**On Tails and Tales:**

**Animals, Ethics, and Storytelling in Yann Martel’s *Beatrice and Virgil*  
  
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A fascination with the power and possibilities of storytelling pervades Yann Martel’s fiction, from the early story ‘The Facts behind the Helsinki Roccamatios’, a paean to “the transformative wizardry of the imagination” (17), through his best-selling novel *Life of Pi*, to its less critic-friendly, and altogether more sceptical successor, the 2010 novel *Beatrice and Virgil*. Reviewer Sarah Churchwell is not alone or without reason in unceremoniously dismissing the latter text as “by turns pretentious, humourless, tedious, and obvious,” however her criticism moves too swiftly over a novel which, despite flaws, deserves further investigation. In *Beatrice and Virgil,* Martel’s interrogation of the storytelling impulse – that confused amalgam of desires to witness, master, and celebrate - invites us to consider questions of representation, witnessing, animal suffering, and the Holocaust, not just concurrently, but mutually, unafraid of the disordered and disturbing associations between them.

**Ambiguous Allegories: Martel and the Holocaust**

At the heart of *Beatrice and Virgil* is the assertion that “we are story animals” (7), that the impulse to generate and absorb narrative, to frame events in ways which add depth and interest or promote understanding, is that which is uniquely human. Here, however, Martel is less convinced of the redemptive power of storytelling than in his earlier short story. We are introduced to the novel’s protagonist, Henry, as a writer, and writing as a commodity which generates fame and financial reward: “Henry’s second novel”, we are modestly informed, “written, like his first, under a pen name, had done well” (3). Yet Henry’s work has value for others too; humans are not only writing animals but reading animals and Henry’s books had helped many a reader “pull through a crisis in their lives” (4). We meet Henry at a crisis point in his own life, when his relationship with the practice of writing is no longer in tune with the industry of writing. He has written a flipbook about the Holocaust that his editor regards as “a complete, unpublishable failure” (17). As readers we track Henry’s story as he jettisons writing, determined instead to “write a beautiful life story” (24) with his newborn son. Events conspire against this peaceful plan until finally he is forced to put pen to paper, triggering the reader’s realisation that s/he is reading the fictional telling of the novel’s genesis.

*Beatrice and Virgil* inflamed numerous critics, who were infuriated by its reflexive, preening style and horrified by its treatment of the Holocaust. Writing in the New York Times, Michiko Kakutani describes the novel as “misconceived and offensive”:

Meant as a kind of “Animal Farm”-like parable, this book reads as an allegory about the Holocaust in which the tragic fate of the title characters — a donkey named Beatrice and a monkey named Virgil, who are stuffed animals in a taxidermy shop — is seen “through the tragic fate of Jews”.

Kakutani’s appraisal is rather unclear; is the novel, as suggested above, a text which approaches and interprets animal suffering and extermination through the Holocaust, or is it the opposite, “a kind of philosophical meditation on the Holocaust” in which animals are employed as a defamiliarising tool?

In defence of the novel, critic Laura Peterson rejects the ambiguity of the allegory, opting for what she deems “a more positive reading” in which “Martel present[s] readers with horrific subject matter through story animals” (201). For Peterson, Martel’s strategy runs parallel, and is as effective as, that of Art Spiegelman’s graphic novel *Maus*. In constrast, for Kakutani *Maus* is a marker of Martel’s failure, with *Beatrice and Virgil*:

a botched and at times cringe-making fable — a far cry, indeed, from what say, Art Spiegelman achieved in “Maus,” his 1986 graphic novel, which in depicting Jews as mice and the Nazis as cats did not diminish the event, but instead goaded the reader into looking at the Holocaust anew.

Kakutani’s outrage may lend little insight, but her confusion does leave us with the unresolved question: is *Beatrice and Virgil* about animals or is it about the Holocaust? Peterson’s dogged insistence – like that of Martel in interviews following uproar at the novel’s publication – on a tidy and redemptive resolution of the text’s allegory shuts down this question. Both critics reduce Martel’s novel to a dull and derivative version of *Maus*. In this article, I shall argue that the ambiguity of allegory and representation in *Beatrice and Virgil* – and its critique of the limitations of allegory and representation - is one of the novel’s greatest strengths as it enables the reader to consider both the ethics of storytelling and the relationship between human and non-human animals.

