturely reading, where his love for a mouse does not contradict his humanity, but actually exposes it.

It is significant that Herman's eulogy directly follows his recovery: Huldah's life is the first thing he remembers upon waking from fevered sleep. Herman cannot help but to contrast his present state with Huldah's: "'She is surely dead,'" he said to himself. "Dead of hunger and thirst!" He felt a great shame. He had recovered.'<sup>343</sup> This sense of shame is

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<sup>341</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (New York: Zone Books, 2002), p.55.

<sup>342</sup> Agamben, *Remnants*, p.63.

<sup>343</sup> Singer 'The Letter Writer', p.271.

common to Holocaust survivors. Like Herman, the deaths of others was not their fault, but there was a prevalent feeling that one victim died in place of another. Agamben explains this sense of shame: 'everyone dies and lives in place of another, without reason or meaning; the camp is the place in which no one can truly die or survive in his own place'.<sup>344</sup> In other words, after reaching a point where your perceived humanity was unravelled to reveal a creaturely body, there is an eternal shame over your vulnerability which continues throughout the recovery of those identifiable layers. Singer contrasts these two sentences: 'He felt a great shame. He had recovered.' Perhaps Herman's shame partly exists because he believes he recovers in place of Huldah; certainly much of his shame stems from the fact that he had not fed her and so, in some sense, he was responsible for her death; but the fact that 'The Letter Writer' remains a work of Holocaust fiction may also suggest that Herman's shame is rooted in his survival as a creature.

This theory would fit with Agamben's analysis of survivor shame, which he describes as timeless.<sup>345</sup> Timelessness is key to understanding 'The Letter Writer' and specifically Herman's eulogy because of his reference to an 'eternal' Treblinka, which so names Patterson's text. A survivor who has recovered her/his humanity may experience eternal shame remembering their creatureliness which the Holocaust laid bare. Just so, a survivor's traumatic memories of the Holocaust might outstrip everyday reality. Agamben quotes Primo Levi to highlight this point, whose memories of the Holocaust pursue him in the present, and whose nightmares insist that Auschwitz unveiled a deeper reality:

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<sup>344</sup> Agamben, *Remnants*, p.104.

<sup>345</sup> Agamben, *Remnants*, p.103



I know that I've always known it: I am once again in the camp, and nothing outside the camp was true. The rest – family, flowering nature, home – was a brief respite, a trick of the senses. Now this inner dream, this dream of peace, is over; and [...] the outer dream [...] continues relentlessly[.]<sup>346</sup>

This quotation may document Levi's dream, but this dream is just as real as Levi's waking world: it reminds him – just as survivors are reminded that they are creaturely bodies – that the world of Auschwitz is embedded in reality. It may be tempting to redress one's humanity, as it may be tempting to recall a peaceful life, but after Auschwitz Levi finds this impossible. His sleeping world, where he is back in the camps, is more real than the façade of wakefulness, and in this sense the Holocaust pursues him eternally.

This is mirrored in 'The Letter Writer' through Herman, but – as with a mirror image – Singer reverses expectations: Herman is a survivor, but he appears more like a *Muselmann*; unlike Levi's vivid memories, Herman's feverish dreams draw him in with the promise of forgetfulness; finally, and most significantly, I argue that he is not ashamed of his unveiled creatureliness but of his unshakable humanity.<sup>347</sup> Anat Pick identifies the first of these reversals in her *Creaturely Poetics*, where she writes that 'in his anorectic-apathetic state Herman resembles not the archetypal survivor but that other central figure of the Holocaust, the *Muselmann*'.<sup>348</sup> She draws upon his appearance as 'a short man, in oversized pajamas, emaciated to skin and bone'; his 'tremors' and his sense of having lived through death: 'a corpse returning from its own funeral'.<sup>349</sup> Singer attends to this *Muselmann* in his

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<sup>346</sup> Agamben, *Remnants*, p.101. A slightly different translation can be found in Levi, *If This Is a Man – The Truce*, p.379.

<sup>347</sup> Herman's sleepfulness causes him to immediately forget reality: Singer, 'The Letter Writer', p.268.

<sup>348</sup> Pick, *Creaturely*, p.49.

<sup>349</sup> Pick, *Creaturely*, p.49.

story, where magical realist tropes allow for such a liminal figure – so often portrayed in Holocaust testimonies as silent and afflicted, waiting to die – to survive and to speak. Furthermore, Herman’s dreams are not those of a survivor but similar to Levi’s other documented dream where he is in Auschwitz. Here, Levi notes that many other inmates have the same dream: they tell family and friends about their experiences but their audience is ‘completely indifferent: they speak confusedly of other things amongst themselves’.<sup>350</sup> Similarly, Herman dreams of his family quarrelling over a straw basket and a comb, and marvels that they should find such mundane objects so important.<sup>351</sup> In both cases, the dreamer’s life is in the balance, Levi’s because he is in constant fear of being murdered and Herman’s because he is suffering near-fatal pneumonia, yet the subjects of their dreams are preoccupied with far more trivial matters. Items like baskets and combs are items used exclusively by humans, far from the lives of creaturely necessity Levi and Herman are used to. The preoccupations of their family and friends are superficial, and provide a screen from the realities of vulnerability and death.

As quoted with regard to *Multidirectional Memory*, screen memory allows for a victim to remember one event in place of another, more traumatic one:

Freud determines that the banal memory of the everyday life is in fact a *screen memory*, “one that owes its value as a memory not to its intrinsic content, but to the relation obtaining between this content and some other, which has been suppressed. [...] The mechanism of screen memory thus illustrates concretely how a kind of forgetting accompanies acts of remembrance.”<sup>352</sup>

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<sup>350</sup> Levi, *If This is a Man - The Truce*, p.66.

