
A Hoard of Floating Monkeys: Creativity and Inhuman Becomings in Woolf's Nurse Lugton Story

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Abstract

This essay analyses how Virginia Woolf's critically under-examined children's story about Nurse Lugton connects the becoming-artistic of writing to animal becomings. Examining the links between creativity and the other-than-human via Gilles Deleuze and Elizabeth Grosz, I claim that the 'animation' of the stitched animal figures on Nurse Lugton's 'canvas' reveals that art is the enlivenment of vibratory and affective qualities, as opposed to a monumentalising of symbols or concepts. Moreover, the curtain in Woolf's story should be read as creative materiality itself, its folds participating in the self-varying dynamism of the virtual and actual. My analysis of the two published versions of the story, and their accompanying illustrations, outlines an affirmative bio-poetics at the heart of Woolf's aesthetic project and suggests that Woolf's creative sources are embedded in inhuman, biological forces.

Keywords: Virginia Woolf, Nurse Lugton, animal, creativity, inhuman, art, becoming, Elizabeth Grosz, vital materialism, life

Virginia Woolf's children's story about Nurse Lugton depicts a woman whose stitched figures come alive whenever she falls asleep. Lugton sews various animals onto a curtain; they activate after she dozes off and are then returned to their 'frozen' positions on the drapery when Lugton awakens. The tale has been most famously known for

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its discovery in 1963 at the British Museum by Mr Wallace Hildick, amid the manuscript notebooks of *Mrs Dalloway*. That story was titled *Nurse Lugton's Golden Thimble* by Leonard Woolf, and was published by Hogarth Press in 1966. Perhaps less well known is the discovery of a second, revised version of the story in the 1980s at King's College Library, Cambridge.¹ Thus, as Kristin Czarnecki points out, we know that Woolf revisited her tale, re-worked it, and gave it a name, *Nurse Lugton's Curtain*. This revised version was published in 1991 by Harcourt, with accompanying illustrations by Julie Vivas. In the foreword to the original, 1966 Hogarth Press book, Leonard Woolf claims that the 'story appears suddenly in the middle of the text of the novel, but has nothing to do with it' (Woolf 1966: Foreword). This assertion practically begs for a critical response, precisely because Leonard Woolf makes the counter-intuitive claim that the story appears *in the centre* of the *Mrs Dalloway* manuscript yet has 'nothing' to do with it.²

This seemingly benign story, however, is not just central to an interpretation of a single Woolf novel, but it also reveals something fundamental about Woolf's understanding of aesthetic principles. Those principles are specifically Deleuzian in that they ground the artistic in the animal and inhuman. It is, after all, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari who write, 'Not only does art not wait for human beings to begin, but we may ask if art ever appears among human beings, except under artificial and belated conditions' (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 320). Similarly, Deleuze and Guattari ask whether 'art begins with the animal' and suggest that 'art is continually haunted by the animal' (Deleuze and Guattari 1994: 181, 182). Woolf's story might be said to literalise this continual haunting of aesthetic practice by the animal or animality.

Indeed, I agree with Czarnecki, who maintains that 'Woolf confronts the creative process head-on in the story' (Czarnecki 2012: 226), as opposed to avoiding it, as other critics have claimed. What is more, this shadow text reveals something foundational about Woolf's views regarding a writer's relationship to the inhuman. The Lugton tale catalogues an awareness of the way that a writer's aesthetic powers are profoundly linked to becomings that are animal in nature. Moreover, the specific becoming-other/becoming-animate of the prosaic curtain suggests a vital materialism in which matter cannot be cordoned off from the forces of life itself. In the wake of such recognitions, the formerly exceptional human creative genius must be recast from its 'verticality' and placed on a horizontal plateau with inhuman artistic intensities.

Despite Leonard Woolf's emphasis on a thematic distance between the children's tale and *Mrs Dalloway*, critics have worked to read the texts together and to understand how they might exemplify both a thematic and a psychological or temperamental reciprocity. Geneviève Sanchis Morgan's 1997 essay goes a long way towards linking the metaphorical work of the children's story with the themes of Woolf's novel, what Morgan calls the 'obvious interrelations between the two' that have to do with 'Woolf's development as a writer and as a modernist [being] predicated on her negotiation of domestic material' (Morgan 1997: 95). Her essay renders both texts, therefore, intellectually serious. Among a number of insightful corollaries that Morgan describes is that between sewing and writing. Convincingly, she makes the case that 'if sewing is a metaphor for writing, or art making, then the nexus of the two stories implies that the key to changing reality lies within the grasp of the artist's needle and pen' (101). Sayaka Okumura elaborates on this theme and calls the knitting Nurse Lugton 'a version of the author herself' and Woolf's 'self-caricature' or 'self-portrait' (Okumura 2008: 175).

If sewing is a metaphor for writing in Woolf, then this modest, critically unheeded children's story might be seen as a key of sorts to Woolf's own understanding of her creative practice. This possibility may be all the more likely because Woolf wrote the tale for children. In the collection *Human, All Too Human*, Diana Fuss discusses three 'border identities' for humanism: animal, thing, child. Her introduction to the book's essays reminds us of the age-old alliance between children and animals, beings whose liminal status troubles the 'integrity of the human' (Fuss 1996: 5). Framing this narrative for children allows Woolf to be less rigid or prescriptive in her 'artistic' and high modernist expectations of herself, as a stylist and a thematic innovator. She can 'play' with the analogue between sewing and writing more easily, without censoring her own conclusions, or judging them as 'childish' or naïve. That is, she can work in a space that is generically removed from the all-too-human, internalised censor that demands respectable, elaborate themes in the serious-minded novel.

