

ON SINGULARITY AND THE SYMBOLIC: THE THRESHOLD OF THE HUMAN IN CALVINO'S *MR. PALOMAR*

Carrie Rohman

Italo Calvino's representation of animal ontology in *Mr. Palomar*, particularly in his discussion of the albino gorilla and the iguana, is rare in its complex and deeply philosophical portrayal of the captive animal and its relationship to human epistemologies. Calvino's text provides a simultaneous acknowledgment of animal difference and of the homologous relation humans and animals have to the object both through language and outside of language. In two brief sections, Palomar theorizes the subjective experience of an isolated gorilla, considers the construction of zoos as they attempt to mimic the putative stasis of "species," and experiences the essential *inhumanity* of time that binds us to other animals. Palomar's narrative invokes the threshold or limit of human abilities to know, and it emphasizes various ahuman, creaturely modalities that decenter the Cartesian human and destabilize the human/animal barrier. Moreover, Palomar's complex relation to nonhuman animals challenges even some of the most recent posthumanist critiques of ethical philosophy by troubling the question of animal alterity. This text therefore narrativizes several of the most significant ethical questions that have emerged in recent theory about the discourse of species in humanism.

There is a kind of humanism central to the protagonist's quest in this novel that repeatedly employs the other animal as its point of reference. Mr. Palomar's somewhat singular motivation in the text is to reduce the world's complexity to its "simplest mechanism" in order to eliminate ambiguity and vague feelings.¹ He tries to fashion an exacting narrative of meaning that he can eventually extend "to the entire universe," which he believes will mitigate the anguish he often feels when confronted with incoherence and with that which escapes calculation (8). There is clearly a hyper-Cartesianism at work in Palomar; he attempts to unify the entirety of the universe's workings with one rational formula upon which he can

always rely. The number of creatures that appear among his musings is noteworthy: tortoises, blackbirds, geckos, starlings, penguins, and giraffes occupy his attention, in addition to the gorilla and the iguanas that I will focus on here. When Palomar considers that the blackbirds' behavior is quite similar to that between himself and his wife, we learn that the "discrepancy between human behavior and the rest of the universe has always been a source of anguish. The equal whistle of man and blackbird now seems to him a bridge thrown over the abyss" (27). In other words, the place of the human among other creatures is one of Palomar's recurring considerations and becomes central to his general quest.

Also recurring in Palomar's universe is the contemplation of captive animals, particularly zoo animals. This emphasis is compatible with several moments in the novel that explore what we might call the making-cultural of materiality. Readers of the novel will recollect, for instance, the fascinating section titled "The Cheese Museum," in which Palomar marvels at the "presence of civilization that has given it [the cheese] its form" (73). He understands the cheese shop as "a dictionary; the language is the system of cheeses as a whole"; the food items signify in multivalenced ways to the human consumer (74). Indeed, these discussions of food extend to animal flesh—goose fat and beef carcasses—whose cultural meanings present contradictory and troubling responses in Palomar as he scrutinizes how humans make meaning in the process of turning animals and their by-products into food.

This interest in the making of cultural meaning resonates with the presence of zoo animals in Calvino's text. We will return to this question occasionally in the essay, but it is important to note here that the zoo highlights the need for narrative, order, and the construction of *human* meaning systems in relation to other animals. In his classic essay "Why Look at Animals," John Berger observes that "animals are always the observed. . . . They are the objects of our ever-extending knowledge. What we know about them is an index of our power, and thus an index of what separates us from them."² Berger goes on to suggest that the zoo is like the museum (note the parallel here with Calvino's "cheese museum"). "In principle," he claims, "each cage is a frame round the animal inside it. Visitors . . . proceed from cage to cage, not unlike visitors in an art gallery who stop in front of one painting, and then move on to the next."³ Randy Malamud's extensive discussion of the meaning(s) of zoos sharpens these claims. Malamud suggests that what "zoogoers see in cages actually represent[s] a kind of human contrivance immeasurably distant from real animal life."⁴ In some ways, Calvino's text will challenge these readings of zoo life, but we will come to those complexities. My point here is this: since the novel

itself is especially concerned with Palomar's very human meaning-making, it is fitting that he returns to zoo animals several times in his journey. In other words, the zoo animal, even more than the wild or perhaps domesticated animal, often tells us as much, if not more, about humans than about the animals that are displayed there. The zoo provides a particularly salient setting for Palomar's attempts to create meaning and, indeed, for the destabilization of those attempts.

