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The dog and the parakeet: Lacan among the animals

Abstract

This article explores the place of the animal and animals in Lacanian psychoanalysis, arguing that the standard accounts of Lacan on the animal, including the influential intervention by Derrida, depend almost exclusively on the *Écrits* and Lacan's early seminars, overlooking late Lacanian texts and seminars. It starts by examining perplexing instances in Lacan's seminar of 'silliness' or 'stupidity' – what he himself calls *bêtises*. The *bêtise*, which Lacan says plays a critical role in clinical practice, is then treated as the way into a discussion of how the figure of the animal functions in Lacan's seminar, and how it changes between early and late seminars, especially in terms of Lacan's reliance on ethology. It shows how the early work rests heavily on key figures such as Konrad Lorenz and Niko Tinbergen, who disappear entirely from the late Lacan. Part of this reading is dedicated to a reassessment of Derrida's account of the animal in Lacan, an account which is often taken to be the final word on the subject.

What is the animal for Lacan? At one time the question would hardly have occurred to anyone. And even though the question is now routinely addressed to the central figures of the theoretical tradition (see Badmington, Calarco), it is still rarely asked of Lacan.¹ It is an odd omission, for as Michael Ziser, one notable exception to the rule, points out in his careful examination of Lacan's 'discontinuism' (16), Lacanian psychoanalysis is 'historically and logically dependent on a large body of zoological research and animal engagement' (12). Perhaps the question is so rarely asked because an answer is always ready to hand. On the rare occasions when his name comes up in discussions of the post-

human and animality, Lacan is more often than not spoken for by Jacques Derrida.

In *The Animal that Therefore I Am* Derrida devotes an entire chapter, some twenty pages, to Lacan on animals, decisively placing the psychoanalyst within the tradition of Descartes, Levinas, Heidegger. For many, as a consequence, the matter is closed. Cary Wolfe, for example, comparing Lacan with Daniel Dennett, notes the former's 'strategy (...) to juridically separate the human from the animal as that being, alone among the living, who can *lie by telling the truth*' (39). Having just quoted Dennett, Wolfe goes on that 'here the distance between Dennett's discourse and Lacan's will become absolutely minimal' (39). And to confirm this similarity of discourses, he quotes not Lacan ... but Derrida. Given the highly distinctive nature of Lacan's discourse, this is a surprising way of making the comparison. It is just one example of the way in which knowledge of Lacan on this subject is given in advance, but there are others.² While it is true that in *The Animal that Therefore I Am* Derrida carefully identifies in Lacan's work a range of structuring biases against animals and animality, and does of course cite Lacan, and in detail, this does not relieve us from also doing so if we are going to ask what the animal is for him.

Bétises of burden

In the opening essay to *The Cambridge Companion to Lacan*, Jean-Michel Rabaté tells of his first encounter with Lacan's seminar in 1968. Coming into the lecture theatre late, the first words he heard from Lacan were a complicated series of puns about mustard and mustard pots. To Rabaté, Lacan looked like 'an aging performance artist (...) whose very garb had something of the cabaret

comedian's outfit' (2), and although the elaborate word-play on mustard was clearly absurd, even hilarious, 'no one laughed or even smiled' in the room, with the exception of Lacan himself. For the reader of the transcribed seminars, divorced from the original context of the utterance, and therefore without the clues about mode of delivery and reception enjoyed by Rabaté, such bemusement is felt doubly. One can't help suspecting that this whole Lacanian exercise is rather more fun than it is reputed to be, but how, exactly, are we to know when or whether the speaker is having a laugh?

To take two examples, from *Seminar XVII: The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, and *Seminar XX: Encore* —

1. In the session of June 10, 1970, Lacan breaks away from an extended gloss on a single sentence in Freud's 'Analysis Terminable and Interminable' to speak at length about 'a somewhat neglected aspect' of the domestic dog, which, it seems, cannot resist rotting flesh (carrion – *charogne*). This carrion, Lacan tells us, is equivalent to S_1 , the master signifier, and furthermore, 'speech can very easily play the role of carrion' (*The Other Side* 167). Before finishing this he puns on how unappetizing speech as carrion is, calling it not very *ragoûtante*. *Charogne* itself contains another pun, a cat (*chat*) concealed in the first syllable, which explains the dog's passion for carrion, but also its poor flavour.³

2. Lacan spends the session of November 21, 1972, the opening one of the year, circling around a main thesis of *Encore* – that there is no sexual relation. Halfway in, just after introducing the neologism 'l'amur' and reflecting briefly

on Frege, he announces 'I can tell you a little tale, that of a parakeet that was in love with Picasso' (*Encore* 6). The parakeet, it seems, nibbled away amorously at Picasso's shirt, not in order to get past the clothing to the man beneath, but precisely because the bird was in love with what came between it and the painter. In this, Lacan tells us, the parakeet was just like Descartes, for whom 'men were merely clothes (...) walking about' (*des hommes, c' était des habits en (...) pro-ménade*) (*Le séminaire: Encore* 12). Again, there is some punning from Lacan, who breaks up *promenade* (a stroll) to suggest, as the translator's note tells us, *prometter la ménade* (promising debauchery). And the word echoes, resonates, when later in the same year he expresses a wish to stroll among his audience: 'je désirais vous parler en me promenant un petit peu entre vous.' (61) In a seminar where movements of all sorts (including the MLF) play a paramount role, this wish is not insignificant, but as for the parakeet, whether parable or joke, it makes no further appearance in his speech.

