

This essay suggests that West's story exposes forms of racialized and gendered mastery that are coded as a failed attempt to eliminate and transcend animality. The exposure is read as a sophisticated commentary on species anxiety in modernist literature, a rhetorical problem that is still critically under-thought.

On Marrying a Butcher: Animality and Modernist Anxiety in West's "Indissoluble Matrimony"

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Modernist critics in the last decade have recuperated the work of Rebecca West, a British writer noted for her construction of "female epics" and feminist heroines. West's short story "Indissoluble Matrimony" appeared in the experimental journal, *BLAST*, published by Wyndham Lewis in 1914 as a Vorticist manifesto and call for revolution in British art. Recently, *BLAST* has garnered increasing critical attention as an avant-garde modernist compilation committed to unsettling intellectual and aesthetic practices at the beginning of the twentieth century. The placement of West's story within the anti-normative context of *BLAST* has implications that have not been theorized for twentieth-century literary criticism. "Indissoluble Matrimony" not only unveils various racial and gender codes that were operative at the turn of the twentieth century, but it also implicitly articulates how those codes are given force through the discourse of animality. Ultimately, this text should be read in its specificity as a sophisticated gloss on species anxiety in early-twentieth-century literature.

The question of the animal in modernism can be situated in the wake of post-colonial and feminist criticism, which has dominated studies of British modernism in

recent decades. Postcolonial critiques worked to illuminate the dialectic between Western subjectivity and the non-Western “other,” a disenfranchised other whose projected alterity served to stabilize European imperialist identity. Marianna Torgovnick’s *Gone Primitive: Savage Intellectuals, Modern Lives*, for instance, was widely read as an exposé of primitivism’s cultural work in the modernist aesthetic. Torgovnick, gives primacy to the racial and sexual binaries used by writers to codify the primitive. She maintains that European primitivism often rehearses a self-serving set of dichotomies that defines native peoples alternately as “gentle, in tune with nature, paradisaical, ideal—or violent, in need of control” (3). Modernist writers deploy the primitive in an ambivalent, self-serving discourse of otherness, whose object is at once excessively desirable and deeply threatening, ideal and abject.

While Torgovnick notes that Western ambivalence toward the racialized “savage” was frequently rooted in the post-Darwinian evolutionist premise that a continuum exists between civilized and savage, she fails to address the ways in which animality often underlies this dynamic. A similar elision appears in the more recent postcolonial work of Anne McClintock, whose insightful 1995 study *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Conquest* reads gender as a constitutive category of imperialism. McClintock’s work establishes a link between the British investment in domesticating women and in controlling the racial other at the turn of the twentieth century. While McClintock discusses the appropriation of Darwinism by European anthropologists to determine the rank of human races, she does not recognize the discourse of species as fundamental to these imperialist otherings. For instance, although McClintock points clearly to the feminization of natives in various images from the period, she does not theorize the animalization of native populations so striking in many of her book’s images.

Therefore, while the problem of the “irrational” and the “primitive” has been analyzed within modernism, the specificity of modernism’s species discourse remains undertheorized. West’s story exhibits a complex grid of racial, gender, and species discourses that seem to reproduce “typical” preoccupations of the period. In this narrative, George Silverton, a white man, has an ambivalent relationship to his mulatto wife, Evadne, whom he repeatedly associates with nonhuman animals. After the two argue over her political connections, Evadne flees to a nearby lake and George follows her because he is convinced she is meeting a lover. Despite the inaccuracy of his suspicion, the two come to blows and George believes he has succeeded in drowning his wife. However, when he returns home, he finds her asleep and unscathed.

Modernist writers often use the discourse of animality to articulate racist and sexist paradigms, projecting European species anxiety onto the framework of human

difference. For instance, T.S. Eliot's Sweeney poems animalize women and Jews through various narrative devices that attempt to retain the position of imperialist master for the European masculinist speaker. Moreover, Conrad's framework of ethical regression in *Heart of Darkness*, while complicated, depends upon a deep ideological racism that conflates African and animal. Similarly, the male protagonist in West's story attributes his wife's excessively animal interest in physical and sexual pleasure to her having "black blood." In this regard, the mulatto figure destabilizes her husband's identity along racial, gender, and species lines. His character adopts the discourse of animality in order to marginalize Evadne as woman and Negro. However, the husband ultimately fails to eliminate this threat in the narrative, and the text highlights his excessive and histrionic anxieties surrounding her.

