

# 1 A Left-Handed Blow: Writing the History of Animals

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In 1940, Walter Benjamin wrote that “every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably” (“Theses,” 247). The implications of Benjamin’s statement are twofold. First, there are elements of the past that are deemed unworthy of entry into conventional history, and it is the obligation of the radical historian to ensure a place for these elements. Second, if that past is allowed to disappear it will take with it a knowledge of the present, because the two are inseparable. In fact, history is where both the past and the present must be brought together, and the historian has a duty to both.

Benjamin is not alone in his sense of the importance of the work of the historian. Just a brief look at the opening statements of two of the most important journals within the discipline underline this fact. In February 1952, the original editors of *Past and Present* wrote, “[H]istory cannot logically separate the past from the present and the future,” and they quoted Polybius’s idea that the study of history allows us “to face coming events with confidence” (iii). Again, the distinction of then and now, past and present, is refused, and history is figured as a project not merely of recollection, but also of future planning.

From a very different perspective, the founding editorial collective of *History Workshop: A Journal of Socialist Historians* (now called *History Workshop Journal*) argued, “We believe that history is a source of inspiration and understanding, furnishing not only the means of interpreting the past but also the best critical vantage point from which to view the present” (2). And in a following editorial on “Feminist History,” Sally Alexander and Anna Davin made the case for the “use” of history—its role as a project of the past, but *for* the future. “Sexual divisions are being questioned now because of the women’s liberation movement, and it is through investigating the problems which feminism has raised that we can expect the most useful women’s history to emerge” (4–5). All three perspectives—Benjamin’s, *Past and Present*’s, and *History Workshop*’s—emphasize the role that history can—and should—play in contemporary culture.

A history of animals would seem to be an obvious place where yet again the ethical nature of the historian’s work should be clear. Just as Alexander and

Davin emphasize the formative role of the women's liberation movement in the work of women's history, so it is impossible not to link the recent emergence of histories of animals to the growing centrality of debates about animal rights and welfare. Some histories, for example Richard Ryder's *Animal Revolution: Changing Attitudes towards Speciesism*, have been written that are directly a part of the project of animal liberation. In this book Ryder, conventionally, claims a use for his work: "[S]pecies alone," he writes in his introduction, "is not a valid criterion for cruel discrimination" (6), and as the rest of his work shows, "the motives for speciesist exploitation are multiple. . . . [A]ll are culturally shaped" (333). The book's aim is to explore the ways in which culture shapes our current attitudes, with the intention of changing them. But other histories of animals are also emerging that seem to be less directly linked to what might conveniently be called "activism," and it is these works that I am interested in here. What is the ethical work performed by a history of animals that might appear on the surface to be just another aspect of human history? This essay is an attempt to trace an answer to this question by exploring some of the historiographical issues thrown up by the entry of animals into the arena of history, and it is an attempt to outline how future work might reflect current ethical concerns.

As I began this work, one of the things that immediately struck me was the fact that very little has been written about the historiographical issues raised in writing about animals, and that, in fact, one of the most extended discussions of this topic is probably a joke. The article to which I refer comes from 1974 and is about the need for a history of pets. Published in the *Journal of Social History*, Charles Phineas's "Household Pets and Urban Alienation" is a parody of that rising star of the historical firmament—social history.<sup>1</sup> It is worth quoting at length to give a sense of its argument:

It seems brash to suggest that pets become the next 'fad' subject in social history, but, after running through various ethnic groups (and now women) historians may need a new toy. There are other promising possibilities. Homosexuals deserve a history, but a movement in this direction has not materialized, perhaps because homosexuals lack political muscle, perhaps because of more personal tensions among historians. Left-handers, another large group long subject to intense social discrimination, merit attention, but again their collective consciousness has lagged. So why not pets? Here, clearly, would be the ultimate history of the inarticulate. Written records, where available, would lend themselves more to anal than to oral history, and a new field could open up. Yet it may not come to pass. Without political power or claims, pets will hardly attract the interest of radical social historians. And at the other pole of academe, university administrators will be under no pressure to add courses on the history of pets, until such time at least as obedience schools are merged with standard undergraduate fare. (339)

The article notes developments within the discipline of history—the emergence of histories of previously unnoticed groups—and takes them to their logical terminus, the history of the most unnoticed of all: animals.