Czarnecki takes up the question of just how 'child-friendly' the story really is, a question that has provided occasion for some rather pointed critiques of Woolf's text as being too serious for children.³ Sceptical of such critiques, Czarnecki intimates that the second version was revised by Woolf to be more accessible to the child who reads or hears it. Perhaps counter-intuitively therefore, the first version of the story often reveals the deep philosophical contours of Woolf's creative vision more clearly. In other words, Woolf's technical revisions for the child reader

occasionally work to dilute the more striking or radical elements of this narrative. For that reason, I often refer to the *Thimble* version (1966) rather than the *Curtain* version (1991).⁴

The opening page of *Nurse Lugton's Golden Thimble* usefully sets the stage for considering questions of the post-human, animality and the vibratory:

She had given one great snore. She had dropped her head, thrust her spectacles up her forehead, and there she sat, by the fender with her thimble on her finger, and her needle full of cotton, snoring, snoring—on her knees, and covering her apron, a large piece of figured blue stuff. The animals had not moved until—one, two, three, four, five—Nurse Lugton snored for the fifth time. Ah! the old woman was asleep. The antelope nodded to the zebra; the giraffe bit off a leaf of the tree. For the pattern on the stuff was this: all the animals in the world were trooping down to the lake and the pagoda, and the boat and the bridge to drink. (Woolf 1966: 5)

Woolf begins her tale with a snore (in the later version Lugton is asleep at the opening, and the snoring is downplayed). The nurse had given a *great* snore: Woolf commences this 'childish' story with the provocations of vibration. Deleuze and Guattari begin their chapter on the refrain in *A Thousand Plateaus* with a child and vibration: 'A child in the dark, gripped with fear, comforts himself by singing under his breath... The song is like a rough sketch of a calming and stabilising, calm and stable, center in the heart of chaos' (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 311). Deleuze and Guattari's additional examples on this page are of a female child and a woman, but not of a grown man. Perhaps the most clichéd case of the 'universal' artistic (albeit this universal is often limited to the human) is the mother humming to her infant. The genre of the children's book, as I have already claimed, may allow Woolf to make more explicit these elementary forces of creativity. Children, women, mothers, nurses are expected to rock, sing, sew and play circle games. They have cultural permission to make primal refrains (ring around the rosy) a mainstay of their daily play and ritual.

Elizabeth Grosz theorises the Deleuzian role of vibration for the artistic when she discusses the movement from rhythm to refrain to music as 'nothing but *vibration*, resonance, the mutual condition both of material forces at their most elementary levels, and of music at its most refined and complex' (Grosz 2008: 54). 'What is transmitted and transmuted throughout this vast evolution', she maintains, 'is nothing but vibration, vibrations in their specificity, vibrations as they set objects moving in their wake' (54). The vibratory not only connects human life

to the inhuman, but I would also assert that Grosz figures vibration as a kind of *invitation* to the creative. We inevitably partake in the tremor of the rhythmic and the territorial in Deleuze's terms, to be sure, but the vibratory also functions as an incitement to become *more* vibratory:

Vibration is the common thread or rhythm running through the universe from its chaotic inorganic interminability to its most intimate forces of inscription on living bodies of all kinds and back again. It is vibration that constitutes the harmony of the universe with all its living components, enabling them to find a vibratory comfort level—neither too slow or too fast—not only to survive but above all to generate excess, further vibratory forces, more effects, useless effects, qualities that can't be directly capitalized. (Grosz 2008: 54)

The story's opening with one great snore signals a provocation to creativity through vibration, and this provocation involves a necessary becoming-inhuman. We can apprehend this necessity through Grosz's broad thesis: art cannot be understood as exclusively human if it is fundamentally about excesses and displays that we share with other animals. In this story, the inhuman becoming-enlivened of art is manifested specifically through animality and, I want to suggest, places animality at the centre of Woolf's own artistic universe.

While it may seem peculiar at first to emphasise Lugton's snoring as Deleuzian vibration, Woolf dwells upon this activity in a text that occupies only six short pages: she accentuates these tremors which seem almost to penetrate and shake the animals 'awake'. By enumerating Lugton's snores, 'one, two, three, four, five' (Woolf 1966: 5), Woolf emphasises the rhythmic and pulsating intensities that resonate from and through bodies, that incite the aesthetic and ultimately get transferred from bodies to proper works of art. Grosz describes how the forces of the universe connect the arts to one another through sensation:

Deleuze suggests that this is because there is indeed a common force shared by all the arts and the living bodies that generate sensations out of material forms that derives from the universe itself. This is precisely vibratory force—perhaps the vibratory structure of subatomic particles themselves?—that constructs sensations as neural reactions to inhuman forces. (Grosz 2008: 83)

Indeed, Deleuze and Guattari note, 'Sensation is excitation itself, not insofar as it is gradually prolonged and passes into the reaction but insofar as it is preserved or preserves its vibrations' (Deleuze and Guattari 1994: 211). Lugton's snoring inaugurates the story with an invitation to a becoming-artistic, an initiation of aesthetic emergence through rhythm and vibration.

