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ON D.H. LAWRENCE'S *SNAKE* THAT SLIPS OUT OF THE TEXT: DERRIDA'S READING OF THE POEM

Abstract

This paper confronts and compares Derrida's "close reading" of the poem *Snake* (by D.H. Lawrence) with questions about the philosopher's speculations in the interest of animal ethics. Discussion focuses on how the animal in *Snake* is represented and how Derrida combines ethics with aesthetics in his ninth lecture of *The Beast and the Sovereign*.

The text, according to Derrida, leads to an old biblical statement in front of a real beast: "Thou shalt not kill". The phrase of the poem *I, like a second-comer* is especially recalled. What does it mean that the snake was before man, and that the scene takes place near a water source? Why is the snake a beast that becomes a sovereign, an uncrowned king in the underworld? Finally, Derrida's understanding that the snake is a victim from the Garden of Eden is discussed.

Key words

Literary animal; human-animal relationship; nonhuman representation; animal ethics

There are not many widely known poetic texts in which the anthropocentric paradigm has been so undoubtedly exceeded as in the D. H. Lawrence poem, *Snake*. This paper will follow Jacques Derrida's ("close") reading of Lawrence's poem as carefully as possible, focusing on the relationship between man and animal. It aims to demonstrate the significance of the relations between religious, ethical, and aesthetic perspectives in concerns with ecocritical and philosophical perspectives on the question of the animal. This question as a problem, sometimes addressed as "animal philosophy", has been formulated anew in Derrida's philosophy, and stemmed from his earlier work, both on textuality and approaches to the

other. One of the key reasons, analysed by him, is the situation of human-animal meetings and confrontations, which in the poem result in a consideration of the animal's gaze and a need for changing animal status in culture.

In this paper, Derrida's speculative thoughts formulated in reference to the poem will be presented. However, while bearing in mind posthuman and ecocritical approaches, these speculative thoughts will be attempted to be transformed into more meaningful and practical arguments that may on the one hand contribute a little to the debate on redefining the status of animals in art and literature, and on the other, reflect on the critical situation of animals in the world outside art and literature.

The hopeless situation of animals, widely recognisable among Derridean academics, is interwoven in ethical discussions and moral judgements that question humans' relationships with animals. Unfortunately, thinking of Matthew Calarco's argument in his *Zoographies*, we are trapped by moral philosophy: "within an implicit anthropocentric, subject-centered model, and in order to make a case that can gain a hearing within that model, one has to speak its language and accede to its demands" (2008: 9). However, even if it is impossible to omit, this can be framed within different poetics and aesthetics with regards to nonhumans.

I share with others a view that literature and art can alternatively answer questions on how nature is represented and how it conceptually changes from the singularity of being (as opposed to humanity) into the plurality of other individual and nonhuman species. In other words, the ethical accountability for cruel practices against animals still rests with us, humans. It is due to this that it is engaging to reread Lawrence's poem with Derrida's accompanying comments to tackle the questions: who calls upon us to respond to animal issues? Who is the animal? Who do we represent when we refer to a nonhuman creature, to the others that we are not? However, one danger has to be pointed out at the beginning: the constructed animal in the sense of being an absent, unreal creature, a figure of one man's imagination, does not have any incarnation, any referential possibilities to exist outside the text. Thus, I would like to see if, or how, Derrida manages that, as poetics without real connotation might be the biggest problem in raising the issue of the animal.

According to the cunning language of Derrida (2009: 236–249), the snake, not the man, is the real victim in the Garden of Eden. If we want to talk about the snake, we refer to religion, to our roots, where we constantly ask about the boundaries of (hu)man. The Book of Genesis seems to be the source for constructing animals as objects and silent beings, creatures without language as many theoreticians recognize it: for example, Lynn White (1996: 10) on the basis of nature's subordination. Derrida also points to the Bible. The poem presents the opportunity to investigate the possibility of a relationship with nonhuman beings thanks to a changing perspective and changing language in cultural reference to them. For Derrida it is important to mention that Walter Benjamin (1996: 72), in his reflection on language genesis, emphasized the fact that animals were named by humans externally, and treated as passive creatures. This has enormous