<sup>351</sup> Singer, ‘The Letter Writer’, p.266.

<sup>352</sup> Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory*, p.13.

In Herman's case, his family have died and their spirits' obsession with superficial objects is 'too ridiculous', especially considering that they died in the Holocaust.<sup>353</sup> Arguably, they screen off their trauma by fighting over 'banal memor[ies] of everyday life'. Similarly, when Levi dreams that his relatives ignore him, his story is so traumatic as to be unbelievable: to believe it would be world-shattering so they choose to screen it off. However, this screening is not so simple: it is a willed forgetting used as a protection mechanism and therefore involves a simultaneous denial and acceptance of the event. This is similar to the feelings of shame felt by many Holocaust survivors. As discussed, these survivors often feel ashamed because they have lived through death and, as such, they know what it is to have their humanity stripped down to bare creatureliness. The more of their identity they can recover (the more that superficial objects like combs or baskets seem to cover up their creatureliness) the more they are aware that these items are not identity-forming, but actually identity-screening. Banal, everyday items at once build back preconceived ideas of humanity, and confirm that underneath it all is a vulnerable creature: 'for if the Holocaust proves anything at all, it is that Jewish (and other) bodies are animal bodies'.<sup>354</sup> Similar to a screen which touches upon two events – the event remembered and the event "screened off" – shame is 'what is produced in the absolute concomitance of subjectification and desubjectification, self-loss and self-possession'; in other words, it is produced in the space between memory and forgetfulness of the creaturely body.<sup>355</sup>

Just as Singer reverses our expectation of Herman as an archetypal Holocaust survivor, so too he reverses Herman's sense of shame. I posited above that, as 'The Letter

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<sup>353</sup> Singer, 'The Letter Writer', p.266.

<sup>354</sup> Pick, *Creaturely*, p.51.

<sup>355</sup> Agamben, *Remnants*, p.107.

Writer' is a work of Holocaust Literature, Herman's shame ostensibly stems from this simultaneous memory and forgetfulness of his creaturely body. However, much more evidence suggests that Herman's shame rather stems from his identity as a human, despite living a bare and creaturely existence. Indeed, he is at ease in his vulnerable body and accepts his bare life: even when he is on the threshold of death, he accepts his lot and asks for no help in his prayers.<sup>356</sup> He understands that his 'sleepiness had transformed him into a helpless creature' and it is significant that, in his eulogy to Huldah, he speaks of men and 'other creatures', which suggests he also considers humans to be creaturely.<sup>357</sup> However, he still sets mankind apart as 'the worst transgressor of all the species' for the atrocities they commit on each other and animals. It is clear that Herman speaks of mankind's transgression not from human to creature, but rather from creature to human. This is why, after his eulogy, he begs to die: 'Herman clapped his hand to his mouth, "I mustn't live, I mustn't! I can no longer be a part of it! God in heaven – take me away!"<sup>358</sup> As a human, Herman identifies with other transgressors, 'Asmodeous, Hitler, and Stalin', who have used others for their own gain.<sup>359</sup> From this collective, human identity he cannot detach himself, and as such he is filled with shame.

If it seems hyperbolic that Herman should be so moved by a mouse, or so consumed with the shame of his collective species, it is because 'The Letter Writer' gestures towards infinity at every turn. The 'eternal Treblinka' so often quoted is only one such example, where others include references to God, the cosmos and Herman's belief that we are all tied to one another through the life we share:

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<sup>356</sup> Singer, 'The Letter Writer', p.267.

<sup>357</sup> Singer, 'The Letter Writer', pp.268, 271.

<sup>358</sup> Singer, 'The Letter Writer', pp.271-272.

<sup>359</sup> Singer, 'The Letter Writer', p.271.

'He believed there was life in everything'.

He believes 'in psychic powers and in the world beyond'.

"It is predestined that no *human* institution will last forever." [my italics]

'This particular day, this very date would never return again, unless Nietzsche was right in his theory about the eternal return. Even if one did believe that time was imaginary, this day was finished, like the flipped page of a book. It had passed into the archives of eternity'.

'The steam seemed to speak in the pipes, consoling Herman: "You are not alone, you are an element of the universe, a child of God, an integral part of Creation. Your suffering is God's suffering, your yearning His yearning. Everything is right. Let the Truth be revealed to you, and you will be filled with joy."

'Here stands a mouse, a daughter of a mouse, a granddaughter of mice, a product of millions, billions of mice who once lived [...]. She is just as much a part of God's creation as the planets, the stars, the distant galaxies'.

'Memory itself demonstrates that there is no oblivion'.

'What was the connection between the molecules in New York and the molecules in Kalomin?'

"Each day begins with amnesia."<sup>360</sup>

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<sup>360</sup> Singer, 'The Letter Writer', pp. 251, 255, 259, 263, 263-264, 264, 365, 265, 274.

Listing these references to eternity in 'The Letter Writer' does not only contextualise the 'eternal Treblinka' quotation within a grander narrative which gestures towards the infinite; it also locates this concept within three further capacities: memory, the interconnectedness of all things, and God. The above quotations, particularly Singer's reference to Nietzsche's eternal return, reveal how these capacities may channel a multidirectional, creaturely ethics, especially when situated in Singer's magical realist, Holocaust fiction. For the quotation above which begins 'This particular day' suggests two contrasting lines of thought regarding the concept of return. The first half of the quotation is evocative of Paul Celan's Meridian speech, where he discusses art as an eternal problem, its relation to the creature and the artist, and – specifically evoked here – the significance of a date from and towards which the poet writes. The second half explicitly draws upon Nietzsche's concept of eternal return, which Giorgio Agamben analyses in relation to the Holocaust in *Remnants of Auschwitz*. Eternity is the common trope between these two meditations, which is further explored in 'The Letter Writer' and, by extension, *Eternal Treblinka*.