The opening snores are accompanied by a symbolic beheading and a disavowal of the specular that challenges the centrality of the human in terms of aesthetics, authorship and creative ‘vision’. When Nurse Lugton drops her head, she relinquishes the reign of the Enlightenment *cogito* in which human rationality—or in this case human ‘genius’—is the source of artistic production. Moreover, as she pushes her spectacles up her forehead, she also specifically renounces a humanist ‘vision’. This moment reminds us of Freud’s claim in *Civilization and its Discontents* (1930) that the acquisition of human identity coincides with the process of ‘organic repression’, whereby man replaces the olfactory with the specular in his sensorium. In that text, Freud imagines early man’s transition from a quadruped to a biped stance and the various results of this rising up from an animal way of being. Walking upright brings about the rejection of formerly stimulating smells—particularly blood and faeces—and the consequent transition from an olfactory mode of sensing to a visual one. Moreover, organic repression performs a disavowal of the inhuman and thus thwarts the possibility for becomings. Deleuze and Guattari’s discussion of desire as lacking a *subject* rather than an object acknowledges this operation: ‘it is, rather, the *subject* that is missing in desire, or desire that lacks a fixed subject; there is no fixed subject unless there is repression’ (Deleuze and Guattari 2009: 26). Lugton’s spectacles represent the dependence upon and, indeed, the sharpening of that most human visuality which helps maintain the static subject. When she removes them, she relinquishes a humanist way of perceiving and being. That, and her vibratory snoring, are answered with the activation of animality in the story. Once the animals realise Lugton has closed her eyes, which they ascertain from the five snores, they come alive.

I. Aesthetic Animals

A significant difference between the original and revised texts is that in the first, Woolf discusses the pattern on the curtain in extraordinarily universal terms. This moment appears on the very first page of the Hogarth Press story. After the initial animation of antelope nodding to zebra and giraffe biting a leaf off the tree, Woolf writes: ‘For the pattern on the stuff was this: *all the animals in the world* were trooping down to the lake and the pagoda, and the boat and the bridge to drink’ (Woolf 1966: 5; my emphasis). In the later version, Woolf economises to ‘all the animals began to toss and prance’ (Woolf 1991: [3]). The obvious difference here is that in the second version ‘all’ refers only to

the animals on the drapery, while in the first version Woolf marshals animality as such by using the phrase 'in the world'. This revision marks an understandable whittling down of what Woolf may have considered 'excess' in her original text. But having all the animals in the world galvanised in an image of creativity clarifies my claim that Woolf reveals in this text how her artistic practice, *pace* Deleuze and Grosz, has its roots in the inhuman. That is, if the curtain serves as a placeholder for creativity, and Woolf figures it as harbouring the activation of animality itself, then we can make more extensive claims about Woolf's own relation to inhuman aesthetic forces.

Grosz has refined her understanding of art as having its roots in animality and specifically in the workings of sexual selection in her most recent book *Becoming Undone* (2011).⁵ She emphasises the bodily and affective nature of artistic experience via Deleuze and insists, via Darwin, that animals have the power of discrimination or taste that is central to aesthetic appeal and choice. 'Music, painting, dance, and the other arts', she explains,

are only possible because the power to appeal and enhance seems to reside in regular ways in [animals'] use of colors, sounds, and shapes for the purposes of resonance and intensification. Art is the formal structuring or framing of these intensified bodily organs and processes which stimulate the receptive organs of observers and coparticipants. (Grosz 2011: 135)

Grosz goes even further to speculate that sexual selection as Darwin outlined it is the 'most elementary form of discernment or taste', and may be understood as 'the evolutionary origin not only of all art, but of language use and intelligence more generally' (Grosz 2011: 136). The idea here is that the protocols of sexual selection may produce and fine-tune 'processes of perception and reception... intelligence, communication, and collective living' (136). Whether or not one agrees with these more catholic claims, Grosz's discussion of enhancement, bodily intensification and taste locates aesthetic behaviours and discernments well outside a limited human purview. In the broadest terms, then, Woolf's story reveals to us the evolutionary underpinnings of artistic experience, emphasising the human's deep ontological coincidence with animality. At its most basic, her writing and creating are linked, stitched we might insist, to animal forces, to the rhythms and affects that are shared not just by humans but by the living in general. The images in both versions command our attention, especially because they represent other artists' rendering of a text that, in my view, is primarily about creativity. The 1966 Hogarth Press book

includes illustrations by Duncan Grant, who was known for his rich use of colour. It is unfortunate that the black and white renderings of his pictures eliminate that element of his work. In contrast, the contemporary version of the story (1991, Harcourt) is illustrated in bright watercolours by Julie Vivas, and it includes more than double the number of images that we find in the 1966 text. One striking fact about Grant's comparatively spare set of images is that the curtain is only represented in two of his six illustrations, while animals are represented in five. Indeed, after the initial image of Nurse Lugton dozing in her chair, every Grant illustration includes animals.

Grant's second and third illustrations are composed only of animals that seem to hover in their own space, which suggests a dream-like quality that critics have discussed as a space 'free of constraints' (Czarnecki 2012: 224) and in which cross-species interactions occur 'peaceably' (Levy 2004: 148). As I will discuss further, the liminal state between waking and sleeping is a prime condition in which becomings can occur. In these Grant images, we see giraffes, zebras, rams, leopards, elephants, birds, bears and monkeys. In the third image, an elephant seems to merge with an ostrich, perhaps suggesting a dynamism and instability of the block of animality itself that also reflects the border-crossing between human and inhuman creativity. The dream-like image of an elephant-ostrich hybrid suggests the constant mutation, improvisation and ultimately species instability that are hallmarks of Darwin's theory of evolution, though these qualities are rarely associated with his concept of species even today. Grosz reads Darwin's account of the unfurling of life itself through a Bergsonian/Deleuzian durational force. She emphasises 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. (Grosz 2004: 19)

Grosz goes on to detail Darwin's 'quite peculiar, and thoroughly postmodern, account of origin' as it impinges on the idea of species (Grosz 2004: 23):

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, nonnumerical measure of significant differences. (Grosz 2004: 23)

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' (Grosz 2004: 24). If the image of an elephant-ostrich dismantles our conventional sense of species distinctions in this story, that dismantling only confirms the way in which creativity or the aesthetic sensibilities deterritorialise the human via animality.

