
The Quiescent Ass and the Dumbstruck Wolf

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The DONKEY and the LITTLE ASS (*asinus et asellus*) are so named from being sat upon—as if from the word ‘seat’ or ‘saddle’ (*a sede*). People captured the Ass by the following stratagem. Being forsooth a tardy beast and having no sense at all, it surrendered as soon as men surrounded it. The Little Ass, although smaller than the Wild Ass, is more useful, because it puts up with work and does not take exception to almost unlimited neglect.

A WOLF’s eyes shine at night like lamps, and its nature is that, if it sees a man first, it strikes him dumb and triumphs over him like a victor over the voiceless. But, also, if it feels itself to have been seen first, it loses its own ferocity and cannot run.

T. H. White, *The Book of Beasts*¹

“Is there any point to which you would wish to draw my attention?”

“To the curious incident of the dog in the night-time.”

“The dog did nothing in the night-time.”

“That was the curious incident,” remarked Sherlock Holmes.

Arthur Conan Doyle, “The Adventure of Silver Blaze”²

Introduction

The medieval bestiary relied on the pedagogic potential of individual animals. This compendium of observation and time-honoured anecdote

1. T. H. White, *The Book of Beasts: Being a Translation from a Latin Bestiary of the Twelfth Century* (Gloucester: Alan Sutton, 1984), pp. 58, 82.

2. Arthur Conan Doyle, “The Adventure of Silver Blaze” (1892), in *Sherlock Holmes: The Complete Illustrated Short Stories* (London: Chancellor Press, 1985), p. 244.

dote derived from sources stretching back to the ancients and before, drawing on the works of Aristotle, Pliny, the anonymous “Physiologus,” and others.³ The medieval scholar appreciated that the animals it contained could be edifying. Thus the beaver, knowing himself to be pursued for his medicinal testicles, would remove them with a bite and cast them before the huntsman. In like manner, the bestiary asserted, “every man who inclines toward the commandment of God and who wants to live chastely, must cut off from himself all vices, all motions of lewdness, and must cast them from him in the Devil’s face.”⁴ The weasel, meanwhile, who conceives through the ear and gives birth through the mouth, signifies those “who willingly accept by ear the seed of God’s word, but who, shackled by the love of earthly things, put it away in the wrong place and dissimulate what [they] hear.”⁵ The principal role of the bestiary, then, was didactic. It was recognized that each beast could teach the reader something different, and this by virtue of its distinctive way of life.

In the following, I would like to discuss two ways in which non-human animals function in the works of philosophy and cultural theory. I do not claim that these two roles exhaust the ways in which animals appear in such texts, but they recur with sufficient frequency to warrant a closer examination. The first and most common function of the animal is as a *cipher*. The philosopher J. L. Austin will illustrate the part that the cipherous animal plays with the help of his pigs, before we look in more detail at a particular ass discussed by the medieval scholar Jean Buridan. The second function of the animal is as an *index*. Here we will examine one of Austin’s fish, before we turn to the white wolves who provide the focus of a famous case study of Freud’s. In each of these four cases the animals seem at first to remain dutifully silent. By attending to the manner in which they are presented, however, we will find that, like the creatures of the bestiary, they can be remarkably instructive.

Austin’s Cipherous Swine

The term “cipher” derives from the Sanskrit *Śūnya*, which literally means “empty.”⁶ Translated into Arabic, it became the adjective *ṣifr*, also employed as a substantive to designate the arithmetic symbol “zero” or “nought.” The concept was adopted by Europeans in this

3. White, *Book of Beasts* (above, n. 1), pp. 230–247.

4. *Ibid.*, pp. 28–29.

5. *Ibid.*, pp. 92–93.

6. All quotations in this paragraph come from the *Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972–86), pp. 224–225.

latter sense during the Middle Ages and became the Latin *cifra*. Acceptance of Arabic numeric notation (really Indian) was slow and in many quarters reluctant, but the importance of the addition of the symbol zero was revolutionary and the whole system came to be known by its name, *cipher*. The process of calculating by means of the “new” system was, by extension, *ciphering*.⁷ Figuratively, during the sixteenth century, the term “cipher” began to be used of a person or thing “who fills a place, but is of no importance or worth” in its own right. The real power residing elsewhere, the cipher remains “a nonentity, a ‘mere nothing.’”

Although all manner of entities are fair game for cipherous appropriation, philosophers have been especially keen on animals. A good many appear in J. L. Austin’s *Sense and Sensibilia*, his reconstructed lectures on perception and knowledge.⁸ Austin believed that the first step toward relieving a significant number of philosophical perplexities is to enumerate at least some of the many and diverse uses to which contentious words employed in the discussion are actually put. Without such elementary ground-laying, philosophers embark on speculative analyses and semantic tampering at their peril. The seventh lecture in this volume concerns the complex set of concepts denoted by the word “real.” Austin’s chief interest in this entertaining essay is to show how all manner of metaphysical pseudo-problems are resolved (or dissolved) if we attend to the ways in which the word “real” is ordinarily used (“real cream,” “a real hiding,” and so on).⁹ Several different animals put in appearances, including a horse, a number of ducks, a chameleon, a goose, and even a talking cat or two. Most, though not all, do little more in the text than fill a place, his pigs being a prime example.

Austin points out that one of the many uses to which the word “real” is actually put is as an “adjuster-word.” The demands of the world upon language are innumerable and unforeseeable, and no matter how large our vocabulary, there will inevitably be occasions when we don’t have words ready at hand that are entirely adequate to our new experiences:

7. For a brief history of zero and a fascinating discussion of the difference between the symbol and the number, see Constance Reid, “0,” in *From Zero to Infinity: What Makes Numbers Interesting*, 4th ed. (Washington, D.C.: Mathematical Association of America, 1992), pp. 1–15; and Karl Menninger, *Number Words and Number Symbols: A Cultural History of Numbers*, trans. Paul Broneer (New York: Dover Publications, 1992), pp. 396–403, 422–424.