Paul Celan's Meridian speech approaches ideas about art's purpose and its relation to the author, the world and creatures, so even though Singer does not reference it explicitly in his short story, a brief comparative reading illuminates similar themes between Celan's ideas on eternity in art and poetry, and 'The Letter Writer'. Celan delivered this speech upon receiving the Georg Büchner Prize for Poetry. In it, he refers to Büchner as 'the poet of the creature' and continues to use his oeuvre to highlight how the artist or poet might work in relation to creatures. Celan believes that art should be 'put next to the creature as God made it' and the 'nothing this creature is wearing'.<sup>361</sup> Here, Celan highlights

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<sup>361</sup> Celan, 'Meridian', p.38

the duty of art to stand up against the impenetrable, bodily reality of the creature. There must be an element within art which is aware both of its distance from this reality, and its dependence upon it. Indeed, Celan explains how an artist must take an imaginary step beyond the human world into a world where the artist – not himself but an uncanny version of the artist – and the creatures are at home.<sup>362</sup> This could be illustrated in ‘The Letter Writer’: Herman is not an uncanny projection of Singer, but they do bare striking resemblances as both are vegetarian Jews of the same era. As well as this, the world of ‘The Letter Writer’ seems similar to the human world in which we live, but the magical realist tropes such as Rose’s correspondence with her grandmother, Herman’s belief in the occult and his identification with a mouse, show how Herman’s world is uncanny to Singer’s. This is further evocative of Celan’s speech, as he wishes his poems to become ‘the poem[s] of a person who still perceives, still turns towards phenomena’.<sup>363</sup> The uncanny projection of the poet is one who questions the world as if much of it were a mystery. Similarly, Herman, who ‘believed there was life in everything’, ‘considered himself to be among the select few privileged to see beyond the façade of phenomena’.<sup>364</sup> He speaks to the mouse, even to his soap, as if it were a living thing. Indeed, he pays everything its due attention, and Celan defines such attention as ‘the natural prayer of the soul’.<sup>365</sup> Next, Celan’s focus shifts from the creature to the author. There must be a recognised distance between the poem (or in Singer’s case, short story) and the real world: the poem must at once contain its author and move beyond her/him. Magical realism can gesture towards this movement, as the created

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<sup>362</sup> Celan, ‘Meridian’, pp.42-43.

<sup>363</sup> Celan, ‘Meridian’, p.50.

<sup>364</sup> Singer, ‘The Letter Writer’, p.251.

<sup>365</sup> Celan, ‘Meridian’, p.50.

world contrasts with reality without contradicting it. Celan highlights these thoughts through his analysis of dates.

This is where Celan's Meridian speech best compares to Nietzsche's eternal return, yet seems more applicable to a post-Holocaust era. He writes that 'every poem is marked by its own 20<sup>th</sup> January'.<sup>366</sup> 20<sup>th</sup> January 1942 is the date of the Wannsee Conference, where the Final Solution to the Jewish question was confirmed, leading to the extermination of European Jews including Celan's parents. This date holds unspeakable significance for Celan, who writes from and towards such a date: from, because it is his tragedy, and towards because his poetry aims to transport future readers to such a date, which may hold significance both for them and for the poet. In this vein, Celan writes that a poem must be 'mindful of its dates', and continues:

I think [...] that the poem has always hoped, for this very reason, to speak also on behalf of the [...] *altogether other*. [...] Perhaps an encounter is conceivable between this 'altogether other' [...] and a not so very distant, a quite close 'other' [...]. The poem takes such thoughts for its home and hope – a word for living creatures.<sup>367</sup>

The future of the poem is determined by an 'altogether other' whom the poet cannot know. This may be a future reader of the poem, and Celan must trust that, despite being an 'altogether other', the reader might have a conceivable encounter with the uncanny poet within his poem. The future of this poem is entrusted into the hands of an altogether other who must also be mindful of its dates: in other words, the future of the poem is dependent

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<sup>366</sup> Celan, 'Meridian', p.47

<sup>367</sup> Celan, 'Meridian', p.48.



on the future of memory. These thoughts encompass the hopes of the poet who writes such a poem, yet they are also the place from which the poet writes. As such, they foreground an eternal return and, moreover, it is an eternal return dependent on the multidirectionality of memory. Indeed, the encounter may be between the uncanny poet and an altogether other, from an altogether different time, place and history.

For Celan, 20<sup>th</sup> January 1942 is a marked date not only because it is the date from which he writes and towards which future readers might turn, but because it may be the first date of its kind. Agamben touches upon a similar idea in *Remnants of Auschwitz*, where he argues that Nietzsche's concept of eternal return is foreclosed by the Holocaust. In this extensive quotation, Agamben outlines Nietzsche's concept and explains why it fails in the face of Auschwitz:

Zarathustra teaches men to will backward, to desire that everything repeat itself. [...] The eternal return is above all a victory over resentment, the possibility of willing what has taken place, transforming every "it was" into a "thus I wanted it to be" – *amor fati*.