That specific deterritorialising of the human as Creator is perhaps most keenly registered in the images of monkeys that Duncan Grant contributes to the original, Hogarth Press edition of the story. The first of these appears on the second page of the text, in the initial animal conglomeration in which the creatures seem to float about unanchored. The monkey in this illustration is almost distressingly hybrid in its oscillation between human and animal features. It appears 'monstrous' or uncanny, with the legs and feet of a monkey, and the head and arms of a human. Particularly strange and even difficult to articulate is the way in which the monkey seems to have a human hairstyle, as if this animal woke up and groomed itself with a comb and hair oil. If hair is a residual reminder in humans of their 'beastly' pre-history,⁶ then the taming of the monkey's hair through styling proves especially captivating in our discussion of aesthetic framing. In a fascinating, perhaps unconscious, visual translation, Vivas renders a similarly coiffed monkey in the 1991 *Nurse Lugton's Curtain*. On the third page of text, as the animals begin to climb off and away from the 'blue stuff'—the material of the curtain—one of six enlivened and descending monkeys is drawn in profile and seems to have a cap of human hair. That particular monkey also has unusually human-like hands compared with the other monkeys in the text, whose hands and feet are more web-like.

Like other monkeys envisioned in Woolf's broader fictional universe, the coiffed one in the original edition seems to hold a nut at which it gazes.⁷ Its thoughtful contemplation of the object in its possession renders the monkey all the more 'human' and all the less 'animal', as the creature almost appears to be reading a text. If, as Georges Bataille suggests, our development of tool-use as a kind of transcendence of the object subtends the 'human' participation in symbolic systems, then this monkey's consideration of its nut places it at least in a liminal space

between animals, who are erroneously considered tool-less, and humans, at the zenith of technological manipulation.⁸ Grant's portrayal of this hybrid creature reminds the reader with an almost shocking force that she too is a primate with an object in hand to contemplate, the very children's book she is reading at that moment. This implicit analogy figures taste and discernment within a dizzying *mise en abyme* produced by the interchangeability between nut and book, between 'animal' and 'human'.

Monkeys figure prominently in the fifth and penultimate illustration of the Hogarth Press edition, as well. Probably the most surreal of Grant's images in the text, this one depicts the imaginary Queen of the fictive town 'Millamarchmontopolis', where the animals roam for their pleasure and to secure food and drink while Nurse is sleeping. The Queen in Woolf's story has come to town in her palanquin and sits reposed, in her regalia. Hovering bizarrely just in front and above her in Grant's image is a cluster of seven monkeys. While some of the monkeys' faces and heads are obscured, there are nonetheless a few that suggest pensive examination. Moreover, the monkey most in the picture's foreground holds a proverbial nut. If Woolf as conventional artist can be understood as residing in the 'trappings' of the Queen's highly symbolic and humanist personage—one with a crown that circumscribes and ornamentals the 'rational' or conceptual lodged in the head—then we must also reckon with her attendant hoard of floating monkeys. Indeed, the Queen of modernism (and of high modernism) is nearly surrounded by monkeys, and their hovering suggests that her own imaginative sources are animal rather than royal. This image, perhaps more than any other in the 1966 text, elucidates a replete, Woolfian becoming-animal/artistic.

At this juncture in the story, Woolf has emphasised how the awakened animals freely range over Nurse Lugton's apron, despite the fact that in her waking life Lugton is terrified of even 'a little beetle' (Woolf 1966: 11). That Woolf chooses to depict the animals crossing freely from the curtain right onto Lugton's apron powerfully accentuates an intimacy or familiarity with non-human creativity that comes only when the strictly conscious or rational mind is relaxed. Some critics have asserted that the story's reliance on a sleeping state suggests Woolf's dread of the unconscious creative forces at work in her own psyche. For instance, Hodgkins discusses Lugton as Woolf's double and as an 'image of the creative female unconscious', but also argues that the association connotes 'a fear of its author, that of the artist who wants to avoid confronting the creative process lest its products die in their amber'

(Hodgkins 2007: 361). Similarly, Michelle Levy suggests that Woolf's description of Lugton as not seeing the awakened animals amounts to an 'alienation from the animal world' and a kind of 'anthropocentricity' (Levy 2004: 148). Perhaps a more useful way to read the question of conscious and unconscious here is to see the drifting into an unconscious state in the story as the submerging or relinquishing of the humanist self, the 'ego' that attempts to cordon itself off from the natural and affective. That is, when Lugton enters an unconscious or semi-conscious state, the edicts of organic repression diminish and the affective forces of becoming are triggered. Thus, when the head drops and the glasses are pushed away, Lugton opens herself to the inhuman creative forces that are less accessible to the 'waking' self. The snore signals Lugton's letting go of the impossibly reified and carefully maintained 'human', and the ushering in of a world in which the human has a participatory relationship with the animal, natural and material worlds. It is important to put this process in a Deleuzian context. In his late discussions on immanence, Deleuze refers to the dying figure whose individual life 'gives way to an impersonal and yet singular life that releases a pure event freed from the accidents of internal and external life, that is, from the subjectivity and objectivity of what happens', and he discusses small children who 'are infused with an immanent life that is pure power and even bliss' (Deleuze 2005: 28, 30). And it such a liminal subject, fading between waking and sleeping awareness in Woolf's story, that is best equipped to demonstrate the human's interlacing with the other-than-human.