influence on misrepresenting animals in cultural texts, with just a few exceptions mainly related to animals being anthropomorphized (the talking and crying horses of Achilles, Balius, and Xanthus are some of my favourite examples). The instrumentality or functionality of animals, especially found in canonical texts like the Bible, deprived them, in general, of independence. This is what interests the philosopher – animals have been in the background of our culture for so long that we continue to forget about their inspiring otherness, or their differentiation in comparison to us. In other words, what if one tries, what if one risks, following Derrida, suspending judgement and forgetting about the Book of Genesis if an animal changes status like in Lawrence's poem? This would attempt to break down Christian humanist assumptions.

When Derrida questions the biblical tradition in order to show how meaningful and neglected animal issues are in Western philosophical reflection, the choice of poetry to relate to nonhuman species is intentional and not accidental. Poetic language is perceived as a language that "speaks" on behalf of "the other". In *Shibboleth: For Paul Celan* we read:

Yet the poem speaks. Despite the date, even if it also speaks thanks to it, as of it, toward it, and speaks always of itself on its own, very own behalf, *in seinereigenen, allereigensten Sache*, in its own name, without ever compromising the absolute singularity, the inalienable property, of that which convokes it. And yet this inalienable must speak of the other, and to the other; it must speak. (Derrida 2005: 8)

In *The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)* he adds, "for thinking concerning the animal, if there is such a thing, derives from poetry. There you have a hypothesis: it is what philosophy has, essentially, had to deprive itself of" (Derrida 2002: 377). Thus, through poetic language, it is possible to express concern for the animal, although it is difficult: "if there is such a thing" as an animal, a kind of sympathy and empathy might be lost in various discourses when one tries to mediate between the experiences of the other and culture. Reading Lawrence with Derrida encourages the questions: what does "poetry reading" mean in reference to the relationship between man and animal? How is it different when a poem "speaks" and why, in comparison with philosophical discourse, is poetry a more appropriate form to speak about nonhuman otherness in reference to animals? Does it influence our relationships with other species and if so, how does a poem do this? How does literature, generally, represent "the other" and what is so exceptional in Lawrence's work that enabled him to regard animals differently?

In *Birds, Beasts and Flowers*, Lawrence deals with the process of understanding or at least striving to grasp a completely strange world outside the range of human experience – the world of nature. Moreover, the collection comprises Lawrence's fullest bestiary (Inniss 1971: 65). The creatures of the natural world – mosquitoes, tortoises, bats, fish, and more – appear not only as "the others" but also as

alien, strange persons in whose presence man can perceive some of his perennial problems from a completely new perspective. These problems are related to human nature when dealing with nonhumans brings, in my opinion, the posthuman perspective, and gives rise to a fundamental and ethical question: what does it mean to view the other as nonhuman? This is what Calarco (2008: 5) regards as “an ethical dimension to the question of the animal”. In Derrida’s work, and for Emmanuel Lévinas, “ethical” is understood to be the situation of facing the other like the animal. One of the reasons why Lawrence is committed to this question lies in the biographical genesis of the collection *Birds, Beasts and Flowers*: in the face of the Great War, problems with his health, and public opinion, Lawrence wanted to escape from humanity, from the human beasts who were killing each other in the war. He turned to the nonhuman world to restore his faith in life *per se* (Sagar 1986: 15). This could be categorised as a traditional reference to nature, as a need to experience something radically strange, or, even more crucially, to oppose the human, so-called civilized, world by referring to pastoral nature.

The idealized construction of nonhuman reality embedded in pastoralism functions as a *simulacrum* in many literary texts but rather not in Lawrence’s *Snake*. The animal presented seems to be both equal to and an exceptional partner for the man. Dialectic to symbolic and metaphoric representations, awakening them, the snake as a character plays a major part in the poem and, significantly, embodies a real being. This is, in my opinion, the decisive reason why Derrida favours this poem so much. Since it defies defining the snake as a mere cultural creature, we are dealing, above all, with a real beast once encountered by the poet. Such exemplification of the transformation in presenting the animal’s appearance is approached by Derrida, which brings about subsequent questions regarding non-human agency, subjectivity, and personhood.