West exposes the attempted disavowal of contingency and the iteration or production of transcendence that thinkers like George Bataille describe in *Theory of Religion* as the drive to posit the self as subject-over-object. While the story seems normative in its alignment of feminine with black with non-human, I will show that, through its narrative strategies, the text reveals these discursive parallels as suspect. In this regard, the story exposes modernism's political and ideological mainstream, particularly in terms of a post-Darwinian, masculinist rhetoric. Such an exposure, with its implicit critique of speciesism in humanism, aligns West's work not only with that of Djuna Barnes, but also, interestingly, with the work of H.G. Wells. I have argued elsewhere that Barnes and Wells represent the desire to disavow and repress animality as a futile and disastrous project and that their texts unsettle "the traditional notion of the 'human' as ontologically nonanimal" ("Burning" 132).

The "revolutionary" climate of historical modernism that Marianne DeKoven theorizes also helps us clarify the particular valence of animal discourse in West's text. DeKoven reminds us that modernism reflects an ambiguous response to the "downfall of class, gender, and racial (ethnic, religious) privilege," and that "revolution was to be in the direction of egalitarian leveling on all those fronts" (20). In DeKoven's terms, we may want to consider George Silverton's bestiary within the framework of his wife's emergent power along gender, racial, and political lines. We must not forget, however, that in the decades following Darwin, human privilege itself is threatened by the re-definition of the species barrier.

Let me briefly situate this discussion in relation to the study of animality and posthumanism. Cary Wolfe has recently suggested that "much of what we call cultural studies situates itself [. . .] [on] a fundamental repression that underlies most ethical and political discourse: repressing the question of nonhuman subjectivity, taking for granted that the subject is always already human." For Wolfe, this means "that the

debates in the humanities and social sciences between well-intentioned critics of racism, (hetero)sexism, classism [. . .] almost always remain locked within an unexamined framework of *speciesism*" (1). If Wolfe is right, then one of the tasks of literary and cultural critics is to unveil the operations of species discourse, especially in texts that have been primarily understood through a racial or sexual lens. West's story is such a text. This process not only advances the theorization of the nonhuman other, but it also reveals how such mechanisms of othering are used to marginalize humans.

Regarding work on Rebecca West, critics such as Marina MacKay and Bernard Schweizer have recently noted that West scholarship has tended toward the biographical and feminist-apologetic. Schweizer, in particular, situates his work among an emerging body of criticism that reassesses West "by implementing a new focus on previously undervalued aspects of her work" (2). This call for a renewed appraisal of West's work complements my own reading of her story as one that disrupts the humanist and racially inscribed identities that sometimes characterize modernist texts.

The opening line of "Indissoluble Matrimony" subtly foregrounds George Silverton's anxieties about an animalized racialism, anxieties that subtend the ideological import of this under-examined text: "When George Silverton opened the front door he found that the house was not empty for all its darkness" (98). Questions of the dark, the dusky, and the primordially "full" circumscribe meaning throughout this story. If darkness has denoted a lack, metaphysically, if black has sometimes been read as an absence—of white, of light or otherwise—George's intuition about the house suggests, through a domesticating metonym, the contrary about his mulatto wife. She is not empty, despite her darkness. The "other" of George's imaginary is not characterized by an absence: indeed, the racially marked woman constitutes *for him* an excess or abundance of animality. I want to emphasize the *for him* at the outset of this discussion since my larger argument about modernism and animality hinges on that narrative detail. West's text ultimately *exposes* the normative conflation of woman and black through the discourse of species in an important and, I want to argue, critically significant way.

The dominant thematic axes of the text are in evidence from the outset of the narrative. In the opening paragraph, we view Evadne implicitly from George's perspective as his gaze assesses and evaluates her. George inhabits the classic exoticist position of ambivalence from the start when he, through the narrator, remarks that "she was one of those women who create an illusion alternately of extreme beauty and extreme ugliness" (98). Robert J.C. Young further complicates this classic position in his discussion of racial hybridity, a concept that circulates "around an ambivalent axis of desire and aversion: a structure of attraction, where people and cultures intermix

and merge, transforming themselves as a result, and a structure of repulsion, where the different elements remain distinct and are set against each other dialogically” (19). In this sense, then, the pairing of white with mulatto, an already amalgamated term, produces a *mise en abyme* of potential intermixture.