Auschwitz also marks a decisive rupture in this respect. Let us imagine repeating the experiment that Nietzsche, under the heading "The Heaviest Weight," proposes in *The Gay Science*. "One day or one night," a demon glides beside a survivor and asks: "Do you want Auschwitz to return again and again, innumerable times, do you want every instant, every single detail of the camp to repeat itself for eternity, returning eternally in the same precise sequence in which they took place? Do you want this to happen again, again and again for

eternity?" This simple reformulation of the experiment suffices to refute it beyond all doubt, excluding the possibility of it even being proposed.

Yet this failure of twentieth-century ethics does not depend on the fact that what happened at Auschwitz is too atrocious for anyone ever to wish for its repetition and to love it as destiny. [For Primo Levi, at least] the impossibility of wanting Auschwitz to return for eternity has another, different root, one which implies a new, unprecedented ontological consistency of what has taken place.

*One cannot want Auschwitz to return for eternity, since in truth it has never ceased to take place; it is always already repeating itself.*<sup>368</sup>

Agamben draws on Primo Levi's dream, not from when he is in Auschwitz and dreams of going back home, but from when he is back home and dreams that he has never left Auschwitz. This leads Agamben to discuss the eternal shame of survivors who cannot forget their essential creatureliness. Levi could not overcome his creatureliness even if he were to go back and repeat Auschwitz day after day because it is not something which can be overcome: it is something which was exposed as a reality. As such, everything which follows his experience is marked by this reality: even life outside the camp is viewed through the lens of a creaturely survivor. This is also a way in which Celan is marked by 20<sup>th</sup> January.

Celan's model of eternal return is multidirectional, where Nietzsche's is not.

Nietzsche conceptualises eternity by repeating one event endlessly. This involves going back to the same time and the same place in order to gain mastery over it. On the other hand, Celan gestures towards eternity by marking a date within his poetry. This means the poem

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<sup>368</sup> Agamben, *Remnants*, pp.99-101.

carries Celan within it, but also speaks on behalf of others: the other which may be an uncanny projection of himself, but also the ‘altogether others’ whom Celan has never met. Celan conceptualises this eternity as a ‘meridian’: ‘something as immaterial as language, yet earthly, terrestrial, in the shape of a circle which, via both poles, rejoins itself and on the way serenely crosses even the tropics’.<sup>369</sup> This meridian passes through Celan but moves on to pass through endless numbers of other spaces. In other words, it is multidirectional: ‘subject to ongoing negotiation, cross-referencing, and borrowing’.<sup>370</sup> This is mirrored in ‘The Letter Writer’ when Herman identifies the interconnectedness of all things, such as his thoughts on the similarities between ice crystals in New York and crystals in Kalomin, where he spent his childhood. The one reminds him of the other, crossing both time and space. Similarly, Herman’s letters, which he sends to unknown recipients, are like messages in a bottle: an image Celan uses elsewhere to describe how poetry is sent over time and space to an ‘altogether other’, whom, he hopes, receives them in the spirit of compassion. Herman’s letters and Celan’s poetry cross the meridian in the hopeful ‘belief that somewhere and sometime it could wash up on land, on heartland perhaps’.<sup>371</sup> In Herman’s case, his letter reaches Rose who – in the spirit of gratuitous attention – nurses him back to health, allowing him to care for Huldah.

The image of one person sending letters across the globe in the hope for a compassionate encounter with others is once more evocative of Rothberg’s multidirectional ethics which ‘combines the open-endedness of the universal with the concrete, situational demands of the particular’. Moreover, Agamben’s model of eternity – through Levi and

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<sup>369</sup> Celan, ‘Meridian’, p.55.

<sup>370</sup> Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory*, p.3.

<sup>371</sup> Paul Celan, quoted in: John Felstiner, *Paul Celan: Poet, Survivor, Jew* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001), p.115

impressed upon Herman – creates fidelity ‘in the sense given that term by Alain Badiou’s *Ethics*’.<sup>372</sup> As discussed, Badiou understands fidelity as remaining true to an ethical decision following an unprecedented event. Now, the fact that Holocaust victims were stripped down to a vulnerable, creaturely body cannot be considered an ‘ethical decision’, and nor can they remain truthful to this state when, for them, the Holocaust has never ceased to take place: it has simply become an unescapable reality. However, Herman chooses to embrace his creatureliness and makes ethical decisions by remaining true to his shared vulnerability with other creatures. Presumably this is why he donates money to Palestine: his shared identity as a creature outweighs his collective, Jewish identity, which means he offers support to those who are most vulnerable, irrespective of geographical or ideological identities.<sup>373</sup> Similarly, Herman gives loving attention to Huldah despite (or because of) the fact that she is a mouse. As a result of Herman’s multidirectional, creaturely ethics, Herman speaks a eulogy for Huldah in which he compares the plight of animals to an ‘eternal Treblinka’. Previously, I questioned whether this fits a competitive model of memory, whereby Herman suggests that animal cruelty is more atrocious than the Holocaust. However, in the spirit of shared creatureliness and the interconnectedness of all things, Herman combines the open-endedness of universal, animal suffering with his own, particular demands as a human animal. Indeed, for him too, the Holocaust has never ceased to take place: he appears as the archetypal *Muselmann* and his murdered family visit him in his dreams.

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<sup>372</sup> Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory*, p.22.

<sup>373</sup> Singer, ‘The Letter Writer’, p.263.