In recent decades, thinkers have been especially concerned about how we make meaning regarding other animals. Debates about the ethical status of the nonhuman animal—ranging from Peter Singer's groundbreaking work, to Tom Regan's contributions, up through Jacques Derrida's and Cary Wolfe's discussions—have grappled with the problem of using the human as the final measure against which we decide who counts. Much early animal-rights theory used human qualities to determine the value of other beings, thus ushering a deep philosophical humanism surreptitiously back into its own discourse. Thinkers like Wolfe have had to counter with arguments that value the unharmonizable other, the creature that cannot be humanized as readily. Derrida's more recent work on this question also tends to emphasize the *absolute* alterity of the nonhuman animal. While such correctives have been crucial to moving us beyond a recursive humanism that simply holds animals up to the human "measuring stick," on some level posthumanist discussions may be hampered by an overemphasis on alterity. Calvino's vision could be most valuable ethically because it posits the simultaneous difference and sameness of the nonhuman animal and suggests that we need to find ways to acknowledge this complexity. Mr. Palomar confronts our affinities with other animals while maintaining and even exaggerating the animals' differences in order to demonstrate that, while we can never fully assimilate, explain, or calculate the animal, the animal nonetheless remains an associate, a counterpart in the "Communion of Subjects" that a recent title outlines.⁵

One is reminded of Lisa Uddin's claim that we need a "neighborly" relation to other animals, one manifesting "responses that are rife with ambiguity."⁶ Uddin refers to Mr. Rogers's sense of the neighborly in her discussion of the gorilla Koko's appearance on the classic television program, and her claims inevitably evoke the Levinasian framework that I will turn to momentarily in this discussion. Uddin, also making note of Derrida's accent on absolute difference, suggests that embedded in the television scenes between Koko and Mr. Rogers is "the possibility of an otherness that is more friendly more collective."⁷ It is this kind of relation, which cannot be characterized either by an unbridgeable gap or an easy

fraternity, that I want to explore in Calvino's depictions of Palomar and the zoo animals.

Mr. Palomar is visiting the Barcelona zoo and comes upon an albino gorilla nicknamed Snowflake.⁸ This creature is presented as the "only exemplar known in the world of the great albino ape" (81). Calvino highlights the animal's extreme isolation by emphasizing first his skin color and second his emotive facial expressions. I'd like to put aside the issue of skin color for a moment and address Snowflake's face specifically through the lens of Derrida's recent critique of Levinas's concept of ethics and the face. In "The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)," Derrida seems to suggest that the animal is our most different or difficult "other."⁹ As Cary Wolfe explains, "Derrida is struggling to say . . . that the animal difference is, *at this very moment*, not just any difference among others; it is, we might say, the most different difference, and therefore the most instructive—*particularly* if we pay attention . . . to how it has been consistently repressed even by contemporary thinkers as otherwise profound as Levinas and Lacan."¹⁰

In this essay, Derrida is especially keen to tease out the implications of the animal gaze, and, implicitly, the problem of the face: "[N]othing will have ever done more to make me think through this absolute alterity of the neighbor than these moments when I see myself seen naked under the gaze of a cat."¹¹ This sentence alone presses Levinas's notion of ethicality and the face-to-face well beyond its human limits. Derrida seems to challenge Levinas almost directly when he writes,

The animal is there before me, there close to me, there in front of me—I who am (following) after it. And also, therefore, since it is before me, it is behind me. It surrounds me. And from the vantage of this being-there-before-me it can allow itself to be looked at, no doubt, but also—something that philosophy perhaps forgets, perhaps being this calculated forgetting itself—it can look at me. It has its point of view regarding me.¹²

The cat looks at me and, Derrida insists, *addresses* me. We might say, at the very least, that Derrida asymptotically approaches the claim in these moments that animals have a face, that faciality as an ethical demand extends beyond the human. Moreover, Derrida repeatedly emphasizes the inherent nakedness of being looked at: He writes, for instance, "[N]udity is nothing other than that passivity, the involuntary exhibition of the self."¹³ The repeated emphasis on the nude and nudity in philosophy asks

us to confront Levinas's claim that the other's alterity approximates a nakedness. In fact, Derrida accomplishes in this essay a formal meditation on what many of us have felt while reading Levinas's description of the face: that the qualities of this ethical relation are not only descriptive of our experience of the animal other, but are sometimes *more* true of the ethical call that issues from animals.