In the opening paragraph, we see within the span of a sentence how questions of taste, race, and the body will frame George’s imaginative animalization of his wife: “Under her curious dress, designed in some pitifully cheap and worthless stuff by a successful mood of her indiscreet taste—she had black blood in her—her long body seemed pulsing with some exaltation.” The culminating feline image of Evadne in this first paragraph sets the stage for a proliferation of species conjunctions that articulate George’s masculinist and white-ist fears, fears that are ultimately mocked by the text’s judgment of George: “The blood was coursing violently under her luminous yellow skin, and her lids, dusky with fatigue, drooped contentedly over her great humid black eyes. Perpetually she raised her hand to the mass of black hair that was coiled on her thick golden neck, and stroked it with secretive enjoyment, as a cat licks its fur. And her large mouth smiled frankly, but abstractedly, at some digested pleasure” (98). This descriptive sequence exhibits an excessive foundation for George’s discursive politics throughout the story. The immediate emphasis on blood recapitulates racial codes that are located in blood lines, but the fact that it courses *violently* under her *yellow skin* exaggerates the corporeal valence of racial markers in a kind of hyper-materialization of Evadne. Here, importantly, the association between the sexual and the animal becomes clear. Evadne’s eyes and mouth are enlarged, suggesting an over-developed relation to the sensory and sensuous, at the same time that these “organs,” if you will, highlight her animal languor. She strokes her hair, coiled almost like a snake, as a cat licks its fur, so that the masturbatory *jouissance* of the moment is represented as animal: as untranslatable, “secret,” and outside the register of human language capacities. This makes her enjoyment especially threatening to George’s phallogentric economy. Finally, the image of Evadne smiling at a “digested pleasure” registers George’s racial and sexual anxieties through an animalized depiction of consumption: the cat as the *vagina dentata*. This opening description is significant because it emphasizes with such abundance George’s reading of race and sexuality through the register of the animal.

The linking of non-white with the sexual and animal was especially prominent in the late nineteenth century. As Young points out, British and European cultures were often consumed with the question of miscegenation—a question revolving around sexuality—and many scientists during that time period seemed similarly “prone to such hostile obsessions and ambivalent fantasies” (148). One very prominent feature

of this concern, according to Young, is an “ambivalent driving desire at the heart of racialism: a compulsive libidinal attraction disavowed by an equal insistence on repulsion” (149). George will exhibit this kind of ambivalence, as we shall see. Moreover, the potency of the “elicit” desire for the non-white at this time period is specifically refracted through a post-Darwinian discourse of animality. The ambivalent desire for, and repulsion from, black sexuality echoes the culture’s ongoing anxieties about human origins in the non-human world; thus the white European must shore up his humanity but sometimes imagines himself “going native” with animal abandon.

This utilization of animality in order to marginalize or distance the racial other, in particular, needs to be more fully articulated by postcolonial theory. Etienne Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein acknowledge that “every theoretical racism draws upon *anthropological universals*” (56) in which “the persistence of the same ‘question’: that of *the difference between humanity and animality*” recurs. Their discussion illuminates George’s perception of his wife’s “secretive enjoyment.” Balibar and Wallerstein note: “The ‘secret,’ the discovery of which [theoretical racism] endlessly rehearses, is that of a humanity eternally leaving animality behind and eternally threatened with falling into the grasp of animality” (57). Feminist theory is not immune to a similar blind spot, as Carol Adams and others have pointed out. Despite the fact the women are routinely aligned with the sacrificeable animal, many feminist critics have not recognized the need to theorize the human as they have theorized the masculine. In this way the human/animal binary remains relatively intractable, despite our attentions to race, gender, and class.

West’s text emphasizes the extreme binary opposition *that George perceives* between himself and his wife in the opening pages of the story. George’s initial irritation at Evadne’s ahuman sensuality is dispelled when he reminds himself that *any* kind of stimulus results in her “riot of excited loveliness.” He is then free to dismiss her in a reduction to the “purely physical,” insisting that “unless one was in good condition and responsive to the messages sent out by the flesh Evadne could hardly concern one” (98). The alignment of George with an attempted transcendence of the bodily and the animal, and Evadne with the converse, is cleverly rehearsed in their subsequent dinner scene.

While brief, this scene articulates the couple’s incongruous relationship to animality through the habituated but culturally primary question of food consumption and what Derrida has called the sacrificial structure of subjectivity. George remarks on the carelessness of the preparations, adding, “Besides, what an absurd supper to set before a hungry solicitor’s clerk! In the center, obviously intended as the principal

dish, was a bowl of plums, softly red, soaked with the sun, glowing like jewels [. . .] [and] a great yellow melon, its sleek sides fluted with rich growth, and a honey-comb glistening on a willow-patterned dish.” In contrast to this preposterous centrality of fruit, George notes that the “only sensible food to be seen was a plate of tongue laid at his place” (West 99). In his essay “Eating Well,” Derrida theorizes the sacrificial structure that situates Western subjectivation in relation to the animal other. This structure is dependent upon the hierarchical opposition between “man” and “animal,” and it organizes the cultural and discursive justification of violence against animals: “it is a matter of discerning a place left open [. . .] for a noncriminal putting to death” (Derrida 112) of entities that fall into the category “animal.” The prevailing schema of Western subjectivity itself, then, is extended by Derrida to include carnivorous virility and thus becomes “carno-phallogocentrism.” Derrida adds the prefix “carno” here to indicate his further delineation of the Western subject he had already identified as “phallogocentric.” If the subject is identified with phallic privilege (phallogocentrism) and with the metaphysics of presence (logocentrism), it is equally associated with carnivorous sacrifice. Essentially, the acquisition of full humanity in the West is predicated, among other processes, upon eating animal flesh. Derrida notes that the same sacrificial operation occurs for the subject in a symbolic relation to other humans.