At its heart, the article is a parody of the kind of social, Marxist history that can be traced in the work of a historian such as E. P. Thompson. The pet is

placed within the discourse of social history, and its existence within urban culture is given the Marxist spin. Phineas writes, "While granting that escape and particularly the formation of collective protest, as in roving bands of wild dogs, were not common occurrences, it is here that the history of pets should be pursued" (340). This statement is surely a parody of Thompson's documentation of the lives of the workers in *The Making of the English Working Class*. In fact, Phineas is apparently using the kind of social history epitomized in that book to rescue pets from what Thompson infamously termed "the enormous condescension of posterity" (12). "Every gesture of deference," writes Phineas, "every sign of affection among pets was matched by barely-veiled contempt, beginning with resistance to housebreaking" (343). As with Thompson's worker, whose rebellions were sometimes, as he notes, "backward-looking" (12), so the pet could only rebel through a return to the most basic of actions.

Phineas's article, then, is an attack on social history, but it is also strangely prophetic in its recognition of possible developments within the discipline: the history of homosexuality is currently being debated; and, of course, the history of animals is now emerging.<sup>2</sup> One of the arguments of this paper is that the history of animals is not merely a "fad" in the ever widening reach of historical scholarship. Rather, it is a development of existing debates in the discipline as well as in the wider world of human relationships with nature. More than this, I want to argue that the history of animals is a necessary part of our reconceptualization of ourselves as human.

## I

There are problems, however, with the idea of a history of animals, and it is worth dwelling on them briefly, before moving on to think about their implications for the development of this area of research. Phineas, albeit ironically, pointed out one of the fundamental issues that faces historians: animals are "inarticulate"; they do not leave documents. Gwyn Prins has noted the traditional belief that "until there are documents, there can be no proper history" (114). It is from the written word that our knowledge of the past comes. Prins, an oral historian, has reason to question this idea and argues that spoken texts continue to be more central than written ones in political as well as popular culture. However, the historian of animals has no such argument available to her: a dog can bark, and that bark can be recorded, documented, but it cannot be understood. The only documents available to the historian in any field are documents written, or spoken, by humans.

Another problem for the history of animals emerges in the ways in which we organize the past in our histories. This is a problem which exacerbates one that is recognized in other fields of history. In 1977, Joan Kelly famously asked the question "Did Women Have a Renaissance?" She answered it by arguing that the term being used to epitomize a historical period actually represented what happened to only a tiny minority of literate men; that it immediately evacuated from the interest of the historian those who were not involved in the intellectual

debates—women, the poor, the illiterate. Likewise, in histories of the non-European, a similar question of periodization emerges: L. C. Van Leur, a historian of Indonesia, wondered whether the categories which organize European history—such as “the eighteenth century”—were useful. As Henk Wesseling notes, Van Leur “concludes that there was no point in this since none of the great changes that typify European history of this period can be traced in the Indonesian past” (74). Animals, as far as we know (and this is the only perspective available to us) have no sense of periodization. So, given the question “did dogs have a Renaissance?” the answer is clearly no; dogs did not partake of the intellectual debates which define the period, nor did they have the concept of historical periodization so central to our understanding of the past. If we are to write the history of animals, a wholly different organizing structure would seem to be necessary.

When we take just these two points—the lack of documents and the need for new temporal organization in a history of animals—the whole project becomes rather difficult, not to say impossible. We are attempting to write histories without some of the fundamental ingredients for history. But, as someone with an investment in the history of animals, I do not, of course, wish to declare the project to be futile. The problems I am raising—which, I recognize, sound like they could have been raised by Charles Phineas—are problems which, like the joke article, force us to rethink some of the things that we have perhaps taken for granted. So we must ask another question: is there really an emerging field of work which can be called the history of animals? My answer to this question is both yes and no. The emerging field—containing much absolutely fascinating and rewarding work—is clearly there, but it is not the history of animals; such a thing is impossible. Rather, it is the history of human attitudes toward animals. I continue to use the term “history of animals” as if it were, as Derrida has proposed, *sur rature*—under erasure: it is both indispensable and impossible. It sums up an area of study, but cannot define it.

But, if this history of animals is in reality the history of human attitudes toward animals, we are, perhaps, dealing with something that is merely a part of the history of ideas: nothing really new at all. If our only access to animals in the past is through documents written by humans, then we are never looking at the animals, only ever at the representation of the animals by humans. The difference is an important one, and in a sense epitomizes one of the most significant debates currently taking place within the discipline of history itself, between (broadly speaking) empiricism and poststructuralism—that is, between a belief that the past is recoverable to history through an objective analysis of its documents, and a belief that history is constructed (not always-already there for the taking), and that the documents of the past are always-already only representations. The difference between these interpretations affects how historians can know, can understand the past.

