Taking Barthes’s discussion of Aesop’s lion as a starting point, this essay examines two uses to which the animals of philosophy and critical theory have been put: as ciphers and as indices. The twin dangers to theory’s beasts, of becoming either examples of a deadening, generic “animal” or stultifying stereotypes, are assessed and potential solutions proposed.

**Quia Ego Nominor Leo:**  
Barthes, Stereotypes,  
and Aesop’s Animals

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In his Inaugural Lecture at the Collège de France, Barthes suggested that it had been his semiological project, at least during the mid-1950s, to understand “how a society produces stereotypes, i.e., triumphs of artifice, which it then consumes as innate meanings, i.e. triumphs of Nature” (471). The stereotype is insistent and dangerous, Barthes says, a monster that sleeps within every sign (461). His analyses of this process of naturalization, this “mythical speech,” are well known from his _Mythologies_. Perhaps the most famous of all, and certainly the most frequently quoted, is his discussion of the

_Leo the Lion, mightiest of beasts, will stand up to anybody. The word ‘beasts’ should properly be used about lions, leopards, tigers, wolves, foxes, dogs, monkeys and others which rage about with tooth and claw—with the exception of snakes. They are called Beasts because of the violence with which they rage, and are known as ‘wild’ (ferus) because they are accustomed to freedom by nature and are governed (ferantur) by their own wishes. They wander hither and thither, fancy free, and they go wherever they want to go._—The Book of Beasts, trans. T.H. White
Paris-Match cover in “Myth Today” (109–59). There is another example in this essay, however, that immediately precedes that of the soldier and the tricolour, and which is usually passed over by commentators. Imagining himself a pupil in a French lycée once more, Barthes opens his Latin grammar and reads a single sentence: *quia ego nominor leo* (“because I am named Lion”) (115). The sentence is borrowed, he says, from the fables of Aesop. At the level of the linguistic system, Barthes points out, it has “a fullness, a richness, a history” drawn from the fable and beyond: “I am an animal, a lion, I live in a certain country. I have just been hunting, they would have me share my prey with a heifer, a cow and a goat; but being the stronger, I award myself all the shares for various reasons, the last of which is quite simply that my name is lion” (118).

As part of a mythical system, however, this rich set of values and meanings is put aside. When it is used as a grammatical example, concerning the agreement of the predicate, the sentence has a new function. The old values make way for a whole new set of ideas and assumptions, this time concerning the importance of Aesop, of Latin, of grammar itself. We focus no longer on the intriguing details of Aesop’s tale, but are required instead to concentrate on the “grammatical exemplarity” of the sentence (118–19). The rich detail of the lion’s story is not entirely suppressed, however. By keeping it close to hand, “an instantaneous reserve of history” on which it can draw, the myth lends itself an air of the natural (118). This is how the myth, the stereotype, works, by invoking a “natural history” that is not its own, but which shores up its legitimacy. The lion, so ferocious, so regal, so wild in Aesop, is tamed in the grammatical example, the better to naturalize the assumptions and values that accrue, at a particular time and place, around the student learning Latin in the second form of a French lycée. How obvious that one should learn Latin, that one should ensure that the predicate always agrees with the subject, that Aesop is a worthy pedagogical text for pursuing these worthy scholarly goals.

In discussions of, and especially introductions to, Barthes’s analysis of myth, Aesop’s lion is often put aside in favour of the saluting soldier. The latter, with Barthes’s brief but effective analysis of the implicit concepts (signifieds) of imperialism and colonialism, seems more immediate, more useful perhaps, than an example drawn from a dusty Latin grammar. If Barthes is to remain relevant, he must be able to tell us something about myth today, after all. Aesop’s lion is every bit as effective as the Paris-Match cover, however, at demonstrating the two distinct semiological systems, the role of form, concept, and signification, the insidious operation of mythic speech as a whole. The use to which Aesop is put by a Latin grammar, by the educational apparatus, is here made clear. But what of the use, by Aesop and by Barthes, of the lion? What of the rich set of meanings, the “whole system of values” that contains “a
history, a geography, a morality, a zoology, a Literature” of the lion (Mythologies 118)? What of the lion himself? Is he the victim of mythic appropriation? Is he subject to an insistent and dangerous stereotype? It is this question, of the stereotyped animal, that I would like to investigate a little further. We will find that the beasts of philosophy and critical theory, when pressed into service as means or media of philosophical exemplarity, frequently find themselves caught up in the monstrously naturalizing hold of mythic speech.