This attempted transcendence over nature also posits the non-animality of the human carnivore, and, as Bataille’s *Theory of Religion* suggests, works to remove man from the realm of the thing. Eating meat defines the animal as always-having-been a thing, and conversely, it defines man as never-having-been a thing. Thus Derrida explains, “The subject does not want just to master and possess nature actively. In our cultures, he accepts sacrifice and eats flesh.” For this reason, Derrida explains, in Western cultures the head of state could never be a vegetarian since “the *chef* must be an eater of flesh.” Becoming “human” is accomplished through the ingestion, incorporation, and interiorization of the other, the other both as object and as subject. Thus, Derrida notes that it is both real and symbolic cannibalisms that bring us into subjecthood. He observes, “The question is no longer one of knowing if it is ‘good’ to eat the other or if the other is ‘good’ to eat, nor of knowing which other. One eats him regardless and lets oneself be eaten by him. The so-called nonanthropophagic cultures practice symbolic anthropophagy and even construct their most elevated socius, indeed the sublimity of their morality, their politics, and their right, on this anthropophagy.” This is why Derrida explains that the head of state, the “*chef* must be an eater of flesh (with a view moreover, to being ‘symbolically’ eaten himself . . .)” (114).

Derrida’s framework goes a long way toward explaining the connection between masculinity and meat-eating that is implicit in West’s dinner scene. George believes

Evadne to be careless and absurd in her preparation of dinner because her meal does not emphasize the ritualistic elements of incorporation, the real and symbolic anthropophagies that function to set *man* apart from the animal. Indeed, George remarks of her presentation and behaviour, “There was *no ritual* about it” (99, *emph. mine*). The “sensible” plate of tongue is unusually provocative here. George may eat animal tongue in order to over-mark his mastery of the vocalizing animal and thus recite his own exclusionary claim to “language.” Actually, his meal partakes of an extremely indeterminate organ that initiates the most animal and sensual acts yet also forms abstract words and phrases, markers of transcendence and ritual. One cannot help being reminded of Gilles Deleuze’s claim in an interview that he prefers eating brain, tongue, and marrow. Nicole Shukin calls these organs “sites of extreme potency,” and notes that “Deleuze’s favourite things, furthermore, connote a virility of force and a blood-lust for becomings that are peculiarly male gendered. Unverifiably, but arguably, brain, tongue and marrow emit a muscular and raw masculinity” (146). While Evadne is the one who seems to operate within various becomings here, George certainly seems concerned to dissociate himself from all things feminine, a project at which he will not succeed.

In George’s subsequent reminiscence about meeting Evadne, we are further schooled in the ways of his temperament and especially in his anxieties. When his firm had been confronted with the complicated financial calculus of the often-married Mrs. Ellerker (through whom George will meet young Evadne), it was “Silverton alone in the office, by reason of a certain natural incapacity for excitement,” who could “deal calmly with this marvel of imbecility” (West 100). This masculine/imperial calm, in his mind, is set in sharp contra-distinction to weighty, material affect; that is, to the “obscene” animality of a sexualized feminine. George’s memories of visiting Mrs. Ellerker are marked by the very descriptive excess that I want to argue highlights his own hysterical desire for mastery throughout the text: “He alone could endure to sit with patience in the black=panelled drawing=room amidst the jungle of shiny mahogany furniture and talk to a mass of darkness, who rested heavily in the window=seat and now and then made an idiotic remark in a bright, hearty voice” (100). Ellerker, in her domestic jungle, is heavy with the weight of the material, the black, and the animal. The “jungle-ization” of blacks and black women is so hackneyed in literary and cultural discourse that the animal character of this trope is practically elided from our thinking about it. As I have noted, one of the tasks of racial and postcolonial criticism is to theorize the specific discourses of animality within such mechanisms of othering. What is “the jungle” but the most frenetic and fecund representation of animal activity imagined principally as aggression and sexuality alongside the torpor of heat,

moisture, and the din of the swarm? This regressive evolutionary implication sits at the core of George's "real horror" of Ellerker and of all women:

This horror obsessed him. Never before had he feared anything. [. . .] This disgust of women revealed to him that the world is a place of subtle perils. He began to fear marriage as he feared death. The thought of intimacy with some lovely, desirable and necessary wife turned him sick as he sat at his lunch. The secret obscenity of women! He talked darkly of it to his friends. He wondered why the Church did not provide a service for the absolution of men after marriage. Wife desertion seemed to him a beautiful return of the tainted body to cleanliness. (West 100)

Women, and *especially* non-white women, produce disgust because they are bodily, and, for George, this corporeality is unclean. The description rehearses a series of familiar associations: the Kristevan abject, the menstruating contaminant, the obscene animal materiality of female sexuality and reproduction. Thus, the somewhat stunning claim that closes this section about wife desertion as a "beautiful return of the tainted body to cleanliness" describes a fantasy of male embodiment as transcendent *if and only if* the male corpus can be dissociated from woman, black, and animal. Again, George's excessive fears of the bodily seem frantic and actually render him as the spouse most out of control.