Snake is a first person perspective spoken monologue, not a dialogue, although both the speaker and the animal play a significant part in it. Derrida does not treat the poem as a challenge to literary criticism; he reads it, paying attention to details, as a sort of guidebook, a summary of human and other species’ history of complex relationships and emerging problems. This results in a philosophical interpretation, and Derrida’s “close reading” – understood not as a conventional method in literary criticism but as a detailed analysis – sheds light on the issue of human and animal rapprochement and distance, not directly but also not far from the vantage point of many critical, anti-speciesists and anti- or post-humanist accounts. His ninth improvised lecture in *The Beast and the Sovereign*, a volume of posthumously collected lectures from 2001-2002, is devoted to the poem. This exceptional lecture – wholly concentrated on the one poem – is an analysis, word by word, line by line, of the relationship between man and animal. Even though Derrida tries to pose this question – under the influence of Lawrence’s text – in a radically new approach, his efforts might be considered as linked with his earlier work both on textuality (valorising margins, not the centre) and approaches to the other. However, many academics deeply involved in changing human-animal relations¹ interpret Derrida’s “animal philosophy”, mainly presented in *Animal*

That Therefore I Am, and simultaneously relate it to some performative problems recognized in non-anthropocentric animal or human-animal studies. What is more, it should be considered that Derrida's analysis of Lawrence's poem is formulated and organised differently, not only because it is an oral lecture, recorded and written later, where he constantly repeats himself, but also because he is convinced that Lawrence's poem comprises his whole "animal philosophy" as "it concerns just about everything we've approached directly or indirectly" in "the history of the relations between what is called man and animal" (Derrida 2009: 236).

From the beginning of the lecture, Derrida discusses the poem with a critical regard for Lévinas's perspective in ethics. This may seem paradoxical, however, it could be applied to a broader understanding of responsibility, which is to empathise and connect, and a readiness to "stand for the other", whoever he/she/it might be (Castricano et al. 2008: 5). What I find to be problematic here is when there is no other, just a mere construction, a signifier without any signified. This is a fundamental issue in accordance with the poem's figure of a snake. Simultaneously, I would like to trace how Derrida defends himself from such accusations, how he combines ethics with aesthetics, and poetry with the problems of animal representation. One guess could be that he treats Lawrence's poem as a description of a meeting, not a poem that creates but rather re-creates a story, a parable like in the unwritten Bible.

Derrida (2009: 237) asks, when starting his interpretation, whether the snake has a face, particularly in Lévinas's sense. Why? Perhaps because Lawrence uses the personal pronoun "he" when he speaks about the snake throughout the text ("he was at the trough"; "he reached down from a fissure"; "he sipped" and so on). Additionally, when anticipating some important philosophical consequences, he refers directly to "the face" in Lévinas's philosophical language, which stands for an ethical dimension and is attributed to a person who participates in an ethical relationship:

This is the situation we call welcome of the face [...] The relation with the face, with the other absolutely other which I can not contain, the other in this sense infinite, is nonetheless my Idea, a commerce. But the relation is maintained without violence, in peace with this absolute alterity. The 'resistance' of the other does not do violence to me, does not act negatively; it has a positive structure: ethical. (Lévinas 1979: 197)

However, Lévinas was not sure whether this also applied to animals; in other words, whether animals have faces, so Derrida (2009: 237–238) argued with him and undermined his concept of ethics, which did not include other living and sentient creatures. In *Totality and Infinity*, Lévinas rather tended to exclude non-human species from the community of "the Others" who have "faces", share a "common language", and – most importantly – can resist violence. He even excludes them because as nonhumans, who are not "the Others", they do not con-

tribute to “a meaningful world”: “A meaningful world is a world in which there is the Other through whom the world of my enjoyment becomes a theme having a signification” (Lévinas 1979: 209). Another way, they do not exist.²