Another monkey that requires attention in these stories is the mandrill. In both versions, Woolf includes a litany of animals just after she declares officially that they had begun to move. Grant does not represent the mandrill; he uses only chimp-like monkeys throughout the Hogarth version. Vivas, on the other hand, depicts an almost Biblical parade of animals (reminiscent of the Ark story) at this point in the narrative, illustrating each of the creatures that Woolf mentions in the passage: 'First went the elephant and the zebra; next the giraffe and the tiger; the ostrich, the mandrill, twelve marmots and a pack of mongeese followed; the penguins and the pelicans waddled and waded, often pecking at each other, alongside' (Woolf 1991: [9]).

The mandrill is an especially interesting case for my argument not because mandrills are the world's largest species of monkey, but rather because they are the most vibrantly coloured. Notably, Charles Darwin wrote in *The Descent of Man* that 'no other member in the whole class of mammals is coloured in so extraordinary a manner

as the adult male mandrill (*Cynocephalus mormon*)' (Darwin 1871: 292). Most descriptions of mandrills emphasise the male's brilliant colouration, with a red stripe down the middle of the face and ridged blue muzzle. The 'rump' is strikingly saturated with bright pinks, blues, reds and purples. Indeed, the mandrill seems almost alien in its pigmentation. In Grosz's terms, such extreme colouration would be understood as a particularly incisive example of the way that sexuality itself requires creativity: 'sexuality needs to harness excessiveness and invention to function at all' (Grosz 2008: 64). Additionally, the mandrill exhibits one of the most pronounced cases of sexual dimorphism in the primate world where males and females are radically asymmetrical in their physical appearances. For Grosz, such divergence specifically links, in a rather surprising philosophical lineage, the work of Darwin and Luce Irigaray around the crucial Deleuzian question of difference:

Darwin insists that sexual bifurcation, the division of species into (at least) two sexes, is an evolutionary invention of remarkable tenacity and value, for it multiplies difference *ad infinitum*. Irigaray's conception of nature as the differentiating and differentiated condition of subjectivity... remains consistent with Darwin's conception of sexual selection—the division of species into two sexes, two different morphologies, and with it the advent of sexuality and sexual reproduction, and the generation of ever-new (genetic and morphological) characteristics and qualities, ever more morphological or bodily differences. (Grosz 2011: 104)

Thus the mandrill is an especially significant animal in Lugton's creative universe because it is a primate whose bodily apparatus testifies to the intensely evolutionary, yet non-adaptive, investment of living beings in the 'spectacular performance' of creative sexuality (Grosz 2011: 125).

Grosz's broad discussion of difference *as such* is too complex for me to rehearse here, but it partly elaborates Deleuze's notion that difference is 'something that distinguishes itself', and that 'is made, or makes itself' (Deleuze 1994: 28). Grosz's assertion that 'difference is the generative force of the universe itself, the impersonal, inhuman destiny and milieu of the human, that from which life, including the human, comes and that to which life in all its becomings directs itself' becomes a useful way to read the animality in and of Nurse Lugton's story and Woolf's writerly process (Grosz 2011: 94). The mandrill in this text functions as an exemplar of creative difference that is specifically aimed to reveal the human's species liminality.⁹ That is, the excessively bright, almost painterly monkey seems to insist with a shameless intellectual

effrontery that – clearly – the creative can never be a strictly human affair. Moreover, in Vivas's illustration, the mandrill, who marches along in the Ark-like procession, is the only creature who stares directly out at the reader. As I have noted elsewhere,¹⁰ recent work in animal theory has often coalesced around a kind of 'primal scene' in which subjectivities that we call human and animal confront one another, retreat, respond or otherwise intermingle. Perhaps the most well known of these is Derrida's naked-in-front-of-cat scene and, subsequently, Donna Haraway's insightful reading of its limitations. Testifying to the centrality of the interspecies look or gaze, Kari Weil begins her recent book about the 'animal turn' in critical and cultural theory with Derrida's now well-known proclamation, 'An animal looks at us and we are naked before it. Thinking, perhaps, begins there' (Derrida 2008: 29). Weil rightly emphasises the link between an animal's look and the concept of human nakedness or nudity. 'Does a confrontation with and acknowledgment of another animal', she asks, '*expose* us as humans by stripping us of those clothes and thinking caps with which we have claimed to stake our differences from animals?' (Weil 2012: xv; my emphasis). In this case, the mandrill's gaze can be read as a direct challenge to our humanist notions about the artistic. The monkey's look strips away aesthetic human exceptionalism by emphasising the magnificent becoming-artistic of one of man's more proximate primate relatives.

