

## Subject: Animal

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K.S.A. Brazier-Tompkins

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# Subject: Animal: Representing the Seeing Animal in Yann Martel's *Beatrice and Virgil*

K.S.A. BRAZIER-TOMPKINS

IN YANN MARTEL'S *LIFE OF PI* (2001), the protagonist comments that "we look at an animal and see a mirror" (39). His point is that people consistently attribute human qualities to nonhuman animals, anthropomorphizing — and distorting — animals through an anthropocentric gaze that brushes everything it touches with a veneer of humanity. A mirror reflects back that which faces it, and if a nonhuman animal is a mirror, then it either lacks self and subjectivity entirely, or the human gaze has no access to that subjectivity. Animals are not "pure" objects in Martel's work: they function independently of human directives, and human characters frequently interpret and respond to the actions of nonhuman characters, as Pi does with the tiger Richard Parker throughout much of *Life of Pi*. The issue is not that the animals are pure objects, but that their subjectivity is inaccessible, after the fashion of Jacques Derrida's absolute Other,<sup>1</sup> in which the "being-there-before-[Derrida]" is a subject who can look at him, but whose subjectivity is at once completely present and completely unreachable (11).

*Beatrice and Virgil* (2010) contains several categories of animals, including (1) live animal characters, (2) taxidermied mounts and animal skins, and (3) allegorical animals nested in a play within the framing text. Thus, there is a minimum of three layers of animal representation, comprised of (1) living animals, (2) disarticulated and rearticulated mounts made from the skins and bones of animals, and (3) animals that are purely fictitious even within the text itself. The interplay among these layers, as mediated by the narrator, mitigates not only the subjectivity of the animals as the narrator perceives it, but also the presence of the animal Other at all. The narrator's gaze strikes the surface of the animal and is returned, but the same act performed upon the shell of an animal that is no longer living, with the same result, casts doubt upon

the fact of the agency of the Other within the novel altogether. This speaks to one of the fundamental questions facing postmodern animal literature: is it possible to represent something as subject whose subjectivity cannot be known? The three-fold animal-as-Other in *Beatrice and Virgil* addresses this doubt in the context of layered articulation, with (1) the animal represented in narrative and (2) the self-conscious construction and problematization of animality through the taxidermied mounts and the metafictional animal characters that are based on these mounts.

*Beatrice and Virgil* presents its three categories of animals as subjects at various points in the novel, despite Western culture's stigmatization of the subjectification of nonhuman animals. Typically, an animal is considered anthropomorphic in any narrative in which it exhibits mentation or more than the simplest of sensations (e.g., pain), and Martel pushes beyond this low threshold with speaking, reading animals in the embedded play and with the meaningful gaze of the animal in the novel as a whole. Streamlining matters somewhat, Luc Ferry comments that "We are, at least since Descartes, authorized to treat animals as simple *things* devoid of the slightest ethical significance" (148). The Cartesian philosophy that animals do not reason and do not have souls has filtered into most, if not all, branches of science (Fudge 99), and it reached its most extreme form in the rise of behaviourism and operationalism, which marginally softened Descartes's conceptualization of animals as beings without minds or souls to the idea that people "do not and cannot know that animals think or feel, so to be parsimonious we should just assume that they do not" (Luke 180). This sort of disavowal of nonhuman animal affectivity and mentation creates a culture of objectification in which anything with regard to nonhuman animals that cannot be scientifically proven is, in the name of objectivity, assumed not to exist. Bluntly put, objectification of animals is a more socially sophisticated and socially acceptable behaviour than the subjectification of animals. Nevertheless, Martel has crafted a novel in which nonhuman animals frequently transgress their allotted place as object. However, although these transgressions initially appear to validate nonhuman animal subjectivity, the human protagonist whose narrative gaze filters these subjectifying animals, Henry L'Hôte, subjectifies carcasses and taxidermied mounts in addition to living animals, thus marking the animal subject in the novel as originating from the narrator's imagination rather than the animals' inherent subjectivity.