Although Rabaté is willing to call attention to the apparent silliness of Lacan, none of the essays in his *Cambridge Companion to Lacan* enlighten us on the dog or the parakeet. But then, nor do the two English-language volumes dedicated to Seminars XVII and XX have anything to say about these two psychoanalytic pets (Clemens and Grigg; Barnard and Fink). This silence extends to the indexes of the English translations of the seminars in question (the original French editions have no indexes). While one might not expect a single entry for 'parakeet', Picasso does not appear in the index to *Encore* either, as if this reference to him is neither here nor there, but certainly not in any sense genuine. The absence of

'carrion' from the index to *The Other Side* seems a more serious omission, since the concept resurfaces later in the seminar in Lacan's articulation of the psychoanalyst's (non)relation to knowledge (186).

It is tempting to read as symptomatic the critical silence on the issue of the dog and the parakeet, and their indexical exclusion. These lacanimals are passed over because commentators are oriented almost uniformly towards that which in Lacan is transmissible, that which he made available for reiteration, which is to say his frequently repeated sayings or formulae ('desire is the desire of the other', 'there is no sexual relation', 'a signifier represents a subject for another signifier', 'the subject is the one who speaks'), as well as his graphs and assemblages of mathemes (such as the four discourses of *The Other Side*, the graph of sexuation of *Encore*).⁴ By comparison, the baroque eccentricities of Lacan's spoken style – the profuse silliness punctuating the transmittable pronouncements – radically resist transmission. There is no shortage of commentators to skillfully explicate the graph of desire or the four discourses,⁵ but you will search long and hard to find one who does not studiously ignore the dog and the parakeet.

To ignore the silliness is to smooth over the irregular contours of the Lacanian seminar. For what do the dog and the parakeet introduce into Lacan's argument, regardless of whatever conceptual content they contain (which cannot be negligible either), if not incongruity and discontinuity? The tale of the parakeet and the lesson of the dog with its carrion are tiny contusions or eruptions. For the textualist these bizarre deviations in the fabric cannot be ignored. Psychoanalysis, after all, teaches us to pay attention to precisely those uttered elements that might otherwise be considered pointless remainders –

nonsense or rubbish without meaning. And as Lacan himself says in *Seminar XI*, 'Discontinuity (...) is the essential form in which the unconscious first appears to us as a phenomenon' (*Four Fundamental Concepts* 25).

In fact, in calling these incidences of discontinuity in Lacan's own speech 'silliness' I have drawn on a key Lacanian term from *Encore*, although I have given it a different translation from the one given by Bruce Fink, who renders *la bêtise* as 'stupidity'.⁶ Either translation is acceptable, but in both, the *bête*, the beast or animal of *la bêtise* is lost. The closest one might come to retaining this element of *la bêtise* is to translate it as 'horse-play', or perhaps 'monkey business'. In *The Lacanian Subject* Fink also suggests 'funny business', arguing that *la bêtise* 'is a piece of nonsense produced by the analytic process itself' (135). Lacan claims that whereas all other 'discourses' avoid at all costs stupidity/silliness (*dans les autres discours la bêtise c'est ce qu'on fuit [Le séminaire: Encore 18]*), analytic discourse 'hangs together by basing itself on the dimension of stupidity' (*Encore 12*) (*ce discours ne se tient-il pas de se supporter de la dimension de la bêtise?*).

By citing the importance of *la bêtise*, Lacan is in the first instance referring to the centrality of free association to the analytic situation – the way in which the analysand is encouraged to say whatever comes into her or his mind, regardless of how irrelevant it might seem. He often reminds his seminar that the goal in psychoanalysis is not to 'say all' (*tout dire*), but 'dire n'importe quoi, sans hésiter à dire des bêtises' (*Le séminaire: Encore 29*) – to 'say anything, without worrying about saying anything stupid.' (*Encore 27*) This is because 'It speaks' more powerfully, immediately, in *la bêtise* than it does in all those things we 'mean' to say. But Lacan is clearly also alert to the figure of animality

contained in *la bêtise* when he suggests that it is what other discourses ‘flee’ from (*fuit*) and when he says that it must be fed, nourished: ‘Il faut pourtant nourrir la bêtise.’ (*Le séminaire: Encore* 19) And when he talks of analytic discourse as ‘se supporter de la dimension de la bêtise’, he invokes a term – the ‘support’ – that echoes throughout his writings and his seminar. The mirror is described as a support, but so is his audience at the seminar, with the connotation of ‘prop’ at the forefront, but also of course, in the reflexive sense of the French verb ‘supporter’, to tolerate, or put up with. A support, in Lacanian terms, both bears our burden and is a burden for us to bear.