8. J. L. Austin, *Sense and Sensibilia*, reconstructed by G. J. Warnock (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962).

9. *Ibid.*, pp. 64, 73.

We have the word 'pig', for instance, and a pretty clear idea which animals, among those we fairly commonly encounter, are and are not to be so called. But one day we come across a new kind of animal, which looks and behaves very much as pigs do, but not quite as pigs do; it is somehow different.¹⁰

About these new creatures we may remain silent, or we may immediately invent an entirely new word with which to refer to them. More likely, though, we would initially say that such animals were like pigs, but, if pressed, that they were not true pigs, or perhaps that they were not real pigs. We would thus be able to talk about these creatures even without their having a specific name of their own. A similar advantage would be gained, Austin suggests, if we talked about the members of the new species as "piggish" or as "pig-type" animals, or perhaps referred to them as "quasi-pigs."

Austin's point is to demonstrate that our uses of the word "real" are many and varied, and that frequently the creature or object to which the term is applied is not real as opposed to *unreal* (illusory, insubstantial, phenomenal), but a *genuine* something (a real pig) as opposed to a genuine something else (a real quasi-pig). His concern is with the everyday discourses involving the word "real" and the light they can throw upon the half-baked theories so often invented by philosophers. To this end, *any* animal could have filled the place of the pigs (and quasi-pigs) quite adequately. There is nothing about the pig, *qua* pig, that lends itself to the discussion; any other creature would have done. In fact, *any* object, animate or otherwise, might be substituted here. Cats (and their cat-like kin), dogs (and their doggy relatives), tables or chairs (and examples of quasi-furniture)—indeed any entity among those we fairly commonly encounter—would have made Austin's point just as clearly. The pig fills a place, but is of no importance or worth in her own right *as a pig*. The pig, in short, is a cipher.

Buridan's Quiescent Ass

A second example further illustrates the frequently neglected and unhappy lot of the philosophers' cipherous animals. The paradox of "Buridan's ass" has circulated among a particular philosophical set for donkeys' years. A hungry ass, we are told, stands between two bales of hay. The bales are identical in every respect, or at least as regards their size and succulence, and the ass stands exactly equidistant from each. The ass looks longingly from one to the other, but, due to their equal merit, is unable to choose between them and

10. *Ibid.*, p. 74.

consequently starves to death.¹¹ This poor beast, it turns out, has the dubious honor of functioning as a cipher on two distinct levels.

First, as with Austin's pigs, it is not necessary that the indecisive creature be an ass; any animal placed between identical food sources would do. And, in fact, it was *not* a donkey. The first of many confusions regarding this tale arises from the fact that Buridan's ass is never actually mentioned in his writings.¹² He does discuss a dog, similarly paralyzed by indecision between two equal portions of food, in his commentary on Aristotle's *De Caelo*. And, further, in Aristotle's own example, it is not a hungry dog, but a man, or even a piece of hair. He considers "the hair which, stretched strongly but evenly at every point, will not break, or the man who is violently, but equally, hungry and thirsty, and stands at an equal distance from food and drink, and who therefore must remain where he is."¹³ In fact, as the example was taken up with alacrity by commentators and others, the role of the cipher was filled variously by: the place of planet Earth in the heavens; a man between two dates (or different parts of a loaf, or wine and gammon); a lamb between two fierce wolves; a hound between two does; a student between books; a man between two knives; a courtier between two ladies; and even an accused between two identical doors that are to decide his fate, behind which are secreted a ferocious tiger and a fair maiden.¹⁴

Second, the cipherous nature of the ass is demonstrated especially clearly by the fact that the function of the story—the philosophical point that is intended—has changed over time. The nature of the donkey work has evolved more than once, and this is one ass who has indeed had to put up with a good deal of labor and almost un-

11. Nicholas Rescher, "Choice without Preference: A Study of the History and of the Logic of the Problem of 'Buridan's Ass,'" *Kant-Studien* 51 (1959–60): 142–175.

12. Schopenhauer complains bitterly of the fable that "one has now been searching his writings for some hundred years [. . .] I myself own an edition of his *Sophismata* [. . .] in which I have repeatedly searched for it in vain, although asses occur as examples on virtually every page," quoted in *ibid.*, p. 153. Many other writers have run into similar difficulties, including, it has to be said, the present author.

13. Aristotle, *De Caelo/On the Heavens*, trans. W. K. C. Guthrie (London: Heinemann, 1938), 2:13:295b (p. 237). Schopenhauer conjectures that Buridan changed Aristotle's man to an ass "solely because it was the custom of this parsimonious Scholastic to take for his example either Socrates and Plato, or *asinum*," quoted in Rescher, "Choice without Preference" (above, n. 11), p. 154. William of Baskerville, the Franciscan sleuth of Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose* and fictional contemporary of Buridan, divines the name of the abbot's escaped horse, Brunellus, thanks to his familiarity with Buridan's frequent animal examples; see Eco, *The Name of the Rose*, trans. William Weaver (London: Secker & Warburg, 1983), p. 24.