Yet, despite being a victim himself, he cannot escape his connection as a human being to Nazi perpetrators: 'in relation to [animals], all people are Nazis'.<sup>374</sup> Herman at once identifies with the mouse through their shared creatureliness, and recognises human-animal distinctions between them. In favour of a multidirectional ethics, Michael Rothberg argues that finding common ground between two groups should never come at the expense of their individual identities: 'Shared histories of racism, special segregation, genocide [etcetera], provide the grounds for new forms of collectivity that would not ignore equally powerful histories of division and difference'.<sup>375</sup> This seems applicable to Herman who at once identifies and distances himself from Huldah; however, in this case this simultaneous identification and division puts Herman's identity in crisis: he is at once human, as were Nazi perpetrators, and creature, as were their victims. The powerful human-animal histories of division and difference seem incompatible with their shared histories of creatureliness and, as such, Herman feels ashamed of his collective, human identity. To see beyond this crisis, Herman needs a revelation, which he experiences by the end of this short story: Rose agrees to stay with Herman and bear his burden; Huldah has survived; a new day begins and he awakes to familiar sounds of humans, animals, and even inanimate objects (in which Herman believes there is life). The final image in 'The Letter Writer' is of Herman's books bathed in morning light and, as everything interconnects, 'it all had the quality of a revelation'.<sup>376</sup>

This closing tableau suggests that Herman's identity crisis is put to rest: the story does not end with the idea of an eternal Treblinka dividing humans and animals, but rather

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<sup>374</sup> Singer, 'The Letter Writer', p.271.

<sup>375</sup> Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory*, p.23.

<sup>376</sup> Singer, 'The Letter Writer', p.276.

with transcendental unity between all things. In *Gravity and Grace*, Simone Weil writes about the revelatory powers of attention whereby the whole self is given over to the attention of another:

‘The most commonplace truth when it floods *the whole soul*, is like a revelation’.

‘Attention, taken to its highest degree, is the same thing as a prayer’.

‘Attention alone – that attention which is so full that the ‘I’ disappears – is required of me’.

‘The poet produces the beautiful by fixing his attention on something real. It is the same with the act of love. To know that this man who is hungry and thirsty really exists as much as I do – that is enough, the rest follows of itself’.<sup>377</sup>

The gratuitous, loving attention Herman both receives and gives brings him out of his identity crisis, not because he has lost sight of who he is but because he has given himself over to the full attention of another being. As a result, he is ‘filled with love both for the mouse and for the woman’, and sees all three as existing together in attentive harmony: “It is all pure Grace”, he says.<sup>378</sup> Singer focuses on creaturely bodies in his short story: Herman recognises that Huldah exists as much as he does and, as a result, gives her the care and attention she needs; so too, Rose attends to Herman. As I wrote at the end of section I, above, it may be impossible to put oneself in the place of an animal, but by recognising its worth as a fellow creature and giving it full attention, identity beyond creatureliness ceases to matter. Singer produces the beautiful by fixing his attention on something real – that is –

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<sup>377</sup> Weil, ‘Attention and Will’, *Anthology*, pp.231, 232, 233, 234.

<sup>378</sup> Singer, ‘The Letter Writer’, p.274.

the shared vulnerability of bodies. As such, it can be said that 'The Letter Writer' gestures towards a creaturely poetics. Moreover, as Singer tropes creatureliness through the interconnectedness of all things, it can also be said that 'The Letter Writer' adheres to a multidirectional ethics, and it is this ethics, rather than a competitive one, in which he, and subsequently Patterson, writes of an 'eternal Treblinka'.

### *Conclusion*

*Eternal Treblinka: Our Treatment of Animals and the Holocaust* may seem to suggest that Patterson adheres to a competitive model of ethics, whereby our treatment of animals is far worse than the treatment of Jewish people under the Nazi regime. However, instead of adhering to this competitive model of ethics, which would be contentious at best, Patterson focuses his content on the interconnected legacies of force which are discharged from humans to animals. Not only does he argue that animal cruelty can lead directly to genocide, as through Henry Ford, but also that Holocaust victims often turn to animal activism because they understand what it is to be treated like an animal, as if having their identity stripped down to its bare creatureliness is an excuse for further violence. Some survivors, such as Marc Berkowitz, stand up for animal rights because they empathise with victims of animal abuse and, as such, argue that their relative treatments are comparable to one another.

In 'The Holocaust and the Henmaid's Tale', Karen Davis also makes a case for comparing atrocities. Her argument generally fits Rothberg's model for multidirectional memory, whereby one event can be remembered in light of another:

When the oppression of one group is used metaphorically to illuminate the oppression of another group, justice requires that the oppression that forms the basis of the comparison be comprehended in its own right. The originating oppression that generates the metaphor must not be treated as a mere figure of speech, a mere point of reference. It must not be treated illogically as a lesser matter than that which it is being used to draw attention to.<sup>379</sup>

Davis' use of the term 'justice' in this context encapsulates the tone of much of Patterson's text, where both humans and animals are shown to be treated cruelly albeit legally. In *The Jungle*, for instance, Rudkus is victimised by a capitalist society. He protests the injustice of his situation and compares himself to a hog at the killing plant, but those who abuse him do so within the scope of the law, just as the hogs are processed cruelly but legally. Yet, Rudkus does not seem to consider the dual implications of comparing himself to a hog. By including Sinclair's socialist text as a key reference point in *Eternal Treblinka*, Patterson seems to suggest that the originating oppression, in this case the slaughter of the hog in such dire conditions, not only mirrors but foregrounds the inhumane treatment of Rudkus. This is similar to Cary Wolfe's choice to include LeDuff's essay in *Zoontologies*, despite the fact that its focus is on racial segregation in the workhouse. In both texts, the implication is that a system of justice which starts at the bottom of the chain of oppression might discharge compassion, rather than force, further up.