Another key ‘support’ from *Seminar XVII* onwards is his formalized depiction of discourse, the arrangement of the mathemes, barred S, a, S₁, and S₂, which when rotated, produce four discourses: the master’s, the hysteric’s, the university discourse and the analytic discourse. Throughout Seminars XVII and XX Lacan refers to this assemblage as a ‘quadripode’ (eg, *Le séminaire: Encore* 85) or as having four paws or feet, ‘quatre pattes’ (eg, *The Other Side* 20), admitting implicitly to the work that the animal does in his thought, either carrying it along, or perhaps running off unbidden in pursuit of *cha(t)rogne*. The phrase ‘quatre pattes’ must also be considered an allusion to that other hard-working although mythical beast, the Sphinx, whose riddle of four feet, two feet and three feet provides such support to the Oedipal tale. In these relatively late seminars, then, the ‘animal’ is a nonsensical intrusion in Lacan’s spoken discourse, a puzzling obstacle to understanding an already opaque discourse. At the same time, as *bêtise*, it is absolutely integral to psychoanalytical processes, difficult though it is to anticipate what form the *bêtise* will take.

Imaginary animals

What is the figure of the animal for Lacan then? We know Derrida's answer to this question. Based mainly on a reading of 'The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire' (1960), Derrida shows that Lacan sits firmly within 'the Cartesian tradition of the animal-machine without language and without response' (119). In common with Kant, Heidegger, and Levinas, Lacan is found by Derrida to invoke the concept of 'the animal' in general, and to deny to animals that which is taken to be properly human. More specifically, Lacan refuses the animal access to language, speech, the signifier, which disbars it in turn from desire, the law, the unconscious. In what Derrida calls 'a limited but incontestable advance' (122), Lacan grants to the animal a specular function, which is to say, a relation to its *semblable*, or mirror-image. But this progress in admitting the animal to the imaginary realm is simultaneously undone by Lacan, who, in Derrida's words, 'depriv[es] it of any access to the symbolic' (120). The animal in Lacan is therefore subject to a certain 'fixity' (122-3) whereby it is held 'in captivity within the imaginary' (121). Or as Bruce Fink puts it, for Lacan, '*the imaginary dimension is the one that reigns supreme in the animal kingdom*' (*Lacan on Love* 65).

It is difficult to disagree with Derrida. He concentrates on the writings assembled in *Écrits*, but we could just as easily cite from the seminars that were the original crucible for that text. In those early seminars, Lacan speaks frequently of animals, or even 'the animal', and takes up a fairly consistent and coherent position about them. For example, in 1954, in *Seminar I: Freud's Papers on Technique* he declares:

You have only to observe a pet to see that a being deprived of language is quite capable of making calls on you, calls to draw your attention to something which, in some sense or other, it lacks. To the human call a further, richer development is reserved, because it takes place precisely in a being who has already reached the level of language. (84)

The animal, although capable of making calls, that is, articulating a demand, is nevertheless 'deprived' in relation to the human, whose access to language makes its call 'richer'. That richness, unavailable to the animal 'stuck within a number of imaginary conditions' (146) is of course also a curse. The animal is subject to various 'releasing mechanisms' (121) which function more or less adequately, but for man, subjected to symbolization, 'an eminent disorder characterizes the manifestation of the sexual function. Nothing in it adapts.'

(138) In order to press forward with the fundamental Freudian discovery about the instability, the disorder at the heart of sexual identity, Lacan feels it necessary to imagine a relative stability in the animal realm. As Michael Ziser puts it, Lacanian psychoanalysis, 'with its anthropolinguistic assumptions about subject-formation and its operation in language, is necessarily and revealingly blind' to 'the challenging otherness of animal language' (14). That blindness was in evidence the previous year in Lacan's Rome Discourse, in which he contrasted the 'diversity of human languages' with the 'fixity of the coding used by bees.' (1977 84). Lacan draws on the work of Karl von Frisch on the 'waggle dance', and claims that von Frisch found in the bees' dance a 'code, or a system of signalling', but not language per se. But von Frisch did in fact bestow on the dance the status of language, calling it a *Tanzsprache*, a conclusion that has been recently confirmed in *Nature* (Riley et. al.). Lacan and von Frisch no doubt had

very different underlying theories of what constituted language, but what interests Derrida most when he examines the Rome Discourse is Lacan's insistent and jealous protection of language.⁷

Later, in 1955 in *Seminar III: The Psychoses*, the dividing line between human and animal remains strictly drawn in terms of participation in imaginary and symbolic:

the imaginary is surely the guide to life for the whole animal domain.

