

On Animal faith

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[Long parenthesis: I am thinking of a cat, a particular cat, the familiar named Zoë or at least the one Tracy and I named Zoë (for I do not know what she calls herself; neither do I know what her mother called her when she called her, her mother, feral and cautious, of whom we only ever saw fleeting glimpses, the one we named The Burnished One, because of the way in which, with each pregnancy, her calico colours deepened and flared, as if fired in the kiln of life), the fluffy gray one with the large green eyes who holds my hand in her jaws, letting the sharpness of her incisors be felt along the surface of my exposed skin.

I feel her feel my skin with her teeth, pressing them into my flesh without drawing blood, feel her inhibit her bite, not *not* bite but rather, bite without, as it were, following through. Remarkably, to her, I am mortal. I suffer and am vulnerable to suffering, a creature, like all creatures, open to having its flesh rent, its life taken. And more, much more: to her I am a creature whose vulnerability can be played with, made a game of.

But why do I say that this address, this comportment, is “remarkable”? Why do I express wonder that there is “transcendence in the animal,” as Levinas says, exclaiming his incredulity that animals are in excess of the sum of their captivations? Perhaps what is remarkable is that there is nothing remarkable in that. Hegel had said that the difference between humans and animals is that animals devour and ingest the other whereas human beings, in addition to devouring and ingesting, can also choose to incorporate the other, “inwardize” or “abstract” it, and in that way create the interior space that we who call ourselves human call the thinking subject. Thinking is then a kind of eating or a taking in without devouring.

Zoë refuses to make me food and in that gesture of inhibition she makes a thought of me rather than a meal. My hand amid her pressed incisors is a thought. How strange! So I am thinking of the thoughts of this creature before me, the one in whom I wager a confidence, and who wagers one with me, the other animal who takes with her teeth yet elects not to bite, much less to eat (or eat in a certain bloody or unseemly way), and thus submits herself to a ritual or regulation that in effect creates a world in which we two animals dwell alone, together, at that moment, we two, *vivre ensemble*, playing at biting and being bitten among the meat-eaters, both feline and human. What we are doing together is not nature, is it? But does that make it culture?

Perhaps that indeterminacy will be our shared *Umwelt*. I fall under your gaze by yielding my hand to your mouth. What are the terms of that pleasurable agreement or engagement? “I won’t tear into you,” my little cat says to me, or seems to say to me, her tensed jaws on my flesh. “Instead, let us play, let us join in a game (perhaps not unlike the “hunting games” of which Levinas speaks in the opening of “Name of a Dog,” or the game with his cat of which Montaigne speaks and that Derrida remembers with fondness) . . . let us join in a game that we instantiate together, you know, the game that we’ve played before (that’s why I don’t reflexively shrink from you in real fear; we’ve done this before, the sign of which is that you understand and expect that there are rules to follow, rule number one being, you will pursue, yes, and bite, yes, after a fashion, but not *avec acharnement*, i.e, not “fiercely”), the game where you pretend to bite me, and pretend right up to that thrilling threshold where you may no longer be pretending, and I pretend to be wary of being bitten, right up to the threshold where I may no longer be pretending too.” Is that what you are saying and thinking Zoë?

In this game (if it is a game, a word and a concept that is after all so heavily burdened with anthropocentric assumptions about play being a human prerogative, as Friedrich Schiller claims, not to mention the closely related supposition that we “humans” know what play is and that we know who or what we are when we say that we are playing) . . . in this game, we agree, my little cat and I--rule number two, but who’s counting?--that the roles are not to be reversed. With her I agree that I will neither bite her back nor pretend to do so. I will not put her paw in my mouth and clamp my teeth down on it without drawing blood; I will not play with your mortality while you play

with mine. That could in theory be a game that we might play, me taking you with my teeth and all but biting you; that is a game in fact that I've seen you, Zoë, the one whose very name means "life," savour many times with an other of your kind, but with you and with me, things are different, that is not our game; it is the asymmetry and non-reciprocity of the pretending to bite and to be bitten that makes this game *this* game, the one that takes place between you and I and that in some obscure way is what it is because it is you and because it is me.

Before agreeing to these particular terms and, as the condition of the possibility of agreeing to them at all, we will already have agreed that we can agree, that agreement is within our individual and collective competences--that is, we will have undertaken an agreement, never something assured in advance because always open to being torn apart. And so agreements call for trust. We have and express faith in each other; indeed, we trust in trust, we trust in that moment in which you inhibit your bite, that you bite and will go on biting but without disinhibiting your bite, that trusting can be the basis for a mutuality that I too coarsely and perhaps anxiously, defensively—but anxious about what? Defensive about what?--call "play." So, then, we both agree and are *in* agreement, i.e., we are creatures who address each other and who discover ourselves, after the fact, dwelling in the midst of the very possibility of address, the wagered and risky space of acquiescence in which we materialize at once as addressees of each other and otherwise than addressees.

Is this not *foi d'animal*, "animal faith"? Naming this primordial opening, this archaic clearing, let us not hesitate to use the phrase that Levinas uses, even if he writes it down for others to read without necessarily knowing all there is to know about it, even if he risks the wager of these strange, necessary, and generative words about risk. Now, no doubt the animal that abjures a biting violence still bites, just as the human being who refuses to eat meat still eats and indeed eats anthropophagically. In all rigour, who could say that the feigned bite, the all-but-bite, is not itself a kind of bite? And if a kind of bite, then why not a kind of eating? In the midst of this biting game and indeed in anticipation of it, have I not already given myself over to be eaten, not only because I may yet be eaten and because my not-being-eaten is intelligible only against that ghastly horizon but also because I am dispossessed by the animal that refuses wholly to possess me as, say, meat? When we two animals give each other to eat, but do not eat, when we expose each other's condition of exposure to each other, are we not then still eating, just a little?

As if we needed to be reminded, eating and being eaten are hardly reducible to consumption for the same reason that biting flesh is so much more tearing into skin and bones. What to make of the *frisson* of the experience of the animal that decides not to injure the other and thus to address the other and be addressed by the other on that very basis, acceding to the imperative, "Thou shalt not kill," and all that flows irremissibly from it: "thou shalt not make him suffer, which is sometimes worse than death, thou shalt not do him harm, thou shalt not eat him, not even a little bit, etc.." (as Derrida says in "Eating Well"). We cannot know and should not know in advance what an animal body can do, mine or an other's. This suspension and this not-knowing is a kind of faith, a faith in the animal that too has faith, as Derrida also says: "the animal, it calls for faith and it has faith; it calls for trust and it trusts." In the game at hand, in the game with your mouth and my hand, we partake of each other in what is nothing less than an animal sacrament.]