So acknowledging the centrality of representation that emerges in the history of animals places it firmly within what I am terming the poststructuralist camp,

and this makes a huge difference to the project. It means, in the first instance, that documents come into being: we read humans writing about animals. Representation is always-already inevitable. But it also, and more significantly, means that the real animal can disappear. That is, the emphasis on the material might be abandoned in favor of the purely textual. Roy Porter has argued that this is a particular problem when dealing with the history of a corporeal substance like the body (208), but it is also fundamentally problematic, I think, when dealing with the history of animals. This issue lies at the heart of Coral Lansbury's *The Old Brown Dog*.

In her study of the Edwardian case of the twice-vivisectioned "Brown Dog," Lansbury charts the different social groups which became involved in the anti-vivisection movement of the time and offers contextual readings of their motivations. The animal, she argues, was understood in this moment merely as a representation of the (human) self. The women protestors saw their sense of degradation in medical treatment and in pornographic writings echoed in the figure of the vivisectioned animal; the poor interpreted the use of the dog on the laboratory table as replicating the ways in which some hospitals, under the guise of treatment, used low-status humans for experimentation. These perceived links between animals and humans, however, bring with them dangers. Lansbury notes, "The cause of animals was not helped when they were seen as surrogates for women, or workers. . . . If we look at animals and see only the reflection of ourselves, we deny them the reality of their own existence. Then it becomes possible to forget their plight" (188). By reading the animal as a representation—by managing to displace the central reality of the treatment of the dog—these rioters, Lansbury argues, were not necessarily furthering ideas about animal welfare. Rather, they were using the opportunity to think about their own degraded places in society. The dog is a representation of the human; it is not, paradoxically, a dog.

Lansbury's history, however, is about this repression of the real animal, and rightly points in a different direction. Animals are present in most Western cultures for practical use,<sup>3</sup> and it is in *use*—in the material relation with the animal—that representations must be grounded. Concentration on pure representation (if such a thing were possible) would miss this, and it is the job—perhaps even the duty—of the historian of animals to understand and analyze the uses to which animals were put. If we ignore the very real impact of human dominion—whether in meat-eating, sport, work, or any other form—we are ignoring the fundamental role animals have played in the past. A symbolic animal is only a symbol (and therefore to be understood within the study of iconography, poetics) unless it is related to the real. One way of thinking about why an idealist, purely representational history of animals is a problem is by thinking about the intention of the project: the reason for recovering the history of the animal. In order to do this, a brief outline of some current developments in the field might help to trace some of the interests which histories of animals are currently serving. I should state clearly here that I am not looking at the kind of work that is

going on in the fields of environmental and evolutionary history, but am concentrating on work that relies upon textual sources that can be broadly termed social and cultural history.

## II

Recent histories of animals seem to take up, broadly speaking, one of three possible positions: these I am terming intellectual history, humane history, and holistic history. The first of these positions can be traced in two recent collections on animals in the Middle Ages: Joyce E. Salisbury's *The Medieval World of Nature* and Nona C. Flores's *Animals in the Middle Ages*. Both offer new ways of reading canonical works of the period, and what is at stake is the deeper understanding of an intellectual debate. Flores writes that the essays in her collection "show how animals were used to convey meaning—whether religious or profane—in medieval culture" (xi). What defines these books as "intellectual" rather than humane or holistic can be clearly traced in Salisbury's introductory claim that the essays in her collection "look at one element of nature but yield much larger truths that reveal the medieval mind" (xii). It is this "medieval mind" that is the main object of analysis, and because of this, these histories seem to reproduce the ideas of the period they are recording. They do not necessarily question them, because what is at stake is an assessment of an intellectual position.<sup>4</sup> Another book that would fit into the category of intellectual history is Keith Thomas's *Man and the Natural World*. Its right to be included here is explicit in its subtitle in the English edition: *Changing Attitudes in England, 1500–1800*. Attitudes, not animals, are the focus.