**Representation and Holocaust Writing**

As the taxidermist in *Beatrice and Virgil* observes, “reality escapes us. It’s beyond description, even a simple pear” (115). In an extended dialogue, Martel’s animal protagonists slowly try to discern what constitutes the ‘pearness’ of a pear, clearly an attempt to re-establish a relationship with words and things after an event, or events which exposed the opacity of that relationship. From Henry’s Holocaust flipbook to Beatrice and Virgil’s references to “Aukitz” (184), *Beatrice and Virgil* foregrounds the problem of responding meaningfully to the Holocaust through art and thought, given that the Holocaust evacuates our very structures of meaning-construction and questions the possibility of accurate representation. As Auschwitz survivor Elie Wiesel writes:

Now, one generation after the event, one can still say – or one can already say – that what is called the literature of the Holocaust does not exist, cannot exist. It is a contradiction in terms, as is the philosophy, the theology, the psychology of the Holocaust. Auschwitz negates all systems, opposes all doctrines. They cannot but diminish the experience which lies beyond our reach […] A novel about Treblinka is either not a novel or not about Treblinka; a novel about Treblinka is about blasphemy – is blasphemy. For Treblinka means death – absolute death – death of language and of the imagination. Its mystery is doomed to remain intact. (405)

Wiesel gestures towards a double-bind: the necessity of responding to the Holocaust in order to bear witness to its victims and prevent its repetition, yet without succumbing to the temptation to conceptualise. The latter is prohibited not only because conceptualisation has been rendered impossible – as Theodor Adorno tells us in *Negative Dialectics*: “Our metaphysical faculty is paralyzed because actual events have shattered the basis on which speculative metaphysical thought could be reconciled with experience” (362) - but also because conceptualization itself, in its attempt to totalise, systematise, and master, is complicit with structures which facilitated the Holocaust. Consistently haunted by this dilemma, and, like Wiesel, unfailingly suspicious of systematicity, German-Jewish exile Theodor Adorno begins to suggest ways in which we might respond to the Holocaust through philosophy and art. For Adorno, this is anything but a recuperative or redemptive process. Lawrence L. Langer suggests that “The Holocaust requires us to *unlearn* something” (117) about Western ideals and the meaning of progress and Adorno’s work advocates and adopts a critical, reflexive mode of thinking and unthinking, the “thinking against itself” (365) of negative dialectics. This strategy, Adorno implies, might have the potential to “express suffering” (*Dialectic of Englightenment* 130), without assimilating, appropriating or commodifying it, without trading in melancholia for mourning.[[1]](#endnote-1) “Our feelings resist any claim of the positivity of existence as sanctimonious, as wronging the victims; they balk at squeezing any kind of sense, however bleached, out of the victims’ fate” (361), Adorno tells us.

Relating these insights to *Beatrice and Virgil*, we might ask how literature can avoid the potential for ‘blasphemy’ that Wiesel detects. Implicit in Wiesel’s claim is the assumption that novels attempt to impose some kind of narrative closure or definitive meaning which defies the incomprehensibility of the Holocaust. A similar supposition accounts for Adorno’s rejection of realist modes of art, and his preference for the fragmentation and indigestibility of modernist art forms. Of particular interest for him is Samuel Beckett, whose work is clearly, but always implicitly, shadowed by the Holocaust. Of *Endgame*, Beckett’s bleak, post-apocalyptic play, Adorno writes: “Understanding it can only mean understanding its unintelligibility, concretely reconstructing the meaning of the fact that it has no meaning” (“*Endgame*” 243). From the *Godot*-esque dialogue between Beatrice and Virgil, to Beatrice’s reference to “The Unnameable” (135), Martel frequently directs a knowing nod towards Beckett, alert to the challenges posed by Beckett’s non-representative strategies and like Beckett, convinced that literature is an appropriate space for philosophical questions.

The tension between the accessibility and familiarity of realist literary modes and the need for different languages and genres to express the horrors of the Holocaust is played out in Holocaust writing and within *Beatrice and Virgil* itself, with the novel’s narrator asserting the need for a “supplementary way of thinking about the Holocaust” (11). Although as Michael Rothberg testifies, “The realist approach has characterized the dominant scholarly methodology” (4) of Holocaust writing, it is clear that Holocaust literature has pursued more experimental pathways. Following the work of critic Sue Vice, Robert Eaglestone observes: “Holocaust fiction is highly intertextual and uses anterior sources much more self-consciously than other genres and in very specific ways” (Eaglestone 107),[[2]](#endnote-2) and Laura Peterson identifies “a meta-Holocaust approach” (175) in Holocaust fiction.[[3]](#endnote-3)