Perhaps the best examples of this insistent expansion of the Levinasian ethical universe in Derrida's work are related to the concepts of dispossession, poverty, and the incalculable. Bernhard Waldenfels notes the ineffability of the face in Levinas when he explains that "the nakedness of the face, which is extended to the nakedness of the whole body, does not mean that there is *something behind* the masks and clothes the other wears, it rather means that the other's otherness eludes every qualification we may apply."¹⁴ This elusiveness, he continues to explain, is due to an "'essential poverty' which makes the poor and the stranger equal to us."¹⁵ When Derrida describes the gaze of the animal, we cannot help noticing what we have already felt about the animal face: that it presents a more radical incalculability than the human face. The gaze of the animal, he explains, "is vacant to the extent of being bottomless, at the same time innocent and cruel perhaps, perhaps sensitive and impassive, good and bad, uninterpretable, unreadable, undecidable, abyssal and secret."¹⁶ This undecidability of the animal gaze echoes the difficulty of placing the animal ontologically in the metaphysical tradition. We are reminded of Heidegger's problematic claim that the animal is not world-making, nor without world, but rather "poor in world." This difficulty that confronts us in determining an ontological place for the animal is echoed by Georges Bataille, who claims that the animal "opens before me a depth that attracts me and is familiar to me" but at the same time "*is unfathomable to me*."¹⁷

So, too, if we consider Levinas's notion of the poverty of the other, Derrida's discussion of the animal's inability, vulnerability, and capacity for suffering clearly resonates with this ethical consideration of a certain lack, a poorness. In returning to Jeremy Bentham's classic question "Can they suffer?" Derrida foregrounds what he calls "a sufferance, a passion, a not-being-able."¹⁸ For the first time, Derrida writes explicitly about the concerns of animal-rights advocates, specifically addressing the food industry, medical experimentation, and other institutional annihilations of animals that are shadowed by the "organized disavowal of this torture."¹⁹ What sort of Levinasian poverty or homelessness does the animal other not express? These experiences of passivity, Derrida suggests, are clearly animal and are to be found well beyond the realm of *Dasein*. Thus Derrida begins to write a reversal here: he seems to be demonstrating how the animal

Umwelt or environment must be seen as that which expands clearly into the human realm.

Returning, then, to the novel, it is notable that Calvino emphasizes Snowflake's "facial mask" (81) and gaze immediately: "Every now and then that face with its enormous features, a sad giant's, turns upon the crowd of visitors beyond the glass, less than a meter away, a slow gaze charged with desolation and patience and boredom" (81). This segment of the quotation describes the poverty and vulnerability that Derrida problematizes in relation to the animal face, a face that calls us into an ethical relation to the nonhuman. Calvino's drawn-out cadence in this elucidation of a gaze characterized by "desolation and patience and boredom" forces the reader to consider the import of Snowflake's visage at the same time that it reinforces Calvino's descriptor, "slow." Wolfe discusses what he calls the "slowness" of the animal in contradistinction to the "speed" of technoscience, the latter being a specifically human relation to the "transformation of time."²⁰ Calvino's use of the words "patience" and "boredom" is especially compelling because they suggest an evolutionary anticipation on the part of the gorilla that will be clearly echoed in the segment's final discussion of the symbolic. Here the slowness of the gorilla brings to mind what Wolfe discusses as the "inhumanity of time" that we share with other animals.²¹ Snowflake's desolation and boredom may signal his desire for a more complete participation in meaning structures, whereas Palomar's frequent haste in the novel often reflects his frustration at being unable to fully systemize knowledge. As Wolfe explains, the "differences in species may thus be described in terms of the ability to handle increased temporal complexity," thus generating "a scarcity of *time* that drives the evolutionary process."²² Snowflake and Palomar seem to be placed at different intervals on the same continuum, each expressing a similar desire for meaning.