In the second type of history—humane history—we move away from the intellectual realm into an assessment of the lived relation. It is the materiality of the animal that is important here. A good example of this type of history is Robert Malcolmson and Stephanos Mastoris's *The English Pig*.<sup>5</sup> The authors state their claim for the project clearly:

All human communities have involved animals. While, in a sense, we all know this, and might regard such a statement as self-evident, the history that we read tends not to pay much attention to species other than our own. History, being written by humans, is mostly about humans; and we may sometimes forget how prevalent—indeed, very visibly prevalent—animals were in most earlier societies. (29)

A rather simplistic paraphrase might be: it is worth writing about animals because animals lived in close contact with humans, and we can learn new things about the humans if we look at the animals. This concentration on the human is something that the authors explicitly acknowledge: "[T]his book," they write, "is mostly about people, for pigs have enjoyed little of what can be called an independent existence" (31). That is, humane history looks at the animals as they are depicted in documents that are always written by humans, and which therefore reveal something of the human.

An apparently very different study that can also be placed in the same field

of humane history is Hilda Kean's *Animal Rights*. Here Kean traces the ways in which sympathy for animals led to the organization of animal welfare movements and charities in nineteenth- and twentieth-century British culture. Like Malcolmson and Mastoris, Kean uses the human relation with the animal as a way of looking at broader social (that is, human) ideas. It is not accidental that the subtitle of the book is *Political and Social Change in Britain since 1800*, as one of the central issues here is the growth of popular politics. Kean notes that campaigns such as those against vivisection reflected the "growing influence of women and the working class in political and cultural life" (157). The book is as much a study of the significance and power of popular protest, traced through an analysis of attitudes toward cruelty to animals, as it is about the animals themselves.

Both Malcolmson and Mastoris's and Kean's books are, then, important studies of forgotten aspects of social history, and it is through the animal that these are traced. In fact, this is the acknowledged reason for the work. As Kean writes, "When humanitarians rescued stray animals, or deplored the treatment of cattle driven to slaughter, or erected water troughs for thirsty animals, it tells us more about the political and cultural concerns of society at that time than about the plight of animals per se" (11). The recognition that a new understanding of human life can be traced in animals links Malcolmson and Mastoris's and Kean's work with the intellectual histories, but their concentration on the social, the economic, and the political is also the point of difference. Rather than merely tools for the intellect, animals are the site of social change. However, this difference between intellectual and humane history is, in its turn, the thing that links humane history with the third of my categories: holistic history. I am not saying that there is a clear and absolute division between the categories I am setting up. Rather, I am arguing that they represent different trends within what remains a single body of work that I am terming the history of animals. Ultimately, however, the third of my categories—holistic history—is where I believe an interpretation that can work toward ethical change can be found.

The two outstanding contributions to what I am terming holistic history are Harriet Ritvo's *The Animal Estate* and Kathleen Kete's *The Beast in the Boudoir*. In both of these books the representation of the animal is offered as a way of rethinking cultures which have, apparently, been thoroughly ransacked for meaning by historians, and in both cases—as in Malcolmson and Mastoris's and Kean's work—what emerges is a very new picture of the past.

Both Ritvo and Kete make clear the case for their work. Ritvo says that an examination of animals "illuminate[s] the history not only of the relations between people and other species, but also of relations among human groups" (4). And in a similar vein Kete states, "When bourgeois people spoke of their pets, as they loquaciously did, they pointedly spoke also of their times, and above all else of themselves" (2). On one level it could be argued that what Ritvo and Kete have done is recognize that animals can tell us about humans; this is the humane historian's line. But both go further than this, and what is at stake here is the status of the human itself. The idea that meaning can only be made through

difference—which emerges in Saussure’s linguistic theory—leads to the inevitable conclusion that the human is only ever meaningful when understood in relation to the not-human. This is a particularly useful conceptualization, in that we learn more about humans by understanding what they claimed that they were not: animals.

In *The Animal Estate* Ritvo concentrates on “rhetorical” strategies; that is, on the ways in which discourse “restructur[es] and recreat[es] . . . reality” (5). It is here that the animal is at its most potent, and, paradoxically, its most materially weak. “Animals,” she writes, “were uniquely suitable subjects for a rhetoric that both celebrated human power and extended its sway, especially because they concealed this theme at the same time that they expressed it” (6). Again, a look at the subtitle of Ritvo’s work offers a clue to its contents: it is *The English and Other Creatures in the Victorian Age*, and here the reliance of human upon animal for its meaning finds its logical end: human (Ritvo uses the word “English” as a synonym to underline the imperialist belief in the lesser humanity of the non-English) relies on not-human for its meaning, and this reliance creates a sense of a loss of status. The human is just one among “other creatures.”