One critically lauded example of the ‘meta-Holocaust approach’, which like *Beatrice and Virgil*, employs animal figures, is Art Spiegelman’s Pulitzer-winning graphic novel *Maus*. Spiegelman’s animal figures facilitate both the presentation of an inaccessible or “intolerable” history (Mikics 20) and a critique of the ideological assumptions underpinning the Holocaust. “By drawing Jews as mice,” Eric Berlatsky claims, “Spiegelman concretizes the ways in which contemporary discourses about Jews might have looked had they been transparently true, ironically revealing their inherent falsehood” (155). That Spiegelman discovered a critical mode which re-sensitised jaded readers is commendable yet his strategy of representation is problematic.

One particularly arresting image in *Maus* sees Spiegelman at work atop a pile of mouse corpses, the latter representing “the carnage of the Holocaust and his [Spiegelman’s] own guilty role as the maker and destroyer of the characters in his own work” (Geis 2). Whilst the mice are a useful tool to critique the Nazi depiction of Jews as vermin, the notion of vermin goes uncritiqued and the mice themselves become the ‘absent referent’, with Spigelman reproducing an accepted but not incontrovertible hierarchy between humans and other animals. Richard De Angelis explains: “there is no instance in *Maus* where the animal metaphor is meant to be taken at face value; rather than representing other species, the mouse and cat heads are meant to be transparent, serving as windows into human – not animal – nature” (232).

Spiegelman’s critique of the misrepresentation and exclusion of one group of beings is, therefore, reliant on another act of exclusion and misrepresentation. We do not have to regard the exclusions as equivalent to see that Spiegelman’s critique is thus destabilised, and that by employing animal figures merely as a tool to portray humans, and the trope of large-scale animal death as a symbol of human death, *Maus* overlooks the reality of non-human suffering, and animals simply become an object to be instrumentalised in the search for deeper human understanding. In addition, such an oversight perpetuates a sense of human identity that is forged in conjunction with the denigration of non-human animals, as well as an image of the human as master-storyteller who is free to use and abuse other life forms in service of his stories. Turning now to philosophers Jacques Derrida and Donna Haraway, I shall demonstrate why this perspective is increasingly unsatisfactory to philosophical thought, and assess how these thinkers might aid us both in developing a human autobiography which doesn't project negative images onto the animal supplement, and in writing stories which illuminate humans *and* other animals.

**‘Dogs are not an alibi for other themes’: Derrida and Haraway on Animals**

In *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, Jacques Derrida tracks and challenges the “post-Cartesian genealogy” (88) of philosophical misrepresentations of animal life, focusing on the ways in which the figure of the animal – often objectified, homogenised, denigrated – enables the construction of human identity and humanity’s narrative of itself. Central to this misrepresentation of animal life is the “general singular” (41) term ‘animal’, perceived by Derrida as suppressing difference, enacting mastery and violence, and determining inter-species relations and hierarchies. “Animal is a word that men have given themselves the right to give” (32), he reminds us. Derrida is aware of his own complicity in this violence, his subjectivity and social position constituted by structures that routinely devalue and abuse the non-human animal. Despite this, he aims to transform philosophical language in order to write an alternative *autobiography* of the human which would reinterpret human-animal co-existence and consist of stories which do not depend on the objectification or instrumentalisation of the animal.

For Derrida, the human is not just a ‘storytelling animal’, but an “autobiographical animal” (2) who fabulates in order to construct a self-identity which is not pre-given.[[4]](#endnote-4) The ‘animal’ appears as a negative reflection – lacking sentience, rationality, or divinity - or serves as “the abyssal limit of the human: the inhuman or the ahuman, the ends of man, that is to say, the bordercrossing from which vantage man dares to announce himself to himself” (12). As guarantor of the plenitude of human self-image, the ‘animal’ is denied self-image or *ipseity*, its inability to recognise or refer to itself, or to leave a linguistic trace, taken for granted. It is thus assumed that human stewardship entails ventriloquising non-human muteness by naming, classifying and dominating the ‘animal’. In contrast, Derrida offers a different history, the possibility of a “*zoobiotography*” (65), exposing animal abilities to construct traces, to self-relate, to communicate, and to tell stories. However, he also problematises the human lionization of language and stories; in addition to “‘giving speech back’ to animals”, he asks how we might begin to think “the absence of the name and of the word otherwise, and as something other than a privation”. This, however, is “fabulous and chimerical” (49); like Martel, Derrida suggests that our storytelling must be alert to the limitations of stories themselves.