This textual moment resonates especially well with Ann Stoler's discussion of how sexuality circumscribed "being European" in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Addressing the specific fears about mixed-bloods and tropically over-sexed Asians found in 1880's Netherland presses, Stoler quotes a warning against the "indescribable horror and bestiality" putatively awaiting European youths in the Indies army barracks (177). While Stoler does not theorize the discourse of animality here, it nonetheless undergirds the racialized and tropicalized anxieties that produce colonial identity. She goes on to note that such discourses "reaffirmed that the 'truth' of European identity was lodged in self-restraint, self-discipline, in a managed sexuality that was susceptible and not always under control" (178). It is with this restraint and discipline that George continually self-identifies over and against the likes of Mrs. Ellerker, who displays a "hatred of discipline" (West 100). We will see eventually how George's discipline is futile. To extend Stoler's observation, then, we need to understand the "truth" of European identity at this historical juncture as tied not only to a restrained and managed sexuality, but also to a disciplined and controlled *humanity* that surfs its own animal ontology in a precarious and tenuous manner. Both of these problems, as West's text demonstrates, can play themselves out through the question of race at various and overlapping points.

George ultimately narrates his "fall" for Evadne as a deception, which gives it a

subtle resonance with the Edenic question of female desire. Most interesting about this founding seduction, however, is the confusion of spiritual and animal that plays out through the register of voice. George feels he was fooled into perceiving Evadne as spiritual when she was *singing*, and this spirituality sanctioned, to his mind, the “animal” sexuality that she levels at him. Note the way in which the spiritual mitigates the animal by the end of this passage:

Now he knew that her voice was a purely physical attribute, built in her as she lay in her mother’s womb, and no index of her spiritual values. But then, as it welled up from the thick golden throat and clung to her lips, it *seemed* a sublime achievement of the soul. It was smouldering contralto such as only those of black blood can possess. As she sang her great black eyes lay on him with the innocent shamelessness of a young animal, and he remembered hopefully that he was good looking. (West 100, *emph. mine*)

Because he first perceives Evadne’s singing as soulful, he allows himself to revel in her licentious “animal” gaze. We learn on the following page that this spiritual achievement was only seeming in her. George “had tasted of a divine thing created in his time for dreams out of her rich beauty, her loneliness, her romantic poverty, her immaculate youth. He had known love. And Evadne had never known anything more than a magnificent physical adventure [. . .]” (101). The singing voice functions here as a kind of “missing link” between substance and symbolization since it is a physical phenomenon that produces music, the abstract and cultural. Indeed, we might want to understand singing, as we would need to understand dance, as a particularly “deceptive” or confusing aesthetic practice, since it involves the becoming-abstract of the body or bodily. Thus, Evadne’s singing provides a privileged point of conflation for the animal and spiritual in George’s mind: her practice of sculpture or painting, for instance, would not have the same purchase because their mediums are further removed from the body. Her bodily voice-become-art momentarily de-animalizes Evadne from George’s point of view.

The fact that George is deceived by his wife’s “soulfulness” is especially resonant with his earlier irritation at her “humming in that uncanny, negro way of hers” (99). The Negro spiritual has often functioned for oppressed and enslaved blacks as a form of encodement, as a conduit of political or tactical information misunderstood by whites as merely religious in nature. The early mention of her humming parallels the confounding of white power through the black spiritual since George seems to view this practice as subversive, though he cannot articulate why. The recollected spirituality of Evadne’s song at Mrs. Ellerker’s enacts another perceived deception in which Evadne’s

performance of whiteness through a sanctioned cultural practice unmarks her as black, bodily, and animal, if only for an instant. In this sense George imagined her, briefly and to his mind erroneously, to be aligned with the transcendent white human.