Representations of nonhuman animal subjectivity are closely tied to anthropomorphism, and partake of the contentious nature of anthropomorphism.<sup>2</sup> To anthropomorphize an animal is, literally, to give it a human shape. This shape need not be physical, although it can take physical form, as it does in *Beatrice and Virgil*, for example, when a howler monkey reads the newspaper. Anthropomorphism attributes human characteristics — such as speech, thoughts, and morals — to nonhumans. The trouble with this is twofold. First, human representations of animals must always be couched in the anthropomorphic because humans cannot escape their essential humanness to present *anything* outside of a human frame of reference. Second, which characteristics are human alone, or to what degree nonhumans possess them, is a matter of ongoing debate. The strictest followers of behaviourism would deny consciousness, for example, to any nonhuman, and argue that the representation of consciousness or mind in any nonhuman is patently anthropomorphic. Such representations of animals do not represent their *animalness*, say the behaviourists. On the other side of the argument, but troubled by the same question, those who believe in nonhuman animal subjectivity wonder about appropriation of animals into an anthropocentric, anthropomorphic frame. Contemplating the ethics of representation, Don McKay writes that although it is not possible to avoid anthropocentrism, people “can perform artistic acts in such a way that, in ‘giving things a face’ [sic] the emphasis falls on” the acknowledged Other rather than the human frame that shapes human understandings of the nonhuman (99). Rather than using the nonhuman to express humanity, language can use humanity to express the nonhuman (McKay 99). Perhaps this blend is an essential element for creating relationships with the Other. In J.M. Coetzee’s *The Lives of Animals*, Elizabeth Costello suggests that empathy is an essential element of morality, saying that “[t]he particular horror of the [Nazi 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” (34). They refused to relate, to imagine what it would be like if their situations were reversed, or what it would be like to be “this being-there-before-me” (Derrida 117). Such logic suggests that some degree of anthropomorphism is an essential component for ethical

relationships with nonhumans, at least if it could conform to McKay's vision of invoking the animal in honour of the animal rather than as a tool with which to discuss the human.

This ethical dilemma is the primary concern of this article. To what degree does *Beatrice and Virgil* use animals as animals? The work is, of course, filtered through the lens of human perspective and human language, but it is rife with animal imagery and much that might be considered anthropomorphism. For the most part, however, potentially anthropomorphic attributes or descriptions can be credited to the narrator's imagination, or to the use of animals for purposes other than the representation of animals. Henry's pets Erasmus and Mendelssohn, for example, possess the ability to experience boredom and the characteristic of a retiring nature, respectively, but these descriptions are attributable to Henry's imagination, as he is both the narrator of the story and the ostensible author of *Beatrice and Virgil*. Thus, their potentially anthropomorphic descriptors become symptomatic of human fallibility, not a challenge to conceptions of what qualities are inherent to the animals themselves. Descriptions that suggest subjectivity in the novel's nonhuman animals are laid at Henry's feet, the anthropomorphic product of his imagination as the novel's narrator and author rather than a valid quality inherent to the animal characters. The animals are represented through so many layers of human interpretation that there is little left to represent them as animals; instead, Henry's understanding of them as animals becomes the focus.

Likewise, donkey and monkey Beatrice and Virgil do not perform *as animals* within the novel. As taxidermied mounts in Okapi Taxidermy, even their physicality has been carefully sculpted by the taxidermist, whose name is also Henry. The taxidermist further takes and moulds their physicality and their characters in his play *A 20th-Century Shirt*, which the narrator removes still further from the once-animals of the living creatures in his re-creation of the lost manuscript. The play itself is allegorical, and Beatrice and Virgil function allegorically within it. Allegorical anthropomorphization includes "descriptions of animal behavior that are not intended to be interpreted as biological fact," and these descriptions use animals "to make an argument more appealing or to conceal true identities" (Lockwood 45). The set of similarities required in order to forge the connection between the levels of signification make Beatrice and Virgil too human. They are manifestly *not* the

monkey and the donkey they are representing, except insofar as they are creations forged from the taxidermied mounts of what were once animals, using the superficial structure of animals to create things that look like but are not animals. Beatrice's tale of torture, Virgil's discovery that he has been made a non-citizen, and the murders of both characters serve to humanize the monkey and the donkey, so that the nods to their animal skins and the gestures to animal characteristics, such as Virgil's fondness for bananas, seem to be more dark humour than active attempts to retain "the animal" for the purposes of the allegory. The Beatrice and Virgil in the taxidermist's play are subjects despite their objectification by governmental edict and persecution by humans. They speak, philosophize, and read. Beyond the physical characteristics of the animals whose skins they wear, however, they are not animals. The anthropomorphism that facilitates the allegory shapes them into what John Burroughs calls "human beings disguised as animals" (131). What subjectivity they have comes from their ability to speak their own names and to represent themselves linguistically as Henry does to assert his own subjectivity, and even then, the play's embedded metafictionality marks the animal characters as not merely humans in the shape of animals but as fundamentally human constructs.

