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Pissing Angels

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Since its origins, Western metaphysics has been concerned with the definition of humanity and what is proper to man (for instance when investigating language, reason, responsibility, independence and rights). This ontological tradition recognizes most, if not all, human properties as *opposed* to what is considered a non-human impropriety, traditionally articulated in terms of “natural” and “divine.” That is to say that the human territory borders on *animality* — the “natural” region closer to us — on one side, and on “angelity” — the mundane region of the “divine” — on the other. In short, the human being consists of a *double lack*: it lacks the shortcomings of other animals and the golden completeness of angels. Yet this distinction between what is human, and what is “bestial” or angelic is far from being innocent. On the contrary, it hides a double move: by an *appropriating exclusion* — which degrades animals to things, goods, labor — and an *ex-appropriating inclusion* — which equates ourselves to angels in order to deny our fragile and mortal corporeality. This double move allows us to place ourselves outside of nature and to have the whole of existence at our disposal as if we were its absolute owners.

Two recent books, though still within a framework of thought that remains *all too human*, might help us reconsider these human boundaries: the boundary with the other animals is the *spirit* of *Le mal propre* by Michel Serres, whereas the boundary with angelic creatures is the *matter* of *Fallen Angels* by Harold Bloom.

“Everybody likes the smell of his own shit” [Serres 8]. Serres begins by posing a couple of questions: “How do living beings dwell in a place?,” how do they “appropriate their space, how do they dwell in it, how do they live in it?” (6). He continues with a long list of compelling examples that remind us that living and having are almost indivisible (how can someone *live* without *having* a nest, a den, a cave or a room?). As a consequence, he contends that “property is what is dirty” (7): the common practice humans and other animals use to acquire the *property* of what is beyond their

bodies — and therefore not immediately their own — consists of marking it, branding it, with their own *physical traces*:

I believe that the act of appropriating, which is necessary to survive, has an animal, ethological, corporeal, physiological, organic, vital origin ... and that it does not derive from agreement or from some positive right. I can perceive in it a hint of urine, excretions, blood, decaying corpses ... *Its foundation derives from the foundation ... its foundation derives from the living or the dead body.* (15; emphasis in original)

Other animals delimit their territory by marking it with whatever their body is able to emit — urine, howls, cheerful warbles. Humans are no different: a soup smeared with saliva is no longer appealing to others and becomes our own, a bed soaked in sweat is repulsive to others and becomes our own, etc. Following this line of intra-specific reasoning, Serres interprets several cultural phenomena as *biological marking* as well: the birth of agriculture (taking possession of the land by laying manure, urine or faeces); the birth of a nation (whose territory is marked by the blood of dead soldiers); marriage (“thanks to his ejaculation of semen [a man] thinks he can appropriate those places where the act of his desire is accomplished” [31]), and the sacred (“the first human being that, after draining a child or a pig and after making him run around the perimeter of the spot, poured the sacrificial blood all over the place, could fence it and make a *temple* out of it” [37; emphasis in original]).

However, unlike other animals, human beings seem to have no limits in this process of marking the existence:

The growth of volume of rubbish, corporeal and physiological excretions — urine, sperm, blood, corpses ... —, *mark an extension of the appropriated space* — lair, farm, town, village—, and *a quantitative increase of those who appropriate* — individual, family, nation ... (37; emphasis in original)

The mechanism we previously described is here fairly obvious: human beings lack the “natural” lack that delimits the emissions of other animals, the extent of the space where they can settle, and the number of possible owners. The absence of this lack generates an extraordinary and unsustainable excretion growth rate, which, according to Serres, should be held responsible for two human and “cultural” phenomena: on the

one hand, subjective excretions are being replaced by more objective waste matter (what we normally refer to as pollution) while, on the other side, appropriation is made more acceptable through a semiotic contamination (i.e., logos, brands, advertising, signatures, money) that colonizes the environment and domesticates humans and their own consciousness. Hence, human property is takes shape, once again, by an opposition:

The very growth of man's appropriation becomes his PROPERTY. For sure, animals, too, appropriate shelters for their dirt, but they do so [only] in a *psychological and local way*. *Homo [sapiens] appropriates the global physical world through his hard waste and [...] the global human world through his soft waste.* (55; emphasis in original)

“Dog shit.” We cannot deny Serres's observation of the growth and the modification of human excretions compared to those of the animals. Similarly, we cannot ignore Serres's suggestion — even if it is only implied — that humans also delimit their own property with physical traces belonging to “our animal brothers” (41), taking possession of their bodies:

[The animals] gave us their blood, their flesh, bones, skin. According to what unwritten right do we assume that animals, plants and the world belong to us? In short, that such sensations, such beings are given to us and we can quietly dispose of them? (29)

The description that Serres offers of the structure of those places defined by corporeal excretions is also correct:

[This structure] consists [...] of three layers. The first, the inner one, protects the inhabitant by its softness; the last, on the outside, threatens eventual invaders with its hardness. Holes, transits, doors, or porosities open up in the middle-layer [...] making things close, go out, pass through, attack, hopelessly wait [...] That's the triple way in which the boundary works: it defends, protects, interdicts or permits to pass through. (49)

Why, then, as mentioned before, do we consider Serres's analysis too “human?” The answer lies in his implicit acceptance of the [aforementioned] metaphysical ontology, an acceptance that justifies its conclusions. Considering that what is proper to man is

shaped in opposition to the impropriety of the animal, we just need to (re)trace that “property” in order to put things back in order, to approach a more benevolent and less appropriating/polluting management of the world. Indeed, the non-deconstructivist part of Serres’s essay simply states that human beings must commit themselves to transform their condition from owners of the world to tenants of the world by abandoning the claim of property through physical emissions. In this way, they will bring cosmocracy and peace will come, conceived as a new age of a *fleshless and therefore traceless man-god*, a man that becomes *disincarnated* into God and a God that becomes *incarnated* into man, because the Other is in the image of the One (77 ff.).

The main problem is that Serres’s thesis presupposes that human beings are able to give up their property (if by property we mean a bodily residence in the world). If physical beings can survive thanks to the marks that define their proper territory, this renunciation can only happen if we deny our animality. Indeed, Serres leaves no room for doubt on this matter:

We must, then, rethink [the property right] and go beyond its actual form which is *still too near to animal behavior*. We must evolve, one more time, on the clumsy way of humanization. (72; emphasis added)

Little by little, we have to leave our animal condition behind: the condition of mammals or carnivores that urinate on the edges of their lair. Who could ever believe that the Cartesian motto — let’s control nature and make it our own — would have equated us to dogs and lions as for hardness’ concern, and to nightingales for the softness? *Poor Descartes! He was doing nothing but confirming our animal customs*. (26; emphasis added).

That is to say, that *what is proper to man* consists of being able, unlike other animals, to *get rid of his/her own body* — a kind of excretion, deep enough to cancel the possibility to emit other excretions — to become spiritualized, to increase our speed until we detach ourselves from the earth and become *absolute* and free of boundaries (*Homo Nullius* that “belongs only to himself” [81]), displaced to a different place where we get the chance to look at “the world and to things as the total amount of stocks” (86).

Another, possibly more effective, way to evade the *condition of abjection* that the metaphysical tradition assigns to humans, is to depart from the meaningless search for

what is proper to man and move towards a different search, aimed at tracing the impropriety of animality that exists in man. Here, two considerations that actually run throughout Serres's essay become fundamental.

First of all: *the property of animals is never private* and never deprived (here to be understood as both proper and damaged: damaged *qua* proper and proper *qua* damaged); animals mark their territory through excretions, but they do not fence it off, so that it is never completely closed, it is always open and closed at the same time.¹ Some animals cannot trespass it while some others can. For instance, when a male lion marks his borders by urinating, some animals are not allowed to enter (other adult male lions) and some others are (female lions, puppies, and other species too, including the gazelles). What is proper to the animal is defined by being not proper (im-proper), the place of the animal is not based on a pure exclusion as it is the case for the metaphysical man — chiefly, it is a place of encounter, which of course can turn into a conflict. This is fairly evident when Serres reminds us of the three forms of physical boundaries, a combination of hardness and softness made possible by an *external* excretion and therefore necessarily *porous*. Surely private property is relevant to animals (other adult male lions cannot trespass it); yet only when referring to man does *privation* mean nothing but property. When the *inside* itself of our place is made dirty, taking all the softness away, the three kinds of borders turn into an *impermeable*, permanently closed barrier. Animal properties, being improper, constitute a *between*, and can be run through by negativity; human private property on the other hand, pretending to be proper, denies the negation, *denies* the between that should form it, and takes the shape of exclusion and clash.