Derrida, contrary to Lévinas, looks for such ethics, inspired by aesthetics and literature, which include nonhuman animals, without deciding what their ontological status in the text is. Can they slip out of the textualisation? What do they represent? What do they denote – a human construction of animality or are they real, self-independent beings? One of Derrida’s modes of thought is to concentrate on the individual and exceptional animal, represented here by the snake, emphasizing that “he” in the poem refers to a person, so the snake from the beginning appears – and is experienced – as a person. Despite the acknowledged tradition of anthropomorphic animals in fables, which like in La Fontaine’s stories represent some human qualities, the situation described in Lawrence’s poem is different because it is constructed as a reference to a real, wild creature that comes suddenly to drink some water. Moreover, Derrida stresses that a man, a speaking persona, has to wait until the animal has finished drinking:

So, he waits for the first to pass. He says... and here, to return to Lévinas – I don’t want to place the whole poem under the sign of Lévinas, but reading it I remember something Lévinas often says, namely that morality, ethics, begins with an ‘After you.’ After you. The first sign of respect for the other is ‘after you’. (2009: 238)

Thus, there is one sign, the “sign of respect” that is not constructed; it is a very direct and performative act which also means, for Derrida, “after” the animal. It is meaningful in the context of the poem, when Lawrence begins:

Someone was before me at my water-trough,
And I, like a second-comer, waiting. (103)

The snake as “someone” appears in front of a man near a source of water. This place is called a “water-trough”, which is very important because from the very beginning it indicates that the boundary between (hu)man and animal is being questioned here. The “water trough” is not an ordinary place; it is a desired place, a place that can bring about conflict between people and, generally, between different species. The question of the boundary between (hu)man and animal at the source of water changes its connotation: the man who has to wait is compared to “the second comer”, and the animal embodied by the beast is accordingly “the first comer”. Derrida explains that as the animal is the “first comer”, this means that “morality, ethics, the relation to the other, is not only coming after the other, helping oneself after the other, but after the other *whoever it be*, before even knowing who he is or what his dignity is, his pride, his social standing, in other words, the first comer” (2009: 239). That would suggest that a man is waiting out of respect for the other, who was there first.

The animal in a reptile's body also indicates a relationship with the other that is completely different from domesticated animals, or companion species that are better acknowledged by humans and to whom they are more accustomed. The personal pronoun "he" in reference to the snake (so much further removed from cats, dogs, cattle, and other household creatures) is a challenge here. This is not because of the frequent association of snakes with personified evil (Serpent – Satan) but because people prefer to keep their distance from this reptile, because of fear or disgust (some people think that all snakes are dangerous, or venomous). However, Derrida does not develop the notion of the animals' personhood, and many also advocate this by using the term nonhumans. This is connected with adopting alternative perspectives that encourage us to think of animals as particular individuals of whom we might want to think of as persons, no matter if they represent wild or domestic creatures, in order to break from the subjection and unlimited violence that is done toward them (DeGrazia 2006: 40–53).

When talking about Descartes, Kant, Heidegger, Lacan, and Lévinas, Derrida notices that "the experience of the seeing animal, of the animal that looks at them, has not been taken into account in the philosophical or theoretical architecture of their discourse" (2002: 383). Lawrence expresses it differently:

He lifted his head from his drinking, as cattle do,
And looked at me vaguely, as drinking cattle do (103)

The animal is looking at the man; by doing this the snake absorbs the man's attention. This situation creates an interaction between them. Derrida (2009: 239) points out here that "cattle" is followed by a plural, a collective verb ("as cattle do" not "does"). This seems interesting particularly as it is in relation to animals that are bred for consumption. Why do the snake's eyes resemble cattle, understood as a group of animals? What do they have in common? In a sense, Lawrence expresses an intuition, which is present in many theoretical texts, and evokes eco-critical associations, such as, for instance, the proximity or even the inevitability of an undeserved death for the nonhuman other. The snake looks at the man "as cattle do", that is, unconsciously, forgetfully, not realising that there is any lurking danger from human beings. Thus, he does not try to escape but he "stopped and drank a little more" (Lawrence 2011: 103). His look is devoid of hidden meaning because this is what animals look like when they do not anticipate what awaits them. "As cattle", or without distinction between individuals, treated as a taxonomic group of anonymous creatures, means that the snake is perceived as one of many similar beings which are subordinated and used by man. The word "cattle" also has associations with vulnerability – they are slaughtered for food at man's whim and there is no sense of guilt or moral responsibility. Simultaneously, the animal gave the man a glance, which in other terms could mean a specific or an individual point of view of this snake.