While the image equally plays a capital role in our own domain, this role is completely taken up and caught up within, remolded and reanimated by, the symbolic order. (9)

Two completely separate 'domains', then, one characterized by libidinal dynamism, the other, the animal, by a sort of pre-programming. Here again, as Derrida notes, Lacan only allows to the animal 'the fixity of coding' (122). Again, in *Seminar III* Lacan defines the human 'subject' in relation to its desire in contrast to the inhabitant of the 'animal kingdom' which has pre-determined 'rails' along which it runs:

The subject does not have to *find* the object of his desire, he is not led, channeled there, by the natural rails of a more or less pre-established instinctual and, moreover, more or less stumbling, adaptation, such as we see in the animal kingdom. (85)

Against the received wisdom that Lacan marks a radical departure from the Cartesian subject, Derrida sees him as a direct inheritor of Descartes. In passages like the above, it is indeed difficult to see the difference between the Lacan of the early seminars and the Descartes who argued in *Discourse on Method* that animals 'do not have a mind', but that 'nature (...) acts in them according to the

disposition of their organs, as one sees that a clock, which is made up only of wheels and springs, can count the hours and measure time' (76-7). At the very point where he is attempting to break a new path in understanding the human subject, Lacan is reproducing, as Derrida says, an 'old, old discourse' (123) on the animal. In this reading Lacan's laborious decentering of the human subject, his constant project of inflicting wounds to human narcissism, is nevertheless dependent on an anthropocentric privileging of the human over the animal.

But the situation is more complicated. The key word for Derrida is 'incapable', which he uses seven times within the space of three pages (127-9). For Lacan, Derrida tells us, the animal is incapable of witnessing, incapable of the signifier, incapable (echoing Heidegger) of an authentic relation to death. Unusually for Derrida, for whom the exact text matters so much, the word is not actually found in Lacan, or at least Derrida nowhere cites Lacan calling the animal 'incapable', in spite of the insistence of the term in his own account. According to Derrida, one of the things Lacan (along with Descartes, Kant, Heidegger, Levinas) considers animals incapable of is the return of the human gaze. The animal for Lacan, and the rest, is 'seen and not seeing' (*une chose vue et non voyante*) and 'the experience of the seeing animal, of the animal that looks at them (*de l'animal qui les regarde*), has not been taken into account' (14). The equivocation of 'regarde' is important here, since it means in French not only 'to look', but in the reflexive case it means 'has to do with you', or 'concerns you'. So when Derrida concludes in relation to these philosophers that 'cela leur regardait' he means that they are denying not only that the animal is looking at them, but that it is any of their business. And yet, this is not exactly right. The human animal in Lacan does not own the gaze, and is always more seen than

seeing: dissected by the field of vision rather than possessor of a dissecting gaze. This is why when Lacan introduces the gaze in *Seminar X: Angoisse*, he says precisely, 'ça me regarde', with the same equivocation intended by Derrida when he uses the verb (293). Indeed, *Seminar X*, replete with animal and insect life, includes a striking opening apologue in which Lacan imagines himself faced with a giant praying mantis whose gaze he cannot interpret, but which concerns him intensely. Not only can he not look the creature in the eye, but he does not know what it sees when it looks at him (14).⁸

Along similar lines Derrida finds in Lacan a claim for a human 'possession of power' over or in language, as well as 'mastery' in the ability to 'pretend to pretend' which comes as a surprise to any reader of Lacan accustomed to finding him precisely denying such things to the speaking subject. Indeed, Lacan's account of the mirror-stage can hardly be described as proposing 'the superiority of man over *animot*' (130) as Derrida puts it. After all, that very first lacanimal, the chimpanzee of the mirror-stage, is in fact *not* captive to the image, quickly recognizing its emptiness (*l'inanité de l'image* [*Écrits* 92]), unlike the human infant, who remains in its thrall. Or rather, not captive according to Lacan's dubious account of the animal psychologist Wolfgang Köhler, as Ziser has shown. For in his desire to assert the chimpanzee's superiority over the human infant in matters of captation and the mirror, Lacan misrepresents Köhler, who detected rather more narcissistic tendencies in his subjects than Lacan claims (Ziser 17-18). Based on this error, innocent or deliberate, it would appear that Lacan is far more interested in the incapacities of the human animal than non-human ones. Even within the same paragraph Derrida recognizes this much. In Lacan, 'access to the symbolic', which is deprived to the animal, is in fact access to ... a lack.

Therefore, if the animal is lacking vis-à-vis the human in Lacanian discourse, what it is lacking is lack. (Derrida 130). Freud himself held this view, writing in a letter to Marie Bonaparte of his admiration, or envy, for his own dog, who could experience 'affection without ambivalence, the simplicity of a life free from the almost unbearable conflicts of civilization, the beauty of an existence complete in itself' (430). Lacan does not escape by virtue of this nuance the well-worn philosophical tradition where Derrida locates him: to posit the animal as lacking lack, as possessing therefore an unmediated presence-to-itself, an organic intimacy, is hardly an advance either, if there can be such 'advances'.