Davis' text is similar to Patterson's not only in discipline but also because the title of 'The Henmaid's Tale' is literary. In Davis' case, the referenced text is Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*: a dystopic fiction in which women are used for their function as

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<sup>379</sup> Davis, 'The Holocaust and the Henmaid's Tale', p.4



mothers, which Attwood compares to the treatment of hens. On the other hand, Patterson's text references 'The Letter Writer': a magical realist, Holocaust fiction in the form of a short story by Isaac Bashevis Singer. In both *The Handmaid's Tale* and 'The Letter Writer', the fictional space (and especially the magical realist space in Singer's story) allows the authors to create a world which is at once contrasts to our own without contradicting it. In the case of 'The Letter Writer', the story's magical realism allows for fantastical relationships to bloom, such as Rose's correspondence to her grandmother and Herman's deep (and non-farcical) love for a mouse. Here, Pick's analysis of Simone Weil's oeuvre, and especially her work on injustice, can be applied to Singer's story, where 'the material and the supernatural meet [...] in the reality of vulnerable bodies whose oppression is not a crime against humanity but a violation of the sacred'.<sup>380</sup> It is in such a sense that Herman cannot stand the thought of Huldah dying of starvation: she is a part of God's cosmos every bit as much as he, and as such her creaturely body is sacred. It is by paying this sacred body full attention, and by believing in the interconnectedness of all things, that Herman experiences something comparable to a revelation by the end of the story.

By displacing Singer's quotation from its context in a work of fiction into the title of a historical text, Patterson risks oversimplifying the story's message, therefore seeming to set up his text as competitive and contentious. It is at odds with the historicist focus of Patterson's text and therefore the title may be considered in the same vein as Lawrence Friedman's analysis of Herman's love for Huldah: hyperbolic and, as such, a trivialisation of the text's message. However, Patterson's choice can be read in a more forgiving light. As Paul Celan suggests, a poem – as a work of the utmost attention – is as a message in a

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<sup>380</sup> Pick, *Creaturely Poetics*, p.48.

bottle, sent out into the world to at once speak on behalf of the author and its unknown recipient. The poet must dare to hope that the message reaches a compassionate hand. In a similar way, Herman sends letters across the globe and one finds its way into the hands of Rose Beecham, who nurses him to health; so too Patterson reads 'The Letter Writer' and takes from it a creaturely message applicable to his own life and work. In the spirit of multidirectionality and creatureliness, there is reason to hope that this message will continue on its meridian journey to influence others and demand their attention.

## Conclusion

This thesis has engaged with comparisons made between the Holocaust and animal cruelty, and suggests that literature which gestures towards a multidirectional, creaturely poetics may be the best form through which to compare these, and other, atrocities. In Chapter One, I analysed a sample of Holocaust testimonies for examples where the authors compared themselves, their perpetrators or their situations to animals. Although I split this chapter into sections which analysed the use of different species in testimonies, there remained many similarities between the species and what they signified, such as vulnerability or a perceived sense of inhumanity. This sense of inhumanity is undercut by the sheer number of animal comparisons made, which implies that inhumanity is, paradoxically, a common characteristic of humans: when social conventions, individuality, self-restraint or dignity are removed, the human remains in a bare and barely recognisable state. Taking this as the key point of Chapter One, Chapter Two went on to explore the idea of a shared creatureliness between humans and other animals, where creatureliness can either be accessed through an anthropocentric mode (as outlined by Santner) or gestured towards in literature which seeks to move beyond anthropocentrism (Pick). I explored these theories by applying both to Yann Martel's *Beatrice and Virgil*, which also allowed me to touch upon how fiction can use tropes such as metatextuality and metaphor to compare atrocities through a creaturely prism. As Chapter Two concluded that Pick's model of creatureliness is more applicable to this thesis, Chapter Three moved forward using this model to analyse *Disgrace* and *Elizabeth Costello*, both by J. M. Coetzee, as texts which gesture towards a creaturely poetics. One key difference between these novels is the protagonists' relation to literature: where Lurie gives up his profession and lives a creaturely

existence despite himself, Costello cannot escape her authorial roots despite her willingness to engage with other animals on a creaturely plane. Therefore, this chapter allowed me to explore the difficulties involved in representing creatureliness in works of fiction, especially due to the fact that literature narrativises difficult realities and therefore may deflect from them. In my fourth and final chapter, I analysed *Eternal Treblinka* as a work of non-fiction which engages with animal cruelty in comparison with the Holocaust, and 'The Letter Writer' as the short story from which Patterson took his title. This allowed me to compare, contrast and connect the presentation of creatureliness as a multidirectional ethics in fiction and non-fiction. Rothberg's concept of multidirectionality offered an excellent justification for reading Holocaust literature as a creaturely poetics, which brought me back to the idea explored in Chapter One that inhumanity is a common trope in literatures of atrocity. As such, this thesis concludes that reading Holocaust literature as a creaturely poetics allows each atrocity to be remembered through the due attention, memorialisation and literatures of others.