Richard Dyer has argued that there is an inevitability to stereotyping. In order to make any kind of sense of what William James called the “great, blooming, buzzing confusion” of reality (qtd. in Dyer 11), in order to get a hold on the “mass of complex and inchoate data that we receive from the world,” it is necessary, inescapable even, that we employ generalities, patternings, typifications (Dyer 12). Stereotypes are simply a form of this “ordering” and in themselves need not be considered a force for evil: the stereotype sleeps within each sign after all. It is the unreflective iteration of signs that lends them their stereotypic character, and which results in increasingly rigid, sharply defined categories (Dyer 16). Homi Bhabha has argued, in fact, that stereotypes achieve their fixity by means of an anxious repetition, vacillating as they do between that which is always “in place,” obvious, known, and that which can never in fact be proven. He provides the examples of “the essential duplicity of the Asiatic” or “the bestial sexual license of the African,” both of which, on the one hand, need no proof, and yet, on the other, can never really, in discourse, be proven (Bhabha 18). There is, it seems, an ambivalence at the heart of the stereotype. Similarly, Dyer suggests that the rigidity and shrillness of a stereotype is inversely proportional to the internal fluidity that threatens its coherence (16). The danger with stereotypes, then, lies in allowing them to hide their limitations and partiality, in failing to appreciate that it is an incomplete picture that they paint (12).

We will return to Aesop’s lion, and to this matter of ambivalence and iteration, in a moment. Before we do, I would like to highlight two particular uses to which animals have been put by philosophy and critical theory that complicate the question of the stereotyped or stereotypic animal. On the one hand, writers who have clearly had no interest in animals per se have not been able to resist employing them as ciphers. A cipher is any person or thing that “fills a place, but is of no importance or worth” in its own right. The real power lying elsewhere, the cipher remains “a nonentity, a ‘mere nothing’” employed for the benefit of others (Oxford English Dictionary).

Though all manner of entities are fair game, so to speak, for cipherous appropriation, literary and cultural theorists like Barthes, as well as a long history of philosophers,
have been especially keen on animals. Saussure’s horse and ox are a case in point. In
order to investigate language, Saussure begins his *Course in General Linguistics*, famously,
by examining the nature of its basic unit, the linguistic sign (65–70). The sign is com-
posed, he asserts, of two distinct but mutually dependent elements: the concept or sig-
nified (signifié) and the sound-image or signifier (signifiant). Thus, the sign for a
horse, Saussure’s first cipherous animal, will comprise, on the one hand, the mental
concept of a horse (“a solid-hoofed perissodactyl quadruped, having a flowing mane
and tail,” according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*), and on the other, the word
“horse” (*h-o-s*). Both elements, Saussure stresses, are “psychological”: the signified is
not an actual horse, but the mental concept of one, and the signifier is not a physical
or material sound but a “sound-image,” an “inner image” that we can recite to our-
selves without actually vocalizing (66).

Considered in its entirety, then, the sign is a wholly immaterial entity (65–67). It
is also arbitrary in nature, that is, there is no necessary connection between the two
elements. If we consider an ox, as Saussure now urges us to do, we can see that the sig-
nified (“domestic bovine quadruped”) is not linked “by any inner relationship” to the
signifier (“ox”). This becomes especially apparent when we remember that different
languages will employ quite different signifiers: *o-k-s, b-ö-f, etc* (67–68). The sign is
thus seen to be both immaterial and arbitrary. So too, though, is Saussure’s choice of
animal. There is nothing about the horse, *qua* horse, nor the ox, *qua* ox, that lends
itself to the discussion: any other creatures would have done. In fact, any object, ani-
mate or otherwise, might be substituted here. The horse and the ox are “mere noth-
ings,” simply filling a place within Saussure’s analysis of language that a meaning
might be conveyed.