Lacan, ethology and scientific discourse

What then are we to make of Lacan's later work, work from the period of the dog and the parakeet? Derrida is open about his neglect of Lacan's work after 1966, saying that he will 'have to leave in suspense the question of whether, in later texts (*dans les textes qui ont suivi*) or in certain seminars (published or unpublished, accessible or inaccessible) the armature of this logic came to be explicitly reexamined' (132). Much of that unpublished work is now available, but Derrida surely alludes here to *Encore*, the seminar published twenty years before he was speaking. Not only does *Encore* contain the perplexing parakeet, a swarm of bees and a heavily punned upon rat, but also a thinly-veiled criticism of Derrida, or at least of Jean-Luc Nancy and Phillippe Lacoue-Labarthe, who are described there as *sous-fifres* (underlings) for their reading of Lacan's 'The Instance of the Letter'. Lacan calls Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe's short book 'cet extraordinaire travail' (62), with all the meaning that the word 'work' (*travail*) contains in psychoanalysis, referring to the unconscious mechanisms which

disguise desires (dream-work, joke-work). In this case the desire is the 'dé-supposition de mon savoir' (64) (the de-supposition of my knowledge), with 'dé-supposition' just one of many words beginning 'dé' with which Lacan peppers his discourse at this point in pointed allusion to Derrida (Lacan is wary of those who treat him as a 'subject supposed to know' as well).⁹ In any case, it is certainly worthwhile considering this seminar, since in it the animal appears no longer to perform the same function that it did in the earlier seminars I have cited from.

What has changed? Lacan more or less drops the theory of animality which explicitly guided him in the earlier seminars. It is a theory that Derrida mentions in his account of Lacan, but only to wonder twice why Lacan doesn't draw on 'ethological knowledge' (133, 135). In response to Lacan's blanket claim that the '*animal in general* is incapable of pretending pretense', Derrida wonders why Lacan 'does not invoke here any ethological knowledge (whose increasing and spectacular refinement [*raffinement croissant et spectaculaire*] is proportional to the refinement of the *animot*) or any experience, observation, or personal attestation' (133). Here Derrida seeks from Lacan *any* evidence (experience, observation, personal attestation) other than flat assertion, of which ethology is but one possibility. In other places in *The Animal that Therefore I Am* 'ethological knowledge' is invoked positively in its own right by Derrida: at one point he notes the 'enormous progress that has been made in primatological and ethological knowledge in general (l'énorme progrès qu'on a fait dans le savoir primatologique et éthologique en general)' (59). Instead of making undifferentiated claims about the animal, Derrida asks, why does not Lacan (and indeed Levinas, Heidegger) turn to the rich body of knowledge on the 'infinite

diversity of animals' which is ethology? (59) It was not yet available to him, but Derrida might have pointed, for example, to an instance in Lacan's *Seminar X*, the one with the praying mantis. Just after Lacan notes cases of animals effacing their traces and laying false traces, and just before he says this does not constitute making signifiers, Lacan says to his seminar audience, 'I don't want to go into the infinite variety of what a developed zoology can teach you on this score.' (63) So, on the one hand, Lacan recognizes the 'infinite variety' of creaturely life, and on the other, he symptomatically turns away from the science that might provide the evidence one way or the other.

And yet, at other points in *Seminar X* Lacan discourses on, among others, hippopotami, a domestic dog, leeches, the black beetle, and echidna, sometimes, but not always, in relation to their difference from the human, but certainly not as homogeneous to each other in a single category of the 'animal'. As Lacan's intimacy with the hippopotamus and the echidna demonstrates, it is not the case that he never engaged seriously with the most 'up-to-date' ethological data available. Most strikingly, in the 1950s his theory of the imaginary drew heavily on Konrad Lorenz and Niko Tinbergen, two founding figures of ethology. These two, and ethology in general, are cited throughout the early seminars that I have been quoting from. For that matter, where does Lacan find the hen-pigeon of the mirror-stage which finds its own image so formative but in a then-recent essay by zoologist L. Henry Matthews? As Bruce Fink has convincingly shown, Lacan's concepts of developmental processes, aggressivity and even love are all at least partially derived from his study of contemporary ethology (*Lacan on Love* 62-8).

It is in fact zoological and ethological data that allows Lacan to refine the links between imaginary captation, in both animal and human, and aggression

towards the idealized image that is the inevitable precipitate of this captation. Indeed, the conceptualization of the imaginary in the early seminars is heavily dependent on ethological theories of animal aggression towards any 'mirror' image or 'counterpart'. For instance, in *Seminar III*, when he comes to explain again why alienation is a necessary byproduct of the illusory mastery of imaginary relations, Lacan digresses into an extended discussion of the erotic and combative life of the male stickleback, a discussion taken directly from Lorenz's *King Solomon's Ring* (93-6). So, at least when it suits his arguments, Lacan is conversant with advanced 'ethological knowledge', even if in the later seminars it is precisely this scientific material on the animal that he gradually abandons.