And while he imagines wanting this spiritual creature, he nonetheless balks at his wife's intellectual pursuits. When she is invited to speak at a political rally for a Socialist candidate, he again sexualizes her through the discourses of race and animality: "In the jaundiced recesses of his mind he took for granted that her work would have the lax fibre of her character: that it would be infected with Oriental crudities. [. . .] His eyes blazed on her and found the depraved, over-sexed creature, looking milder than a gazeller [*sic*], holding out a hand=bill to him" (102). After an exchange about the candidate's involvement with a mistress, George launches into a string of bizarre accusations, first telling his wife that she talks "like a woman off the streets," and then suggesting she may be one. He complains that she has always been sexually aggressive, and blurts out the claim that "good women" are sexually passive. During this episode, we see an early example of George's own panicked state from Evadne's perspective: "With clever cruelty she fixed his eyes with hers, well knowing that he longed to fall forward and bury his head on the table in a transport of *hysterical sobs*" (103, *emph. mine*).

Gilbert and Gubar's project on gender anxiety at the turn of the twentieth century, *No Man's Land: The Place of the Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century*, is instructive here, but George not only inhabits a feminized hysterical position *in response to* female social and sexual power, his perception of the return of animal prowess also reflects a broader post-Darwinian anxiety about the instability of the male imperial subject vis-à-vis the species barrier. This fear of the animal clearly contributes to his distress. In this way, George can be read as a caricature of writers such as T.S. Eliot, who often construct elaborate literary works that attempt to shore up imperialist mastery and privilege by marginalizing animals, women, and Jews. We must also note the implicit fear of bestiality that is played out in George's psyche. Evadne's putative hyper-sexuality is linked both to her non-white status and to her animal qualities. She is marked by "Oriental crudities" and is an "over-sexed creature" (102).

The climax of the couple's dispute over Evadne's speaking engagement reveals—in a subtle but lucid moment—George's sacrificial relationship to animality. After he threatens to throw her out of the house if she speaks in public, we observe George's own brief lapse into animal instinct, followed by his return to a humanist position: "She rose to come towards him. She looked black and dangerous. She trod softly like a cat with her head down. *In spite of himself*, his tongue licked his lips in fear and he cowered *for a moment* before he picked up a knife from the table. For a space she

looked down on him and the sharp blade” (West 104, *emph. mine*). In response to his black and feline partner, George becomes-animal despite himself, despite his rational, Cartesian, humanist self. West’s syntax is especially significant here: George does not lick his lips, but rather, “his tongue licked his lips in fear.” George is momentarily elided by his licking tongue, a tongue that appropriates his agency at this instant. This description clearly plays off of George’s “sensible” meal of tongue at the outset of the story. Here, he is at the mercy of an instinctual, oral, and partly sexual fear/drive. And though he briefly hesitates, he does not remain in this exo-humanist space for long.

When George picks up a *kitchen* knife, he returns to the tool-using, sacrificing human that Bataille examines in *Theory of Religion*. This human works to remove himself from the realm of the thing by reducing the animal to an eaten object in a process that posits the human as transcendent:

An animal exists for itself and in order to be a thing it must be dead or domesticated. Thus the eaten animal can be posited as an object only provided it is eaten dead. Indeed it is fully a thing only in a roasted, grilled, or boiled form. [. . .] Concerning that which I kill, which I cut up, which I cook, I implicitly affirm that *that* has never been anything but a thing. To cut up, cook, and eat a man is on the contrary abominable. [. . .] And despite appearances, even the hardened materialists are still so religious that in their eyes it is always a crime to make a man into a thing—a roast, a stew. (39–40)

George brandishes the kitchen knife in his temptation to make Evadne into a dead object. In doing as much, he would be confirming that she had never been fully human, but rather had always been an animal-thing. He nearly inhabits the position of butcher here, and we will see how central that potential is to George’s vision of Evadne near the end of the text.

This scene marks a turning point in the narrative. George has allowed himself only an instantaneous “regressive” lapse into animality. He subsequently resolves, knife in hand, to sacrifice his own and his other’s non-human nature. The violence of the couple’s eventual struggle is clearly foreshadowed in this exchange, and from this point forward, George is driven by his need to eliminate Evadne, who now represents the obscene animal that must be exterminated. After she flees their home and he follows at a distance, George watches: “‘Go on you beast!’ he muttered, ‘Go on, go on!’” While George’s violent resolve and animalization of Evadne are compounding, his own inadequacy and ineffectiveness begin to peak. First, he shouts obscenities after his fleeing wife only to have the door jam as he tries to open it. Not long after he begins to pursue her through the fields and hedges, he steps with his slippers into a

pool of mud, which “seemed the last humiliation” (West 105). This turn in the narrative inaugurates an inverse relationship between George’s determination to conquer his wife and his own physical strength: the more fiercely he pursues her, the more his body hampers him. We have our first clear indication of the text’s general suggestion that attempts to control and eliminate animality are vain.