A construct is an object, by virtue of its status as a created thing, but Henry begins the novel by troubling this easy distinction in his critique of his own objectification by others, an act that blurs the edges of the standard human-subject/animal-object binary. Contemplating his own renown as an author, he notes that fame is "entirely external, coming from the minds of others. It exist[s] in the way people [look] at him or [behave] towards him. In that, being famous [is] no different from being gay, or Jewish, or from a visible minority: you are who you are, and then people project onto you some notion they have" (5). Here Henry identifies the core difference between being seen as a subject or an object: he recognizes himself as the mirror, reflecting back what people expect to see. A critical part of objectifying someone is to make that someone a *something*. That is to say that objectification begins with the denial of the "I" in another, with the idea that the being that one is looking at cannot apprehend that look, cannot *look back*. It is a simple thing to see a being as an object: one must merely fail to recognize that being as one with consciousness, intent, voluntary actions, or a point of view distinct from one's own (see Derrida 6-11). Henry, like most humans, has the

ability to represent himself linguistically, to say “I” and speak his own subjectivity and believe himself to be heard and seen as a subject on the basis of his ability to refer to himself as a self, self-aware and responsive. Even so, he experiences the gaze of others who see him first as a body carrying his career and success before they see him as person and subject (see Martel 167).

Nonhumans have no ability to represent themselves linguistically to humans, unless a given narrative anthropomorphizes them to the extent that they acquire human language and thus lose any hold they might have on representing the “purely” animal, but Henry is keenly aware of animal subjectivity. When Henry introduces his dog and cat, Erasmus and Mendelssohn, he emphasizes their subjectivity at the expense of their physical appearance. Neither is purebred, and the only physical description he provides is that Mendelssohn is black. Unlike donkey and monkey Beatrice and Virgil, the shape of these animals is apparently unimportant. They might be long- or short-haired, fat or slender, gold- or copper-eyed. The descriptions of them that Henry finds important pertain to their personality characteristics and behaviours: the animals are “bright-eyed and vigorous,” Erasmus “rambunctious, but easy to train” and Mendelssohn “retiring” and with a propensity for avoiding strangers (26). They are companion animals in the truest sense of the word. They companion Henry. Mendelssohn does this in an introspective, meditative fashion, Erasmus in an extroverted, interactive way. Henry’s neglect of the animals’ appearance in favour of their behavioural attributes is an indicator that he considers Erasmus and Mendelssohn subjects, but the same perceptual difficulties adhere to seeing the Other as to seeing an object. Henry’s gaze is untrustworthy. He creates the animals’ subjectivity as much as authors construct the subjectivity of their characters, and this construction of subjectivity is made doubly clear by Henry’s ostensible authorship of *Beatrice and Virgil*.

One indicator of the unreliability of Henry’s ascription of subjectivity comes from the time that Henry spends with Mendelssohn. Henry equates Mendelssohn’s attention to him while he plays the clarinet with that of the howler monkey skull he has purchased from the taxidermist, whose name is also Henry: he has, he believes, “two faithful spectators” in “Mendelssohn, who was patiently fascinated in the way only cats can be, and the monkey skull. . . . Their round eyes, the cat’s and the skull’s, were always on him when he played” (119). The skull is more

spectre than spectator, but Henry invests its eye sockets with the same attention as Mendelssohn's living gaze, a comparison between an empty skull and a living animal that marks their attention as Henry's creation and, consequently, constitutes a denial of the cat's subjectivity.

Erasmus is a surer barometer of subjectivity, both of his own being and that of others. Henry not only enjoys spending time with the dog but also talks to Erasmus, and fancies that he reads comprehension in Erasmus's facial expressions (53). He describes the dog as "responsive" (53), a word that recalls the widespread contention among philosophers that "the animal" cannot respond to the human in a way that can be properly distinguished from a reaction (Calarco 125), and this denial of the possibility of response makes the animal an object. Henry, however, believes that Erasmus is capable of response, and only a subject may respond to another; all else is reaction. It is evident, however, that at least some of what Henry believes is fanciful: as a dog, Erasmus may recognize some words in addition to recognizing tone and behaviour that reveal emotional states (see Wang and Tedford 167), but he would not be able to follow a running monologue, as Henry suggests he can. Ironically, the degree of response-ability that Henry has granted to Erasmus jeopardizes Henry's narrative reliability. Henry's subjective gaze endangers the legitimacy of the dog's subjectivity. By amplifying the dog's ability to respond beyond the credible, and by equating the cat's subjective gaze with that of a skull, Henry has undermined the subjectivity of the novel's two real, living nonhuman animals.

Erasmus's behaviour is also a better indicator of subjectivity in others than Henry's observations. Henry has a tendency to bestow mindfulness upon the dead, as with the howler monkey skull, and create narratives for — and emotions in — that which is wholly object, without mind or self. When he enters Okapi Taxidermy for the first time, for instance, he is struck by the lifelike nature of the stuffed animals, and is particularly interested in a set of tigers, manufacturing a narrative that includes a fantastical pair-bonded tiger couple (60-61). Like Richard Parker in *Life of Pi*, these tigers are "an anthropomorphic trope writ large," whose "consistent humanization" is the basis for their characters (Cole 28, 30). Erasmus, however, rejects Henry's anthropomorphic narrative; he is "the only living animal in the room, [and is] as bored as a child in an art museum" (60-61). He does not confuse the appearance of life with the fact of life, but reacts to the animal mounts the