We find a less guarded account of storytelling in Donna Haraway’s *The Companion Species Manifesto*. Here Haraway rejects the idea of the human as *rational* animal or discrete pre-existent subject, *dasein* who precedes *mitsein,* instead arguing that beings are constituted by cross-species relationships, rather than pre-existing them: “We are, constitutively, companion species. We make each other up, in the flesh” (2-3). This co-constitution is also understood as the development of cross-species stories, but for this we must discard the notions both of a master narrative and of a master storyteller.

Haraway’s own stories entwine philosophy, biology, and lived experience. She perceives no contradiction in associating the truth with storytelling, with asserting that the biologist “*must* tell a story, *must* get the facts” (*Companion Species* 19). In this, she parallels Martel who challenges the value of the distinction between fiction and fact or nonfiction, instead claiming: “The useful division is between the fiction and nonfiction that speaks the truth and the fiction and nonfiction that utters lies” (7). Stories unfold, change, and supplement each other; each ‘true’ story is superseded by another as times change. In rejecting the narrative of a single, dominant storyteller – much like a single, all-powerful creator – Haraway advocates a subtler, decentralised model of storytelling as a dynamic community project. As she discloses in *Primate Visions*, “Stories are always a complex production with many tellers and hearers, not all of them visible or audible. Story-telling is a serious concept, but one happily without the power to claim unique or closed readings” (8). Of course, this is also a cross-species community project, and accordingly she insists: “My story must listen to the practices of interpretation of the primate ordering which the primates themselves – monkeys, apes, and people – all have some kind of ‘authorship’ (*Primate Visions* 8).

It comes as no surprise that cross-species stories are not solely linguistic. Instead Haraway yokes together the fleshy and the textual, perceiving language not as a mark of human superiority but simply another form of natural adaptation, and noting the ways in which flesh too is a system of signs, that as *Beatrice and Virgil*’s Henry observes, each being is “a weaving of tales set in our real bodies” (16). Human beliefs, Haraway maintains, “have been written into the body of nature” (*Primate Visions* 1). I read this refusal to sever the text from the body as a call to vigilance, a reminder that we have responsibilities to figurative and fictional animals as well as to ‘real’ ones, as the boundary between the two is never entirely clear. Haraway insists: “Dogs are not an alibi for other themes” (*Companion Species* 5). Whilst she is frustratingly vague with regard to an ethics of storytelling, she does gesture toward the necessity of a “kind of fidelity” to the experience which stories describe: as a powerful witness, the storyteller must be willing to advance beyond a favourite tale when it is no longer representative of experience. Yet how can we be faithful, particularly when the ‘truth’ of a story is not measurable by correspondence and necessarily involves a degree of artifice, of “feigning or feinting”? (*Companion Species* 19). Neither Haraway nor Derrida offers a clear solution here, but both emphasise the intertwining of human and animal stories, the responsibility of storytelling (particularly to those who are unable to express themselves), and the infinite nature of the storytelling process. Stories are dynamic and *metaplasmic* and no story is definitive. Returning to the role of animals in Martel’s novel, I shall ask whether these are simply an allegorical device, or whether they might challenge the image of human as masterful storyteller and provide a re-presentation of the human-animal relationship.

**Allegories in the Taxidermist’s Shop: Animals in *Beatrice and Virgil***

Martel’s perception of the storytelling impulse as constituted by the contradictory desires to both witness and master is reflected both in his approach to the apparatus of storytelling, in particular metaphor and allegory, and in his understanding of the human subject. Whilst the construction of metaphor entails reaching beyond current horizons in search of fresh understanding and new connections, in practice, metaphor crystallises novelty, abstraction or ambiguity into known, and inevitably restrictive, forms and frameworks. It is in the context of this tension and in light of the simultaneously creative and controlling human subject – epitomised by Henry - which it exposes, that *Beatrice and Virgil* both exploits and interrogates metaphor.

That metaphor at best instrumentalises, and at worst forcibly subdues or masters, has ethical implications, and these are compounded in the case of Martel’s animal metaphors. This is evident not only in the ongoing allegorical exploration of the relationship between animal suffering and the Holocaust, but, in a more prosaic way, through the novel’s animal metaphors - the books that “hog all the publicity” (3), the “heavy, black ox” (21) of Henry’s Mozart rendition, and the “cold, muddy toads” (88) of words which fail to capture elusive meaning. As readers, we are invited both to enjoy the satisfyingly visceral nature of these images and to critique their tendency to mislead: in positing the equivalence of the two terms, and endorsing a limited view of the ‘hog’, ‘ox’, or ‘toads’ these metaphors reinforce human stereotypes and assumption of human superiority. When Henry’s clarinet playing finally improves, it sheds its metaphorical shackles and takes flight, leaving the reader with only the limitations of the weighty and wingless ox, not the strength and reliability which has been harnessed for human gain over millennia.