The gaze of animals has been explored recently in many works.³ Likewise, Derrida, especially in *The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)*, pays

attention to something that philosophy, according to him, seems to forget: that animals can not only be looked at but they can also look at humans. The animal, like the snake in Lawrence's poem, "has its point of view regarding me" (Derrida 2009: 380). Derrida does not want to say that only the poet is fascinated by the animal's gaze. It is rather an encounter with the animal agent represented by his/its gaze, where the human presence starts to be a problem in a situation of confrontation with the radical and the real otherness. At the language level, it is shown that Lawrence is trying to absorb and recognize the snake's new look, but it is hard for him to avoid the old one. The poem depicts how the notion of animality is disenchanted from nature or from the powers that keep nature in its place, although, there are still some remains of it to be found – the animal is a wild and probably venomous creature (he/it has an "earth-golden" body, and "in Sicily the black, black snakes are innocent, the gold are venomous") (Lawrence 2011: 103). The intensity dramatically rises when safety limits are exceeded; the situation of the meeting between the animal and the man becomes dangerous but the man is thirsty, so he has to wait, since the animal wants to drink from his "water-trough":

A snake came to my water-trough
 On a hot, hot day, and I in pyjamas for the heat,
 To drink there

In the deep, strange-scented shade of the great dark carob tree
 I came down the steps with my pitcher
 And must wait, must stand and wait, for there he was at the
 trough before me. (103)

The repetitions – "on a hot, hot day" and "must wait, must stand and wait" – recall the moment of suspense, the inability to go further and the anxiety about what will happen next. From this image a tension can be sensed between these two, the only figures of the text. The speaking persona comes under the "shade of the great dark carob tree". A carob tree produces carobs, also known as St. John's bread, which in the past, especially during periods of famine, were a source of food. This may symbolise that despite the gloom from the shade, something of value, something fruitful, will appear because of this extraordinary encounter.

For Derrida, the phrase "there he was ... before me" is deliberately ambiguous – he was there, facing me (I had to face him, deal with him), or: he was there first, before me, he came to the trough first, or he was there in the world before us, before human beings, like the Bible says. Avoiding formulating moral arguments, Derrida is trying to express the problems in the human-animal relationship through meaningful metaphors. In the aesthetic language of the poem he finds such expressions that enable him to undermine a human-centred world. Similarly, in the aforementioned essay, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, when he speaks about animals in different discourses – or rather about their absence in philoso-

phy – Derrida points to an ambiguous form in French: “je suis” which bears two meanings: “I am” and “I follow”. This essay is a meditation on whether it means that *I am* before animals, or *I follow* animals – not one animal, but the whole variety of nonhuman species. It could be an ontological and existential issue. Derrida indicates only, without giving any explanation of what it is exactly and what it changes in our (hu)man and animal relationships, that it “will be later revealed as a matter for serious concern” (2002: 381). In the same essay he speaks strongly against objectifying animals and against the development of animal meat processing and the cosmetics industry. He tackles similar issues as Peter Singer in his *Animal Liberation*:

Everybody knows what terrifying and intolerable pictures a realist painting could give to the industrial, mechanical, chemical, hormonal, and genetic violence to which man has been submitting animal life for the past two centuries [...] in order to awaken us to our responsibilities and our obligations with respect to the living in general, and precisely to this fundamental compassion that, were we to take it seriously, would have to change even the very basis [...] of the philosophical problematic of the animal. (Derrida 2002: 395)

As a consequence, the snake is presented in the poem as “someone” – a person, a “who”, a separate creature, or a real being. He/it cannot be internalised, his/its self-dependency, his/its “point of view” are inscribed in the text but to relate to him/it as an animal means to relate through what is bestial and strange to ourselves. This state of alienation, conscious in the human being, introduces a situation of rivalry and leads to a conflict, just like conflicts between humans. “I, like a second-comer” means here “I, who also want to use this water-trough”.

