

3



IS A PET AN ANIMAL?

Domestication and Animal Agency

“Is a pet an animal?” asks Erica Fudge at the beginning of her insightful book *Animal*.¹ Much of contemporary theory would answer in the negative. “Anyone who likes cats or dogs is a fool,” write Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus*.² For the latter, a dog or cat lover is a fool because the dog or cat is not really an animal, but a creature made by humans to confirm an image of ourselves we want to see, but one that, according to these authors, is restricting and regressive. Pets make us seem human when that means fulfilling an identity forced on us by our parents, our schools, and our governments, and it is the only identity, moreover, Deleuze and Guattari argue, that psychoanalysis understands. “We must distinguish three kinds of animals. First, individuated animals, family pets, sentimental, Oedipal animals each with its own petty history, ‘my’ cat, ‘my’ dog. These animals invite us to regress, draw us into a narcissistic contemplation, and they are the only kind of animal psychoanalysis understands, the better to discover a daddy, a mommy, a little brother behind them.”³

Real “animals” lie opposite of pets; they are, in Deleuze and Guattari’s terms, the “demonic animals, pack or affect animals that form a multiplicity, a becoming, a population, a tale.”⁴ *Demonic* of course, is a term of value, if not endearment, for Deleuze and Guattari, signaling the power to be wild and unsocialized, to be deindividuated and

multiple—a power of which, they claim, pets have been stripped. Pet-hood signals the animal’s moral failing, an inability to channel those “intensities” and “affects” of internal movement and thus an inability to combat the need to conform to an identity imposed from the outside. As for Nietzsche, so for Deleuze and Guattari wildness signals both moral and physical health and thus the nobility that is sickened by the domestic pet.

And yet, Deleuze and Guattari maintain, it is possible for the pet to escape this fate, “possible for any animal to be treated in the mode of the pack or swarm; that is our way fellow sorcerers. Even the cat, even the dog.”⁵ But the outlook for pets has not been promising. Already in his seminal article of 1977, “Why Look at Animals,” John Berger puts pet keeping side by side with zoos as institutions that make animals disappear. Pet keeping, he explains, force animals into a human, social setting that demands their deanimalization and eventually molds them into “creatures of their owner’s way of life.” “The small family living unit lacks space, earth, other animals, seasons, natural temperatures, and so on. The pet is either sterilized or sexually isolated, extremely limited in its exercise, deprived of almost all other animal contact, and fed with artificial foods. This is the material process which lies behind the truism that pets come to resemble their masters or mistresses.”⁶

Berger’s comments have found support in the work of historians Kathleen Kete and Harriet Ritvo. In *The Beast in the Boudoir*, Kete writes of the ways in which pet keeping in nineteenth-century Paris “mirrored and mimicked bourgeois culture,” especially in its various attempts to mask and control animal “nature.”⁷ Thus, dogs were bathed, coiffed, and sometimes clothed; they were educated to restrain or display themselves appropriately, and their sexuality was tightly controlled so that when the time came, they could be mated (and indeed “married”) with partners worthy of their well-bred (i.e., class) status. Focusing on Victorian England, Ritvo charts similar practices that led to the making of champion dogs and *The Stud Book*—a veritable who’s who of canines—modeled on the pedigree that already existed for horses. Prizes for dogs, Ritvo emphasizes, were less an award for the animals themselves or even for their illustrious ancestry than for evidence of an owner’s ability to “exploit” an animal’s “physical malleability.”⁸

These dogs were self-referential in that they proved the potential malleability and talent of the rising class of bourgeois pet owners.

Pets have become privileged examples of the potential, moral corruption of humans who regard nature as a resource to be exploited for personal and material gain. Yi-Fu Tuan's *Dominance and Affection: The Making of Pets* focuses on those moral processes that inspire or allow us to turn everything from plants to other humans into a servant, a companion, or a prized object. Whereas dominance alone produces a victim for whom there is little if any concern, Tuan argues, "dominance may be combined with affection, and what it produces is the pet."⁹ As products of and subjects to the abuse of power, pets are potential victims, but their status, like the status of human–pet relations more generally, is rendered ambiguous because of the care and "humaneness" with which they may be bred, trained, and fed and because of the simultaneously abusive and productive ways power operates in the aesthetic–cultural realm. In the end, Tuan argues, "whether we use plants and animals for economic or playful and aesthetic ends, we *use* them; we do not attend to them for their own good, except in fables."¹⁰