As he continues his initial description of Snowflake, Calvino reinforces what Derrida calls the "unsubstitutable singularity"²³ of the individual animal. Snowflake's gaze "expresses all the resignation at being the way he is, sole exemplar in the world of a form not chosen, not loved, all the effort of bearing his own singularity" (81). Derrida argues that recognizing this singularity or irreplaceability of an animal guards against a totalizing linguistic and structural assignation of all nonhumans into the "Animal" category and the sacrificial cultural practices that follow from such structures. As Matthew Calarco explains, "Derrida would have us understand the proto-ethical relations between human beings and animals in terms of a disruptive, face-to-face encounter between singular beings. As such, any homogenizing of human beings or animals would betray the singularity

of the ethical relation as well as the beings who are themselves in relation.”²⁴ Calvino’s gorilla, because he is literally the only example of his kind, exaggerates the unique and unrepeatable nature of the individual animal and therefore, in Derridean terms, hyperbolizes the individual animal’s signature, trace, or ability to respond.²⁵ The animal who responds, who has a face, clearly moves us into a posthumanist framework in which the signifying human is no longer radically distinct or morally superior. It is the exaggerated difference of the albino gorilla that tends to reinforce in this episode the significance of animal alterity. Indeed, Snowflake’s gaze also bears “the suffering at occupying space and time with his presence so cumbersome and evident” (81). In other words, Snowflake’s isolation even from his own species makes acute the otherness implicit in the human/nonhuman relation. That Snowflake was, in fact, historically a famed albino gorilla may subtly contribute to this Derridean emphasis on singularity. Here, the celebrity of the animal known by several names (Copito De Nieve, Nfumu-Ngui) seems only to reinforce the notion of irreplaceability.

Snowflake’s albino status also foregrounds the question of race and its attendant visual cues as a “species” construction. That is, Snowflake’s marginalization because he has a different skin color reflects the ways in which animality has always haunted or stalked the categorization of humans into racial and ethnic hierarchies.²⁶ The interimbrication of the discourses of animality and race is beginning to be more fully articulated by postcolonial and critical race theory. Étienne Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein acknowledge that “every theoretical racism draws upon *anthropological universals*” in which “the persistence of the same ‘question’: that of *the difference between humanity and animality*” recurs.²⁷ Calvino seems to highlight this linkage through his creation of an animal that is actually cognizant of his “racially” determined isolation. Moreover, this racialized animal reminds us that zoos represent the historical convergence of people shows and animal shows. As historians like Nigel Rothfels point out, Europeans such as Carl Hagenbeck merged techniques for displaying peoples considered racially and culturally primitive with techniques for displaying captive animals.²⁸

The fact that the gorilla’s whiteness serves to render him an outcast is compelling in terms of the slippage between human and animal displays. Calvino describes him this way: “The facial mask is a human pink, carved by wrinkles; the chest also reveals a pink and glabrous skin, like that of a human of the white race” (81). Whiteness as an aberration cleverly reverses the typical position of white and colored, potentially implying that the position of cultural master is lonely and intolerable. At the same time, however, Snowflake’s repeated identification with the human here,

especially because of his pinkness, may suggest the awkwardness and anxiety associated with being a human animal, defined by a constitutive imbalance: never fully animal and never fully human. Perhaps it is the white human who has most emphasized and therefore most failed the attempt to transcend and repress animality. This reading, in fact, provides us with a fresh perspective on Mr. Palomar's repeated angst in the novel, since his "quest for unity follows a process of failure."²⁹ We might consider that one of the reasons Mr. Palomar is incapable of reducing the world's complexity "to its simplest mechanism" (6) is because the human itself cannot exist in such a philosophical space: the human itself is irremediably riven by difference and complexity, owing to its own animal origins. The figure of the albino gorilla—a "black" animal rendered white—reinforces the impossibly split status of the human itself.

While Snowflake's profound otherness is emphasized in the opening moments of this segment, the chapter closes with a clear linkage between human and nonhuman animal. Mr. Palomar notices that in "the enormous void of his hours" Snowflake clutches a rubber tire, an object that he "never abandons" (82). Calvino imagines the gorilla's rubber tire as the animal's entrée into the symbolic. The description of this initiation takes on a pseudo-Lacanian quality when Palomar views the tire as giving Snowflake "something to hold tight while everything eludes him, a thing with which to allay the anguish of isolation, of difference" (82). The passage goes on to claim that this affective relation to the tire gives the gorilla a "glimpse of what for man is the search for an escape from the dismay of living—investing oneself in things, recognizing oneself in signs, transforming the world into a collection of symbols—a first daybreak of culture in the long biological night" (83). In a less progressive reading, we might understand Palomar's observations as suggesting merely that the gorilla approaches, but never attains, man's relation to the symbol. Indeed, such a reading would be reminiscent of Heidegger's claim that animals' status as "poor in world" excludes them from the realm of *Dasein*. However, Derrida reveals just how slippery this designation really is when he explains that Heidegger's framework seems to suggest that the animal "*has and does not have*" a world.³⁰ So, too, Calvino's scene unveils that the animal's "poverty" cannot be understood as merely lack.