For Kathleen Kete, petkeeping offers a crucial way into understanding what she terms “mediocre lives” (1). And it is through an analysis of petkeeping that she recognizes that the human relationship with the animal “describes the fault lines of individualism” (2). Her analysis of the literature surrounding petkeeping—training manuals, newspapers, lectures, pamphlets—offers a new perspective on human relationships in terms of class and gender, but it also outlines the ways in which nineteenth-century Parisian life represented a clash of ideologies, of *ancien régime* and modernity. The terrors of the new culture were being offset by the bourgeois ownership of animals, creatures who came to represent everything that had been lost—cleanliness, order, and rationality. But inscribed in the pet’s function is something deeper: it gives access to what Kete terms “the ruins of Enlightenment thought” (138). Her study, in this sense, fulfills, as does Ritvo’s, the purpose of the three classes of the history of animals that I have outlined: the intellectual assumptions and social and political ideas are represented, but, as well as these two elements, Kete reveals the centrality of the animal in human understanding of the self, or perhaps I should say the centrality of the animal in the ways in which humans shore up their fragile status.

In holistic history, then, what emerges is the sense that “human” is a category only meaningful in difference; that the innate qualities that are often claimed to define the human—thought, speech, the right to possess private property; what I have called in *Perceiving Animals* qualities of human-ness—are actually only conceivable through animals; that is, they rely on animals for their meaning. The movement from material to rhetorical, from real to discursive animal, that can be traced in Ritvo’s and Kete’s works is an inevitable response to some of the problems with the history of animals which I have outlined above, and Ritvo and Kete show brilliantly how turning from the material to the rhetorical need not undercut what I see as the ethical impetus of the history of animals. What the move reveals, in fact, is the way in which use cannot be separated from



meaning, and what we see is humans undoing their own status even as they claim they are strengthening it. This is where, I think, the power of the history of animals really lies. Recognizing the centrality of the animal in our own understanding of ourselves as human forces us to reassess the place of the human. If we identify the human as neither a given nor a transcendent truth, then intellectual attitudes that leave unquestioned the result of these assumptions—dominion—must themselves be reviewed as not true, but created. Material and rhetorical are linked in their context, and the history that recognizes this can, in turn, force a reassessment of the material through its analysis of the rhetorical strategies of the written record. The inevitable centrality of the human in the history of animals—the reliance upon documents created by humans—need not be regarded as a failing, because if a history of animals is to be distinctive it must offer us what we might call an “interspecies competence”;<sup>6</sup> that is, a new way of thinking about and living with animals. Holistic history, in its redrawing of the human, offers us a way of achieving this.

Recognizing the continuing centrality of humans in the history of animals has two consequences that can upset the wider anthropocentric attitudes. The first is a reexamination of the past and a reassessment of the ways in which humans have perceived and treated animals. The second emerges out of the first, and is a new assessment of our own status as “humans.”

### III

In Thesis VII of his “Theses on the Philosophy of History” Walter Benjamin writes,

There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism. And just as such a document is not free of barbarism, barbarism taints also the manner in which it was transmitted from one owner to another. A historical materialist therefore dissociates himself from it as far as possible. He regards it as his task to brush history against the grain. (248)

Benjamin is writing here of human society, but his ideas about taintedness, about the fact that nothing which is used to maintain power is innocent, however it is presented, are also useful in thinking about the ways in which we live with animals now and in the past. Where Benjamin writes of barbarity, I write of anthropocentrism.

Benjamin noted the transmission of the barbarity of the documents claimed by the victors. Even when the barbarity is counteracted, is protested against, it is still barbarism that rules the day; it is still barbarity that is being expressed. In a recent article M. B. McMullan tells a tale that exemplifies the ways in which the problem of the transmission of barbarity which Benjamin has highlighted might be useful for the history of animals. Following a campaign by the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (SPCA) and other reformist groups, and based partly on the fear of the spread of rabies, as well as on the sense of the dogs’ physiological unsuitability for the work, in 1839 a new law—section

39 of the Metropolitan Police Act—prohibited the use of dogs to pull carts in London. This act would appear to be based upon humanitarian arguments, but the immediate outcome was far from emancipatory: most of the dogs were killed by their owners because they were too expensive to keep as pets. As McMullan notes, “The measure, purporting to be for their benefit, resulted in their slaughter” (39).