14. Rescher, "Choice without Preference" (above, n. 11), *passim*.

limited neglect. In his meticulously researched essay on the history and employment of Buridan's ass, Nicholas Rescher identifies several distinct roles for which the example has been appropriated,¹⁵ but for the sake of brevity we will confine ourselves here to just two. In the first instance, the story deals with the old philosophical chestnut of *freewill and determinism*. This is the role that the story is generally believed to have played in Buridan's own teachings.¹⁶ In his questions on Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, Buridan asks: "Would the will, having been put between two opposites, with all being wholly alike on both sides, be able to determine itself rather to one opposed alternative than to the other?"¹⁷

His answer is a blunt "no." Buridan provides the examples of a traveler presented with two routes to the same destination (from Paris to Avignon via Lyons or via Dun-le-roy), and of a sailor caught in a storm, trying to decide whether to dump his cargo or risk holding on to it. In a formulation that Hume would later turn precisely on its head, Buridan argues that the *will* is not capable, in itself, of making choices, but is subject to the dictates of *reason*. Should the latter discern an advantage in a particular course of action, the will can only follow, and conversely, if reason can find no advantage, the will remains dormant. The ass and, for that matter, the human unfortunate enough to find him- or herself between equally pressing alternatives, be they bales of hay or paths to Avignon, will be unable to pursue either.

Thus it is clear, to Buridan at least, that the ass must starve. However, an alternative interpretation of the paradox is possible, which allows us to save our ass. It has been suggested that the tale of the starving ass was told not by Buridan, but by his opponents.¹⁸ On this reading, the patent absurdity of the outcome—that an ass would starve to death while standing before not just one, but *two* perfectly good meals—demonstrates the error of Buridan's theory of the will by means of a simple *reductio ad absurdum*. The tale, far from demonstrating an "intellectual determination of the will,"¹⁹ reaffirms instead the (fourteenth-century) common-sense belief in the *freedom* of the will. Buridan himself, we are now being told, was a bit of an ass. Unless further textual evidence comes to light that would al-

15. *Ibid.*, p. 171.

16. See, however, *ibid.*, pp. 153–155.

17. Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 154.

18. *Ibid.*, pp. 154–155.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 155.

low us to decide definitively whether the ass belongs to Buridan or to his naysayers, a choice between these equally appetizing alternatives seems impossible. But either way, the very fact that this ass has been used to argue for diametrically opposing accounts of the will serves further to illustrate the cipherous role that the poor creature has been required to play.

In more recent times, the function of the tale has evolved entirely away from the discussion of free will, and is used instead to illustrate the apparent paradox of making a *choice without preference*. The object of the discussion shifts from a contentious human or animal capacity (free will) to the allegedly paradoxical limitations of pure reason. Presented with two alternatives, between which, by definition, one has no preference, it seems on first sight to be obvious that there can be no reason to choose between them. We are driven to conclude that there can be no reasonable choice without preference. But, on the other hand, Buridan's ass, being a reasonable creature, would certainly prefer the outcome of a full stomach to that of starvation; therefore the ass *must* choose one of the bales of hay, but without having any reason for preferring one bale to the other.²⁰ How to resolve this paradox? Entering enthusiastically into the spirit of the debate, Rescher manages to provide an ingenious, and only seemingly paradoxical, solution that dictates that the reasonable course of action is in fact to choose a bale at random.²¹ Whether this solution, or indeed the "paradox" it is designed to resolve, is convincing need not concern us here. What is of import is that our ass has once again succumbed to the cipherous requirements of the philosophers, uncomplainingly undertaking duties wholly different from those originally proposed.

Both Austin's pigs and Buridan's ass operate, in their respective texts, as "place-fillers." They are nonentities, mere nothings, of no importance or worth in their own right. The use by philosophy of nonhuman animals as ciphers is a particular example of the casual anthropocentrism that pervades the discipline. Philosophers have frequently conversed *using* animals, but less often do these discussions prove to be *about* animals. They remain invisible, metaphorical phantoms, employed purely as examples of epistemological problems or metaphysical speculations. When ciphers are involved, the focus is not on the animal but on the argument, the example, the problem to be solved.

This elision is an example of the animal made "absent referent," the process described by Carol Adams that "permits us to forget

20. Ibid., p. 142.

21. Ibid., pp. 167–171.

about the animal as an independent entity."²² In her book *The Sexual Politics of Meat*, Adams provides a critical, feminist analysis of the structures underpinning the mistreatment of animals within contemporary culture. Building on the work of the literary theorist Margaret Homans, Adams suggests that there are three ways in which animals are made absent referents. First, on a very literal level, the eating of meat requires that individual animal lives are made absent. Second, these animals are further absented by means of linguistic definition: not even dead animals are present when we talk, instead, of "meat" or "veal."²³ Finally, animals become absent referents on a further metaphorical level: whenever someone suggests that they have been treated "like a piece of meat," for instance, the animal's own fate is "transmuted into a metaphor for someone else's existence."²⁴

Adams suggests that in becoming a metaphorical absent referent, the "original meaning is undercut as it is absorbed into a different hierarchy of meaning."²⁵ Our animal ciphers represent a fourth, philosophical variety of absent referent. Adams argues that "[t]he absent referent is both there and not there [. . .] we fail to accord this absent referent its own existence."²⁶ Although the animals—the pigs and the asses—are there, they are not there *as animals*—that is, as particular pigs or asses in their own right. The cipherous absent referent is not accorded its own existence, but derives its meaning from its application or reference to some entirely unrelated endeavor. In addition, it is not uncommon and perhaps not entirely coincidental that these ciphers, these philosophical beasts of burden dutifully carrying out their delegated tasks without so much as a murmur of dissent, find themselves on the receiving end of a bit of little offhand animal abuse or even, as with our unfortunate ass, meet with an untimely end. More often than not, the place that needs filling is a less than happy one.

The absent referent, Adams argues, "enables us to resist efforts to make animals present."²⁷ These philosophical animals who are

22. Carol J. Adams, *The Sexual Politics of Meat: A Feminist-Vegetarian Critical Theory* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990), p. 40.