As the passage moves toward closure, we approach a more radical claim. Palomar is struck by the proliferation of the tire's possible meanings: "And yet what, more than an empty circle, can contain all the symbols you might want to attribute to it?" He thinks in the next moment that perhaps the animal is "about to reach . . . the springs from which language burst forth" (83). But, in the final sentences of the chapter, Palomar indeed

collapses himself and the gorilla, thinking, "Just as the gorilla has his tire, which serves as tangible support for a raving, wordless speech . . . so I have this image of a great white ape. We all turn in our hands an old, empty tire through which we try to reach some final meaning which words cannot achieve" (83). Calvino constructs a dynamic of endless deferral here that reveals the futility or impossibility of signification: Palomar "uses" Snowflake as Snowflake "uses" the tire, but neither human nor nonhuman creature succeeds in a final translation of meaning. We might say that the residue of signification, the outside of the word, links human and nonhuman in this final observation.

The question of languaging as an activity that exists beyond the human has become a central problem in critical theory about the species barrier. Derrida has argued that we must understand the technicities of language, such as the trace, as not being limited to the realm of *Dasein*. In his interview "Eating Well," he established that Western notions of the subject, especially those related to language, cannot be confined to the human domain: "Such a vigil leads us to recognize the processes of *différance*, trace, iterability, ex-appropriation, and so on. These are at work everywhere, which is to say, well beyond humanity."³¹ It is actually the impotence of this act of languaging that produces Palomar's posthuman identification with the gorilla at the end of the scene. What is more, Calvino succeeds in capturing as a transspecies experience the paradoxical relation between symbol and thing that has been the subject of much recent criticism. As Peter Schwenger explains, the "murder" of the thing by the word is attended by the desire to fill or fulfill that lack or absence, "where richness and emptiness produce each other continuously": "If there is a murder of the thing by the word, then, this does not definitively annihilate that thing; it only transposes it to the scene of an interminable haunting of language."³² This uncanny unfigurability binds Palomar and Snowflake. Generally, then, Palomar's relation to the gorilla is one of simultaneous alienation and camaraderie: Calvino emphasizes both the "gap" between human and nonhuman *and* their inevitable similarity.

Donna Haraway's recent critique of Derrida's encounter with his cat is especially useful here in articulating the significance of Palomar's "reading" of Snowflake. In *When Species Meet*, Haraway acknowledges the importance of Derrida's recognition that his cat does actually look back at him, but she goes on to suggest that, in his philosophical acrobatics, he fails to follow through in terms of "what the cat might actually be doing, feeling, thinking, or perhaps making available to him in looking back at him that morning."³³ In this way, she suggests, Derrida misses "a possible invitation, a possible introduction to other-worlding."³⁴ Palomar's musings

are notable, then, for their deep engagement with the other animal's experience. Although Palomar does make an analogy between his own and the gorilla's impossible relation to signification, Palomar also undertakes a genuine effort to comprehend some portion of the animal's unique perspective.

In the subsequent section of Calvino's text, "The Order Squamata," Palomar visits the reptile house in Paris's Jardin de Plantes. His initial descriptions, while similar to those regarding Snowflake, are even more remarkable in their attention to details of the creatures' physicality. In keeping with the prior section, Calvino emphasizes the iguana's "evolved" eye, "endowed with gaze attention, sadness, suggesting that another being is concealed inside that dragon semblance" (84). He continues to catalogue the strangeness of the creature's physical equipment, but then asks in another moment evocative of Derrida's cat, "too much stuff for one animal to bear. What's the use of it? Does it serve to disguise someone watching us from in there?" (85). What we notice most about this shift from the gorilla to the iguana is the acknowledgment of physical unfamiliarity, a disconnect in form, that nonetheless attends the tentative claim that this creature may represent "an animal more similar to those we are at home with, a living presence less distant from us than it seems" (84).