Perhaps Henry speaks for the author when he declares that “craft” not “sentiment” dictates the prominence “of animals in his novel” (29), a procedure which encourages readers to suspend their cynicism and think afresh. Yet the assumption that fictional animals can be instrumentalised and objectified without any ethical repercussions jars within the novel’s framework. This becomes most visible in Henry’s visits to the taxidermist’s shop. As ‘story animal’, the shop is Henry’s natural environment, his fascination and imagination presented as ‘animal’ impulses, rendering him silenced and “wide-eyed” (61) as he examines its inhabitants. As readers, we too are fascinated by this “stage full of stories” (61), the theatrical image stimulating the unsettling realisation that the animals are not actors; “frozen to the spot” (61), they lack all agency. Henry’s role is ambivalent: his solemn animal litany lures the reader into perceiving the text as testimony to each individual loss, yet this is undercut as he is unable to observe anything meaningful, noting banally “a shared culture of animalness” (63). Listing the animals in this way also recalls Flaubert’s story ‘The Legend of St Julian the Hospitaller’ – cited at length in *Beatrice and Virgil* – in which animals are listed proprietorially, either as destined for slaughter or, from the “twenty-four Barbary greyhounds” (46) to the “seventeen pairs of Breton dogs” (47) part of a crack team assembled to savage other creatures.

Martel highlights the sense of artifice in the taxidermist’s shop. The animals are a vehicle to display the taxidermist’s “superlative” skills, yet these skills are utilised to deceive and master. The dead animals “positively glistened with life” (66) and each is presented in a “completely natural pose” (67) which suggests “its own personal situation, its own story” (66). The cold, sinister taxidermist is counterbalanced by jovial Henry, yet the latter’s impulses are suspicious: to whom is directed his “impulse of pity”? And why is he so keen to become “involved with all these animals” (71)? Any readerly apprehension is fulfilled as we are led to the preparation area in the shop:

A chain was hanging from the wall with a hook at the end of it. There were animals again, on shelves and on the floor, though far fewer than in the display room, and some were entirely disembodied, just a pile of hide or a mound of feathers, and others were works-in-progress. […] At the moment, the taxidermist appeared to be working on a deer head mount. The skin was not yet properly fitted on the fibreglass mannequin head and the mouth was a tongueless, toothless gaping hole revealing the yellow fibreglass jaw of the mannequin. The eyes had that same yellow glow. It looked grotesquely unnatural, a cervine version of Frankenstein. (72-3)

Martel spares nothing in this grisly description, inviting us to view the taxidermist as a reconstructor of appearances, behind which lie devastation and destruction, ‘tongueless’ subjects who are unable to speak for themselves. In his simultaneous repulsion and intrigue, Henry is complicit. Martel is clearly drawing a parallel here with the work of writing and re-presenting memory and history, of re-packaging other peoples’ lives, perhaps a nod to Adorno’s unrelenting indictment of the way in which “the victims are turned into works of art, tossed out to be gobbled up by the world that did them in” (“Commitment” 88). We might also interpret this as a caveat against settling for the clean lines and closure of the story, a lesson that the task of remembering and re-interpreting is endless, that we must keep returning to the horror and disorder behind the gloss of the story, reading round and round the flip-book without resolution. It is surely no accident that Martel here confuses Frankenstein with his monster; given historical atrocities, it is the human, not the creature, who should be regarded as ‘grotesquely unnatural’.