same way he would react to a coffee table, which is not at all. He reacts only to other living beings, such as the taxidermist, and to the sound of a howler monkey as recorded on a cassette player. When Erasmus hears the howler's cry, he stiffens and pricks up his ears and appears to tremble, and then begins to bark, a reaction that Henry suggests is a sympathetic emotional response to the emotion in the howler's cry (74). The power of Erasmus's reaction to the sound of a living animal contrasts with his indifference toward the animal mounts. Henry sees subjectivity in objects, whereas he records no such tendency in Erasmus. In this case, Henry's descriptions of Erasmus's behaviour show the fallacy of Henry's subjective gaze and also suggest that Erasmus is, in fact, a subject, capable of differentiating between objects and other subjects and, potentially, of responding to his perception of those subjects.

Erasmus is also the animal gone mad in *Beatrice and Virgil*. In a pathos-saturated scene, Henry discovers Mendelssohn savaged by Erasmus, and a veterinarian must euthanize both of his pets on the same day. Mendelssohn dies quietly, "trusting" Henry all the way to death, but Erasmus is killed in a gas chamber, dying "mouth frothing, eyes rolling and legs trembling" (161). Rabies's zoonotic properties highlight an essential similarity between humans and nonhuman animals: the bite of a mad animal will make a mad animal, and that madness does not differentiate between the human and the nonhuman (Wasik and Murphy 3). Erasmus's deterioration to this "bestial" state suggests a prior higher level of functioning, from which he devolves into something not "himself," a state Henry had noticed at several earlier points (e.g., 119). In their description of a rabid dog, Wasik and Murphy explain that "[o]ne could hardly grieve for the dog, because the dog was already gone. To euthanize it . . . was merely to acknowledge its departure" (223). That is to say that the thing that makes the dog an individual was gone and only a shell remained; that shell is the object, as much as the skin of an animal without the animal in it is an object. In his madness, Erasmus has lost that which makes him "himself," a nod to a subjectivity noticed through its absence. Although this depiction acknowledges animal subjectivity, subjectivity that requires the death of the animal validates an animal being that is no longer present. *Beatrice and Virgil* offers an animal subject that appears genuine rather than constructed *ex post facto*, because Erasmus's hinted-at subjectivity can only be validated by the death of that subjectivity. Like Derrida's

conceptualization of the animal as an absolute Other, the once-subject is completely inaccessible, because acknowledgment of that subjectivity is predicated upon its present absence. If that is indeed the case, there is no way to approach that subjectivity, and it cannot be recognized while the animal is still a subject.

Henry's narrative construction of the subjectivity of the novel's living animals and its dead ones mirrors what the taxidermist accomplishes with his more literal animal representations. A taxidermist takes the skin and sometimes bones of an animal and creates a human vision of what that animal is, working with physical aspects of an animal to accomplish the same sort of (re-)articulation that writers use words to achieve. A taxidermist's work is one of extreme objectification. He takes a thing, a corpse, and, choosing what to keep and what to discard, uses parts of it to make a whole new thing. "The taxidermied mount," Garry Marvin explains, "is only a superficial animal; it is, literally, only skin deep, but that surface must be crafted to convey a sense of the whole. In this sense a mount is a simulacrum [that] attempts to convey those proper qualities of the living and original animal, but it can never be more than an appearance" (114). That is, the taxidermied mount is just that: a mount, not an animal. It is the taxidermist who gives the mount shape, who determines its pose and expression. The taxidermist takes an animal out of its skin and fixes the skin onto a frame, adding, removing, and positioning in order to enhance this superficial understanding of what the animal is. Henry L'Hôte wonders how "someone so involved with animals should react so little — in fact, not at all — to a live one right in front of him. The taxidermist [does not] even [glance] at Erasmus" (86), but the taxidermist is *not* involved with animals. "Involvement" implies some sort of relationship. The taxidermist's work is with the dead, with disarticulation and reconfiguration of bodies that have no life left in them, that are pure objects (see Sands 46). The dead have no mind left with which even to attempt to assert subjectivity. Henry the taxidermist mirrors the processes of Henry the writer, whose articulations of animals are narrative-based. Henry the writer imposes his own mental vision of the animal subject upon the animal's physical being, and the novel's concern with the process of that creation emphasizes the roles of both Henrys in the construction of the animal characters. This is true of the taxidermist's creations, of Henry L'Hôte's narration of Erasmus and Mendelssohn — and Henry, as the purported author

of *Beatrice and Virgil* as well as its protagonist, has absolute authority over their representation — and of Henry's narration of the novel's pure animal objects, the taxidermied mounts and animal corpses.