The use of animals as ciphers by literary and critical theory is a particular example
of the casual anthropocentrism that so often pervades these disciplines.2 Theorists have
frequently conversed *using* animals, but less often do these discussions prove to be *about*
animals. They remain invisible, metaphorical phantoms, employed merely as examples
of epistemological problems, metaphysical speculations, or linguistic analyses. With the
cipher, the reader *disregards* the animal and concentrates instead on the argument, the
example, the heart of the matter. The animal used as a cipher is employed to *make a*
*point* for which there is no obvious or necessary reason that *this* animal was chosen.
Saussure’s horse and ox are, for all philosophical intents and purposes, interchange-
able, faceless place-fillers. On the other hand, there is a use to which animals have
been widely put that entirely *depends* on their distinctive, characteristic presence. An
index *points out* a particular quality or behaviour that is peculiar to the animal, and
therefore intrinsic or necessary to the philosophical argument.
The best known discussion of the index is, of course, Peirce's. He describes an index as a sign that has an “actual” or “real” association with its object (Peirce §2.286, §5.75), as one that has a “dynamical (including spatial) connection both with the individual object, on the one hand, and with the senses or memory of the person for whom it serves as a sign, on the other” (§2.305). This “association by contiguity” (§2.306) has the effect of “forcing the attention upon its object” (§2.357). More generally, then, the index is “anything which focuses the attention” (§2.285). Throughout his writings, Peirce provides examples of a large number of indices: a photograph (§2.281), a person’s rolling gait or bow legs, a sundial, a rap on the door (§2.285), the pole star, a spirit level (§2.286), a large variety of different kinds of pronoun (§2.287, §2.289, §2.305), and even a bullet hole (§2.304), amongst many others. Perhaps the best example of an animal index, however, comes from Schopenhauer.3

In the final parable of his quirky Parerga and Paralipomena, Schopenhauer enlists the aid of several prickly porcupines: “One cold winter’s day, a number of porcupines huddled together quite closely in order through their mutual warmth to prevent themselves from being frozen. But they soon felt the effect of their quills on one another, which made them again move apart. Now when the need for warmth once more brought them together, the drawback of the quills was repeated so that they were tossed between two evils, until they had discovered the proper distance from which they could best tolerate one another” (Schopenhauer 651–52). In like manner, Schopenhauer goes on to tell us with characteristic misanthropy, human society is the result of a compromise between the emptiness and monotony of people’s individual lives, which draw them together, and their many unpleasant and repulsive qualities, which drive them apart. Whether this adequately accounts for humans’ capacity to endure living together is less interesting, for us, than the fact that this apologue would not work were the protagonists any other creatures than porcupines. Perhaps another species with some antisocial talent or disposition could be imagined, but none, surely, as evocative and appropriate as a porcupine. The porcupine and the point, both of the quill and the story, are intrinsic to Schopenhauer’s fable. Porcupines are not interchangeable ciphers, but carefully selected indices.

The cipherous use of an animal, in which the selection is entirely arbitrary and inconsequential, stands in direct contrast to the indexical use, in which specific qualities of a specially chosen creature are required. Both means of employment retain the services of animals, but whilst one denies any attributes to the animal, the other relies on particular qualities. The distinction between the vacant cipher and the instructive index is by no means clear cut, however. In many cases the former manage to transform themselves into the latter. The cipher here becomes an index, now pointing out
or disclosing some previously unacknowledged aspect of the argument or example. Gilbert Ryle’s dog can help show us how.