Similarly, in a subtle but nonetheless striking visual staging of human animality that again seems less than conscious on the part of Vivas, the back cover image for Woolf's short story cleverly shows Nurse Lugton viewed from the back, as she sits in her sewing chair hard at work. We see the back of her kerchiefed head, the chair rungs and pillow she leans upon. The way that Vivas draws the backs of Lugton's shoes, especially the seam down the centre of each heel, makes Lugton's shoes appear entirely hoof-like. Lugton seems to enact a becoming-bovine, which takes on a certain fascinating quality if we consider Nietzsche's claim about reading, art and the ruminative that Weil cites at the outset of her book: 'One thing is necessary above all if one is to practice reading as an *art*. Something for which one has almost to be a cow and in any case *not* a man: *ruminatio*n' (Weil 2012: qtd in epigraph; Nietzsche's emphasis). The point here is that if Lugton is Woolf's alter-ego, then this would seem to be the only visual image of a Woolf-as-writer figure becoming-animal in all of Woolf's oeuvre. Combined with the mandrill's confrontational gaze, the becoming-ruminant of Vivas's final Lugton illustration may be prodding us to ask if the becoming-animal/artistic

of the writer does not also invite or compel the reader into a similar trans-species engagement.

II. This Fold

Okumura makes the important suggestion that Lugton's curtain ought to be understood in terms of textuality. She writes, 'Nurse Lugton is sewing a curtain, the description of whose pattern occupies the story's text. Her textile is equated to the author's text' (Okumura 2008: 175). Reading the curtain as creative materiality itself, in a new-materialist or neo-vitalist register that is indebted to Bergson and Deleuze, pushes these concepts about textuality even further. To start, consider the curtain's most basic, 'architectural' qualities. It is a large piece of fabric that is draped and folded over Lugton's lap. As she works, portions of the fabric are revealed and manipulated, while other portions are inevitably hidden. There are the active vectors being stitched, and in the many folds and creases that remain unworked or latent, there is the virtual, waiting to be actualised. The undulating folds of Nurse Lugton's curtain, coupled with its becoming-animal that serves as engine of the entire story, suggest an almost uncanny enactment of the active and creative force of enlivened matter. Thus for Bergson, the incalculable creativity of organic life exists, which 'we cannot in any way subject to a mathematical treatment' and which exhibits 'continuity of change, preservation of the past in the present, real duration—the living being seems, then, to share these attributes with consciousness... [And] life, like conscious activity, is invention, is unceasing creation' (Bergson 1998: 20, 23). Moreover, Deleuze outlines the virtual as a self-differentiating source for life's actualisations:

The three requirements of a philosophy of life are as follows: (1) the vital difference can only be experienced and thought of as internal difference; it is only in this sense that the 'tendency to change' is not accidental, and that the variations themselves find an internal cause in that tendency; (2) these variations do not enter into relationships of association and addition, but on the contrary, they enter into relationships of dissociation or division; (3) they therefore involve a virtuality that is actualized according to the lines of divergence; so that evolution does not move from one actual term to another actual term in a homogeneous unilinear series, but from a virtual term to the heterogeneous terms that actualize it along a ramified series. (Deleuze 1991: 99–100)

Grosz remarks upon these concepts:

Each [Bergson and Deleuze] distinguishes life as a kind of *contained dynamism*, a dynamism within a porous boundary, that feeds from and returns to the chaos which surrounds it something immanent within the chaotic whole: life as a complex fold of the chemical and the physical that reveals something not given within them, something new, an emergence, the ordered force of invention. (Grosz 2011: 27; original emphasis)

The folds of Lugton's curtain are more than suggestive of such revelations.

Deleuze insists upon the inseparability of life and matter in his discussions of the fold: 'Organic matter is not, however, different from inorganic matter (here the distinction of a first and a second matter is irrelevant). Whether organic or inorganic, matter is all one' (Deleuze 1993: 7). Grosz also reminds us that, in Bergson's terms, materiality is characterised by repetitions or 'near repetitions' (Grosz 2011: 29):

The material world is that which is capable of unrolling or unfolding what has been already rolled or folded, that is caused: it is the inevitable unwinding or unfurling, the relaxation, of what has already been cocked and set, dilated, in a pre-given trajectory. (Grosz 2011: 29)

Thus the folding and unfolding of Lugton's curtain not only conjures the latency of the unknown that marks the possibility for the new and unexpected, the creative, but it also gestures towards the regularity with which the material world maintains itself.

If we remain within a Bergsonian framework for a moment more, we can consider how the animals' coming alive from the folds of the curtain might be read as the functioning of *élan vital*. Jane Bennett suggests that the 'task of *élan vital* is to shake awake that lazy bones of matter and insert into it a measure of surprise' (Bennett 2010: 78). What is more, Bennett recalls that the task of this vital spark is to 'increase the *instability* of material formations' (78; original emphasis). This indetermination associated with the creative, what Bergson calls 'a perpetual efflorescence of novelty', may also explain Lugton's trepidation at confronting the animals while she is fully conscious (Bergson 1992: 95). In other words, the creative does involve the incalculable, to use Derrida's terminology, and so Lugton or Woolf's disquiet about this unfolding can be appreciated rather than characterised as retrogressive.