Animals have a double presence in *Beatrice and Virgil* through the protagonists themselves and in this hideous backdrop which feels so radically disordered, “all wrong, all inside out” (156). In one way, the novel’s allegory presents the animal characters Beatrice and Virgil as a fresh lens through which to view the horrors of the Holocaust, the radical powerlessness of the animals re-sensitising the reader, and re-iterating the ways in which the Holocaust challenges the ways we construct meaning. “Allegory” Jeremy Tambling asserts, “serves as a way to describe the indescribable, or the monstrous” (92). By diverging from the surface phenomena of an event such as the Holocaust, strategies such as metaphor and allegory can begin to gesture towards the epistemic shift which it generated. Yet Martel shies away from this allegory, wary of suggesting complete correspondence between the terms and of closing the story or advancing a clear message. Instead he suggests a competing, inverted allegory. Rather than the animals being a lens for viewing the Holocaust, here the Holocaust itself is the image repository; as we learn of Henry, “It wasn't that he saw the Holocaust in everything. It’s that he saw everything in the Holocaust, not only camp victims, but also capitalists and many others, perhaps even clowns” (116). Later, in case we were insufficiently alert to the duality of the allegory, Martel projects this perspective onto the taxidermist:

Here was irrefutable proof that he was using the Holocaust to speak of the extermination of animal life. Doomed creatures that could not speak for themselves were being given the voice of a most articulate people who had been similarly doomed. He was seeing the tragic fate of animals through the tragic fate of Jews. The Holocaust as allegory. (173)

By attributing it to the taxidermist, Martel may well be intending to discredit this perspective. The effect however, is rather more complicated, resulting in both a double-ended allegory, whereby the animal characters enable us to see the Holocaust afresh, and the Holocaust helps us to reconsider animal suffering, and in a critique of the allegorical method itself.

Martel’s assertion that humans are story animals holds fast throughout *Beatrice and Virgil* and yet he shares James Geary’s suspicion of allegory and metaphor, the tools of storytelling. As Geary reminds us, “Metaphor is a lens that clarifies and distorts. It focuses our attention on a specific set of associated commonplaces, but in so doing also narrows our view” (147). By highlighting one facet of something in order to draw a connection to another, every other facet is lost. This argument forms the basis of the most effective critiques of comparisons between the Holocaust and animal suffering, for example that of Donna Haraway who, responding to the position advanced in J.M. Coetzee’s novel *Elizabeth Costello*, argues:

It is not that the Nazi killings of the Jews and others and mass animal slaughter in the meat industry have no relation; it is that analogy culminating in equation can blunt our alertness to irreducible difference and multiplicity and their demands. Different atrocities deserve their own languages, even if there are no words for what we do.[[5]](#endnote-5) (*Species* 336)

Haraway’s desire that we generate an entirely fresh idiom in order to bear witness to the singularity of an atrocity is not only impossible but also disavows her faith in the process of storytelling.[[6]](#endnote-6) A story is the hinge between the singular and the general. Stories – and the metaphors, analogies, and allegories which they employ – are the blunt but necessary tools that we adapt in order to bridge between old languages and new ones, to bear witness to the singularity of an event within a universally accessible medium. Human beings conceptualise within a broader associative framework; each new event is understood through its differences from the last. We are historical and spatial beings who cannot think pure singularity; as Robert Scholes insists, “We think metaphorically. Metaphorical thinking is the way we make sense of the world.” (10-11). Stories are, therefore, both necessary and necessarily violent. As such, they require that we be endlessly vigilant.

Haraway’s rejection of any comparison between human and animal suffering through the figure of the Holocaust also speaks of the tendency to sacralise the Holocaust, regarding all comparisons as an affront to its uniqueness. This seems misplaced, not least because the connection between animal suffering and the Holocaust is implicit in the term itself. Boria Sax explains:

A Holocaust was a Hebrew sacrifice in which the entire animal was given to Yahweh to be consumed by fire […] The usage of the word for the Nazi murders is based on an identification between the Jewish people and the sacrificed animal. (156)

Sax’s example serves to illustrate that the notion of Holocaust is already embedded in a network of historical and cultural associations; it simply cannot possess a singular meaning. In light of this we might return to comparisons between human and animal suffering via Karen Davis who asserts: “there is no good reason to insist that one form of suffering and oppression is so exclusive that it may not be used to raise moral concerns about any other form of oppression” (4). Following Davis, we might conclude that a comparison, metaphor, or allegory is ethically sound as far as the compared term is not “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” (4). This, I argue, is where *Beatrice and Virgil* differs from *Maus*; whereas the latter text entirely overlooks the animal suffering which shadows its metaphor, the indeterminacy of the allegory in the former means that we are forced to consider both human and animal suffering. Martel’s allegories are intentionally unclear, incomplete and in conflict. As such, they provide a commentary on the limitations of allegory itself, and the violence of trying to achieve allegorical or narrative closure.