This history of pets as objects of use, abuse, and exploitation follows a similar history of domestication that focuses on human agency and control over animals. Largely viewed with a Marxist lens, domestication has been understood to be a process of taming that turns animals into property. Anthropologist Juliet Clutton-Brock defines domestic animals as "bred in captivity, for purposes of subsistence or profit, in a human community that maintains complete mastery over its breeding, organization of territory and food supply."¹¹ In this history, which makes little distinction between animals used for food and animals for companionship (the latter believed to derive from animals used for protection or to keep other predators away), domestic is pitted against wild in a binary opposition of enslaved to free that carries a host of gendered, raced, and otherwise hierarchically organized associations. This view of domestication represents a reversal—at once romantic and politically charged—of Enlightenment taxonomies such as Thomas Bewick's *General History of Quadrupeds*, where tamable or trainable animals were at the top of a hierarchy, tame was on a continuum with civilized, and wild was most often associated with savage

or sometimes, by association, with unruly lower classes in need of a master to discipline or defend them.¹²

The term *domestic*, as Richard Bulliet reminds us, was first used for animals in 1620 and comes from the Latin *domus*, signifying “living in or belonging to a household.”¹³ By the end of the eighteenth century, this process of moving into the house would take on negative associations of effeminacy and the loss or weakening of natural strength. Thus, for example, in imagining what humans would have been like in a state of nature, Rousseau considers that “the horse, the cat, the bull, even the Ass . . . have a sturdier constitution, greater vigor, force, and courage in the forests than in our homes; they lose half of these advantages when they are Domesticated, and it would seem that all our care to treat and to feed these animals well only succeeds in bastardizing them. The same is true of man himself: As he becomes sociable and a Slave, he becomes weak, timorous, groveling, and his soft and effeminate way of life completes the enervation of both his strength and courage.”¹⁴

From Rousseau through Nietzsche to Deleuze and Guattari, we find a similar condemnation of the domestic pet as a deanimalized creature that has been stripped of its original virile wildness and tamed into a “feminine” and inauthentic servitude. Domestication is understood to be a process done to animals by humans through coercive means. But because, as Rousseau suggests, domestication is also something that humans did to themselves and not always wittingly, not necessarily out of that “property of being a free agent” by which a human is distinguished from an animal, but out of those passions that are shared with animals and that turn habits into needs, he leaves open the possibility that other animals may also, if to a lesser extent, have participated in the process.¹⁵ Could animals have “chosen” domestication, as the title of Steven Budiansky’s *The Covenant of the Wild: Why Animals Chose Domestication* suggests?¹⁶

What it means to be an actor in history and what it means to have agency in the historical process are notions that have been deconstructed since the 1950s, whether from the standpoint of linguistic or psychoanalytic or cultural theory. We humans are shaped by language, by the unconscious, and by the world around us as much as we shape and create that world. To realize that history is not only the result

of conscious intentionality is also to open the door to understanding that animals might also have agency in certain historical processes. Indeed, to realize that historical agency should not be regarded only in terms of human intention has been crucial to recent reexaminations of the process of domestication and the role of humans and animals alike. As Philip Armstrong explains, agency has become a problematic topic within animal studies because a notion of nonhuman agency carries the charge of anthropomorphism. But responses from human–animal geographers such as Chris Philo and Chris Wilbert, says Armstrong, “turn the charge of anthropomorphism on its head” by explaining that the “allegation of anthropomorphism itself derives from an anthropocentric and ethnocentric understanding about what agency is.” Taking the lead from Philo and Wilbert, Armstrong writes that the assumption that agency as a “capacity to effect change” requires rational thought and conscious intention derives from “an Enlightenment humanist paradigm within which these traits came to define the human as such.”¹⁷