Because Henry's point of view is unreliable, any subjectivity that he sees in any nonhuman animal is suspect, and his persistent perception of the presence of a subject in the remnants of what were once animals undermines the subjectivity that he sees in living animals. Staring at the skinned body of a fox, Henry sees a mouth "open, as if in a scream," a soul, and then "a being caught in its moment of greatest agony, shuddering uncontrollably, beyond reason and beyond help" (156). He sees in the skin and the skinless corpse a being that was once "sentient," that had "*soul*," projects its death throes upon it, and is aghast (156). Some of this is the empathetic imagining of the fox's death, but its projection into the present moment, not imagining the fox prior to its death but its agony *now*, post-mortem, blurs that line between seeing the animal as a subject and creating the animal subject. Impositions of subjectivity upon what are clearly objects, such as the fox skin, the tiger mounts, and the howler monkey skull, indicate that Henry does *not* see Erasmus and Mendelssohn as subjects, but as objects reflecting back his imposed narrative of subjectivity. The subjectivity that Henry grants to the inanimate casts doubt upon his ability to truly see any subject, and suggests that what he sees is his own projection of idea, narrative, and being reflected back at him.

Mirroring Henry's constructed animal subjectivity, the taxidermist's play, *A 20th-Century Shirt*, also contains constructed animals, although these are fictional even within the fiction of *Beatrice and Virgil*. In the play, the taxidermist has created articulate animal characters — Beatrice and Virgil — who have been extracted in their turn from the taxidermied mounts that the taxidermist has himself constructed. This makes Beatrice and Virgil doubled and doubly constructed, both as taxidermied characters within the novel and as living characters within the play. The taxidermist's impetus for seeking out Henry is, in fact, his desire for assistance in character construction, in describing the physical aspects of Beatrice and Virgil. It is, in Henry's words, "a conventional descriptive job, matching a concrete reality with its most obvious verbal counterparts" (83). With this sort of description, this articulation of minute physical details such as the "loops and whorls" on Virgil's palms "that look like the finest silverwork" (82), the taxidermist usurps the typical

visual medium of a play in favour of the linguistic. "ATTENTION!" one of the posters projected onto the back wall will read; "Large monkey with black face and bearded chin. Body thick and heavy. Tail long and naked at tip" (77). This obsessive attention to detail, although surely correlated with and necessary to the taxidermist's job, functions as an added measure of control: with Henry's help, the taxidermist is fixing the animals' characteristics *in his own words*. The taxidermist's drive to map every inch of Beatrice's and Virgil's bodies shows an obsessive need for control, both in terms of the play and the corpses that inspired the protagonists. At the same time as he is recording what Beatrice and Virgil *are*, as bodies, he is also determining *how* their physicality is expressed, and in large part also describing his own creations, as Victor Frankenstein might describe his Creature. Taxidermists "make models of animals"; they "fix," "sew back," and "repaint and shellac" (Martel 68-69). In short, the taxidermist has physically created Beatrice and Virgil, from their life-like appearance to the shine on Virgil's nails, as much as he has returned them to a representation of what they were when the animals were alive.

This is textbook objectification. The taxidermist's store contains the shells of animals, sculpted and positioned just so, "fixed and immobile" (Martel 147) and completely under the taxidermist's control. Animals are typically "denied the power to refer to themselves through *deixis*, the power to point to the world and to themselves in the same thrust in order to 'say': Here I am" (Berger and Segarra 8), and the taxidermied mount can only reaffirm the self and subjectivity of the one describing it while marking the *thingness* of the object referent. The speaker is in control of the representation of the thing and, in the taxidermist's case, even in the actual physical appearance of the thing being represented. Beatrice and Virgil are objects that the taxidermist has imbued with life and a story, both in his positioning of the physical animals and in his creation of their characters in the play. *Beatrice and Virgil* not only positions Henry as a human author telling the story of nonhuman characters, but it also has a human character within it creating a story for nonhuman characters to tell. This sort of metanarrative emphasizes the artifice behind the storytelling, coating even the taxidermist's play, in which a monkey and a donkey form the speaking protagonists, with a layer of objectivity. The characters are talking, but they are not real. They are the product of a human imagination. The animals

that inspired them are dead and their skins mounted. They are utterly dominated by their human re-creator. Even Henry sees the text of the play as “fixed and immobile, like one of [the taxidermist’s] mounted animals,” with the one controlling the dissemination of the text as the one in control of the text itself (147). This in turn reflects Henry’s position as the narrator and author of *Beatrice and Virgil*, with absolute authority over the articulation of his representations of Erasmus and Mendelssohn. The emphasis on this process of creation, Henry’s, the taxidermist’s, and the novel’s, foregrounds the human engineering that creates the text’s (suspect) animal subjects and in so doing relegates the animals themselves to a place of secondary importance. This is neither an address to nor a translation of the other, as McKay describes the process of representing animals (99, 28), but an inscription of human acts upon animal constructs.