In a 1949 review-essay of Rudolf Carnap’s book *Meaning and Necessity*, Ryle identified an oft-encountered philosophical blunder which he dubbed the ‘Fido’-Fido Principle (“Discussion” 69–76). The error is to assume that the significance or meaning of an expression is the process or object that it designates, just as the appellation “Fido” names the particular dog who answers to that name. This equation of words with proper names is, says Ryle, “a monstrous howler” (“Theory” 243). Those guilty of this crime of hypostatization, he says, might similarly reason, from the model phrase “he took a stick” that “he took a walk [. . .] a nap [. . .] a job [. . .] a liking [. . .] the opportunity [. . .] time” also “refer” to a selection of rather odd entities (“Discussion” 70). Ryle’s point is well made, and addresses a particular sticking-point, with which he is concerned, in the work of Mill, Frege, Russell, and Carnap, amongst many others. But we should pause momentarily and notice that, helpful though he is, Fido is a cipher here. Ryle could have nominated any dog, nay, any physical creature, that is customarily designated by a proper name. The Parthenon, or perhaps even Carnap himself, would have served just as well to make Ryle’s point. So why does he pick Fido? Why does he select a dog at all? Derrida was also puzzled by this canine slant to Ryle’s criticism, and he suggests that the choice of exemplar was not in fact entirely arbitrary: “Why did ‘Ryle’ choose this name, Fido? [. . .] Because a dog is the figure of fidelity and that better than anyone else answers to his name, especially if it is Fido? [. . .] Fido answers without answering, because he is a dog, he recognizes his name but he never says anything about it [. . .]. If he is there, Fido, he cannot make the reference lie, without saying anything he answers to his name [. . .]. Why did Ryle choose a dog’s name, Fido? [. . .] ‘so that the example will be obedient’” (Post Card 243–44).

Faithful Fido is chosen by Ryle because he is docile. He serves as a placid, brute referent, demonstrating an argument without ever uttering a premise or conclusion, “answering without answering.” He is, in short, a cipher within the operation of Ryle’s argument, but, by virtue precisely of his enduring loyalty, Fido proves to be an index. This model of fidelity makes the ideal animal companion, is the philosopher’s best friend, when called upon to illustrate Carnap’s hypostatizing approach. Only a dog, and especially one named “Fido,” could make this point with such insistent conviction.

There is hope, then, for the work-horses of the philosophers. Whenever we encounter a cipher, a faceless, place-filling nonentity, there will be every chance that they will transmute into an individual, edifying index. This de-ciphering of ciphers is no bad thing: use of the animal cipher encourages a particular mode of thinking, an understanding of “the animal” that posits, as Derrida has suggested, “one thing, one
domain, one homogeneous type of entity, which is called animality in general, for which any example would do the job.” Such a hypothesis is, he says, “irreducible” and “dogmatic” (Of Spirit 57), and constitutes an asinanity (une bêtise) (“Animal” 400). This animal in the “general singular,” says Derrida, is “a sin against rigorous thinking, vigilance, lucidity, or empirical authority” (416). We must look closely at faceless animal ciphers, then, and see whether they might in fact be highly individual indices. Like a series of informative fingerposts, and as a direct result of their characteristic particularities, these animal indices can focus our attention and point us away from the well-trodden cul-de-sacs of habitual thinking about “the animal” and toward avenues of thought that remain rigorous, productive, and open. Indexical animals, in short, can help teach us lessons. These instructive animal indices, however, present problems of their own, as we shall see shortly.

The terms cipher and index do not exhaust the ways in which animals can appear in philosophical or theoretical texts, of course, and doubtless there are many more functions that the birds and the beasts are made to fulfil. Moreover, neither the ciphers nor the indices themselves are intrinsically or exclusively one thing or the other. As we have seen, a cipher may well metamorphose into an index, and in fact many a philosophical beast will demonstrate, simultaneously, something of both the cipher and the index. This leads us back to Aesop and to the question of particularity.

"Quia ego nominor leo." Barthes’s Latin sentence comes from the fable titled “The Cow, the Goat, the Sheep, and the Lion.” These four animals, Aesop tells us, entered into an unlikely partnership, and went hunting together. Having managed to catch a deer, the lion divided the kill into four portions. The first portion he took for himself “because I am named Lion,” the king of the beasts; the second he claimed because he was a member of the partnership; the third because of his superior strength; and the last he took simply because “it will be too bad for anyone who meddles with the fourth.” In this way he claimed all the spoils for himself, thus proving, as the author points out, that it is never a safe investment to go shares with the mighty (Perry 199).

As is well known, a principal function of the fables is to convey moral lessons of this sort. As such, each animal is carefully selected for the particular qualities they exemplify. As George Fyler Townsend, the best known translator of Aesop into English, says of the fables: “The introduction of the animals or fictitious characters should be marked with an unexceptionable care and attention to their natural attributes, and to the qualities attributed to them by universal popular consent. The Fox should be always cunning, the Hare timid, the Lion bold, the Wolf cruel, the Bull strong, the Horse proud, and the Ass patient” (Preface). If we focus on just the fox, for
instance, we find that if he meets a crow he flatters her into dropping her cheese; if he
disputes with a monkey or a leopard we know that he will best them; and if he
befriends an ass or a goat he is more than likely to betray them (Jones 16, 29, 140, 22,
38). Throughout his many appearances in the fables, the fox is deceptive, cunning,
and treacherous. Without a doubt he is, like his fabulous colleagues, an index.