In this respect, it is significant that Rousseau was already writing in the eighteenth century against such a paradigm that regards intention as the motor of history (and, hence, domestication). Rousseau ultimately believed that it is impossible to know what allowed humans to separate from the state of nature, if indeed such a state ever existed. Almost a hundred years later, as Bulliet emphasizes, Darwin believed that the “origins of domestic species would always remain obscure.”¹⁸ Because of the difficulty of understanding how humans could have knowingly domesticated a species without having prior knowledge of the results, the Marxist framework that regards domestication as a process of intentional shaping and oppression has become less tenable. Bulliet argues that, “in most cases, domestication came about as an unintended, unremembered, and unduplicatable consequence of human activities intended to serve other purposes.”¹⁹ Some biologists, such as Raymond Coppinger, have argued that “the dog domesticated itself” through forces of natural selection that gave an advantage to those most adept at scavenging from human garbage.²⁰ The thesis published by Lynn Margulis in 1966 that symbiosis is a driving force of evolution, despite its initial rejection by mainstream biologists, has recently become a central idea of evolutionary biology.²¹ Drawing on

these biological models, anthropologists have promoted a model of coevolution that views domestication as a symbiotic and dynamic relationship between humans and animals independent of either's forethought or conscious intent and that potentially ascribes agency to both.²²

Such a shift in the debates reflects a similar shift in attitudes toward anthropomorphism and its role in how we understand the process of domestication. If, that is to say, the effort to avoid accusations of anthropomorphism led theorists to discount agency and intention in animals, the twin wrong of "anthropodenial" might be said to have encouraged others to reconsider if not intention, then the subjective desires and emotions of certain animals that could also lead them into a domestic relationship. Anthropodenial, as Frans de Waal has characterized it, is "the *a priori* rejection of shared characteristics between humans and animals . . . [a] willful blindness to the human-like characteristics of animals or the animal-like characteristics of ourselves."²³ As archaeologist Gala Argent concludes in her work on the domestication of horses, the domination model of horse–human relations focuses on the exploitation and use of animals by humans, underestimating those "social needs . . . for inclusion and affection" that are shared by humans and horses alike.²⁴

Such focus on the dynamic force of affective relations has been especially pronounced in recent thinking about relations between pets and their humans. Because pets live with us and offer the opportunity to observe and interact with their behavior, historian Keith Thomas has argued that pets and their keepers have played a crucial role in challenging dominant philosophical and scientific views concerning animal emotions, intelligence, and the human monopoly on notions of personhood, thought, and subjectivity.²⁵ Many municipalities in the United States have recently changed the legal terminology from *pet owners* to *pet guardians* in order to reflect the change in pets' status from property to companions with individual needs that must be met. Concomitant with the reevaluation of the origin, the process, and consequently the ethics of domestication has been a reconsideration of practices associated with pet keeping and, in particular, the art and sport of animal training. As I discuss in chapter 8, training takes center stage in the work of Vicki Hearne and Donna Haraway, both as a real

and daily practice of sustained interaction with another animal and as a metaphor for a practice of language and world building in which humans and other animals participate equally in establishing verbal, gestural, and sensory communication. For Haraway and Hearne, training is what allows a pet to escape the status of victim by offering a means of communication between species. Training sets up a relation between unequals—animals of unequal lexicons and unequal capacities for scent, touch, and hearing—but each of whom must be acknowledged as “having a world” and having something to say. For training to work, each must become attuned to the language of the other, while acknowledging that there will be limitations to knowing that other.

Whereas Hearne approaches training from within the philosophical tradition of skepticism, in which humans are shorn of their certainty about themselves and about the world, Haraway looks at it from a science studies perspective influenced by biological theories of coevolution and actor–network theory. Training institutes “contact zones” between species similar to those zones that Mary Louise Pratt defines between cultures: “social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other.”²⁶ For Hearne, such spaces provide for new kinds of languages—pidgin languages that are at once embodied and arbitrary in the linguistic sense, but that inspire and depend on an interspecies trust or moral certainty that human languages cannot provide. For Haraway, such contact zones are of scientific and historical significance, proving that “co-constitutive companion species and coevolution are the rule, not the exception.”²⁷ In other words, cooperation or at least codependency rather than competition in the Darwinian sense may be the motor of evolution. Humans and animals are entangled with each other at the microbial and ontological levels such that each becomes what it is only by virtue of that entanglement where what is a product of “nature” cannot be separated from what is a product of “culture.” For Hearne and Haraway, training, as one form of entanglement in which humans and animals clash and grapple but also find something they mutually enjoy, is not an anthropocentric exercise of power over an animal that depends on submission and obedience to a human-authored design, but rather an intersubjective relation that demands an openness to difference on both sides and an openness to be transformed by difference.