Despite the fact that this thesis suggests applying a multidirectional, creaturely mode of comparison across any number of different groups' histories of persecution, its focus on the Holocaust and animals is not merely paradigmatic. Michael Rothberg justifies his use of the Holocaust as central to *Multidirectional Memory* by positing that 'there is probably no other single event that encapsulates the struggles for recognition that accompany collective memory in such a condensed and global form' as the Holocaust.<sup>381</sup> Here, Rothberg highlights the worldliness of the Holocaust as an event which has moved towards the centre of our consciousness especially since the second half of the twentieth century. This, in and of itself,

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<sup>381</sup> Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory*, p.6.

is a fine reason to take the Holocaust as a central concern of this thesis. However, as an added incentive to focus on the Holocaust, especially from a literary perspective, it initiated – or at the very least perpetuated – the genre of testimony whereby survivors felt compelled to write about and share their experiences in a form which could not bear the weight of these experiences. This has put immense pressure on the genre not only to represent atrocity but also to gesture towards its difficult realities. As Raul Hilberg writes, survivors of the Holocaust maintain a unique knowledge which cannot, and yet must, be translated into literature. These survivors

have referred to [their knowledge] in expressions like ‘planet Auschwitz’ and in such sentences as ‘Those who were not there cannot imagine what it was like’. Clearly, they were there, and thus they are set apart or set themselves apart from anyone who did not share their fate. The outsider can never cross this divide and can never grasp their experience.<sup>382</sup>

The idea, put forward by Hilberg and reflected in many testimonies, that those who were not there can never access the event, suggests that the Holocaust at once necessitates and renounces literature. This makes the comparison between the Holocaust and animal cruelty especially pertinent because of the difficult reality we – and characters such as Elizabeth Costello – encounter when trying to empathise with other animals on a shared, creaturely plane. Humans stripped down to a creaturely existence may empathise with other animals (and indeed this is reflected in the copious amount of animal comparisons in Holocaust testimonies), but this only serves to highlight the impossibility of communicating atrocity in

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<sup>382</sup> Raul Hilberg, *Perpetrators Victims Bystanders: The Jewish Catastrophe 1933-1945* (London: Harper Perennial 1992), p.187.

literature: as I suggested in Chapter Two, Holocaust survivors share with other creatures the incapacity to represent their incapacitating experiences. From this concept I moved on to coin the phrase ‘tangential empathy’, which suggests the difficult reality of empathising with another’s singular experience of suffering. This calls for a multidirectional approach to comparing atrocities: that which accounts for the events’ shared singularities, and which might be gestured towards in a creaturely poetics.

In his essay ‘Trauma, Absence, Loss’, Dominic La Capra considers differences between absence and loss through an extended analysis of trauma, particularly following the Apartheid and the Holocaust. He maintains that these events are, in many personal and historical ways, incomparable, but moves on to recognise that a transhistorical sense of absence is left behind by both. He argues that this sense of absence, when conflated with or founded on a particular, historical loss, leads to various groups of people identifying themselves, at least in part, by a founding trauma:

The Holocaust, slavery, or Apartheid – even suffering the effects of the atom bomb in Hiroshima or Nagasaki – can become a founding trauma. Such a trauma is typical of myths of origin and may perhaps be located in the more or less mythologized history of every people. But one may both recognize the need for and question the function of the founding trauma that typically plays a tendentious ideological role, for example, in terms of the concept of a chosen people or a belief in one’s privileged status as victim. As historical events that are indeed crucial in the history of peoples, traumas might instead be seen as posing the problematic question of identity and as calling for more critical ways

of coming to terms with both their legacy and problems such as absence and loss.<sup>383</sup>

La Capra identifies how people might use their collective identities as victims to argue for a privileged status above other groups. This leads to groups who adhere to a competitive model of memory, such as the example given by Michael Rothberg of Khalid Muhammad, outlined in Chapter Four. However, La Capra calls 'for more critical ways of coming to terms' with one's sense of absence or loss, such that one can respond to another's suffering without competing against, or over-identifying with it.

Instead, he suggests that we might respond through the mode of 'empathic unsettlement': a phrase which may help to clarify how tangential empathy, multidirectional memory and creatureliness – three key concepts of this thesis – might together form a discursive model by which to articulate and respond to suffering:

Trauma is a disruptive experience that disarticulates the self and creates holes in existence; it has belated effects that are controlled only with difficulty and perhaps never fully mastered. The study of traumatic events poses especially difficult problems in representation and writing both for research and for any dialogic exchange with the past which acknowledges the claims it makes on people and relates it to the present and future. Being responsive to the traumatic experience of others, notably of victims, implies not the appropriation of their experience but what I would call empathic unsettlement, which should have stylistic effects or, more broadly, effects in writing which cannot be

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<sup>383</sup> Dominick La Capra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), p.81.

reduced to formulas or rules of method. [...] At the very least, empathic unsettlement poses a barrier to closure in discourse and places in jeopardy harmonizing or spiritually uplifting accounts of extreme events from which we attempt to derive reassurance or a benefit (for example, unearned confidence about the ability of the human spirit to endure any adversity with dignity and nobility).<sup>384</sup>

Something similar to tangential empathy – the idea that we empathise with other creatures through a shared sense of suffering which, in turn, distances us from them – is here acknowledged through the difficult ‘dialogic exchange’ between past and present events, or personal trauma compared to the trauma of someone else. Moreover, empathic unsettlement encourages a multidirectional mode of memory, whereby traumatic events are not misappropriated through others but viewed in light of a shared sense of disruption of the self. In other words, one might empathise with someone else’s trauma not through identifying with the victim directly, but rather through acknowledging a shared sense of disorientation or loss. Finally, it is clear to see how articulating empathic unsettlement through ‘stylistic ... effects in writing’ might concur with a creaturely poetics, whereby literature gestures towards loss and suffering through the destruction of standard ‘formulas or rules’ of writing. This can be traced from the Horrors Sewing Kit in *Beatrice and Virgil*, through Singer’s use of magical realism in ‘The Letter Writer’. Just as Anat Pick’s creaturely analysis of the Holocaust concludes that, ‘in the name of progress, the Holocaust drained not only the idea of humanity but of inhumanity as well, of their intelligible powers’, proving only that ‘Jewish (and other) bodies are animal bodies’, so La Capra argues that empathic

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<sup>384</sup> La Capra, *Writing History*, pp.41-42.



unsettlement discourages the anthropocentric idea that the human spirit can 'endure any adversity with dignity and nobility' (*CP*, 50-51).