23. For a detailed and fascinating discussion of the naming of animals as food, see Edmund Leach, "Anthropological Aspects of Language: Animal Categories and Verbal Abuse," in *New Directions in the Study of Language*, ed. Eric H. Lenneberg (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1964), pp. 23–63.

24. Adams, *Sexual Politics of Meat* (above, n. 22), p. 42.

25. *Ibid.*

26. *Ibid.*

27. *Ibid.*, p. 40.

present yet absent—these ciphers—are made to act as interchangeable placeholders for a generic Animal, a characterless animal amalgam. The inconceivable variety of living beings is reduced to a more manageable philosophical form. This leveling of creation has been described by David Wood as “a deadening shorthand,”²⁸ which presupposes, as Derrida argues, “one thing, one domain, one homogeneous type of entity, which is called animality *in general*, for which any example would do the job.”²⁹ The Aanimal: this creature remains enclosed, Derrida says, as if within a zoo or paddock, by a definite article.³⁰ From Plato to Heidegger, he complains, no philosopher has protested against the general singular of “the animal.”³¹

Lynda Birke and Luciana Parisi argue that this positing of a “generic animal,” whether done explicitly or otherwise, is an example of the “homogenization of the colonized.”³² This animal in the general singular is, Derrida says, “a sin against rigorous thinking, vigilance, lucidity, or empirical authority.”³³ It is a hypothesis that is “irreducible” and “dogmatic”³⁴ and constitutes, he contends, an *as-inanimity* (*une bêtise*).³⁵ The absencing of the individual animal from those philosophical texts, which would nonetheless utilize some beast or creature as a placeholder, produces thereby an interchangeable cipher, drawn with a deadening shorthand from the larger set of the generically singular Aanimal. There has been, however, another way in which animals have been employed within philosophical and critical discourse.

28. David Wood, “*Comment ne pas manger—Deconstruction and Humanism*,” in *Animal Others: On Ethics, Ontology, and Animal Life*, ed. H. Peter Steeves (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), pp. 15–35, quote on 29.

29. Jacques Derrida, *Of Spirit: Heidegger and the Question*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), p. 57.

30. Jacques Derrida, “The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow),” trans. David Wills, *Critical Inquiry* 28:2 (2002): 367–418, quote on 398.

31. *Ibid.*, p. 408.

32. Lynda Birke and Luciana Parisi, “Animals, Becoming,” in *Animal Others* (above, n. 28), pp. 55–73, quote on 59. Birke and Parisi discuss the work of Val Plumwood, who in turn draws on Nancy Hartsock and Albert Memmi. Memmi calls this homogenization the “mark of the plural”; see Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 53–55, and Memmi, *The Colonizer and the Colonized* (London: Souvenir Press, 1974), p. 85.

33. Derrida, “The Animal That Therefore I Am” (above, n. 30), p. 416.

34. Derrida, *Of Spirit* (above, n. 29), p. 57.

35. Derrida, “The Animal That Therefore I Am” (above, n. 30), p. 400.

Piscine Indices

A number of the animals of philosophy have operated not as ciphers, but as *indices*. The term “index” derives from the Latin *indicare*, meaning to demonstrate, indicate, or expose. The forefinger is called the index finger precisely because it is used for pointing things out.³⁶ The animal index, then, is a creature who points out or discloses something for us; these animals helpfully indicate an avenue of thought that will prove productive. Unlike ciphers, these animal indices are neither arbitrarily chosen nor interchangeable: that which the index demonstrates, the point that is made, is peculiar to the particular creature at hand.

Austin himself employs an index in the same lecture in which his cipherous pigs appeared. He is discussing yet another way in which we use the word “real”:

Suppose [. . .] that there is a species of fish which looks vividly multi-coloured, slightly glowing perhaps, at a depth of a thousand feet. I ask you what its real colour is. So you catch a specimen and lay it out on deck, making sure the condition of the light is just about normal, and you find that it looks a muddy sort of greyish white. Well, is *that* its real colour?³⁷

Austin’s point here is to demonstrate that the “real colour” of something cannot be explained, as some philosophically minded souls have been inclined to say, simply as the color that it looks “to a normal observer in conditions of normal or standard illumination.”³⁸ If we observe of someone, “That isn’t the real color of her hair,” we are not suggesting that, stretched or otherwise, once she moved her hair into normal light we would find that it is, in fact, a different color.³⁹ The word “real” has many varied applications that cannot be reduced to some core element. And, in contrast to his cipherous pigs, Austin’s deep-sea fish has here been carefully chosen to help illuminate this point. There are relatively few creatures whose appearance and color can change so drastically with their environment, and substituting dogs, cats, or even pigs for the biolumines-

36. For Peirce’s semiotic discussion of the index, see Charles S. Peirce, *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, ed. Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press/Harvard University Press, 1931–35), 2:283–291, also 2:281, 2:304, 2:305, 2:306, 2:357, and 5:75.

37. Austin, *Sense and Sensibilia* (above, n. 8), pp. 65–66.

38. *Ibid.*, p. 65.

39. *Ibid.*

cent fish would render Austin's lesson meaningless.⁴⁰ This fish is an index precisely because, as the best creature for the job, she is more than a mere place-filler.

The obliging animal index, then, like a finger-post, discloses the direction we should take. It is worth remembering, however, that in Latin, the term "index" also means "one who informs on another." We find, in fact, that it is those mistreated animal ciphers, those mere zeroes, who often manage to transform themselves into digits in this way. The cipher here becomes an index both in the sense of a sign that points out or discloses, and also in the sense of one who betrays: the overworked animal cipher finally rats on his or her employer. We can see this duplicity all too clearly if we turn now to a particular case study of Freud's.