Palomar then turns his attention to the theoretical possibilities of life-forms and their arrangement in this kind of exhibitionary space: "Life in the reptile house," he muses, "appears a squandering of forms without style and without plan, where all is possible, and animals and plants and rocks exchange scales, quills, concretions" (86). This description refers to the ongoing ruckus of evolutionary life as it mutates, borrows, improvises, and elaborates the potential manifestations of materiality itself. And, while this initial observation suggests a kind of endless proliferation without fixity, Palomar characteristically turns his attention to the prospect of structure. His next series of thoughts is ultimately a gloss on the emergence of a species from the aforementioned proliferation of forms and on the way that humans go about arranging these species:

But among the infinite possible combinations, only some—perhaps actually the most incredible—become fixed, resist the flux that undoes them and mixes and reshapes; and immediately each of these forms becomes the center of a world, separated forever from the others, as here in a row of glass case-cages of the zoo; and in this finite number of ways of being, each identified in a monstrosity of its own, and a necessity and beauty of its own, lies order, the sole order recognizable in the world. (86)

This passage requires a careful and contextualized reading on our part. If we pay attention to the final claim, we recognize this dream of a “sole order recognizable in the world” as Palomar’s repeated attempt in the novel to find an eternal or permanent system, structure, or taxonomy of meaning. In other words, we understand that the almost absurdist phrase “sole order recognizable in the world” tips us off to the text’s own distance from Palomar’s dream here. The distinction between Palomar’s hyperbolic vision of stasis and the reality of constant mutation is subtly reinforced by the mention of zookeeping: the forms are “separated *forever* from the others, as here in a row of glass case-cages of the zoo” (my emphasis). I want to suggest that this description points out the exaggerated and ultimately fantastic idea that species are eternally distinct, that species barriers represent some permanent and reliable mode of differentiation. Rather, this passage implicitly exposes the *human* investment in inviolable and discreet life-forms. In characteristic complexity, Calvino provides us with a protagonist whose own observations ultimately give the lie to his deep-seated desires. Palomar longs for species barriers that are clear and unassailable, but this section will repeatedly suggest that such longings are more akin to humanist wish-structures than anything else.

Palomar’s dream of species permanence resonates with a concept of species that, according to Elizabeth Grosz, misreads Darwin’s own vision. The notion that species distinctions represent an essential or inherent order among creatures—an idea that has clearly served humanism’s disavowal of animality for centuries in the West—does not line up with Darwin’s thinking. Grosz emphasizes that Darwin “develops an account of a real that is an open and generative force of self-organization and growing complexity, a dynamic real that has features of its own which, rather than simply exhibit stasis, a fixed essence or unchanging characteristics, are more readily understood in terms of active vectors of change.”³⁵ She goes on to discuss his “quite peculiar, and thoroughly postmodern, account of origin” as it impinges on the idea of species:³⁶

Origin is a consequence of human, or rather, scientific taxonomy, a function of language. Origin is a nominal question. What constitutes an origin depends on what we *call* a species, where we (arbitrarily or with particular purposes in mind) decide to draw the line between one group and another that resembles it, preexists it, or abides in close proximity with it. . . . A species is an arbitrarily chosen set of similarities that render other differences either marginal or insignificant. Species are a measure, an incalculable, non-numerical measure of significant differences.³⁷

For these reasons, Grosz claims that, in the “durational unfolding” of evolution, “What evolves are not individuals or even species, which are forms of relative fixity or stability, but oscillations of difference.”³⁸

Subtly, the narrative in this segment begins to reveal that Palomar’s dream of fixed species is also humanism’s dream of a permanent boundary between human and animal that is enacted architecturally in the structure of the reptile house. The hyperbolic tenor of Calvino’s earlier description, with its row of glass cages that separate creatures “forever” from one another, cues the skepticism with which we should approach this vision. Soon Palomar’s sense of smell is ignited by the stench of the place: “A damp, soft warmth soaks the air like a sponge; a sharp stink, heavy rotten, forces him to hold his breath” (86), and thus the dismantling of his *vision* commences. This moment reminds us of Freud’s claim in *Civilization and Its Discontents* that the acquisition of human identity coincides with the process of “organic repression,” whereby man replaces the olfactory with the specular as his primary mode of sensory interaction.³⁹ These repressions of organicism, according to Freud, result in the onset of cleanliness, the family structure, and ultimately human civilization. For Palomar, the smell of the reptile house seems to infect his humanized vision of species identity. “Beyond the glass of every cage,” he notes, “there is the world as it was before man, or as it will be, to show that the world of man is not eternal and is not unique” (86). Here the priority of the human is undermined in a moment reminiscent of D. H. Lawrence’s cosmology. Lawrence both understands animal being as preceding the human (in *Birds, Beasts, and Flowers* [1923] for instance) and at times (in *Women in Love* [1920]) instills his characters with a longing for a world devoid of people.⁴⁰