Benjamin argues that the barbarity of the document cannot be eradicated by later interpretations, that these are a mere continuation of barbarity under another name. In the case of the dog carts of nineteenth-century London, the prohibition appears to be a document of humane treatment, a recoiling from the cruelty of dominion which had itself been documented by the carts. On closer inspection the act is, however, a continuation of barbarity under a new guise. As Hilda Kean notes, at the heart of nineteenth-century animal welfare campaigns is the middle-class desire not to be able to see cruelty. Frances Maria Thompson, a patron of the Animal Friends’ Society, wrote in the 1830s, “The increasing instances of cruelty in our streets have now risen to such a height that it is impossible to go any distance from home without encountering something to wound our feelings” (Kean 60). It is the wound she feels that is of primary importance; the animal often appears to be of only secondary concern, but the result is an increase in anti-cruelty legislation. This is the anthropocentrism that lay beneath the protests against the dog carts. The barbarity was not halted; it was, as Benjamin recognizes, transmitted from generation to generation. What would appear to be a challenge is really only a continuation: the terms of engagement have not changed, and anthropocentrism is countered with further anthropocentrism.<sup>7</sup>

Terry Eagleton has written that “[a]ny attempt to recuperate the past directly, non-violently, will result only in paralysing complicity with it” (44). I want to argue that to begin to write about anthropocentrism, to note its transmission, is perhaps to begin to dissociate oneself from it, to read it “against the grain.” It is a refusal of one of anthropocentrism’s strengths—its apparent naturalness. But if we merely recognize that the way in which we understand and inhabit our world remains anthropocentric, we are only part of the way there. The next crucial step, Benjamin argues in his “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” is to recognize that our “amazement [that we ‘still’ do such things] is not the beginning of knowledge—unless it is the knowledge that the view of history which gives rise to it is untenable” (249). A history of progress—one which sees an increase in animal welfare in modernity, one which finds the increase in the number of vegetarians enough to mean the crucial economic centrality of the battery farm can be set aside—fails to see that progress is merely a term which disguises change, a disguise that will always leave us amazed at our own cruelty. By implication, the history of animals cannot merely reflect upon past cruelties, lay them bare for examination with the assumption that such laying bare is itself a political gesture. Actually, in Benjamin’s terms, this merely shifts barbarism; it does not counter it. So an alternative must be sought, and it is here that the second possibility of the history of animals comes into its own and offers, I

think, a reinterpretation that does undercut some of the assumptions that allow anthropocentrism to continue. If we recognize that progress might actually be founded upon something far from progressive, then we—humans—are forced to think again about our relation with animals. If the rise in charitable institutions, “fellow-feeling,” welfare organizations is premised upon attitudes that are not necessarily without the taint of barbarism, then something very new is needed if we do want to work toward a more equitable relation with animals.

#### IV

In 1957, in an implicit reference to Marx’s original, E. P. Thompson wrote, “Men make their own history. They are part agent, part victim: it is precisely this element of agency which distinguishes them from the beasts, which is the *human* part of man” (qtd. in Poster 4).<sup>8</sup> Mark Poster notes that Thompson’s statement would be contested by few historians, “liberal, conservative, or Marxist” (4). Its assumption of a stable subject who makes his/her own meaning transcends many other divisions within the discipline. This humanism, this belief that humans have the power to make their own history, is in Thompson’s case an attempt to reclaim power for those who may be perceived to lack it—workers, the poor, the forgotten—but it relied, of course, on animals to make its point.

Thompson was one of the early advocates for and practitioners of history from below, and more recent discussions of its possibilities have not abandoned the humanist overtones of the early work. Jim Sharpe, for example, argued in 1992 that history from below allows us to see “that our identity has not been formed purely by monarchs, prime ministers and generals” (37). Again, identity is something over which even the most powerless have power. This humanist idea, as Poster has shown, implies that there is a fixed and stable subject—one the same in the past and the present—and that it is merely the context in which this subject finds him/herself that alters his/her being. Humans are born free, you might say, but everywhere they are in chains.

In this interpretation history from below is the history of how humans have been chained, and how they have challenged their confinement. And the writing of history itself becomes one of the greatest challenges: it is where the silencing of the marginal is ended, where “the condescension of posterity” is undone. The recovery of the lives of those regarded as unimportant and insignificant by traditional history not only gives a broader view of society, it also allows the historian to reclaim, in the name of the people, a significant part of the ideological apparatus: history itself. But this history remains humanist in a very obvious and simple way: in response to Francis Fukayama’s declaration of the end of history, most historians, Poster argues, would state that, in fact, “history is a real sequence of events that will end only with the last gasp of the last human being. History and humanity are coterminous” (59). Without our ability to create our own history, Thompson argued, we are not fully human, and without humanity there can be no history.