On the other hand, however, we know that the animals in the fables are present only
as impersonal instantiations of various diverse qualities. They are, as G.K. Chesterton
puts it in his own introduction to the fables, “like abstractions in algebra, or like pieces
in chess,” chosen over human protagonists the better to communicate the truths, or
moral truisms, of the tales. Chesterton argues that it is only by stripping the tales’ pro-
tagonists of any individual personal traits that the virtues or vices that they exemplify
can be made incontestably clear. A human person will therefore not do, and the animal
that takes their place must be of an emblematic, even heraldic type (10). In fact, this
impersonalization serves to undo Townsend’s claim regarding the consistency of asso-
ciation by contiguity between creature and truth.

First, the different beasts do not unvaryingly exemplify a particular virtue or vice. When the fox is hidden by a woodcutter, who then tries to betray him to the hunt, he
is neither cunning nor crooked, but simply wronged. During the frequent appearances
that he, and occasionally she, makes in the fables, the fox is not only cunning, but also
cheeky, inquisitive, perceptive, foolish, indecisive, proud, and very often straightforwardly wise. Secondly, the various virtues and vices are not unvaryingly exemplified
by a single beast. The foolish ass, who in one fable is tricked by the fox into a lion’s
den, is in many versions a stag (Jones 144). Barthes’s own fable provides further illus-
tration. The lion himself may consistently lord it over his hunting companions like
some mediaeval sovereign, throwing his weight about and claiming his titular share.
The cow, goat, and sheep are barely distinguished from one another, however, and they
certainly do not display any obvious characteristics of their own, be they emblematic,
heraldic, or otherwise. Further, in alternative versions of the fable, entirely different
creatures accompany the lion. In one he sets forth with a fox, a jackal, and a wolf, in
another with a buffalo and a wolf (Adrados 673–74), in another with a chicken and a
goat (680), whilst in yet another he takes with him only a single wild ass (Jones 66). The creatures are subordinate to the lesson, and since their selection is frequently
arbitrary, “natural” or universally acknowledged attributes are not always in evidence.
Here, then, the animals are bit players, arbitrarily chosen foils to the central character.
They are, in short, ciphers.

Aesop’s animal alphabet operates, then, with both indices and ciphers. The crea-
tures may or may not be chosen for their peculiar characteristics, but they always
serve as media for the time-honoured and much more important moral at the heart of the tale. In the fables, as with philosophical and theoretical texts, animals are neither ciphers nor indices. Aesop’s fox is not intrinsically one or the other, but rather functions as a cipher or as an index. The use of any given animal will tend at one time toward the cipherous, at another toward the indexical, and will many times exhibit elements of both. The more indexical the use, though, the closer we come to eliminating that rather lifeless creation, the animal in the “general singular.” It is the particularity of the animal index, or rather, the particularities of a host of indices, that serve to reanimate the lifeless ciphers and thereby help to bring about the death of “the animal.”

The potential problem for any animal that functions indexically, however, is that she or he is likely to ossify into a mere stereotype. As an instructor, a studiedly uncipherous educator, the index draws on that which is distinctive or characteristic in order to inform. The danger here is that the animal is reduced to a mere exemplar of their species characteristics. Chesterton pointed out that, for the sake of the fable and its moral, it is important that any individual traits of the animal are suppressed. In doing so, the risk arises that the indexical use will define and delimit the animal, specifying that the lion, fox, or sheep is always and only like this. The effect of this pigeonholing is that the potential elucidation that the animal undertakes for us as an index is likely to fall back into a hackneyed, clichéd, or stale mode of thinking. In short, though carefully selected for some distinctive quality, indeed because this is the case, the index is still a sign, and as Barthes pointed out, “in each sign sleeps that monster: the stereotype” (“Inaugural” 461).