The voice of my education said to me
He must be killed ...

And voices in me said, If you were a man
You would take a stick and break him now, and finish him off. (103)

The (hu)man culture and related education is a source of violence. A call to kill the nonhuman other appears in the consciousness, while the other does not realise it. From the first moment the relationship is uneven. “He must be killed” does not mean that it is done only in order to save one’s life or in defence against a venomous snake. The speaker suspects but does not know for certain whether the snake – seen from some distance – is venomous. He can hear an inner voice ordering him to kill it in order to prove his masculinity (“If you were a man”). In this sense, it is noteworthy that the speaking persona is a man not a woman. Indeed, Derrida ends his lecture with the words: “and there is no woman here, just a man and a snake” (2009: 249). Since a man – in the literal meaning of the

Bible – received from God power over all other species, the question of reformulating the borders of his authority still returns to him. Derrida's words may also prove that the male perspective and the accompanying ideology of man's mastery over nature are too dominant in our culture and what is needed is to introduce the feminine, as a missing part, into the way in which we respond to violence in particular. Culture, in general, does not require a woman to kill, but to give birth. The role of killing has been incumbent on the man for a long time. It is he, according to tradition, who hunts and kills. When a woman tries to kill, as March does in Lawrence's story *The Fox*, she is perplexed because she lacks practice and treats the animal as an individual, so the animal can look at her, even peer inside her, but meanwhile she is silent, thinking about what it will change inside her:

She lowered her eyes, and suddenly saw the fox. He was looking up at her. Her chin was pressed down, and his eyes were looking up. They met her eyes. And he knew her. She was spellbound – she knew he knew her. So he looked into her eyes, and her soul failed her. He knew her, he was not daunted. [...] She put her gun to her shoulder, but even then pursed her mouth, knowing it was nonsense to pretend to fire. (Lawrence 1971: 88–89)

However, Lawrence's portraits of women are not truly on the opposite side with their empathy or sensitivity in regards to their feminine features. They are, like March, rather melancholic figures, difficult to be classified unambiguously. For a moment, so is the male who falls into a trap of questions in a situation of meeting the fascinating but probably deadly animal:

Was it cowardice, that I dared not kill him?
Was it perversity, that I longed to talk to him?
Was it humility, to feel so honoured? (104)

“Cowardice”, “humility” and “perversity” are not regarded as masculine qualities, although dialectics do play a role within the masculine subject. It is strange that for a moment he feels honoured that he can treat the animal like a guest. Unfortunately, different, perhaps even strange, voices come back: “If you were not afraid, you would kill him!” and despite the temporary recognition of an unknown living entity as an equal, the man does not want to let the snake depart in this situation. At the heart of master-slave dialectics, or as it is in Hobbes's state of nature presented in *Leviathan*, there is inequality: one person needs to use violence to subjugate the other:

I picked up a clumsy log
And threw it at the water-trough with a clatter (104)

At first sight, it seems that the man's reaction, finding an instrument of violence (“a clumsy log”), reasserts his position as a ruler and a master over nature. How-

ever, it is the human territory of a garden (suggested by the outside of the house, the tree and sticks and logs on the ground) which has been invaded by the snake, much as it is in the biblical story. Thus, the snake is not a being that can be subordinated. He defies the biblical power of man over other creatures, thus it is likely that he defies God too. Due to this, the meeting can be seen as a breakthrough in experiencing the nonhuman other which – in a special sense – does not belong to creation. Nevertheless, Derrida – and this is the most paradigmatic moment of his interpretation – calls the snake a victim.