As for Derrida, it is difficult to know how to read the regular invocations of scientific knowledge of the animal he makes. This science is marked out by him as signs of progress, or at least as small advances, and yet in his own dealings with the animal with which he is most intimate, the domestic cat, he eschews any recourse to such forms of empirical knowledge. On the contrary, the encounter with the cat is marked by a radical non-knowledge of it on his part, an absolute openness to the questions that it poses for him certainly, an experience or witnessing of otherness, but an encounter that fails to extract a definite and positive knowledge of the other. As Matthew Calarco puts it, 'In insisting on the unsubstitutable singularity of the cat (...) Derrida is contesting the possibility of fully reducing this particular cat to an object of knowledge, whether philosophical or otherwise' (125). The explicit goal of ethology, on the other hand, is to increase and complicate our positive knowledge of animals in all their diversity and plurality. That Derrida in places endorses this activity but is

reluctant in his own experience or practice to follow this path may be an implicit admission that the zoologists, ethologists and primatologists cannot be so easily exempted from the conceptual subjugation of animality that Derrida finds in Lacan.

Given ethology's centrality to both Lacan's understanding of the animal and to Derrida's representation of Lacan, it is worthwhile giving it more attention. A key essay in this respect is Niko Tinbergen's survey piece from 1969, 'Ethology', which more or less coincides historically with the Lacanian seminars of the dog and the parakeet. In this piece Tinbergen outlines how ethology's basic aim is to 'contribute to our understanding of the normal, natural behaviour of animals under undisturbed conditions' (131-2). This science of animal behaviour starts with Konrad Lorenz, but has an important antecedent in Darwin (130). The link with evolutionary science is made explicit in Lorenz's influential early work, *King Solomon's Ring*, where the main goal is to discover how behaviour patterns, especially aggression, contribute to survival. Tinbergen explains how the development of ethology saw its proponents in conflict with animal psychologists, who argued for the possibility of learning in animals while the ethologists gave greater emphasis to 'innate' behaviour. Indeed, the vocabulary of ethology as outlined by Tinbergen is very much of the sort regretted by Derrida in the early Lacan: animal activity is a form of 'response' to 'stimuli' (Tinbergen 141) guided by 'internal programming' and 'behaviour machinery' (147). In other words, if we hope to find a departure from the 'old, old discourse' of the Cartesian animal-machine, then we will not necessarily find it among the ethologists.

Another key distinction for Tinbergen is between observational and experimental ethology, with Lorenz opening the path to the latter but restricting himself to the former (137). Tinbergen in contrast may balk at 'interference with a child's development' for 'ethical reasons' (152), but is perfectly sanguine about the transplantation of pieces of a frog's dorsal skin to its ventral side to determine whether the skin in the new spot will still generate the same reflex mechanism as if it were in the original location. (148-9) In other words, at least one branch of ethology participates in the regime of 'regimentalization', 'genetic experimentation', and 'industrialization' which Derrida establishes as the broader context for his philosophical enquiry. (Derrida 25) On the other hand, for those in animal studies seeking a mode of 'living with animals' differently (see Fudge 21), Lorenz's *King Solomon's Ring* provides a rather extraordinary model. Much to the dismay, as Lorenz admits, of the other human animals with whom he shared a dwelling, his house in Altenberg on the Danube was a place of full co-habitation with the furred and the feathered, and he himself traveled far down the path of becoming-goose (1-10). And yet, Lorenz gives no ground on that other major concession sought by many theorists of animality – that 'culture' is not necessarily the exclusive domain of the so-called human.¹⁰ It would be difficult to find in Lacan such a confident and absolute division of animal and human as these words found in Lorenz's *On Aggression*: 'no means of communication, no learned rituals are ever handed down by tradition in animals. In other words, animals have no culture' (57).

It is precisely this ethological armature that Lacan gives up in the later seminars (the ones that Derrida does not include in his reading). In *Encore*, for example, Lacan has abandoned entirely the empirical support of the animal

scientists when he compares a parakeet to Descartes, puns on a swarm of bees (*l'essaim* sounds like S_1 or the master signifier), and speaks of an equally punned-upon rat not in terms of its so-called behaviour, but in terms of the desire of the scientist who has put it in the maze. What has changed in Lacan's conceptualization of 'the animal', if indeed he still has a unified concept of it as such? Tentatively, we can identify two key differences between the Lacan of the early seminars and the later ones on the subject of the animal: a greater inter-implication of symbolic-imaginary-real; and a growing suspicion of conventional scientific discourse and its claims.¹¹