Docile Dogs and Dumbstruck Wolves

Our second animal index appears in Freud's "From the History of an Infantile Neurosis," better known as the case of the "Wolf Man."⁴¹ A vast number of different animals appear in this study—snakes, horses, flies, beetles, foxes, sheep, a lion, caterpillars, a butterfly, and even a giant snail—but one species in particular predominates. Freud tells us that when initially approached by his twenty-three-year-old Russian patient, who remains nameless throughout the account, the latter was suffering from poor health, was completely dependent on others, and had found himself obliged to spend time in sanatoria, diagnosed with "manic-depressive insanity."⁴² The true causes of his suffering, Freud relates, were brought to light only after a lengthy analysis, many of the details of which were so extraordinary and incredible that Freud initially hesitated in his decision to report on the case lest it place too great a strain on the credulity of his readers.⁴³

The key to the analysis lay concealed, Freud believed, in a singular childhood dream dating from around the time of the patient's fourth birthday that had been related early in the analysis, but whose correct interpretation took several years:⁴⁴

40. Austin does, in fact, mention a second colorfully indexical animal here: a chameleon; *ibid.*, p. 66.

41. Sigmund Freud, "From the History of an Infantile Neurosis," trans. Alix Strachey and Alan Tyson, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, 24 vols., ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1955), pp. 17:3–122.

42. *Ibid.*, pp. 17:7–8. The Wolf Man's name was, in fact, Sergei Pankejeff.

43. *Ibid.*, p. 17:12.

44. *Ibid.*, p. 17:33.

I dreamt that it was night and that I was lying in my bed. (My bed stood with its foot towards the window; in front of the window there was a row of old walnut trees. I know it was winter when I had the dream, and night-time.) Suddenly the window opened of its own accord, and I was terrified to see that some white wolves were sitting on the big walnut tree in front of the window. There were six or seven of them. The wolves were quite white, and looked more like foxes or sheepdogs, for they had big tails like foxes, and they had their ears pricked like dogs when they pay attention to something. In great terror, evidently of being eaten up by the wolves, I screamed and woke up.⁴⁵

Delving into the childhood of his patient, Freud uncovers several encounters with wolves. We hear, as did the young patient, of the wolf in Reynard the Fox who used its tail as fishing bait and thereby broke it off in the ice.⁴⁶ We are reminded of the wolves in the two fairytales Little Red Riding Hood and The Seven Little Goats who were eventually cut open in order to rescue their victims.⁴⁷ Freud speculates that his patient's father may well have played with him by pretending to be a dog or a wolf;⁴⁸ in addition, the patient's elder sister used to torment him with a terrifying picture-book illustration in which a wolf walked upright.⁴⁹ Finally, the element that Freud believes instigated the dream, is the young patient was being told a tale by his grandfather in which a wolf who attacked a tailor had his tail pulled off.⁵⁰ Using these clues and more, Freud begins to tender an analysis of the dream.

Freud divines that the wolf who so terrifies the patient is in fact a surrogate, used by the patient as a place-filler, and that his real fear is of his father.⁵¹ Why does he fear his father? The anxiety is the result of the patient repudiating his own desire for sexual satisfaction from his father. The repression that causes this anxiety results from a conflict between the patient's realization that castration is the necessary precondition for satisfaction of his desire, and a narcissistic genital libido concerned for his male organ.⁵² What, then, were the origins of his desire for sexual satisfaction with his father and of his

45. *Ibid.*, p. 17:29.

46. *Ibid.*, p. 17:25.

47. *Ibid.*, pp. 17:25, 17:31.

48. *Ibid.*, pp. 17:32, 17:44, 17:106.

49. *Ibid.*, pp. 17:29–30.

50. *Ibid.*, pp. 17:30–31, 17:102.

51. *Ibid.*, pp. 17:32, 17:34, 17:40.

52. *Ibid.*, p. 17:46.

castration anxiety? Having long admired his father, the patient began to desire him sexually following an unfortunate seduction by his slightly older sister and the later rejection of his own attempted seduction of his nanny, all of which resulted in a passive sexual attitude.⁵³ Most significantly, Freud deduces that at the age of a year and a half, in a malarial haze, the patient witnessed the primal scene of his parents' enthusiastic copulation *a tergo*, a fascinating and edifying spectacle that, Freud informs us, subsequently confirmed his patient's suspicions regarding castration due to the particularly clear view of both sets of genitalia that this union afforded.⁵⁴ But still, why did his fear and anxiety manifest as a terror of being eaten by a *wolf*? Why were his prior experiences of wolves, in fairytales and picture books, now activated? What could this seemingly unconnected animal *cipher* tell us?

The answer lies, in part, in the particular method of copulation chosen by his parents—a bonding, Freud helpfully points out, that was *more ferarum* (“in the manner of wild animals”). This required his father to be upright, just like the wolf in the picture book that was to terrify the young patient later in life, and his mother to be bent over like an animal.⁵⁵ Similarly, the wolves who lost their tails in *Reynard the Fox* and in his grandfather's story will have naturally associated themselves with his fears of castration. With the wolf theme established, further elements of the dream now fall into place: the violent action of his parents is transposed into the immobility of the wolves, the patient's own intense attention to the primal scene becomes that of the wolves, their color is a reflection of his parents' bedclothes and undergarments, their prominent tails are an attempt to *deny* the confirmation of castration, and so on.⁵⁶ The patient's fear of “being eaten by a wolf” derives not from the content of the dream itself, but from the fairytales in which ravenous wolves featured. The anxiety prompted by his conflicting desires causes his relation to his father to be displaced onto a father-surrogate, the wolf, whom he fears will eat him.⁵⁷ Here, then, the animal cipher, the wolf, becomes in Freud's expert hands an index, helpfully pointing us circuitously but inevitably back to the cause of the patient's debilitating neurosis.

53. *Ibid.*, pp. 17:20, 17:24, 17:27.