*Beatrice and Virgil* ends with *Games for Gustav*, which contains a series of bleak philosophical and ethical problems. It is ostensibly written by Henry and inspired by a fragment of the taxidermist’s play remaining after the fire, a “howling inferno” (193) which destroys the already-muted howler monkey and his companions in the taxidermist’s shop. As narrative climax, the fire seems forced and awkward, yet in its own echoes of holocaust, it enables Martel, via Henry, to begin a process of recuperation which counters that of the dishonest taxidermist and demands the reader ask again: what remains? What ought we to save?

It is tempting to read the taxidermist’s death as either punishment or redemption, however if anything, the taxidermist’s death represents the impossibility of an allegorical or theological narrative. The taxidermist’s fixation on Flaubert’s pseudo-biblical account of St Julian is framed by his desperate urge for salvation, and its appeal based on its provision of “redemption without remorse (189). However, following Beckett, Martel depicts a post-Holocaust landscape not only divested of the divine, but which renders the notion of divine justice or adjudication, absurd. Consequently, the taxidermist’s attempt to act *in loco deus*, as master storyteller fitting events in his play to a biblical narrative, pointing out, for example, “the expulsion from Eden! The Fall!” (129), is dangerously deluded. Its inevitable conclusion – and thus Martel’s indictment of his claims - is the destruction of the “Noah’s Ark” (60) of his shop, destroying the animals he sought to shelter.

**Writing and Witnessing: ‘It hurt, it was painful – that’s all there is to say about it really’**

In her review in *The Independent*, Joy Lo Dico suggests that “*Beatrice and Virgil* is about crushing belief. In the artifice, in the author, in our emotional response to writing, the novel seeks to destroy as much as it creates […] one can no longer indulge in the artifice of fiction.” Lo Dico is right; *Beatrice and Virgil* is not a romantic paean to storytelling. Martel writes in the shadow of Adorno and Beckett, teasing the reader with a little lyricism only to chastise: “How can there be anything beautiful after what we’ve lived through? It’s incomprehensible. It’s an insult” (112). Martel maintains that desire to recuperate, sanitise, or monumentalise transforms one into the taxidermist, oppressively demanding “a proper interpretation of the event” (93-4) and, deluded to the last, sewing subjects’ mouths firmly shut in the mistaken belief that it sustains a relationship with them. Here there is no chance that we might “misleadingly identify the Holocaust as a healable offence” (Langer xii).

The desires to “interpret and conclude” and to stimulate “a new choice of stories” (15) which characterise and motivate Henry are both shared and spurned by Martel, who exposes the ways in which storytelling is an act of mastery. Through Derrida and Haraway, I explored the ways in which the human subject is constructed both through the notion of human as storyteller and through the content of the stories which s/he tells, the latter dependent on the perception of non-human living beings as silent story-fodder. Whereas Derrida challenged the assumed non-responsiveness of the animal and the reduction of animal difference to homogeneity in this human narrative, Haraway exposed the ways in which stories are written not just on the page, but in human and non-human bodies. Accordingly, she invited us to embark upon a practice of storytelling which would be shared and ongoing, rejecting the closure of a definitive story. Likewise, as Henry retrieves and rewrites the taxidermist’s story, Martel leaves the final section ‘Game Number Thirteen’ of *Games for Gustave*, incomplete, demanding the collaboration of the reader.

The intentional brittleness and imprecision of Martel’s allegories serves as a critique of the urge to ‘interpret and conclude’, offering intersecting, sometimes contradictory stories, instead of one final narrative. This is not to say that *Beatrice and Virgil* disavows all ethical claims or conclusions. On the contrary, it demands that the reader begin to discern the differences between watching and witnessing, identifying and collaborating, ethics and aesthetics. Bearing witness is often a central aim of Holocaust writing, yet *Beatrice and Virgil* asks what witnessing *is* and what it entails. In the novel, witnessing is associated with the taxidermist, “a stinking old Nazi collaborator” (190) who believes that his practice of taxidermy can enable him to recuperate some good “once the irreparable had been done” (98). Witnessing is also blurred with passive watching as Beatrice and Virgil silently observe brutality, with the casually destructive “desire to inspect” (184), and with voyeurism, as the reader, alongside Henry, views the taxidermist at work on a fox, “the skin and the flayed carcass, like a baby that has been taken out of its red pyjamas” (155). There is certainly no self-satisfied validation of the novel as a monument to human *or* animal suffering; witnessing, its aims and practices must be critiqued and rethought, must not become dogmatic. We, as readers, must be responsible collaborators in the production of the story.