When Lacan in the early to mid-50s argued that animals participate in the imaginary (and presumably also the real) but not in the symbolic, he implies that these realms are separable one from the other, that the imaginary exists independently from the symbolic. But this contradicts Lacan's usual articulations of the tri-partite schema of R-S-I, where the three are inseparable and cannot ever be taken in isolation.¹² Certainly in the later seminars such as *Encore* Lacan makes a great effort to find ways to capture this inter-implication, which can already be found in the 'Mirror-Stage' essay where imaginary relations are always already caught up in symbolic systems. The inextricability of real, imaginary and symbolic is perhaps most evident in Lacan's late ambition for formalization, which led to the production of a number of graphs and mathemes, which are incomprehensible to any but the initiated and have become the subject of immense explicatory efforts. These efforts are normally oriented towards making the graphs *meaningful*, that is, to bringing them into the symbolic dimension. Indeed, the graphs are composed of symbols or 'mathemes', or what Lacan simply calls 'letters'. But when they are arranged by Lacan on the page or

on the blackboard, these symbols which are not quite symbols also become not-quite images: the four discourses, as has been noted, are composed of 'quatre pattes', and elsewhere he calls them 'quatre godets' (four pots) (*D'un discours* 26); and the graph of sexualization in *Encore* looks remarkably like a bed. The fact that these graphs or arrangements of symbols are clearly neither purely images nor purely symbolic articulations suggests a certain unassimilable remainder, something that falls out or is not captured, or is impossible to imagine or symbolize – the real. As Douglas Sadao Aoki argues, this is why 'Lacan conceptually distinguishes the letter from the signifier (...) and links the letter not with the symbolic, but rather with the real, with what must be excluded from symbolization' (3)¹³ To treat the animal as caught up in imaginary relations, excluded from symbolization and (presumably) with privileged access to the real, is simply to primordialize the real as the realm of instinct and to sever the links of R-S-I which cannot in fact be shorn.

The ideal of formalization also has a complicated relation to what Lacan calls, with increasing dismissiveness, the scientific discourse. It can be confusing to read Lacan on this subject, since his ongoing polemic against scientific knowledge, sometimes caught up in scornful references to the university discourse, is found side-by-side with a continued ambition that psychoanalysis should also be a science. At stake are different understandings of what a science might constitute and whether or not it accepts the challenge of the unconscious. Lacan is deeply skeptical of conventional scientific claims to establish 'knowledge' as some discrete object free from language and a subject. As Bruce Fink has argued, science is a discourse which will not admit to its own discursivity, to its enlistment of a battery of signifiers; nor will it contemplate the

existence of a subject of science who is not independent of that discourse (*Lacanian Subject* 138-40). In contrast, the formalization of psychoanalytic knowledge in graphs and mathemes means that the transmission of this knowledge is not independent of its written supports, but indeed is constituted in and by those written supports. And where conventional science cannot accommodate the unconscious or its subject, the graphs, through their implicit *failure* to imagine or symbolize fully, do so.

Since psychoanalysis is a science that works with the unconscious and its various effects, leaning on ethological knowledge which is based on empirical observation and experimentation becomes highly problematic. By the late 1960s, as Lacan explores more and more the possibilities of what he calls 'lalangue', the animal is no longer a confident reference, an empirical object about which there is certainty and knowledge. It is instead, or in addition, a word, a signifier. So, when he comes to talk at the end of *Encore* of a rat in a maze and what knowledge it might yield, he speaks very deliberately with the indefinite subject pronoun 'on', which Fink translates alternately as 'they' and 'people'. It is not a question of what knowledge can be extracted from the rat in the maze, but of those who put it there wondering about the limits of their own knowledge, and hoping that they might be able to define it if they determine what 'the knowledge of those who do not speak could be' (139). Lacan therefore distances himself from the ethological experimental procedure and comments drily instead on what the 'montage' of the maze can tell us about the unconscious knowledge of the experimenter who constructed it, who built it on the basis of 'lalangue' (141). And not just any maze: in Lacan's French this construct is a *labyrinthe*. He alternately calls it an ensemble, a montage, a composition, but he might very well

have called it what others call it – a myth – with the rat inside it every bit as hybrid as the Minotaur.

And then at the very end of the seminar, in the last minutes of *Encore*, Lacan returns to the rat in order to talk about the relation between being and being, a relation, he says, which is not based on harmony. This absence of harmony is what necessitates love as a form of compensation. Or hate, which amounts to the same misrecognition. This is why ‘being (...) is only sustained by the fact of missing each other’ (145). That ‘missing each other’ which also suggests failure, is ‘se rater’ in French. And so it goes on: the rat can be considered a unity because it can undergo erasure (*ça se rature*); and a former concierge of Lacan’s had a hatred for rats so great that he never missed them (‘il ne le ratait jamais’) (*Le séminaire: Encore* 133). Far from denying to the animal the privileges of being, Lacan grants them abundantly: it is subject to hatred (or love), it is a being which never truly coincides with itself, its being must be considered under erasure. How, then, is one to draw any conclusions about what ‘the animal’ is for Lacan, when this rat is clearly not a rat, or at least not just a rat, but a pretext for clowning, for the enjoyment of word-play, for the small measure of jouissance offered by *la bêtise*?