This idea of the stability of the human subject has, of course, come under threat in the work of Michel Foucault. What is lost in Foucault's work is the sense of self as an autonomous being. Instead of the transcendent, stable, Cartesian subject there is a self formed only in discourse, under the strategies of power. This decentering of the subject is clearly related to the work of the history of animals, but one issue separates the two. Foucault and many of his followers do not go beyond the human. Strategies of othering are examined, but only in terms of othering humans; the animal is a powerful rhetorical category into which some humans—the mad, the criminal—are placed. Real animals are not the issue. A good example of this can be found in Stephen Greenblatt's new historicist analysis of *The Tempest*. Greenblatt writes, "Language is, after all, one of the crucial ways of distinguishing between men and beasts. . . . Not surprisingly, then, there was some early speculation [by colonialists] that the Indians were subhuman, and thus, among other things, incapable of receiving the true faith" (23). The opposition "men and beasts" slides into the opposition of human and subhuman, and the animal disappears from view.

In the history of animals, however, to question the anthropocentric view of the world—to brush history against the grain—is to challenge the status of the human, which in turn is to throw all sorts of assumptions into question. If we can no longer assume our own status then we can no longer take the status of animals as a given. What was assumed to be natural—human dominion—is revealed instead to be manufactured, that is, ideological. Through anthropocentrism—the recognition that the only vision is the human vision, the only history a human history—we can in fact work against anthropocentrism, make it untenable.

In a recent article, Malcolm Bull has suggested a way of reading Nietzsche that parallels my reading of anthropocentrism. Bull argues that the anti-Nietzsche is to be found not so much in reading *against* Nietzsche as in reading *beyond* him by refusing the status of the Superman, of the master, which Nietzsche "flatteringly offers . . . to anyone" (124). Bull writes, "The act of reading always engages the emotions of readers, and to a large degree the success of any text (or act of reading) depends upon a reader's sympathetic involvement. A significant part of that involvement comes from the reader's identification with individuals or types within the story" (126–27). Within the work of Nietzsche, Bull argues, this identification is with the Superman: we inevitably "read for victory," and this means that Nietzsche is never canceled. Rather, he is demonstrated. "Reading Nietzsche successfully means reading for victory, reading so that we identify ourselves with the goals of the author. In so unscrupulously seeking for ourselves the rewards of the text we become exemplars of the uninhibited will to power" (128). We are not being flattered when Nietzsche addresses his readers as Supermen: "If [they] have mastered his text, [readers] have demonstrated just those qualities of ruthlessness and ambition that qualify them to be 'masters of the earth'" (128–29). Bull argues that the only counter to Nietzsche is to "read like a loser," that is, to align oneself with the herd and not the Superman. In accepting the argument of the text, but turning it against

him/herself, readers will be made to feel “powerless and vulnerable,” and it is this that will allow them to move beyond the position of mastery that appears to be theirs (130).

Bull argues that the vulnerability experienced when reading like a loser replicates interspecific relations: “Superman is to man, as man is to animal” (133). By refusing to be positioned as Supermen we are inevitably positioning ourselves as animals, and this, for Bull, is a step forward. It is a step beyond Nietzsche rather than a refusal of him: a refusal, he writes, would allow for the continuation of “the position he chose for himself.” An opposition that “comes only from within pre-existing traditions” would allow Nietzsche to “live for ever as [his critics’] eschatological nemesis” (123–24).

I am arguing that a similar maneuver is needed within the discipline of history. Where Bull posits the anti-Nietzsche, I am suggesting the anti-humanist. We must abandon the status of the human as it is presented within humanist history; we must read against this. Instead, we need to assert and assess the ways in which “human” is always a category of difference, not substance: the ways “human” always relies upon “animal” for its meaning. By refusing humanism, and, implicitly, anthropocentrism, we place ourselves next to the animals, rather than as the users of the animals, and this opens up a new way of imagining the past, something that has to be central to the project. If it is to impact upon questions about the ways in which we treat animals today, if it is to have something to add to debates about factory farming, cruel sports, fur farms, vivisection, and the numerous other abuses of animals in our cultures, then the history of animals cannot just tell us what has been, what humans thought in the past; it must intervene, make us think again about our past and, most importantly, about ourselves. The history of animals can only work at the expense of the human.