What of those who beat a dog or horse into submission and who force it to act out of fear? The point is, as Rebecca Cassidy writes, that domestication is an “ongoing relationship” that “may be exploitative or mutual, intentional, or serendipitous.”²⁸ Even Deleuze and Guattari concede that “even the cat, even the dog” may be treated in “the mode of the pack” or in a way that fosters its “multiplicity.”²⁹ Some theories are bent on proving humans’ inhumanity toward animals, but in so doing they disregard or dismiss animals’ humanlike qualities. Other theories focus precisely on the unseen or unacknowledged capabilities that pets share with humans in an effort to redeem practices that rely on those qualities, if not exploit them. Full disclosure: I keep dogs and ride horses, and my defense of these practices is not disinterested. But the alternative of seeing dogs and cats and horses only as products of indefensible human dominion is also ideological.

In chapters 4 and 5, I look at literary representations of pets that suggest a range of relationships with their humans. These fictions are themselves contact zones in which struggles with otherness are played out and worked through or not. Of course, humans have the last word in these representations because, as far as we know, our pets are not able to write or read (a point that Virginia Woolf makes with regard to Elizabeth Barrett’s dog Flush), but that does not mean that real animals have had no share in those representations. Indeed, just as our representations can have real effects in the world by shaping how we understand other animals and thus how we might relate to them, so those animals and in particular the animals we live with affect the way we represent them or their literary surrogates. In his work on animals in film, Jonathan Burt writes of the “unintended effects” often produced by an animal on screen and of the “mutual gaze between human and animal” that allows us to speak about the way in which an animal “does regulate its symbolic effects.”³⁰ In literature, of course, that gaze is filtered through words, but it is possible to speak of the unintended effects on narrative that are produced by dogs or horses who, according to Vicki Hearne, have their own stories about what, for example, fetching a ball or being caught might mean. And their stories, if we acknowledge them, can induce us to change ours.³¹

The stories I have chosen might be classified as modernist fictions or works by modernist authors, but my argument here is less about

modernist literature than about the prevalence and importance of pets in modernity, a historical fact that may or may not be causally linked to modernism or postmodernism.³² Recent works on animals in modernist literature have focused especially on issues of human “animality,” especially as a result of the prominence made of this fact in Darwin and Freud’s writings. Here I am concerned with the fact of human animality only insofar as it becomes apparent in relation to one’s dog or cat or horse, which is to say as a result of a relation to an animal we live alongside and not only to the animal we harbor within. I likewise do not attempt to trace broad cultural shifts in our relations to domestic animals, whether because of industrial capitalism (for which animals exist only as resources) or because we live in a post-domestic society (and thus have lost experiences of animal life and death that may have been familiar to our parents’ or grandparents’ generation), although I find each of these shifts to be significant and their characterizations regarding human–animal relations to contain unavoidable truths.³³ The problem, however, is not only that such attempts to “account for the key changes [in these relations] (anti-cruelty legislation, animal protection, animal rights, the civilizing of manners) . . . have failed to take stock of continuities or changes that lead in the opposite direction,” as Adrian Franklin attests,³⁴ but also that taking into account specific social or economic locations within cultures and history, as Franklin proposes, does not provide for the shifts that one individual may undergo in a lifetime and even in a split second. Ontogeny does not recapitulate or confirm phylogeny.

What I am especially interested in here is the individual pet–human relation and how that relation participates in and affects our understanding of a modern sense of self—as human and animal. Individual identity is represented as a problematic concept in the literature of modernity, where markers of class, race, gender, sexuality, and even species have become unstable and uncertain and where the sense of self that those markers are said to reflect (and at times produce) is in constant need of affirmation and support. Because pets are part of our private, interior life (and, for some of us, part of our public, professional life), because we live with them, they offer one means to affirm and project identity—witness the number of celebrities, presidents, and Facebook members photographed with their dogs. But just

as, in Hearne's view, dogs and horses often reject the stories we tell about them, so may they reject the stories that we tell about ourselves. We may put up a counterresistance, in which case the asymmetry of domestic relations almost always works to the animal's disadvantage, if not leading tragically to their deaths; Thomas Mann's "Tobias Mindernickel" offers an example of this plot. Or we may grow ever more attuned to their own pidgin languages such that our life narratives follow plots that they are in part responsible for and for which we are grateful to them. Thomas Mann's later novella *Man and Dog* and Virginia Woolf's *Flush* offer versions of this story.