

BETWEEN THE SPECIES

Review
of
The Animal Side

Jean-Christophe Bailly
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Bailly begins by establishing for us a point of contact, a window to a world at once strange and inviting. He recounts, in rich detail, a moment of disturbance—of prolonged contact with an animal other, another modality of being. I am convinced that the chapters of this work are the outpourings of a fervor that has been stoked by this and other such experiences, and Bailly writes as one beholding an interconnectedness that supersedes the species-boundary, grounded in acute self-analyses following moments of contact with nonhuman animal individuals. His entire work is a point of contact, as he draws us toward an essential, indelible aspect of human existence that has been vehemently disregarded or disavowed in recent centuries. Attempts to label the manifestations of this modality are necessarily bound by the determinative nature of language, and we can call it what we will—Bailly momentarily advances the term *animality*—but in our experience it appears as an intimated, possibly inexpressible something. It hints at a primal relation to nonhuman nature and hides from those who refuse to see; it is *le versant animal*, in the fullest of the phrase.

To say that Bailly describes various manifestations of animality would be to misspeak, and a more accurate depiction is that he develops a number of reference points to help us recognize its appearances within the realm of our own experience. Whence develop the descriptions of the project as an admixture of poetry and philosophy—but to fix a determinative line between the realm of poetry and the realm of philosophy is to take away from Bailly's existentially grounded approach. Broadly construed, to be a poet is to reflect lyrically on one's experiences, to depict and recreate meaningful experiences with aesthetic prowess. Likewise, to philosophize is to reflect on the nature of reality—a reality which, hermeneutically speaking, is always informed by one's experience. If the

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poet presents a viable argument, albeit in a manner that also addresses the affective nature of lived experience, is she not operating within the realm of philosophy? Is it not a tremendous asset to possess the ability to draw upon and appeal to the ways in which we experience reality, with heightened powers of introspection? The potency of this work is that it exemplifies and elicits an approach to the nonhuman world that begins with a posture of hermeneutical humility, and in wonder; it mines the richness of certain experiences for insight and understanding, and persuasively undermines human arrogance without ignoring the differences that separate the human animal from those of other species.

In addition to appeals to thinkers of the European variety, especially nineteenth-century German (Hegel, Hölderlin, Rilke) and twentieth-century French (Bataille, Deleuze, Derrida, Guattari, Merleau-Ponty), *The Animal Side* is rife with allusions to philosophic films, poems, novels, and short stories. One such example provides a passageway into Bailly's argument:

But what would be needed, probably, is a pact, and a pact requires the formality of blood. This is quite clear in Jim Jarmusch's film *Dead Man*, when the hero, "William Blake," a fugitive himself, lies down next to a dead deer on the ground in the forest and paints his cheeks with the deer's blood. Something very simple is achieved here—totemism in its pure state, its native state, but also and especially a rediscovery. ...We have the image of two bodies stretched out side by side, lying on the material that makes up woods and forests—pine needles, moss, dried or rotting leaves—the dead animal and the living man are there on the ground with water and blood, and the man confides in the animal, corporates and entrusts

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himself to its soul, travels with its soul, an imposed shamanism in which death and life embrace each other in a prodigious act of peacemaking. (8)

This druidic act embodies the very characteristics of animality that the human animal, in the upshot of the superficiality of modern consumer-culture, has conditioned itself to avoid at all costs: the mortal, the animal, that which is susceptible to death. As Annie Dillard poignantly illustrates in a few of her works, the natural world is at every level a flux of life and death; it is no coincidence that as we have increasingly distanced ourselves from our own mortality, we have also desecrated the bond that connects us to those fellow-sufferers who are also fleeing, in terror, from the shadow of death.

But nonhuman animals are not mere suffering subhumans. They are blessed with another mode of existence, with a freedom that the human animal has lost but can still recollect. Bailly revitalizes Rilke's appropriation of *das Offene, the Open*, a concept derived from Hölderlin, setting Rilke's understanding against Heidegger's arrogation of the selfsame concept. For Rilke, the open is the blessedness of animal existence; for Heidegger, it applies only to the human animal. Thus in the infamous Heideggerian construction animals are *weltlos*, "poor in world," and Dasein is *Weltbildend*, a shaper of the world. But Bailly argues, contra-Heidegger, that our ability to shape and construct (*bildung*) is the very thing that keeps us from the blessedness of the animal modality: "It is because animals are beings without *Bildung* that they are in the open. *Bildung*, which is the proper domain of human beings and the means by which they constitute themselves as freedom, is at the same time the domain that has had to bid goodbye to that other radiant freedom, that of the open" (18). With this move, a call

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to recognize the (radiant) freedom of nonhuman heterotrophs, Bailly begins to destabilize the logic of domination that has often accompanied the conventional, conceptual distinction between the human and the nonhuman.

For Bailly, mere recognition of the open is not enough. Before a suture can be applied to the human-animal divide we must cut to expose the depths of our shared experience. He wants to establish a point of contact, thereby conveying inklings of an intimacy that intimates itself to us in the gazes of animal individuals. Such contact is unsettling, and therefore requires courage: “This vacillation is found at the point of contact, before affect comes into play. The contact is always unsettled, for the encounter relates and even stipulates difference: difference is there, it is there like an abyss, and the abyss cannot be crossed” (5). Some turn away in the face of difference, but others continue to gaze and be gazed upon; the *reservoir of existence* is a shared home but the human animal must initiate healing. To this end Bailly envisions a community wherein living individuals see and are seen: “The community of the reservoir of existence arises first of all from the sense of sight: it is through sight that we recognize that we are not the only ones who see, that we know that others see us, look at us, contemplate us. The major difference that splits living beings into two categories is found along the line of sight...” (26-27). What Bailly conveys is not a condescending, moral sentimentality, but dizziness in the face of our shared animality. We are to see ourselves reflected in the gaze of an animal other, and to gasp—there we find intimacy lost, the possibility that humans do not have an exclusive claim to meaning, and the horror of a rupture that has resulted in domination and destruction.

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To analyze at the broadest level, much of what I admire in Bailly is his adherence to the realm of actuality, particularly with reference to the tension he upholds in directing our gaze *backward* to lost intimacy and *forward* to the possibility of unification. He points us from the onset to “the threshold of the symbolic,” the cave-drawings of early humans, which radiate an intimacy that transcends the species-boundary (9-10). Intimations of primitive unity are everywhere apparent in his work, and he employs highly effectual means—first-person narrative, phenomenological description, analyses of paintings and photographs, etc.—to communicate them. In addition to the initial backward movement, Bailly recognizes that a return to an earlier state of existence, i.e. *animalism*, is neither possible nor plausible. Our capacity for thought must be utilized in the quest for an end to human domination—we must recognize that our lack of moral reflection is precisely the root of problem. Reflection demands action, and action requires courage; Bailly bids us to gaze and be gazed upon, and thence to turn toward and embrace *le versant animal*.