Empathic unsettlement entails 'being responsive to the traumatic experience of others', whilst it also 'resists full identification with, and appropriation of, the experience of the other'.<sup>385</sup> Reading Holocaust literature as a creaturely poetics involves an awareness of how empathic unsettlement might be translated into language: by gesturing towards gaps in comprehension due to personal trauma or the inability to identify with the traumatic experiences of others. It is not a term I have alluded to throughout this thesis because of its association with loss, absence and trauma: concepts which, when applied to other animals, become difficult to analyse, and perhaps deflect from the physical rawness of suffering bodies. However, it is a mode of thought which consolidates three key ideas (tangential empathy, multidirectional memory and creatureliness) within the context of literatures of atrocity. Moreover, La Capra explores this concept through both the Holocaust and the Apartheid, which serves as a reminder towards the end of this thesis that, although I have focused primarily on Holocaust literature (with the necessary exception of *Disgrace* in Chapter Three), literature which responds to other atrocities or founding traumas might also be read through a similar, creaturely prism.

Along with the primary texts I have explored at length in this thesis, *Eating Animals* by Jonathan Safran Foer encapsulates ideas pertaining to animal cruelty, the Holocaust and literature. Foer's text offers a glimpse into the American meat industry, as researched by Foer himself, after he made the decision to find out more about what he and his family were eating. Like *Eternal Treblinka*, it is a work of non-fiction, but as its first and last chapters are

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<sup>385</sup> La Capra, *Writing History*, pp.41, 79.

entitled 'Storytelling', it also recognises the significance of narrative to identity, memory and the attention we afford to others. Furthermore, Foer's oeuvre also includes *Everything is Illuminated* and *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*: two works of fiction on The Holocaust and 9/11, respectively. Foer does not explicitly compare animal cruelty to other atrocities in his text, but through interweaving his personal story as a vegetarian Jew into *Eating Animals*, the Holocaust and animal cruelty are accessed through his memories, by merit of which these memories and narratives become multidirectional. Indeed, Foer's text is not a simple argument for vegetarianism: his text is, among other things, a story. Moreover, it is a story about eating. Eating is a part of his childhood stories, part of his Thanksgiving, and part of his relationship with his Grandmother: a Holocaust survivor whose experience left her obsessed with food and especially meat. Recognising the significance of food to his personal identity as a Jew, Foer writes:

Stories about food are stories about us – our history and our values. Within my family's Jewish tradition, I came to learn that food serves two parallel purposes: it nourishes and it helps you remember. Eating and storytelling are inseparable – the saltwater is also tears; the honey not only tastes sweet, but makes us think of sweetness; the matzo is the bread of our affliction.<sup>386</sup>

The story which accompanies one's meal often come to define that person. It is for the memories that are evoked through food that Foer writes *Eating Animals*, but – more than this – it is for the battle against forgetfulness. Foer's memories of his Grandmother are tied

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<sup>386</sup> Jonathan Safran Foer, *Eating Animals* (London: Penguin Books, 2009), pp.11-12.

closely with her relationship to food, especially as this relationship with food is something which was key to her survival.<sup>387</sup> However, when Foer remembers the joy he experienced from eating his Grandmother's signature dish of chicken with carrots, he recognises that this memory also involves closing his mind to the story of the animal whose flesh he ate. *Eating Animals* is about recovering that memory and offering insight into animals' lives: in this sense, it is about a choice of stories, whereby Foer's personal story does not involve 'screening off' animal suffering.

Reading Holocaust literature as a creaturely poetics involves making a similar choice to Foer. As discussed in Chapter Four, a memorial to the Holocaust does not have to mean that one atrocity is remembered in place of another. Instead, a more multidirectional interpretation might be that it does not only memorialise the specific events of the Holocaust, but also traces the stories of other groups who share histories of persecution. On a smaller scale, the genre of testimony has the dual function of telling the survivor's tale and also of witnessing the murders of other individuals whose deaths make up the Holocaust. Similarly, *Eating Animals* is the story of one man's relation to food, where this food is also considered as a collection of individual animals. For example, Foer includes statistics in his text: 'less than 1% of the animals killed for meat in America come from family farms', yet he also exemplifies the importance of identifying animals as individual lives, such as when he insists that 'no two animals, breeds of animals, farms, farmers, or eaters are the same'.<sup>388</sup> Effectively, Foer expands and contracts ideas of animals, in order that statistics or large numbers of animals do not remain as such, but rather that they give a sense of individual suffering on a mass scale. As Primo Levi remarks, 'a single Anne Frank excites more emotion

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<sup>387</sup> Foer, *Eating Animals*, pp.15-17.

<sup>388</sup> Foer, *Eating Animals*, pp. 201, 13.

than the myriads who suffered as she did but whose image has remained in the shadows'.<sup>389</sup>

A creaturely poetics involves the choice to include and attend to such myriads of others in one's own story, not simply in relation to yourself but by recognising and memorialising their individual experiences of embodiment. By writing or reading in such a way as to attend to these creaturely bodies, one begins to lay down an ethical foundation whereby all creatures are afforded due attention.

*83,346 words*

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<sup>389</sup> Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, trans. Rayond Rosenthal (London: Abacus, 2005), p.39.

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