It is of great significance that the snake as an animal refers to numerous symbols and meanings derived from the Christian tradition. In one of the oldest iconographic books, written by Cesare Ripa in 1618, the snake is associated with sin and with Satan – this is the mass ideology of the Garden of Eden. In that sense he belongs to the divided world, divided into good and evil. Nature is also a subject of this division. The return to innocence, to a pre-ethical world, to paradise, is impossible.

However, on the other hand, there are some interpretations which refer to the snake's ability to shed skin and point to the fact that this is the attribute of Asclepius, the god of medicine and healing in the ancient Greek tradition. In that context, the snake symbolises life, recovery, and revitalisation. In other cultures, such as South American, in which Lawrence took an interest, snakes were considered as gods. This is one of the clues to understanding why Lawrence called him "one of the lords of life" (105) at the end of the poem. Another concern is the philosophy of Lawrence himself, in which the power of life would be opposed to human artificiality and to the art of pretending. In a different text, *Remembering Pan*, Lawrence offers:

a vividly unconventional celebration of nature as a repressed force; a forgotten deity. Ultimately, this counts as Nature rather than nature, perhaps; but as always with Lawrence the immediate impression is that of a strong feeling for the earth and its non-human inhabitants. (Coupe 2008: 62)

Coupe differentiates in this short fragment between "Nature" and "nature", arguing that "Nature" would better refer to Lawrence's philosophy, since he perceives wildlife spiritually. Therefore, the snake would be a victim in the sense of being a repressed god. Derrida does not share this view; however, he does not explicitly discuss it. What is at stake here is that the speaking persona – the man – does not speak for the snake. He speaks because of the snake. The problems with referring to others, to nonhuman beings, begin before communication. Rousseau thought that it is the same with ethics in a hypothetical state of nature: a wild man recognizes himself in another wild man, so he does not want to hurt him:

[...] wandering in the forests without industry, without speech, without settled abode, without war, and without tie, without any need of others of his kind and without any desire to harm them, perhaps even without ever rec-

ognising any one of them individually, subject to few passions and self-sufficient, Savage man had only the sentiments [...]. (Rousseau 1997: 157)

Communication and all that it brings – culture, tradition, ethics, symbols – is an obstacle. Man is abandoned in his monologue, unable to grasp the other creature, doomed to be only himself.

According to Derrida the poem leads to an old biblical statement in front of a real beast: “Thou shalt not kill”. This commandment surely refers to people only, not to animals, but Derrida suggests that in the poem it gets extended to include even the atrocious snake:

Here, visibly, the poet, the signatory, Lawrence if you will, the one to whom this thing happens in some sense awakens to ethics, to the ‘Thou shalt not kill’, in a scene of hospitality, before the first comer, the snake, who can perhaps be threatening (it doesn’t say that he was perhaps threatening; he could always be threatening, always be murderous). So his ethics is announced or awakened in this scene of hospitality before a first comer whoever it be [...]. He becomes aware..., he truly thinks what duty would have obligated him toward the living creature in general, in the figure of the snake, the snake’s head, this snake that is a nonhuman living creature, who becomes in some sense the sovereign as other, as guest; it is the guest that commands, the other as guest who commands. (Derrida 2009: 244)

Derrida considers the situation between the man and the animal as ethical, as a source of ethical response “in the scene of hospitality before a first comer”. He does not give any clues as to if anything can change for the better between humans and animals. He does not analyse the potential for creating new practices, new cultural patterns of behaviour towards other species. Nevertheless, he re-frames the situation of the meeting in different poetics of who is the host and who is the guest, and these bring ethical consequences. The guest, embodied by the animal, is the one who “commands” – In other words: for whom we are grateful for the visit, and to whom we have some moral obligations like respect, concern, and trust. The otherness of the guest ceases to signify the boundary between human and nonhuman species, rather, as in a meeting, hospitality is an equivalent for openness and readiness to allow a guest to appear.

In the poem, this is reinforced by the fact that the speaking persona feels honoured, apart from the “voices of education”, which are dramatically opposed to this feeling of pride in meeting such a guest:

But must I confess how I liked him,
 How glad I was he had come like a guest in quiet, to drink at my water-
 trough

 And truly I was afraid, I was most afraid,

But even so, honoured still more
That he should seek my hospitality
From out the dark door of the secret earth.