The question of witnessing arises again towards the end of the novel in the searingly visceral description of Beatrice and Virgil’s fate at the hands of their torturers. For Laura Peterson, this is “an unexpectedly explicit passage [which] appears unnecessary and arguably undermines the subtleness of the earlier animal-driven messages” (199). It is no accident that this section is a problem for Peterson’s reading, which, you may recall, interprets Martel’s animals as tools through which to view the Holocaust, “granting a difficult topic a new artistically and ethically satisfying means of expression” and providing a means to “bring us back to ourselves, back to the horror, in a way that touches us deeply” (202). For Peterson, the suffering animals in *Beatrice and Virgil* are, like the mouse corpses in *Maus*, utterly transparent, a symbol for human suffering. What renders Peterson’s reading insufficient here is the specificity of the animals’ suffering in *Beatrice and Virgil*. As readers, we inhabit Beatrice’s body as her foot is nailed to the floor “just above the rim of the hoof” (178) and Virgil’s too, as his “soft tail” (184) is severed, launched into the air, and tossed to the ground. If Martel permits us to escape the specificity of the animals’ suffering for a second it is only to realise the ways in which all suffering is unique to each individual body. In the same way that it simultaneously erects and critiques allegory, the novel performs a double-move here: eliciting “the measuring and comparing of physical pains” (127) and revealing the violence and inadequacy of comparison. In their acknowledgment of the other’s suffering in moments of moving tenderness, Beatrice and Virgil demonstrate a cross-species awareness of other sentient beings. This speaks to Derrida’s assertion of a kinship of vulnerability between human and non-human animals: “Being able to suffer is no longer a power; it is a possibility without power, a possibility of the impossible. Mortality resides there, as the most radical means of thinking the finitude that we share with animals, […] to the experience of compassion” (*Animal* 28).

Peterson’s discovery of an ‘ethically satisfying’ conclusion to *Beatrice and Virgil* is misplaced. Martel denies the possibility of ethical satisfaction not only because he is well-schooled in the lessons of Adorno, Beckett, and Wiesel, but also because his animal characters unsettle the foundations of our ethical framework. These are not animals who ‘bring us back to ourselves’, instead they render us strangers to ourselves and summon us to accustom ourselves with that strangeness rather than projecting it onto external others. They are also animals who – clearly and distinctly – represent themselves, even if Martel has not yet devised a way in which they may speak rather than be spoken. Alert to the dangers of a narcissistic storytelling where the human storyteller fiercely polices the limits of the ethical community, Martel, like Derrida and Haraway, begins to envisage a reflexive, open, and endless practice of storytelling which would refigure the human relationship with its own strangeness and with the needs and desires of non-human strangers.

**Notes**

1. For a critique of the commodification of the Holocaust, see Finkelstein. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. See, for example the work of Jenni Adams, who identifies magical realist features in recent post-Holocaust writing: “Magical realism, I suggest, offers an important strategy in attempts to continue the project of Holocaust representation into the post-testimonial era” (1). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. For a lucid synopsis of this, see Deborah Geis: “horror in its deepest manifestation cannot risk being sanitized and framed as ‘art’. If the Holocaust somehow stands outside the realm of narration, though, one must ask what is to prevent it from becoming mystified or depoliticized. Since to tell the story of the Holocaust is to call forth an area of representation that is ultimately unspeakable or untellable because no form of narrative can hope to portray it, second-generation Holocaust writers have frequently shown the problematics of representation within their work as part of what they also see as an ethical response to the past; they engage in what Jean-Francois Lyotard refers to as the act of making the ‘unrepresentable’ into the process of representation” (3). See also Marianne Hirsch’s discussion of the way that the ‘post’ of ‘postmemory’, signifying “more than a temporal delay and more than a location in an aftermath” (5) causes second-generation post-Holocaust writers to experiment with different literary forms. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. There is also a connection between animals and Derrida’s individual sense of autobiography: “animals […] show up each time Derrida’s discourse shifts to an autobiographical’ mode” (“Thoughtprints” 4). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. For a counter-example, see Patterson, who observes “the same attitude” (xvi) of the need to exploit the powerless for the greater good at work in both the Holocaust and large-scale animal exploitation. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. There’s a clear parallel with Derrida here, whose work tirelessly insists upon the ethical urgency of writing idiomatically in order to respond to singularity, and yet repeatedly demonstrates that this task is impossible (and infinite). See, for example, his assertion that “It is necessary in each situation to create an appropriate mode of exposition, to invent the law of the singular event” (*Learning to Live Finally* 31).

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