This reversal signals Palomar’s observations about the manner in which the nonhuman is arranged in places such as the reptile house:

But of the worlds from which man is excluded each case is only a tiny sample, torn from a natural continuum that might also never have existed, a few cubic meters of atmosphere that elaborate devices maintain at a certain degree of temperature and humidity. Thus every sample of this antediluvian bestiary is kept alive artificially, as if it were a hypothesis of the mind, a product of the imagination, a construction of language, a paradoxical line of reasoning meant to demonstrate that the only true world is our own. (87)

Note the precariousness and artifice that Calvino emphasizes at the beginning of this passage: the particular narrative that the reptile house proffers

is laboriously and cautiously rendered. Each cordoned-off reptile is maintained with such technological rigor that Palomar compares the entire gesture to a mental abstraction or a linguistic category. Such analogies cleverly echo the implications for understanding species as categories that I see deeply embedded in this passage. In other words, if species distinctions (*pace* Grosz) are essentially arbitrary means by which we attempt to parse difference amid the ever-dynamic activity of evolution, then the process of determining a species, and the category itself, is very much like “a product of the imagination, a construction of language” (87). This is why these categories require such vigorous citation and iteration within glass cases and through complex machinery. The text here emphasizes the ultimately arbitrary nature of species distinctions that must be carefully orchestrated or even performed in the minitheater of the zoo space: the implication of course is that the one most crucial species barrier (between human and animal) is also “a product of the imagination.” Palomar’s recognition that this scene attempts to demonstrate that “the only true world is our own” (87) actually exposes that position as artificial and requiring repeated reconstruction. When Malamud suggests that the reality of zoos is ultimately a “distorting” experience for people, he refers primarily to the false representation of animal life and a kind of “human contrivance” in that representation.⁴¹ What Calvino’s zoo story suggests is a more philosophically radical undermining of human privilege.

It is just after Palomar recognizes how the reptile house’s layout parallels an attempt to frame human mastery that he feels compelled to escape it: “As if the smell of the reptiles were only now becoming unbearable, Mr. Palomar suddenly feels a desire to go out into the open air” (87). It seems at this moment that he is driven by the rank materiality of the animal *and* by the human’s artificial disavowal of that very quality. As he leaves, he observes the crocodiles and begins to imagine their experience of time: “Is theirs a boundless patience,” he asks, “or a desperation without end? What are they waiting for, or what have they given up waiting for? In what time are they immersed? In that of the species, removed from the course of the hours that race from the birth to the death of the individual? Or the time of geological eras, which shifts continents and solidifies the crust of emerged lands?” “The thought,” he concludes, “of a time outside our experience is intolerable” (88). This final moment emphasizes the fundamental alterity or otherness of time. In the work of Levinas and Derrida, this quality has been understood as the “essential *inhumanity* of time” in which, according to Cary Wolfe, “death is neither ‘for’ me *nor* for the other (since it absolutely exceeds the experience of each).”⁴²

On the one hand, Palomar's claim that the thought of a time outside of human experience is intolerable echoes the protagonist's recurring attempt "to gain a precise and specific knowledge of the physical world"⁴³ and to bridge the gap between human experience and nonhuman experience. But if we consider this claim in terms of Palomar's relation to the nonhuman world, it emphasizes first that the animal other's subjectivity or phenomenality sometimes remains so different from our own that we have no access to it. We are reminded here of what Stanley Cavell calls the "skeptical terror of the independent existence of other minds."⁴⁴ Moreover, the inhumanity or alterity of time itself has a leveling effect in which Mr. Palomar's death is not appreciably different from the death of a crocodile. We are, despite our connections to the abstract and transcendent, still primates subject to mortality. Generally, Palomar's final moment of extreme discomfort at this section's end signals his inability to situate the animal cognitively in an exacting narrative of signification, which, consequently, destabilizes the "placement," if you will, of the human. The threshold of the human in relation to the animal, because it cannot be ultimately located, is thus one of the primary causes of anguish for Mr. Palomar. This moment is important to our discussion because it reveals that, just as the status of the animal other is too complex to be situated only in terms of sameness or difference, the human relation to itself is characterized by the same intricacy and irresolvability.