In broader terms, Woolf's particular framing of a becoming-animal through the material or textual in this children's story supports a new

materialist (or vital materialist, in Bennett's terms) understanding of the relation between life and matter. The curtain—which would have traditionally been understood as inert or frozen matter—self-generates activity or force. The fluctuation between a 'living' state characterised through non-human animation and a kind of dormancy—in which the waking Lugton 'caught the animals, and froze them' (Woolf 1966: 15)—might best be understood as modelling the dynamics of material life itself: as Grosz asserts,

Life is always on the verge of returning to the inorganic from which its elements, its very body and energies, are drawn. Life and matter cannot, in this tradition, be understood as binary opposites; rather they are divergent tendencies, two different directions or trajectories inherent in a single whole, matter as undivided, matter as it includes its 'others'—life, ideality, connectivity, temporality. (Grosz 2011: 32–3)

The becoming-life or animation of the curtain cannot be separated from the curtain itself, although Lugton's sleeping state does suggest that humans are perhaps not ordinarily attuned to this coincidence of life and matter. Grosz carefully explains that in Bergson's view 'life' cannot be understood as a separate or special force that is distinct from matter: 'The common impetus life carries within it is that of *materiality itself*, the capacity to make materiality extend itself into the new and the unforeseeable' (Grosz 2011: 33; original emphasis). More pointedly, Grosz reiterates this idea when she insists, 'Life is that tendency, *in matter* itself, to prolong, delay, detour, which means that matter, "an undivided flux," is as alive, as dynamic, as invested in becoming as life itself' (35). Woolf's text provides a perfectly double-edged example of this in that Nurse Lugton is stitching, writing, creating, thus participating in the activation or the becoming, but also the material or corporeal 'body' or vessel of that activity—the curtain—becomes more than itself semi-spontaneously, activates *itself* through a vibratory animation to take on a 'vitality'. Moreover, it is crucial to read this seemingly paradoxical, double activation as a recognition that human creativity is linked to inhuman creativity. That is, the intricacies of weaving, writing, painting, and so forth, are not without a space of profound overlap with the becoming-artistic of the animal and plant, and even more primitive forms of life. Grosz puts this in fundamental terms when she clarifies how we ought to understand the 'unity of life'. It is not that life can be connected through some genetic web or ecosystem, but rather that

all life is equally pushed – in its originary emergence from the ‘prebiotic soup’ of chemical elements through to the vastly variable forms of life that have existed and exist today – by a temporal, or evolutionary, impetus to vary itself, to capitalize on its material conditions, to differ. The unity of life is not an end, a final harmony or cohesion, but the beginning, the impetus all of life shares with the chemical order from which it differentiates itself, and which it carries within it as its inherited resource. (Grosz 2011: 33)

In a traditional reading, the curtain itself might be understood as a proverbial ‘blank slate’ in materialist terms. In Woolf’s story, however, that interpretation must be recalibrated, for the curtain is anything but blank in Deleuze’s terms. In other words, one might initially want to read the fabric as one would read the ‘canvas’ of a painting – an inert substrate upon which art or creativity will be superimposed. But the becoming-animal of the ‘blue stuff’ suggests that such a reading would be erroneous. I am tempted to speculate about how Deleuze himself would have framed the curtain had he been familiar with Woolf’s story in the way he was familiar with *The Waves*, for instance. If, according to Cliff Stagoll, a Deleuzian plane of immanence can be understood as ‘a surface upon which all events occur, where events are understood as chance, productive interactions between forces of all kinds’ (Stagoll 2005: 204), might Deleuze have recognised Woolf’s curtain as such a plane? Might he have interpreted Woolf’s curtain as, in his and Guattari’s words, ‘a section of chaos’ that gives ‘*consistency without losing anything of the infinite*’ and that harbours ‘*variable curves* that retain the infinite movements that turn back on themselves in incessant exchange, but which also continually free other movements which are retained’ (Deleuze and Guattari 1994: 42; original emphasis).¹¹ While Deleuze and Guattari refer to concepts here in the realm of philosophy, Woolf’s plane in the Lugton story might be understood as referring to her own, or any artist’s, creative concepts and the movements and variations, indeed the enlivened manifestations that they undergo. The suggestion in the story of an ongoing repetition of varying becomings-animal during Lugton’s waking and sleeping intervals invites this comparison. That is, the reader understands that this ‘cycle’ of waking craft and sleeping enlivenment, this rotation of animal becoming and dormancy, will continue ad infinitum. As Stagoll explains further, a Deleuzian plane ‘represents the field of becoming, a “space” containing all of the possibilities inherent in forces. On this plane, all possible events are brought together, and new connections between them made and continuously dissolved’ (Stagoll 2005: 205). Again, the fluctuation

between creative activity and creative dormancy in Woolf's story has a distinctly Deleuzian resonance.

The operative dynamism of the curtain on a systematic level also invites us to read Woolf's text through what Rosi Braidotti calls an 'affirmative' ethics of biopower. Rather than focus unduly on *thanatos* or the questions of mortality and suffering in contemporary philosophy, Braidotti notes that we ought to consider the 'generative powers of *zoē* and to turn to the Spinozist political ontology defended by Deleuze and Guattari':

Death is overrated. The ultimate subtraction is after all only another phase in a generative process . . . For the narcissistic human subject, as psychoanalysis teaches us, it is unthinkable that Life should go on without my being there. The process of confronting the thinkability of a Life that may not have 'me' or any 'human' at the center is actually a sobering and instructive process. I see this postanthropocentric shift as the start for an ethics of sustainability that aims at shifting the focus toward the positivity of *zoē*. (Braidotti 2010: 212)

What other than the *generative* power of *zoē* is portrayed in Woolf's story, in which it is the Life of non-human animality that subtends 'narcissistic' human creativity? Indeed, the illustration Vivas created to span pages 13 and 14 of the *Curtain* text (if it were enumerated) is a bio-poetic image par excellence. Viewed from above, as if from an aerial perspective, animals dip their heads to drink from a lagoon. We see only their backs, demarcated half-ways each, like cells preparing to divide. The landscape is represented almost as if sliced on a molecular level, with trees spreading out like microbial pili or flagella. The half-circular image, with cellular and microscopic overtones, seems to reference the power or creative potential of *zoē* itself. It is an extraordinary image at the centre of a book about a woman's creative sources in that it embeds her aesthetic powers in inhuman, biological forces.