54. *Ibid.*, pp. 17:36–38.

55. *Ibid.*, pp. 17:39, 17:41.

56. *Ibid.*, pp. 17:34–35. A concise and exhaustive version of Freud's reading of the various features of the dream can be found on pages 17:42–44, note 2.

57. *Ibid.*, p. 17:64.

As the wolves take on this new role in the narrative—transformed from ciphers into indices—Freud reveals that they also have a new form. The wolves in the dream, it turns out, were not in fact wolves at all: they were sheepdogs. Up to this point Freud has been cautious in his explanation of the primal scene; afraid that it might be the point at which the reader abandons him, he asks that we adopt only a provisional belief in its reality: it may well have been a primal *fantasy*, the various elements of which were drawn from elsewhere.⁵⁸ It is entirely possible, Freud tells us, that it was not his parents that the patient observed copulating, but animals. Shortly before the dream he had been taken repeatedly to visit the flocks of sheep on the family estate. There, Freud speculates, he would be able to see large white sheepdogs “and probably also observe them copulating.”⁵⁹ Remember that in the dream, by the patient’s own admission, the wolves “looked more like foxes or sheepdogs, for they had big tails like foxes, and they had their ears pricked like dogs.” The patient subsequently conflated this observation with a perfectly innocent scene of his two parents together. The creatures of the dream, then, were in fact sheepdogs in wolves’ clothing. This alternative explanation of the primal scene and of the wolves certainly reduces the demands on our credulity,⁶⁰ but the transformation from wolf to dog has a curious side effect on Freud’s analysis.

We should notice here that at the point at which Freud demonstrates that “wolf” in fact means “father,” he neglects the specificity of the particular animal in question. He does not draw our attention to any characteristic of wolves, *qua* wolves, that lead him to his discovery. There is nothing about wolves themselves that facilitates this unveiling; in fact, it is only by means of a transformation (the wolves into dogs) and then a speculation (the young patient saw sheepdogs copulating) that he is able definitively to discern the wolf as a father substitute at all. So why does Freud feel compelled to turn perfectly serviceable wolves into dogs? We can hazard two separate answers, one *ad hominem*, and the other, in a sense, *ad canem*.

First, Freud’s determination to make this equation between wolf and dog is an *overdetermination*. Just as every dream, according to Freud, tells us about the dreamer, every analysis is revealing of the analyst, and the introduction of dogs perhaps tells us more about

58. *Ibid.*, pp. 17:36, 17:39.

59. *Ibid.*, p. 17:58.

60. *Ibid.*, pp. 17:57–60, 17:120. Ultimately, Freud admits, the evidence is inconclusive as to whether the child observed a primal *scene* or imagined a primal *fantasy*, but for the purposes of the role it plays in his neurosis, and in its subsequent analysis, the distinction is a “matter of indifference.”

Freud than about his patient.⁶¹ In his “Going to the Dogs: Freudian Caninophilia,” Gary Genosko explores what he calls “the rich textual and extra-textual caninophilia” within the history of psychoanalysis.⁶² Genosko catalogs in exhaustive detail Freud’s great fondness for dogs in both his work and life.⁶³ Genosko’s lengthy account of Freud’s history as a dog lover might suggest to us that the transformation with which we are concerned is in fact a *displacement*, the pack of wolves nudged aside by their canine kin.⁶⁴ These latter creatures slink into the manifest content of the analysis from some unacknowledged cache of Freud’s own latent concerns⁶⁵—or perhaps, rather than a case of metonymic transposition, this is an example of metaphoric *identification*. Like the Wolf Man himself, Freud combines wolf and dog into a single composite structure, one with recognized and entirely innocent shared features—their general canine form and disposition—that in fact mask some concealed, displaced common element, perhaps even a commonality that is *wished for* by Freud.⁶⁶ What could such a common element be, which wolf and dog jointly identify and conceal? We will come to this in a moment. Whatever the specific psychic mechanisms at work here, Freud seems to have been “blinkerered by his puppy love”⁶⁷ and is made silent, by the arrival of his dogs, on the matter of wolves.

61. On the essentially egoistic nature of dreams, see Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, trans. James Strachey, in *The Standard Edition* (above, n. 41), p. 4:322.

62. Gary Genosko, “Going to the Dogs: Freudian Caninophilia,” in *Undisciplined Theory* (London: Sage, 1998), pp. 48–72, quote on 71.

63. We learn, for instance, not only of the routine presence of dogs during psychoanalytic sessions (*ibid.*, p. 48) and of their frequent occurrence in Freud’s letters, diary, snapshots, and home movies (*ibid.*, p. 51), but also how Freud was inclined to feed the family dogs from the table (*ibid.*, p. 50), how his daughter Anna’s Alsatian, named Wolf, once bit Freud’s disciple Ernest Jones (*ibid.*, pp. 49–50), and especially how Freud came to provide a German translation of his friend Marie Bonaparte’s tale, *Topsy: The Story of a Golden-Haired Chow* (*ibid.*, pp. 57–58, 65–72).

64. On displacement, see Freud, *Interpretation of Dreams* (above, n. 61), pp. 4:305–309.

65. It almost seems as if Freud were modeling the dream wolves on the only wolf *he* knew personally: his daughter Anna’s pet, named “Wolf,” who *was* in fact a dog. Wolf was certainly in the house during the times of the young Russian’s analysis sessions, and may even have been present during the analytic hour; see Genosko, “Going to the Dogs” (above, n. 62), pp. 50–51. Or perhaps Freud was thinking of one Dr Wulff, with whose work he was familiar, who had psychoanalyzed a nine-year-old boy with a dog phobia; see Freud, “The Return of Totemism in Childhood,” *Totem and Taboo*, trans. James Strachey, in *The Standard Edition* (above, n. 41), pp. 13:vi–161, quote on 128.