What, then, does the King of the Beasts point out to us in “Myth Today”? How indexical, perhaps even stereotypical, is Barthes’s use of Aesop’s lion? In fact, the lion functions for Barthes not as an index, but rather as a cipher, and doubly so. First, as Barthes demonstrates, the grammatical example “tries very little to tell me something about the lion and what sort of name he has” (Mythologies 116). Instead, the lion is an arbitrary place filler, used only in order to illustrate the agreement of the predicate: any predicate, and any subject, would have done as well. Further, Barthes’s own analysis uses the lion only in order to illustrate the technical details of the operation of “mythical speech.” As his second and very different example (the Paris-Match cover) demonstrates, more or less any sign would have done. In examining how “speech enters the service of power,” how language is “worked on by power” (“Inaugural” 461, 471), Barthes is not interested in lions per se (or in French soldiers for that matter), but in the nature of the stereotypes that they are made to perpetuate.
It was, rather, for Aesop that the lion functioned indexically. As Barthes himself pointed out, the fable draws on precisely that rich history, that instantaneous reserve of values—a geography, a zoology, a literature—in order to convey its moral. The lion is impoverished by his employment in the service of myths concerning educational pedagogy, when he features in a Latin grammar, but the vibrant detail and wealth of his history is retained, required even, when he appears in Aesop’s fable, since it is his characteristic qualities qua leo that give this fable its own pedagogic punch. In focusing on these details, however, on his stately nobility, on his royal cupidity, all else that he might be is pushed aside. The majestic lion is reduced to no more than a highly motivated metonym. An altogether different myth from that which Barthes analyses is here in play, but it is a mythical stereotype that impoverishes and diminishes nonetheless. Barthes called the stereotype a monster. Aesop’s lion is certainly feral, even ferocious, but what is monstrous about the stereotype, as Barthes showed, is that, as a mode of speech, as a mode of thinking, it is reserved, curtailed, tame.

If ciphers are in large part de-ciphered when they become indices, how do we stop those indices becoming stereotypes? Having facilitated the death of “the animal,” it is important that theory’s particular animal companions do not subsequently become domesticated, disciplined, broken creatures with nothing new to tell us. As we saw earlier, it is the iteration of signs that stamps them into stereotypic form. Their seeming fixity is the result, as Bhabha says, of an anxious repetition, an uneasy, habitual reiteration that belies the shortfall between that which is firmly established, beyond doubt and obvious, and that which can never be proven. The first strategy for preventing the stereotyping of our animal indices, then, is to indulge this ambivalence. Whatever boundaries the index sets up must remain fluid rather than fixed. What we need are disruptive and unruly indices who question and contradict the stereotypes into which they might otherwise be fitted. They need to be drawn not from the pool of received wisdom (no one learns much if they are told that lions are bold), but from altogether different sources. Our indices must come from histories or contexts that are unfamiliar, must teach us either new lessons, or present old lessons in a fresh light. They should tend toward the troublesome, surprising, unruly, and, hopefully, disruptive. One way or another they should all, each after their own fashion, remain wild animals. We will come to a final example in just a moment.

The second means by which we can curtail the stereotypic appropriation of animal indices is to remember that each and every one is an individual. Fido, who seems simply to fill a space for Ryle, is employed indexically by Derrida: he shows that only a faithful dog, only one named Fido, could take this place. At precisely this point, however, when Derrida demonstrates that Fido is no cipher but rather the apotheosis of
the faithful hound, he is in danger of becoming, like all those dogs of myth and fable
before him, just one more man’s best friend. He is no longer simply Fido, this particu-
lar, individual dog, answering to his own name. He is now Faithful Fido, the very sym-
bol of canine companionship. He becomes, in short, a stereotype. We must remember,
then, that all our indices are also individuals. Each and every one is more than just a
species-exemplar. We must understand that although indices doubtless share charac-
teristics and faculties with their conspecifics, common characteristics and faculties that
lend them their indexical import, they are still individuals. As individuals, singular and
particular, they will always retain the capacity, whether it is exercised or not, to disrupt
the repetition on which stereotypes depend.