What Braidotti calls the postanthropocentric shift is indeed what Deleuze often theorised as the impersonal. Grosz describes this decentring of the traditional conceptualisation of human life:

Deleuze seeks to understand life without recourse to a self, subject, or personal identity, or in opposition to matter and objects. He seeks something impersonal, singular, that links a living being, internally, through differentiation or repetition, to elements and forces that are nonliving. This is what links the concept of life, for him, to becoming-animal, to the Body without Organs, and to immanence rather than to transcendence, the human, or the organism. He is interested in the nonliving tentacles that extend

themselves into the living, the provisional linkages the nonliving and the living form to enable the living to draw out the virtualities of the nonliving; that is, to enable the nonliving to have a life of their own. (Grosz 2011: 35–6)

The tentacles of the inhuman are not only evident in the cellular image above, but the impersonal link to ‘nonliving’ forces is powerfully evident in the Vivas illustration that represents Lugton’s face as a mountain. Near the end of the story, Lugton is conflated with the landscape: ‘They could see her, from their windows, towering over them. She had a face like the side of a mountain with great precipices and avalanches, and chasms for her eyes and hair and nose and teeth’ (Woolf 1991: [23]). Vivas draws Lugton’s enormous head as partially submerged in the earth, with the sinews of her neck bleeding and blending right into the foothills of the landscape. It is as though her body itself *is* the earth, and her head, putatively the most ‘human’ and ‘rational’ portion of her body, can only be partially separated from the forces of the earth. This image recalls Annie Leibowitz’s photograph of Rachel Rosenthal, buried neck deep in the desert. But Vivas can take the concept of merging even further because she blurs the distinction between Lugton’s neck and the descending ripples of the mountain terrain in her watercolour depiction.

What we find in this story, then, is aesthetic enlivenment as that which takes place beyond the personal, beyond the egotistical, and beyond the human. Art is understood as the becoming-other of life itself, as the perpetual and recurrent emergence of difference, and as something having its foundation more in a latent animality than in a waking humanity. If Nurse Lugton’s sewing is figuratively linked to Virginia Woolf’s writing, then this ‘minor’ children’s story persuades us to place the becoming-artistic of animality at the heart of Woolf’s aesthetic practice. Moreover, the seemingly unremarkable ‘blue stuff’ of the curtain emerges as the generative, affirmative life-force of matter itself. Woolf’s tale of ‘magical’ animals and curtains is actually a vital materialist narrative in which humans borrow their creative capacities from the becomings-other, from the differentialising and ‘excessive’ tendencies, of the inhuman.

Notes

1. See Czarnecki’s (2012) discussion of both the original and revised texts.
2. It is important to note that Hildick, when writing of his discovery in the *Times Literary Supplement* in 1965, seemed to have a more nuanced, or at least more speculative, set of notions about the relationship between the novel and the story. As Czarnecki mentions, he wondered if the children’s story gave Woolf

- a sort of relief from the violent themes in *Mrs Dalloway*. See Czarnecki 2012: 222.
3. See for instance Hodgkins 2007.
 4. The 1991 version, *Nurse Lugton's Curtain*, is unpaginated and so page numbers in references to it in this article are given in square brackets.
 5. It is important to note that conditions of the artistic, according to Grosz, can also be found in plant and insect life. However, she focuses significant attention on animal activities through her re-reading of Darwin and sexual selection in relation to aesthetic questions.
 6. See my discussion of human 'fur' in T. S. Eliot's 'Sweeney' poems in *Stalking the Subject: Modernism and the Animal* (Rohman 2009: 35).
 7. For instance, the character Jinny in Woolf's novel *The Waves* discusses a monkey that 'drops nuts from its naked paws' (Woolf 1931: 176). Moreover, Louis in the same novel discusses his own social preening in similar terms: 'it is for them that I do these antics, smoothing my hair, concealing my accent. I am the little ape who chatters over a nut' (Woolf 1931: 128).
 8. Bataille, like many twentieth-century thinkers and scientists, mistakenly understood tool-use as an exclusively human capacity. See chapter 2 in *Theory of Religion* (1989).
 9. It is crucial to note here that Grosz's emphasis on sexual difference, *pace* Irigaray, does not cancel out queer or transgendered identities and thus should not be glossed as such. When discussing Irigaray's claims about sexual difference, Grosz notes that Irigaray

questions, not homosexuality, nor ethnic identification, but only the disavowal of one's own morphological specificity. However queer, transgendered, and ethnically identified one might be, one comes from a man and a woman, and one remains a man and a woman, even in the case of gender-reassignment or the chemical and surgical transformation of one sex into the appearance of another. (Grosz 2011: 109–10)
- As fluid and flexible, as historically contingent and malleable as sexuality may be, Grosz insists 'there is no overcoming of sexual difference' (Grosz 2011: 111).
10. See Rohman 2012.
 11. See also chapter 6 in *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque* in which Deleuze claims that events 'are produced in a chaos, in a chaotic multiplicity, but only under the condition that a sort of screen intervenes' (Deleuze 1993: 76). Laci Mattison discusses the relationship between chaos and art (and the event) in this register, as well, in her 2012 essay 'Woolf's Un/Folding(s): The Artist and the Event of the Neo-Baroque'.

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