66. On identification and composite structures, see Freud, *Interpretation of Dreams* (above, n. 61), pp. 4:319–326.

67. Genosko, “Going to the Dogs” (above, n. 62), p. 7.

The second reason that Freud settles on dogs in his narrative is perhaps due to their traditionally faithful nature. The dutiful, occasionally even docile, house dog, it might be argued, is altogether more suited than the wild wolf to the family setting in which Freud wants his analysis to play out. Genosko argues that Freud's predilection for dogs ends up skewing the psychoanalytic endeavor. This weakness manifests in two related guises, which Genosko calls "pillars of the psychoanalytic bestiary."⁶⁸ First, it causes Freud to domesticate the animals that appear in the analysis. Freud suggests that the anxiety-animal, the wolf, was not easily accessible to observation by the young patient, as a horse or dog might have been, and was known only from stories and picture books.⁶⁹ But, in fact, as a Russian living in "wolf country" where wolves were part and parcel of "popular culture and aristocratic sport," his patient had plenty of exposure to large white wolves.⁷⁰ He may well have encountered them outside the orderly structures of childhood fairytales. Thus, the wolves of the dream *could* well have been wolves and not dogs. Whether or not this detail of personal history seriously affects Freud's explanation becomes immaterial, however, when we consider the second pillar.

The transformation from wolf to dog helps demonstrate that it doesn't really matter *which* animal operates as father-surrogate in this, or indeed in any other psychoanalytic narrative involving the animal phobias of young boys. Turning to *Totem and Taboo* Genosko shows that for Freud *all* animals play this same role, whether we consider Little Árpád slaughtering and caressing his toy chickens or Little Hans donning his horse's nose-bag and biting his father. "It was the same in every case: where the children concerned were boys, their fear related at bottom to their father and had merely been displaced on to the animal."⁷¹ Just like the boy who cried wolf

68. *Ibid.*, p. 58.

69. Freud, "From the History of an Infantile Neurosis" (above, n. 41), p. 17:32; Freud, "The Return of Totemism in Childhood" (above, n. 65), p. 13:127.

70. Genosko, "Going to the Dogs" (above, n. 62), pp. 60–61. For the Wolf Man's own account of his childhood, which features wolves, dogs, horses, and a good many sheep, see Muriel Gardiner, ed., *The Wolf Man and Sigmund Freud* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), pp. 17–36. On Freud's domestication of the wolves, see Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (London: Athlone Press, 1988), pp. 26–38.

71. Genosko, "Going to the Dogs" (above, n. 62), p. 59. Freud points out that no detailed examination had been made of children's animal phobias, and that their general meaning may not turn out to be uniform: the widespread phobias of rats and mice may well result from different mechanisms. Those cases at which he does look, however, which all involve large animals, do all submit to the guiding thesis that he here proposes; see Freud, "The Return of Totemism in Childhood" (above, n. 65), pp. 13:127–128.

one time too many, Freud is in danger of losing credibility. The Wolf Man's father is even represented by a lion at one point.⁷² Genosko argues that Freud's "zoological vision was blinkered by his approach to animals as phobic objects," causing him to see them as no more than "sign vehicles."⁷³ There is nothing especially significant about dogs or wolves (or chickens or horses) that indicates a father-substitute; as B. F. Skinner famously put it, "Pigeon, rat, monkey, which is which? It doesn't matter."⁷⁴ They are all *really* just Daddy. *This* is the displaced common element that Freud's latent analysis-thoughts wilfully wish into existence between dogs and wolves: that both represent the father. In short, Genosko reveals Freud's "indices" as the interchangeable place-fillers they always were. Freud *seems* to treat the animals as indices pointing toward the father, but, in fact, because the individual characteristics of the animals are in all cases effaced, he actually continues to treat them as no more than ciphers.

Freud's faithful dogs, silently lying doggo, were perhaps a little too quiet. Just like the faithful hound in the Sherlock Holmes mystery, by submitting to their master, by failing to give voice in loud and distinctively doggy tones, these dogs denounce him.⁷⁵ Their submissive, cipherous silence speaks volumes. Freud tries to domesticate the wolves by transforming them into indexical dogs; but, despite his best attempts to show the necessity of the connection, they remain obstinately cipherous within the narrative, contributing nothing in their own right *as dogs*. They are not quite the docile doggies that the psychoanalyst had wished for. Freud thought that he had espied the wolves first and thereby deprived them of all their ferocity, but in reality they had been keeping their eye on him long before he had himself adjusted to the twilight

72. Freud, "From the History of an Infantile Neurosis" (above, n. 41), p. 17:39.

73. Genosko, "Going to the Dogs" (above, n. 62), p. 60.

74. Quoted in Frans de Waal, *The Ape and the Sushi Master: Cultural Reflections by a Primatologist* (London: Allen Lane, 2001), p. 57.

75. Arthur Conan Doyle's short story, "The Adventure of Silver Blaze," includes several more significant animals. A flock of sheep, some of whom have turned instructively lame, confirm Holmes's "long shot" intuition regarding the traitorous trainer's misdeeds. Further, during the full course of Watson's account, the disappearance of the racehorse and the murder of the trainer enjoy a curious relation of cipherous substitution: which mystery is Holmes solving? In fact, in a mischievous and indexical flourish, it is by returning the horse—now disguised as a cipherous surrogate—that Holmes demonstrates that the murder was no murder at all, while at the same time capturing the blameless killer, Silver Blaze himself. I am most grateful to Richard Nash for this ingenious reading of the story. "The Adventure of Silver Blaze" (above, n. 2).

gloom,⁷⁶ and his own obmutescence is the result. At the precise moment that Freud inadvertently makes his patient's animals into ciphers and they become interchangeable place-fillers within the narrative, they reveal themselves as indices once more, this time pointing an accusing finger (or paw) not at the preoccupations of the so-called Wolf Man (the Dog Man? the Lion Man?), but at those of Freud himself. The ciphers that were indices that were ciphers become, one final time, indices once more, and in so doing they betray their inattentive employer.