Mr. Palomar's anguish at the complexity of the universe and at his inability to ultimately calculate human and animal being might provide a model for an engagement with the animal that takes us beyond even the most recent theoretical emphasis on alterity in animal theory. If we need a more vigilant practice that allows for oscillation between sameness and difference in our relation to the nonhuman other, Calvino may offer a prototype. Mr. Palomar, while he finds any number of coordinates and mechanisms of producing meaning, is never able to *reduce* them. He not only problematizes the zoo's narrative of quantifiable life, he confirms the unsolvable riddle of human engagements with animals and instructs us to continue to live with the anguish of the profoundly ambiguous question of species being.

—Lafayette College

NOTES

1. Italo Calvino, *Mr. Palomar*, trans. William Weaver (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1983), 6; hereafter cited in the text.

2. John Berger, *About Looking* (New York: Vintage, 1980), 16.
3. *Ibid.*, 23.
4. Randy Malamud, *Reading Zoos: Representations of Animals and Captivity* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 43.
5. Paul Waldau and Kimberly Patton, eds., *A Communion of Subjects: Animals in Religion, Science, and Ethics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006).
6. Lisa Uddin, "A Gorilla Lover's Discourse," *Parallax* 12, no. 1 (2006): 110–19, quotation on 118.
7. *Ibid.*
8. The fictional Snowflake mimics the historical albino gorilla of the same name who was a celebrity and the darling of institutions like *National Geographic*.
9. Jacques Derrida, "The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)," *Critical Inquiry* 28, no. 2 (2002): 369–418.
10. Cary Wolfe, *Animal Rites: American Culture, the Discourse of Species, and Posthumanist Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 67.
11. Derrida, "The Animal," 380.
12. *Ibid.*
13. *Ibid.*
14. Bernhard Waldenfels, "Levinas and the Face of the Other," in *Cambridge Companion to Levinas*, ed. Simon Critchley and Robert Bernasconi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 63–81, quotation on 71.
15. *Ibid.*, 71.
16. Derrida, "The Animal," 381.
17. George Bataille, *Theory of Religion*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Zone, 1992), 22.
18. Derrida, "The Animal," 396.
19. *Ibid.*, 395.
20. Wolfe, *Animal Rites*, 76.
21. *Ibid.*, 77.
22. *Ibid.*
23. Derrida, "The Animal," 378.
24. Matthew Calarco, *Zoographies: The Question of the Animal from Heidegger to Derrida* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 142–43.
25. Derrida, "The Animal," 401.
26. See Carrie Rohman, *Stalking the Subject: Modernism and the Animal* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).
27. Étienne Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein, *Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities* (New York: Verso, 1988), 56, 57.
28. For discussions of people displays and their convergence with animal displays, see Jane C. Desmond, *Staging Tourism: Bodies on Display from Waikiki to Sea World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999); and especially Nigel Rothfels's discussion of Carl

- Hagenbeck in *Savages and Beasts: The Birth of the Modern Zoo* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002).
29. Brian Fitzgerald, "Animals, Evolution, Language: Aspects of Whitehead in Italo Calvino's *Palomar*," *Spunti e ricerche* 10, no. 1 (1994): 43–61, quotation on 43.
 30. Jacques Derrida, *Of Spirit: Heidegger and the Question*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 50.
 31. Jacques Derrida, "'Eating Well,' or the Calculation of the Subject: An Interview with Jacques Derrida," interview by Jean-Luc Nancy, in *Who Comes After the Subject?* ed. Eduardo Cadava, Peter Connor, and Jean-Luc Nancy (New York: Routledge, 1991), 96–119, quotation on 109.
 32. Peter Schwenger, "Words and the Murder of the Thing," *Critical Inquiry* 28, no. 1 (2001): 99–113, quotation on 113.
 33. Donna Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 20.
 34. Ibid.
 35. Elizabeth Grosz, *The Nick of Time: Politics, Evolution, and the Untimely* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 19.
 36. Ibid., 23.
 37. Ibid.
 38. Ibid., 24.
 39. Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, trans. Joan Riviere (London: Hogarth, 1930).
 40. See my own elucidation of Lawrence's relation to animality in *Stalking the Subject*.
 41. Malamud, *Reading Zoos*, 49, 43.
 42. Wolfe, *Animal Rites*, 198.
 43. Fitzgerald, "Animals, Evolution, Language," 43.
 44. Cavell, quoted in Wolfe, *Animal Rites*, 4.

Copyright of Criticism is the property of Wayne State University Press and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.