But this is not to say that the fragmentation of the human—its lack of fixity—is the way forward. Rather, I want to suggest that by recognizing the lack of foundation for our perceived stability we can begin to think about the category “human” in very different terms. History and humanity are, as the humanists proclaim, coterminous, but a history can be written that does not celebrate the stability of what was, what is, and what shall be. Instead history should reinterpret the documents of the past in order to offer a new idea of the human. No longer separate, in splendid isolation, humans must be shown to be embedded within and reliant upon the natural order.

Wendy Wheeler has discussed the need for change in our political, emotional, and working lives, and her ideas are useful here. She writes of a modernity in which melancholia, which is “characterized by punitive and vicious self-loathing, and by an inability to let go and move on,” is the organizing principle of our world, and she argues for a new modernity in which mourning—which allows the individual to “transform the shattered fragments of an earlier self and world, and to build something new from those fragments and ruins”—will be the key (165). Using developments in neurobiology, Wheeler claims that this change from melancholy to mourning is based on the decline of the “old cartesian divide,” a decline which will give way to “more complex holistic models

of both the individual's understanding of the relationship between mind and body and, more widely, the relationship between individual creatures and the living world of which they are a living part." This Wheeler terms an "ecological sensibility" (165).

Likewise, we must write a history which refuses the absolute separation of the species; refuses that which is the silent assumption of humanist history. By rethinking our past—reading it for the animals as well as the humans—we can begin a process that will only come to fruition when the meaning of "human" is no longer understood in *opposition* to "animal." Then "human" can be recognized as meaning something quite new: a being which only differentiates itself by being able to write and interpret its own history. If this is so, it is only right that we should ensure that this history is the one we deserve.

In his spoof article Charles Phineas likened the need for the history of pets to the need for the history of the left-handed. This connection between the human "other" and the animal is not a new one, but his connection has a pleasing resonance with a statement by Walter Benjamin. In "One Way Street" Benjamin wrote, "All the decisive blows are struck left-handed" (65). From the most unexpected place comes the most disruptive assault. The history of animals has the potential to be such a left-handed blow to many of the anthropocentric assumptions we have about ourselves. And by this means it can become, I think, a powerful part of our revisioning of our place in the world.

## Notes

I am grateful to Clare Palmer, Wendy Wheeler, and Sue Wiseman for reading and commenting on an earlier draft of this essay.

1. I am extremely grateful to Anne Goldgar for pointing out this article to me. While researching this paper I contacted the editor of the *Journal of Social History* in an attempt to discover the status of the article, but unfortunately, the journal had no record of Charles Phineas nor of the nature of his article. However, the previous issue of the *Journal* did contain a spoof article—Diana Shroud, "The Neolithic Revolution: An Analogical Overview." This spoof was acknowledged in an "Editor's Note" in the same number in which Phineas's article appeared (368). So spoofing as a way of raising some interesting historiographical issues was certainly a part of the work of the *Journal* at the time Phineas's article appeared.
2. Peter Burke, writing in 1992, seems to have recognized the emerging reality of this turn to nature within history when he noted, "Today, the very identity of economic history is threatened by a takeover bid from a youthful but ambitious enterprise . . . eco-history" ("Overture," 1).
3. The pet might be considered an important exception, and much has been written on its place in culture (see, for example, Shell).
4. This is not, of course, the only way in which medieval scholars have inter-

- preted their period. In her own monograph, *The Beast Within*, for example, Salisbury brings the material and the intellectual positions together brilliantly.
5. In this book Malcolmson and Mastoris do look at the ways in which pigs served a symbolic function in the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries, but the positioning of the chapter “Images of the Pig” at the beginning of the book emphasizes the authors’ concentration in the rest of the study on the real, lived relation of humans and pigs in English culture. The symbolic animal serves as a lead-in to the real subject of the book, the real animal.
  6. This phrase is an adaptation of Christian Meier’s call for an increased “inter-cultural competence” in European history (34).
  7. This anthropocentrism of the animal welfare movement did not end in the nineteenth century. Ted Benton and Simon Redfearn found that some of those involved in the Brightlingsea protests against the live export of veal calves were just as, if not more, interested in their own liberty—their right to protest (51–58).
  8. I am indebted to Poster’s analysis in the following pages.

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