Because of the amount of control the two Henrys have over the animals in the novel, who are narrated and in many ways created by them, any anthropomorphization originates from a human source within the text itself, a position that reaffirms human subjectivity without challenging the Western standard of nonhuman objectification. Henry’s subjective gaze empathetically reanimates the fox’s corpse and gives emotion to the taxidermied tigers, and that same gaze renders thoughts and emotions in living nonhuman animals without demanding that others acknowledge those thoughts and emotions as *real*, as originating from the animal characters rather than Henry’s imagination. Similarly, it is Henry’s subjective gaze that describes Mendelssohn as “retiring” and Erasmus as “bored as a child in an art museum” (26, 61). These are empathetic acts, inferring qualities and characteristics from behaviours, and are often considered anthropomorphic, but the descriptions themselves may be laid at Henry’s doorstep; he has observed the animals’ actions and labelled them as symbolizing a retiring nature or a state of boredom. The Beatrice and Virgil in *A 20th-Century Shirt* are clearly anthropomorphic, but the characters originate from the taxidermist, filtered through the cheesecloth of Henry’s memory in his reconstruction of the play. The play is an allegory, where symbols convey a hidden moral message, and both animal characters function on a largely symbolic level in the play. When Henry presses for specifics about why the taxidermist used Beatrice and Virgil for the play, the taxidermist claims that it is “[b]ecause monkeys are thought to be clever and nimble,

and donkeys are thought to be stubborn and hardworking. Those are the characteristics that animals need to survive. It makes them flexible and resourceful, able to adapt to changing conditions" (101). This is what Confederation poet Charles G.D. Roberts refers to as the "salient characteristics" by which animals are known (141). Because it is "simple to remember that the tiger [is] cruel, the fox cunning," animals come to be seen, "for the purposes of literature, as types or symbols merely" (Roberts 141). Beatrice and Virgil do not represent themselves as animals, but rather serve symbolic functions, representing certain characteristics, nonhuman animals as a group, and those groups of people who were victimized in Nazi Germany. In this sort of anthropomorphization, it is evident that the animals are really people wearing the skins of animals. Their constructed subjectivity drives the play, but the allegorical nature of the play undermines their status as animals.

A curious inversion occurs with these characters. Because there is no early indication that Beatrice and Virgil are animals, Henry, like any reader coming to the novel without prior knowledge of it, initially reads Beatrice and Virgil as human. Thus, any symbolic referents brought to bear on Beatrice and Virgil early in the novel will be purely human symbols to Henry and the naïve reader, flipping the standard symbolic order as the symbolic qualities of human characters inform an initial reading of animal characters.<sup>3</sup> In concert, Beatrice and Virgil strongly recall *The Divine Comedy* and these characters' roles as docents; the symbolic function of the names is difficult to escape and pre-empts the symbolic functions that the embodied characters have as donkey and monkey. The symbolic functions of the animals in language are the primary means through which most humans reference most nonhumans (Huggan and Tiffin 139), but the play initially reverses this to layer historical and literary symbolism upon animals. The animals are functioning symbolically within an allegory, but additional literary symbolism layers their representation, merging historical, literary, and animal symbolism within individual characters. They function within the play itself, then, as multi-layered symbols, signifying something other than themselves, which shifts the focus from the animal self, or subject.

The objectification of the novel's taxidermied animals parallels the symbolism in *A 20th-Century Shirt*, not only in the animal characters but also in the setting of the country of Shirt itself. A shirt is a covering, meant to — at least nominally — conceal and protect, and may contain

symbolic meaning on its own; the Shirt, for example, is striped like a concentration camp inmate's. The Shirt is arbitrary and artificial, and can function as a placeholder for the body it covers, in the same way that the skins of animals represent the animals themselves. In addition, just as the Shirt is both a shirt and symbolic of the parcelled-out world, so taxidermied mounts represent both "real" animals and the purchasers' and taxidermists' visions of what those animals represent (see Luke 94). People make meaning of them. They are pure objects, without the ability to contradict or to make meaning of their own. This link between the shirt and the mounted animal skins also links the setting to Beatrice and Virgil, who are characters created out of mounted animal skins. They are fictional constructs made from the shells of animals, functioning within a fictional work inside a fictional work, and they are functioning as symbolically within that work as is the shirt. In Paul Shepard's words, "The allegorical animal is bent on giving us a lesson. It may be based on real or imagined behavior, but always has a second meaning, a traditional, instructive purpose, usually well known and needing no interpretation" (220). In a location provided in the play (see 148-49), Henry finds "irrefutable proof that [the taxidermist is] 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). The play links Beatrice and Virgil to the victims of Nazi Germany, and the slaughter of animals to the Holocaust.