Another notable shift occurs at this juncture in the story that changes the animal register of George’s imaginary. Still chasing his wife from a distance and suspecting her infidelity, he experiences a moment of inexplicable desire for Evadne’s unrecognizable form: “Even as he went something caught his eye in a thicket high up on the slope near the crags. [. . .] In [a tree’s] dark shadows, faintly illumined by a few boughs of withered blossom, there moved a strange bluish light. Even while he did not know what it was *it made his flesh stir*” (107, *emph. mine*). His wife’s body is finally revealed, and she is wearing a black bathing costume, “her arms and legs and the broad streak of flesh laid bare by a rent down the back shone brilliantly white, so that she seemed like a grotesquely patterned wild animal as she ran down to the lake” (West 108). George’s metaphors shift from the domestic animal to the wild animal here. Early in the story, within the confines of their home, he most often experiences Evadne as furtive and cat-like, but once outside he sees her as ferocious, wild, and patterned, suggesting such animals as striped zebras or boars. We might want to consider too, that cats, zebras, and boars are typically associated with African biosystems. The point here, however, is that the “descent” from domestic to wild animal seems to propel the final violent confrontation between the spouses. George’s perception of Evadne’s animal nature becomes even more visceral as she comes out of the water: “As she came quite near he was exasperated by the happy, snorting breaths she drew, and strolled a pace or two up the bank.” Similarly, “the roar of the little waterfall did not disturb her splendid nerves and she drooped sensuously over the hand=rail, *sniffing up the sweet night smell*” (West 108, *emph. mine*). Freud is clearest on the requisite abjection of the olfactory for the humanized subject in *Civilization and its Discontents*, where he outlines his theory of “organic repression.” Here, Freud imagines early man’s transition from a quadruped to a biped 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 feces—and the consequent transition from an olfactory mode of sensing to a specular one. Evadne’s snorting and sniffing for George cleanly distill her bestial nature.

George and Evadne soon realize that they “must kill each other.” The subsequent descriptions of their emotional states are rendered in the somewhat trite Manichean terms that have been wearying to critics of West’s work. Once the two perceive that

“God is war and his creatures must fight” (110), West rehearses a series of binary oppositions to represent their struggle. The most interesting moment in this section occurs when Evadne briefly doubts her own power: “The illusion passed like a moment of faintness [. . .]. In the material world she had a thousand times been defeated into making prudent reservations and practicing unnatural docilities. But in the world of thought she had maintained unfalteringly her masterfulness in spite of the strong yearning of her temperament towards voluptuous surrenders.” Here, it seems, the narrator tips a hand to reveal that Evadne may have specific animal proclivities that occasionally get the upper hand, though her “virtue” lies in the ability to control those urges when necessary. The telling counterpoint here may be in Evadne’s ability to acknowledge animality *as such* within the human subject, while George panics at the unsanitized “human.” The contrast is immediately rendered in the shift to George’s point of view: “Sweating horribly, he had dropped his head forward on his chest: his eyes fell on her feet and marked the plebeian moulding of her ankle, which rose thickly over a crease of flesh from the heel to the calf. The woman was course in grain and pattern” (111). Despite his own sweat-secreting corpus, then, George projects materiality onto Evadne only, who is again imaged as a patterned, wild creature.

Their battle is played out in the material register, a plane of immanence that George has imagined himself to transcend. Nonetheless, “they fell *body to body* into the quarrelling waters” (111, *emph. mine*). George finds himself in unfamiliar territory additionally because he has always “loathed and dreaded” action, a fear perfectly in keeping with his hyper-spiritual worldview. Practically drowning in the lake waters and hanging from a rock, he is again presented as physically and psychologically feeble: “A part of him was in agony, for his arm was nearly dragged out of its socket and a part of him was embarrassed because his hysteria shook him with a deep rumbling chuckle that sounded as though he meditated on some unseemly joke” (112).

What brings him to his senses is the feel of his wife’s piscine body in the water: “A certain porpoise-like surface met his left foot. Fear dappled his face with goose flesh. Without turning his head he knew what it was. It was Evadne’s fat flesh rising on each side of her deep furrowed spine through the rent in her bathing dress.” This final association of his wife with the marine world begets a mock-Herculean effort to kill her as George “saw his wife as the curtain of flesh between him and celibacy, and solitude and all those delicate abstentions from life which his soul desired” (112). He confidently puts his hand on her “seal-smooth head” and drowns her, noting that “To the end the creature persisted in turmoil, in movement, in action” (113).