Having discussed Barthes’s lion, who turned out to be rather tamer than we
might have expected, I would like to close with another French feline, one who is a lit-
tle wilder. Derrida has insisted on the importance of the singular, concrete, individual
animal in his own work. In “This Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow),” he
talks about a particular, individual cat. He first mentions, briefly, some of the other
cats who have appeared in philosophy and literature. He refers to Kafka’s “vast zoopo-
etics,” thinking especially, presumably, of the ominous tale of the kitten-lamb hybrid.
He mentions The Life and Opinions of the Tomcat Murr by E.T.A. Hoffmann, as well
as Sarah Kofman’s own “magnificent and inexhaustible” text about the same feline.
Montaigne’s cat, from “Apology for Raymond Sebond” also puts in an appearance.
The poetic cats of Baudelaire and Rilke show up, fleetingly, as well as a watchful cat
from the philosophy of Martin Buber (“Animal” 374–78, 376n6, 7, 8). Even Lewis
Carroll’s cats and kittens, including, of course, the Cheshire Cat (le Chat du comté de
Chester), are brought into the picture. None of these are the cat that Derrida wants to
talk about, however. He does not want here to concern himself with any cat that is a
figure or allegory, that appears as an ambassador or representative of the “immense
symbolic responsibility” with which cats have always been charged. He wants to dis-
cuss a real, actual cat, the “unsubstitutable singularity” of a particular cat, sitting now,
gazing at him (378).9

This cat is the one who lives with Derrida, the one insisting that she be fed or let
outside. She is the one who follows him every morning from the bedroom into the
bathroom, and there sees him naked, before instantly changing her mind and
demanding to be let out again (374, 378, 382). This cat is the one who sits, now, gazing
at him as he writes. This cat is, quite surely, an individual. Admittedly, in two
telling respects, the “unsubstitutable singularity” is not maintained within Derrida’s
affable discussion. First, despite the prominent part that this cat plays within the
paper, and despite the fact that the question of naming is here of key importance,
Derrida never tells us the name of his cat. Does the cat’s name matter? Derrida thinks so: in the very paragraph in which he marks the difference between his real cat and the symbolic cats of literature, he says “Nothing can ever take away from me the certainty that what we have here is an existence that refuses to be conceptualised. And a mortal existence, for from the moment that it has a name, its name survives it.” (378–79). This feline is not named, though, either actively (elle s’appelle) or passively (nominatur).10

Derrida does not actually say that “it has a name,” of course: the reifying pronoun is an unfortunate consequence of the English translation. Derrida has pointed out to us, indeed it is relevant to the embarrassment that he feels, that his cat is a female cat, “une chatte” (374-75 and passim). But having made this specification, having drawn our attention to her gender, Derrida persists in using the “generic masculine” (un chat) that he had formerly confined to the cats of figure and allegory: he says “il a un nom.” Derrida’s cat, who has a name, though she remains unnamed, is both une chatte and un chat (378–81). Her existence both as a female cat and as an individual cat seems, by this curious conflation, temporarily to be overlooked.11 These oversights, if such they are, do not take anything from Derrida’s important argument that it is individual animals who demand fresh thought about animals. They point, rather, to the persistence with which forms of discourse, philosophical and otherwise, can work against the attempt to use words that are genuinely naked.

Derrida is embarrassed before the gaze of this cat. He is embarrassed because, he tells us, he is naked. He wants to choose words that are naked, “words from the heart” (369). He wants to avoid repeating himself, wants to resist a habit or convention that would program the very act of thinking. He wants, in fact, to be naked before an animal in order to avoid the stereotyped ways of thinking about “the animal.” He has in mind here all those philosophers who discuss that strange creature which they call “the animal” without ever calling into question this “general singular” (402, 408), or those who gaze at the animal, who turn it into something that is seen, without ever considering the fact that an animal might gaze back, might see them, might address them (382–83). These are stale, formulaic, easy modes of thinking that are repeated far too often by philosophers and theoreticians, when they think about “the animal.” Derrida wants, by contrast, to allow himself to feel uncomfortable, naked even, before the gaze of an individual animal. The animal he chooses, or perhaps the animal that chooses him, is his cat, the cat that lives with him, the cat that looks at him in his bedroom or bathroom, the cat who, like all other cats, is an irreplaceable living being.