La bêtise, so instrumental in the clinic and in Lacan’s teaching, is there from the start, but intensifies in the later seminars. The animal, meanwhile, fixed in its coding in the early seminars, so as to be passed over by Lacan, becomes in the later seminars a reason to pause. The dog and the parakeet are not known in advance, but rather puzzles or puns. Their desire is as much a riddle as the desire of the human animal, and there is no question of bringing ethological

knowledge to bear on them. In *Encore*, the maze the experimenter lays out for the rat – its tests, its punishments, its rewards – does not yield up data about the rat's reaction and response, but about the knowledge and desire of the experimenter. At the same time, at the very end of this seminar Lacan offers a tantalizing metaphor for the human animal, in his enigmatic pun on *l'essaim* (the swarm), which is homophonic with S_1 , the master signifier (*Le séminaire: Encore*, 130). Justin Clemens has traced the roots of this 'puncept' to Kant's *Schwärmerei*, and suggests that for the Lacan of this epoch, 'man is a swarm animal' (143-66). From denying bees language in 1953, then, Lacan is inspired by the buzzing and winged to punceptualise the human in 1973.

As for the bees themselves, they also return in *Encore*, but now without reference to von Frisch. No longer is it a question of whether bees possess language, or whether their 'waggle dance' is a form of speech. Instead, it has become a question of reading. We 'read' in the flights of bees the reproduction of plants, and in the flight of the swallow the coming storm. But, asks Lacan, does the bee read these things, does the swallow? The question, he says, is an open one (*Le séminaire: Encore* 38).

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¹ For example, in the special issue of *Angelaki* devoted to the 'Limits of the human' there is a single reference to an essay of Lacan's from 1953 (Roelvink and Zolkos 49); and in the entire *Angelaki* special issue 'We have never been human *from techne to animality*', there is a single reference to Lacan's 'Mirror Stage' (Stiegler 164). In contrast, the issues contain many references to Heidegger and Žižek, making Lacan the absent middle of a sandwich of precursor and inheritor. A special issue of *Yale French Studies* in 2015, 'Animots: Postanimality in French Thought', contains only three passing references to Lacan (Senior, Clark and Freccero 7, 58, 160); and *Animals ... in Theory*, a special issue of *The New Centennial Review* (Clark), contains one astute paragraph on Lacan's *Seminar XI* (Sliwinski, 73).

² For another example of a text that approaches lacanimals only by way of Derrida see Still 119-20 & 127-28.

³ Thank you to Marie-Dominique Garnier for spotting the cat for me.

⁴ On the 'transmission' of Lacanian knowledge, especially through mathemes, see Fink *The Lacanian Subject* 144.

⁵ As Douglas Sadao Aoki has shown, there is also no shortage of readers of Lacan who are highly allergic to his mathemes. 'Letters from Lacan' 2-7. As Aoki brilliantly demonstrates, the Lacanian letter or matheme is 'the very condition of reading, and yet (...) is impervious to being read.' (3) This challenge of reading Lacan's letters has been taken up quite strikingly in relation to the four discourses, particularly in Clemens and Grigg.

⁶ It is also the translation that Bernard Stiegler relies on in his discussion of the term's use by both Deleuze and Derrida. Stiegler makes no reference to its prominent place in Lacanian psychoanalysis.

⁷ Thank you to the anonymous reader who pointed me towards this literature. Derrida's remarks on Lacan and von Frisch can also be found in *The Beast and the Sovereign* (115-120).

⁸ One theorist of animality goes so far as to see direct affinities between Derrida's reflections on his little cat, and Lacan's account of the gaze in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* (Sliwinski 73).

⁹ Maria Scott has recently noted the importance of Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe 'de-supposing' Lacan's knowledge in 'Lacan's "Of the Gaze as *Objet Petit a*"' 338.

¹⁰ See, for example, de Waal.

¹¹ Dylan Evans has also noted Lacan's abandonment of his early subscription to ethology. Evans, a Darwinian committed to neuro-science, thinks that this is where Lacan went wrong. Evans 47-51.

¹² I am indebted to Rob Lapsley for pointing out to me this inconsistency in Lacan's model when he discusses animals in the early seminars.

¹³ While Aoki insists on the *matheme* or letter as a kernel of the 'real', he later notes that it contains both the lure of the image and the system of differentiation of the symbolic: 'it is exactly the image of the *matheme* that lures such critics into concomitantly misrecognizing it as formalization and overlooking its paradigmatically symbolic difference and slippage' (4).