The second consideration (which is deeply intertwined with the first one) is that *excretions do not move in a single direction*. Even though we keep thinking that excretions move from the body to the environment and not the other way round, empirically speaking this is not the case, since the environment too can appropriate the body and make it dirty. For instance, mice hug the walls to get marked by their environment so that they can find the way back to their nests at the end of their wanderings. In other words, there is a bidirectional biosemiosis of scent marks that moves from the body to the environment and from the environment to the body. However, the bidirectionality of excretions is not just an empirical question, but also (and above all) an actual ontological issue: there is no such thing as a body and an extra-physical environment — this would again reflect a dualism still under the influence of a metaphysical exclusion of the animals. There is instead an environmental body, or a bodily environment, where *Leib* “and” *Umwelt* merge and trace each other: motility expands the animal body into

the environment, and sensorium expands the environment into the body. Only the spiritualized body of the metaphysical human can sharply detach itself from the environment, whereas animal bodies and environment constitute *another between*.

What runs between these two *betweens*, one correlated with the property (the proper, what is owned, and its characteristics) of the animals and the other correlated with the environmental body, is what Serres misses: one correlated with animal property (and their proper, their owners and their characteristics) and the other correlated with the environmental body. It is then worth to re-examining the previous allusion to Descartes, or better to what the “Cartesian” brand stands for. If we follow Adorno and Derrida, Descartes has indeed ratified our bestial customs (and bestiality is what is proper to man²), as Serres maintains — not because he was assimilating us to dogs and lions, though, but rather because he was concealing that “the mansion of culture is built of dog shit” (Adorno 366). Because he was trying to remove the absolute Other, the *irredeemable* that runs through us: physicality, animality, vulnerability, and mortality, the extra-logical and irrational element that should be part of a rationality that aims at being reasonable. In other words, the philosophical search for “what is proper to man,” as stated by Derrida, should begin to follow (taking into account both following and being followed) the “monstrously other” (*Beast* 108):

One must not be content to mark the fact that what is attributed as “proper to man” also belongs to other living beings if you look more closely, but also, conversely, that what is attributed as proper to man does not belong to him in all purity and all rigor; and that one must therefore restructure the whole problematic. (56)

Once we have acknowledged the logic of the between, *what is proper to man is what is improper to him/her*. Everything is a trace, and the human can be traced in the non-human, that pisses, “shits and fucks” (Deleuze and Guattari 1). Man is also becoming-trace.

The fallen angel’s dilemma. In *Fallen Angels*, Bloom provides us with a definition of the human too, this time turning his attention not to animals but to angels. First, Bloom tells us first that fallen angels are not necessarily demons or devils:

“Fallen angels,” though theologically identical with “devils” and sometimes with “demons,” retain a *pathos* and a dignity and a curious glamour. (13)

He then explains that “the center of any discussion of fallen angels has to be Adam, who seems to me far greater a fallen angel than Satan” (20). This means that “fallen angel” and “human being” are “two terms for the same entity or condition” (53), “the angelic and the human are virtually identical” (56). Following the gnostics, Bloom goes on to affirm that the Fall did not happen before the creation of Adam, as Saint Augustine suggested, but on the contrary we fell at the very moment of our creation (28-29), in the moment when we became separate beings and, therefore, “subject to death”:

We once were the immortal Adam, but as soon as we became subject to death we became the fallen angel, for that is what the metaphor of a fallen angel means: the overwhelming awareness of one’s mortality. (63)

We are irremediably fallen because we are indivisible from negativity, from death, and from illness. We fell because we are *transient*, finite, and mortal beings. It seems here that Bloom suggests a vision of what is proper to man that includes the monstrous other. Why, then, have we said that this essay still too human? It is because speciesism is so infesting that it keeps appearing where it should have been eradicated, and the “anthropological machine”³ that seemed to have been stopped for a moment keeps spinning back in haste. Indeed, Bloom agrees that the relationship between humans and fallen angels is mediated by the exclusion of animals and by the ontological difference between us and our body:

The dilemma of being open to transcendental longings even as we are trapped inside a dying animal is the precise predicament of the fallen angel, that is to say, of a fully conscious human being. (63-64)

What makes “a fully conscious human being,” what allows the *mise-en-scène* of the “fallen angel’s dilemma” is the fact that “we are trapped inside a dying animal.” There goes the never-ending litany of metaphysics again: death — the absolute impropriety — does not belong to us, it belongs to the animal body that holds us captive, a body in which we can incarnate or from which we can disincarnate but which is never us, our “poor living flesh” (Landolfi 35). Here the animal seems to point towards the impropriety of man, only to be denied once again through a divinizing purification:

Otherness is the essence of the angels; but then it is our essence also. That does not mean that the angels are our otherness. Rather, they manifest an otherness or potential akin to our own, neither better nor worse but only gradated to a different scale. (23)

After getting rid of the animal, the otherness loses every monstrous connotation, it becomes a “potential” and can be used to describe a sort of *theological taxonomy*. Darwin asserted that humans and animals differ in *degree* and not in *kind*. Bloom instead, echoing the whole history of metaphysics, maintains this difference yet inclines toward the angel. Surely we are mortal, but our mortality immediately takes the shape of immortality (regardless whether if it is religious or secular as in the Hamlet’s dilemma), —the heroic, authentic, and anticipating awareness of one’s *own* death. As a consequence, the dilemma of the fallen angel concerns us and not the animals: as Heidegger said, animals do not die, they simply perish (Heidegger 291).

Following Derrida once again, the endless list of ethological observations that show that some other species are also aware of death is not relevant for the present discussion. We should instead “restructure the whole problematic”; in other words, in order to move the emphasis from a “cognitive” experience of death to a corporeal one — the awareness of physical vulnerability —, it is necessary to affirm that what is proper to man is never pure, that it does not belong to him/her as a private property:

Mortality resides there, as the most radical means of thinking the finitude that we share with animals, the mortality that belongs to the very finitude of life, to the experience of compassion, to the possibility of sharing the possibility of this nonpower, the possibility of this impossibility, the anguish of this vulnerability, and the vulnerability of this anguish.
(Derrida, *The Animal* 28)

Since our deep awareness of our own death is part and parcel of a vaster corporeal sympathy of shared vulnerability and nonpower, it would be challenging to exclude the animals from relationship with the fallen angel.

The irredeemable rest. Contrary to what our tradition proclaims, the borders between human, animal, and angelic are unstable and porous. Angels and animals do not mark

ontological divisions, rather they are helpers that undermine our millennial vision of the world, thresholds towards the *in-human*. Both the fallen angel (since it does not exist) and the pissing animal (since its existence is denied) are messengers of the negative: such a “potency of not,” despite being constantly ignored by our tradition, constitutes — along with the “potency of” — potency before turning into an act, as described by Aristotle. Fallen angels and pissing animals are figures for what could have been and did not become, for the infinite worlds that the creation of the present excluded from existence. Therefore, they are *different ways* to state the *same impropriety* that is behind us, through us, and ahead of us. They mark the *irredeemable rest* that comes before (both ontologically and temporally) the division/characterization of *bios*; they allow us to think a *zoē* that, being impotence, cannot be saved, yet embodies the extreme and paradoxical hope of a *possible* redemption. This is why angels and animals are asking us to renew what we refer to as thought and, as a consequence, what we believe is, together with ethics and politics:

In our culture, man has always been thought of as the articulation and conjunction of a body and a soul, of a living thing and a *logos*, of a natural (or animal) element and a supernatural or social or divine element. We must learn ... to think of man as what results from the incongruity of these two elements, and investigate not the metaphysical mystery of conjunction, but rather the practical and political mystery of separation. [...] It is more urgent to work on these divisions, to ask in what way — within man — has man been separated from non-man, and the animal from the human, than it is to take positions on the great issues, on so-called human rights and values. And perhaps even the most luminous sphere of our relations with the divine depends, in some way, on that darker one which separates us from the animal. (Agamben 16)

Metaphors for the potency that precedes the act, angelic falls, and animal abjections dislocate ethics and politics from the province of what exists and from a transcendental ontology that speaks with the oppressive voice of “You must” or with the delirious voice of “I want.” The dislocation moves to a territory that can be traced by what could have been, and consequently hints toward a radically immanent ontology, to what we *can* (not) do in our condition of transient, pissing bodies.

NOTES

1) This is why Serres believes that “the womb, the bed and the tomb” are the “*three fundamental places*” of dwelling, that “the verb *to dwell* is connected [...] to shelters

which are necessary in moments of weakness and fragility: the embryonic stage, the risk of the birth, the infant during lactation, the caress of the loving gift, the sleep, the peace, the refreshment ... *rest in peace*; happy life, act of love, darkness of the tomb, horizontality of the night" (13-14) and that we can consider "places the sharing of habitable space, [...] a necessary fragmentation [...] for the continuation of life in general" (ibid.).

2) Cf. Jacques Derrida, *The Animal* 63-64; and *The Beast* 140.

3) Agamben, 33-39.

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