George’s belief that he has engineered the “extinction” of his animal-wife brings about a momentary jubilation and sense of triumph against the non-human. Thinking

himself a very strong man, George has a transcendent experience reminiscent of the Derridean sacrificial structure in which “his body fell out of knowledge. [. . .] He knew unconsciousness, or rather the fullest consciousness he had ever known. For the world became nothingness, and nothingness *which is free from the yeasty nuisance of matter and the ugliness of generation* was the law of his being” (113, *emph. mine*). This passage conflates the animal, woman, and black in a remarkably foul sexualized and gestational associative gesture. It also imagines the solidification of George’s masculinized, white subjectivity as that which must eliminate its various others. The violent sacrifice of animality necessary in this humanist framework is revealed perfectly by George’s so-called “generous” thoughts about his wife who he believes dead: “‘If she had married a butcher or a veterinary surgeon she might have been happy’ he said” (114). The shocking implication here is that such a bestial woman needs to be sexually mastered by one who slaughters or vivisects. In this way, the butcher metaphor circumscribes George’s ultimate fantasy of control and annihilation of his racial, sexual, and non-human other. The violence of this epithet points to the profound anxieties of the male humanist in the modernist moment. Applied to Evadne, it also reminds us how Derrida’s “non-criminal putting to death” of the animal is used to sanction cruelty against marginalized humans.

The final pages of the story emphasize George’s vision of himself as holy and untouched by the unclean. After he believes Evadne dead, he is transformed by spiritual visions, feeling that, “He saw God and lived” (113). When it occurs to him that he could be hanged for murder, George fantasizes about committing suicide: “He saw his corpse lying in full daylight, and for the first time knew himself certainly, unquestionably dignified” (114). Here it is only the final death of the animal body and his remaining immortal soul that can be valued. In keeping with Derrida’s and Bataille’s work on the Judeo-Christian subject, George posits himself as saintly and even spiritually generous after his specific and personal de-animalization of the world. Seeing a random fellow through a cottage window, George “interceded with God for the sake of this stranger. Everything was beautiful, beautiful, beautiful” as he descends toward his “own little house [that] looked solemn as a temple” (115–16). This scene suggests a specifically Lévinasian reading of ethicality and the face in which it is only the human face that obliges us into responsibility. Derrida’s most recent work on animality includes a sustained critique of this position, wherein he argues that the “gaze called animal offers to my sight the abyssal limit of the human” (“Animal” 380). It is precisely such destabilizing limits that George avoids when he sympathizes with the human, male stranger.

The staggering fact that Evadne is not dead and is rather sleeping in the very bed

George imagined for his suicide is tidily foreshadowed when he opens the gate to their home: “A stray cat that had been sleeping in the tuft of papas grass [...] fled insolently close to his legs. He hated all wild homeless things, and bent for a stone to throw at it. But instead his fingers touched a slug, which reminded him of the feeling of Evadne’s flesh through the slit in her bathing dress.” This passage clearly registers the *inability* to eliminate the animal from the realm of the human. Within moments, after feeling that the garden is “possessed by her presence,” he sees Evadne lying “on his deathbed” (116). George’s imagined death would have been the death of his animal body, but this actual death is that of his humanized self, a self that has attempted and failed to destroy its connection to animal ontology or being.

The association between Evadne and the animal is reiterated several times in the story’s final paragraphs. George is certain that this is his wife *in body* and not “a phantasmatic appearance. Evadne was not the sort of woman to have a ghost” (116). And in further de-spiritualizing thoughts, he believes that “he had never put her into danger, for she was a great lusty creature and the weir was a little place.” Finally, to cement the difference between them, he admits “Bodies like his do not kill bodies like hers” (117).

When George gets into bed, and Evadne, who sleeps on, “caressed him with warm arms,” we see the ultimate failure of his project; “He was beaten” (117). He is beaten, no less, by a semi-conscious, warm, and sensual embrace. Certainly the association of animality with a sexualized mulatto woman in this text demands a careful reading on our part since the import of such conflation has a long and sullied history. However, it is West’s narrativization of George and his point of view that is more central here. George’s project—his “reading” of Evadne, his exponential hysteria and enervation, and failed attempt to kill her—requires our critical attention. In fact, George’s attempt to “purify” himself and his world of the bestial is ultimately vain; his co-marginalization of the animal, black, and feminine becomes increasingly untenable as the story progresses. This discrediting functions primarily through the characterization of George as hysterical and weak, that is, by a kind of feminization of George himself. And while such a double bind might give feminists pause, the larger force of West’s critique exposes the assumptions and disavowals of an era.

We are compelled to ask what Evadne’s triumph signals in this story. Her presence is clearly too powerful to be eliminated by George’s presence. In this way, the animal, the bodily, the black, and the feminine prevail. These are, to use a Deleuzian term, “intensities” that have been understood to resist locatability within the symbolic. In this way, we can read West’s story as one that privileges the *before* or *outside* of representation. George’s rejection of, and attempted transcendence of, the animal is futile and buffoonish according to the text. Indeed, the stronger human functions not

in contradistinction to animality but within the occasional becoming-animal of her fluid and unfixed character.

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