Conclusion

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. Austin's pigs and Buridan's ass were, for all philosophical intents and purposes, interchangeable, faceless place-fillers. An index, on the other hand, *points out* what is of interest, using a particular quality or behavior that is peculiar to the animal and therefore intrinsic or necessary to the philosophical argument. Light is shed on Austin's explanation by his bioluminescent fish, while Freud follows the unique route indicated by the white wolves back to his patient's childhood, before his faithfully docile dogs point up his own weaknesses. The cipherous use, in which the choice of animal is entirely arbitrary and inconsequential, stands in direct contrast to the indexical use, in which specific qualities of specially chosen creatures are required. Both means of employment retain the services of animals, but while the cipherous use denies any attributes to the animal, the indexical use relies on particular qualities.

The cipherous use makes of the individual animal a zero, a nothing. As we have seen, however, the distinction between cipher and index is by no means firmly established: the one can metamorphose into the other. In both our key examples, the animals have managed to be instructive, despite their initial silence. Buridan's ass appears at first to be quiescent, silent, and unmoving, but his deliberate, stubborn refusal, following considerable deliberation, to shift one way or the other betrays a more active involvement in the discussion. He shows how a cipher, despite being subjected to almost unlimited neglect—in fact, precisely *because* he was employed by two, dia-

76. "For centuries everyone feared the hunting packs [of wolves] who appeared at dusk to ravage their flocks and herds. [. . .] During the daytime, the flocks could be looked after by a shepherd boy and his dog, but at night their protection was men's work. In English, Latin and French there is the same expression for dusk, the changeover period: 'between dog and wolf,' '*inter canem et lupum*,' '*entre chien et loup*'"; see Peter Watkins and Erica Hughes, *A Book of Animals* (London: Julia MacRae Books, 1985), p. 48.

metrically opposing sides in a philosophical dispute—brought the conclusion of that debate into doubt. Similarly, when Freud's wolves are made cipherously silent—that is, when they are struck dumb by their treatment at his hands—they tell us a good deal more about his psychoanalytic method than he intended.⁷⁷

Individual indices help to bring an end to the asinanity of the generic Animal. As particular creatures pursuing their own distinctive ends, they escape the unifying consistency of 'the animal' by the sheer force of their heterogeneity. Indices extract us from the asphyxiating clutch, the deadening shorthand, of this confused and confusing chimera. They point toward the true diversity of what Wood has called "the animal alphabet": the vast and dizzying variety of animal life from aardvark to zebra.⁷⁸ At the same time, while killing off the singular, generalized animal, indices reanimate the pallid, lifeless ciphers of philosophy and cultural theory. These creatures are no longer absent referents and characterless place-fillers that are both "there and not there." As animated, breathing, living beings these indices retain their distinctive, individual qualities so that they *cannot* be exchanged, one for the other, like Buridan's ass, his dog, his traveler, his sailor. The particularity of the index—or rather, the particularities of a host of indices—save us both from vacantly obfuscating ciphers and from the monstrously misleading Animal that have plagued philosophy.

If we are to avoid these two species of casual anthropocentrism we should look, then, to decipher the ciphers. This should not be a matter of decoding them, interrogating the tales so that we might uncover *the* truth of the philosophical problems that lie beneath: Did the ass belong to Buridan or to his opponents? Still less is it a matter of providing *a* decoding, one favored interpretation among others: Does the ass address the problem of freewill or the problem of choice without preference? This is not a hermeneutic matter at all. In our dealings with the animals of philosophy we should not consider them as arbitrarily chosen signs referring to some sepa-

77. I elaborate on the mutual implication of cipherous and indexical uses of animals in my essay, "Quia Ego Nominor Leo: Barthes, Stereotypes and Aesop's Animals," *Mosaic* 40:1 (2007): 45–59.

78. Wood, "Comment ne pas manger" (above, n. 28), p. 29. Wood can do no more himself than begin to recount the members of this alphabet: "ants, apes, arachnids, antelopes, aardvarks, anchovies, alligators, Americans, Australians." When Derrida tries to describe something of the "infinite space" that separates one particular animal from another, "the lizard from the dog, the protozoon from the dolphin, the shark from the lamb" et al., he is forced to invoke Noah's help "to insure no-one gets left on the ark"; see Derrida, "The Animal That Therefore I Am" (above, n. 30), p. 402.

rate, perplexing conundrum; we must *de*-cipher the ciphers—that is, cease treating them as ciphers altogether. As we have seen, many of the beasts have already begun to undertake this work for themselves. Philosophers and theorists have discovered to their cost that it is often the case, though alas not always, that the worm turns and proves the downfall of an incautious employer. Like Balaam before him,⁷⁹ Buridan is made to look an ass by his donkey, and Freud finds himself dealing not with docile dogs but with their rather less domestic forebears. Animals engaged as quiet, uncomplaining ciphers recur throughout the texts of philosophy, psychoanalysis, and contemporary cultural theory. But despite this repetition and this curious incidence, these animals often manage to escape their presentation as mere nothings and prove themselves every bit as instructive as the creatures of the bestiary. Like the curious incident of the dog in the nighttime, they can be informative despite their silence.

79. "Then the lord opened the donkey's mouth, and she said to Balaam, 'What have I done to you to make you beat me these three times?' Balaam answered the donkey, 'You have made a fool of me! If I had a sword in my hand, I would kill you right now!'; see Num. 22:21–39.