Of course, as much as the Holocaust is being used to speak of the fate of animals, so is the fate of animals being used to speak of the Holocaust.<sup>4</sup> Much of the extant criticism of *Beatrice and Virgil* focuses on its treatment of the Holocaust and, specifically, the allegory that pairs animals and Jews. "[I]s the novel," Danielle Sands asks, "a text that 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 defamiliarizing tool?" (42). Reviewers such as Missy Schwartz believe the latter. Some, however, believe that the Holocaust is being used to think about animals (Lasdun). This reversal "has the effect of trivializing the Holocaust" (Kakutani), in that such critics believe that the

novel uses the Final Solution as the vehicle that conveys the tenor, or subject, of the allegory. The issue, to these reviewers, is not that Jews are being compared to animals. As J.M. Coetzee asserts, slaughterhouse and stockyard comparisons abound in descriptions of the Holocaust, the “crime of the Third Reich” being that it “treat[ed] people like animals” (20). The issue lies in the inversion of the metaphor, as it were, as exemplified by the rebuke that “[if] Jews were treated like cattle, it does not follow that cattle are treated like Jews. The inversion insults the memory of the dead” (Coetzee 50). Sands, however, argues that allegory and representation are ambiguous in this novel, and that such ambiguity “enables the reader to consider both the ethics of storytelling and the relationship between human and nonhuman animals” (42). The objectification of the animals mirrors the objectification of victimized people in Nazi Germany, and, equally, the objectification of victimized people in Nazi Germany mirrors the objectification of animals. Both *Beatrice and Virgil* and the play within it pair and compare these two objectified collective nouns — “animals” and Nazi Germany’s “undesirables” — and problematize the ways in which they interact.

As much as the play uses animal genocide to frame the Holocaust, so it also uses the Holocaust to frame the “irreparable abomination” of animal genocide (Martel 134-35), and the objectification of the victimized is at the heart of both. Virgil is astonished to read a government edict that announces “a new category of *non*-citizens” and that “he — he himself personally” is the “target” of this announcement (128). In being so classified, he has become one whose voice does not count. He is not a citizen of the country; he has been made less than others, worth less than others through governmental edict. As with the “undesirables” in Nazi Germany, Virgil has been reduced from a state of some significance, from a being with acknowledged rights if not parity in his society, to that of a subhuman (“Victims”). Western cultural hierarchies of worth would position Virgil just so, as not only nonhuman but subhuman; but this is news to Virgil, who lives in the country of Shirt, where this new law has only recently come into effect. The atrocities done to Virgil and Beatrice and the other victims in the play, who have also presumably become non-citizens, can be countenanced only because the victims are subhuman. Those designated as non-citizen (or subhuman or *Untermensch*) are defined by their lack of something essential to the standard that the designators have set. Virgil is *not* a



citizen, and therefore he is not accorded the rights of a citizen. He is less than a citizen, less than a human, and therefore conventions surrounding the ethical treatment of citizens (or humans) do not apply to him. The power is in those who possess the ability to give names. People do not designate themselves *Untermensch*; others apply that designation to them. People also name, designate, and categorize animals, and even the naming of “the animal” itself is one of distancing. “The animal is a word,” according to Derrida, “that men have instituted, a name they have given themselves the right and the authority to give to the living other,” and into this “catch-all concept [go] *all the living things* that man does not recognize as his fellows, his neighbours, or his brothers” (23, 34). That is to say that the concept of the animal contains all those living beings that humans recognize as living but that are *not* human, *not* the same, and so are therefore either Other or object. Neither the Other nor an object designates itself as such. The taxidermist’s allegory uses acts of designating, of marginalizing a set group through designation, to link the Holocaust with the fates of nonhuman animals.

This linking problematizes the objectification of both groups: if animals are not simply other than but *less than* human, to translate this into the taxidermist’s stated position of human treatment of animals, then wrongs done to them are less wrong, or perhaps not even wrong at all (see Luke 164-65). Similarly, if groups of humans can be re-categorized as animals in a human-subject/animal-object binary, they will share the same considerations of what constitutes moral or ethical treatment of that group. This idea of who — or what — *can* be treated in a moral or immoral manner is something with which Henry L’Hôte struggles as he considers the text that the taxidermist has sent him as their initial point of contact. This text is Gustave Flaubert’s “The Legend of Saint Julian Hospitator,”<sup>5</sup> and it is referenced later in the play in the form of the human body that Beatrice and Virgil discover and name Gustav. In the story, Julian grows up to be an indiscriminate slaughterer of animals, killing joyfully and in great excess, but Henry believes that it is “for killing his parents that [Julian] wanders the earth forlornly and it is for opening his heart to a divine leper that he is saved. His stupendous hunting carnage only provides the great stag that curses him. Otherwise, the slaughter, a wished-for extinction of animals, is a senseless orgy about which Julian’s saviour has not a single word to say” (42-

43). According to Henry, then, the animal genocide in which Julian was involved in his youth is immaterial to his initial damnation and to his eventual salvation. In this story, acting upon animals is amoral behaviour, and amoral behaviour pertains primarily to objects. Throwing a stone into a lake is not immoral *per se*, but tossing a baby in after it is. Again mediating the layers of metanarrative in the novel, Henry is able to problematize animal objectification through his thinking about Flaubert's story, but he is unable to recognize the self-reflective nature of the subjectivity that he sees in the animals he encounters.