Despite appearances, Derrida’s cat is wilder than the lion of Barthes or Aesop. She is not a cipher, nor an instance of “the animal,” nor a stereotype. Each of these
creatures closes down the animal, delimiting the possibilities of what we can think about animals. This foreclosing is a kind of domestication, a taming by repetition, which simultaneously disciplines both “the animal” and the very thinking that addresses it. In order to resist this taming, in order to maintain an openness toward animals and toward thought, we must permit the animals to be wild. This wildness is not of the vicious, predatory kind mentioned by Socrates, which brutishly pursues its rapacious desires unhindered by reason or good sense (Plato, IX: 571c–d). Nor is this a romanticism of the wild: the animals are not feral in quite the manner of Nietzsche’s creatures, innocently ferocious, bursting with vigour and vitality (Ham; Norris 73–100).

Rather, like the exceptional snakes of the bestiary, these indexical animals are wild in the sense that they wander, hither and thither, meandering wherever they want. They are wild in the sense that they will not be pinned down. They are itinerant, unmanageable, and just a little unruly: pests rather than pets (Glendinning 9). These animals are wild, then, to the extent that they resist reification, each maintaining a mortal existence that refuses to be conceptualized. Neither vacuous ciphers nor archetypal stereotypes, they retain a deliberate air of ambivalence or ambiguity, wending an unhurried course through life. Derrida’s cat is fera, following her own wishes, fancy free. She does not rage about with tooth and claw, but wanders from one room to the next, insistently roaming first this way, then that. She is, in short, an amiably unruly, indexical individual.

NOTES
3/ For an animal index of Peirce’s own, see his repeated discussions of weathercocks: §2.257, §2.265, §2.286, §2.357.

5/ Barthes’s discussion of this fable is most likely based, as he alludes (*Mythologies* 115-16), on a version by Phaedrus, a Greek author writing in Latin around the time of Augustus (Perry lxxiii). The fable is usually §5 in collections, though there are several different versions: see ‘Fabula V. Vacca, Capella, Ovis et Leo’ (in Lucianus Mueller, *Phaedri Avgvsti Libriti Fabvlae Aesopiae 3–4*); ‘§5. The Cow, the She-Goat, the Sheep, and the Lion’ (Perry 198-99); ‘§67. The Lion’s Share’ (Perry 82–85); and ‘§149. Lion, Ass, and Fox’ (Perry 449-50). The definitive text on Aesop’s Fables is Adrados’s *History of the Graeco-Latin Fable*. For the many variants of our fable see vol. 3, H. 154 (pp. 204-06), M. 218b (pp. 673-674), M. 225 (p. 678), M. 228 (p. 680), M. 232b (p. 683), M. 464 (p. 792).

6/ Barthes suggests that this sentence is the last of the lion’s claims, though in fact it is always the first. In several versions the reason he gives is that he is called king, rather than lion (“quia rex cluo”). See Perry (199).

7/ An interesting and rather instructive confusion arises here in the English translation. In the Latin sentence *quia ego nominor leo, ego* is the subject and *leo* the predicate noun. Barthes’s translation—*car moi je m’appelle lion*—retains these grammatical forms: *je* and *lion* respectively. In translating the sentence(s) into English as “because my name is lion,” however, Annette Lavers changes the subject from “I” to “my name.” (A rendering closer to the Latin might have been “because I am named lion.”) This change does not significantly affect the crux of what Barthes is doing, but it is worth noting, at least in passing, that by making “my name” the subject, Lavers introduces an ambiguity into the naming process which is not present in either the Latin or the French. On the one hand we lose the passivity implied by the Latin, in which the lion is named, by persons unspecified. On the other we lose the active implications of the French, in which Barthes has the lion call himself “lion” (a formulation that Barthes is, of course, *required* by the French language to make). We will return to this question of naming presently.

8/ Dyer alludes very briefly to this subversive potential (15).


10/ In this light, a third translation of the lion’s declaration suggests itself: had the punctuation been available to him, the *individual* lion of Aesop’s fable might have said, “My name is ‘Leo.’” For a fascinating discussion of the history and impact of punctuation, including italics and many different kinds of quotation marks, see Malcolm Beckworth Parkes, *Pause and Effect: An Introduction to the History of Punctuation in the West*.


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