Beatrice and Virgil are subjects in the taxidermist's play, although the novel problematizes that subjectivity by emphasizing the layers of construction that have created their fictionalized subjects. Their objectification by other characters in the play, reminiscent of Henry's assessment of his own objectification early in the novel, highlights both the mental processes by which one group of humans can justify victimizing another group and how those same processes work in human interactions with nonhuman animals. The animality inherent to Beatrice and Virgil, however, is only skin deep. The allegorical anthropomorphism that allows them to become so enmeshed in the Holocaust narrative effectively turns them into humans in fur coats, animal-skinned people who speak and read and assert their subjectivity in the same way that Henry is able to assert his own subjectivity: linguistically.

The real, living animals in *Beatrice and Virgil* have no such recourse. If an animal cannot assert its own subjectivity, it must depend upon humans to recognize it as a subject, and here the problem of the mirroring gaze reasserts itself. On their own, the subjectivity that Henry perceives in Erasmus and Mendelssohn appears to be a valid reading: he sees the Other, however alien and unapproachable, within them. In concert with the taxidermied animals, however, whose skins and eye sockets Henry invests with subjectivity, the narrator's perception proves unreliable. Corpses do not have self, and even less so the manicured, structured, disarticulated skins and bones of corpses, and thus any subjectivity Henry sees in the taxidermied mount is one that he has imposed upon it, which in turn undermines the subjectivity of the living animals in the novel. There are hints at true subjectivity, as when the rabies that consumes Erasmus marks the absence of a subject that can only be absent if it had once been present, but the mediation of an unreliable narrator makes suspect all representation of that subjectivity.

Elsie Cloete writes that “Because a tiger neither knows nor cares about its authoring[,] it remains the writer’s responsibility to *animot* an alterity that cannot be bridged” (331). Originating from the human, all narrative is in some measure an appropriation of representation, a claiming and fixing of the natures of particular things or beings into the shapes that writers and orators craft within the limits of the tools — vocabulary, style, diction, etc. — at their disposal. This fixing is at some level an act of objectifying by dictating what a thing or being or person is, as both Henry and the taxidermist do in *Beatrice and Virgil*. It should be possible, however, to gesture toward the animal subject in the animal representation, to “translate” the animal subject into linguistic representations (McKay 72). There are glimmers of this translation in *Beatrice and Virgil*, particularly where Erasmus is concerned: his indifference to the animal mounts, inexplicable to Henry; his response to the taxidermist and the howler monkey’s cry; his loss of “self” to rabies. Because Henry projects subjectivity onto animal skins and taxidermied mounts as well as living animals, however, all the evidence that he presents for subjectivity is suspect, and the many layers of metanarrative foreground the process of representation over the animal. On the other extreme, *Beatrice and Virgil*’s manufactured subjectivity hinges on an anthropomorphism so pronounced that their characters’ animality is as superficial as that of the taxidermied mounts at Okapi Taxidermy. Representing animals as animals is difficult to achieve. *Beatrice and Virgil* reads, on the surface, as a text that speaks to the subjectivity of nonhuman animals in its animal characters and the ways in which it problematizes the treatment of nonhuman animals. However, the unreliability of the narrator and the novel’s emphasis on the process of creating representation undermine the subjectivity of the novel’s living animals, and the strength of the allegory in *A 20th-Century Shirt* undermines the animality of the play’s subjects. *Beatrice and Virgil*’s treatment of animals is complex, but it struggles to represent nonhuman animal subjectivity as something more than a mirror reflecting back the subjectivity that a human narrator scripts.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> For Martel's commentary on the animal other, see his interview with Sabine Sielke.

<sup>2</sup> The Nature Faker controversy of the early twentieth century is probably the most well-known debate about the qualities of anthropomorphism. See Lutts for a compilation of much of this literature and the criticism of it.

<sup>3</sup> The use of human names as symbolic signposts for animal characters recurs in Martel's work, both with Erasmus and Mendelssohn within *Beatrice and Virgil* itself and with the tiger Richard Parker in *Life of Pi*. Cloete's "Tigers, Humans, and Animots" provides an analysis of Richard Parker and the provenance of his name and its significance to *Life of Pi*.

<sup>4</sup> For a detailed reading of representations of the Holocaust in *Beatrice and Virgil*, see Haswell.

<sup>5</sup> The title used here is the one used in *Beatrice and Virgil* and is one of several variants.

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