He drank enough . . .
And looked around like a god, unseeing, into the air (104)

The “voices of humanity” are not dominant because the creature is now perceived differently, even as an individual who is compared to “a god” and who comes from another, inhuman world which is underground. However, in the end, the man “could not resist the human pulsion or compulsion, dictated by the voices in him, including the ‘voices of education’, voices that commanded him: ‘Kill it.’” (Derrida 2009: 243) The moment in which he reaches the decision to throw a stick at the snake is very short. He calls it “a sort of horror, a sort of protest against his withdrawing into / that horrid black hole.” (104) Unwilling to let him go, the man transforms the god into an object, victimising him/it. After throwing the log, he feels guilty:

And immediately I regretted it.
I thought how paltry, how vulgar, what a mean act!
I despised myself and the voices of my accursed human
education. (105)

Consciousness (“the voice of my education”) transformed into conscience (“I thought how paltry, how vulgar, what a mean act!”) (Gifford 1999: 163) is only one way of understanding the speaking persona’s reaction. The other would, following the view of Derrida, suggest that the voices of humanity are to blame; but they are only a partial explanation of why the man did it. “Out of fear he kills the other, the guest” says Derrida (2009: 243). However, the act of murder, even though it is not known for certain, was committed. This is why, afterwards, he calls the snake: “his snake”:

He couldn’t resist the drive to kill, he carried out the gesture of killing and is immediately submerged by remorse, but also out of desire for the snake to return. His snake, ‘my snake’: his love for the snake is declared, made manifest, after the guilty act of murder. (243)

Even so, it is worth asking – is killing the snake an act of murder? Perhaps the answer is hidden behind the pronouns: it is when (or if) the snake is “he” and not “it” – when it has a face, a belly, a throat, gums, a tongue, a body – it seems in the poem to be more than just a thirsty reptile. He is Lawrence’s “albatross” like in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* by Coleridge, because of the inseparable feeling of guilt.

Although, according to Derrida (2009: 245), Lawrence awakens ethics in this poem, he does it only after presenting a man who tried to kill a snake. This at-

tempt to kill is a turning point, a case study in which the origins of human moral systems, in general, can be contemplated.

For he seemed to me again like a king,
Like a king in exile, uncrowned in the underworld,
Now due to be crowned again. (105)

Why is it that the snake is a beast that becomes a sovereign, uncrowned king in the underworld? Why is he “like a king” and not “a king”? This is simply because he does not have his own kingdom, so he is “like a king”. He is the creature – in the words of Derrida, “the first comer” – that the ethics concern. However, he is not respected, so he should be “crowned again”. He is also “like a king” because he dominated the reflection of a fault of a (hu)man. He did not allow the man to remain indifferent, causing shame and remorse. The man has something to “expiate: / a pettiness”: because he now regrets what he has done, losing an opportunity to appreciate and treat with dignity “one of the lords of life”; or because his act was so meaningless and it distanced him from the creature that he, in fact, admired.

As the snake is a being in exile, not a man – as a successor of Adam or Eve – he seems to be a victim of the Garden of Eden (Derrida 2009: 246). He might have had his own kingdom but now he lives in the underworld, in the dark, which might symbolise, in the poetic language of Lawrence, a sense of being forgotten and disregarded. However, he appears near a source of water, as a living creature, bringing a conflict, and finally he is treated like royalty. Nevertheless, he may be looking for his own peaceful place, like an old slave who has been long neglected and wants to become his own master – “the sovereign as other”. Can he find, if not Eden, a real place to co-exist and survive in this human world and be treated not as a symbol but as a real being? Or maybe the (hu)man has to once again mull over the questions of his origin and his primary ancestors?

Undoubtedly, Lawrence’s works, and *Snake* in particular, are characterised by his strong sense of regarding animals as persons. “Personal” connotes here pain, fear, or a sense of security that can be felt by one being. I would also like to underscore, after Calarco, that “the animal question cannot be fully reduced to or made identical with other human struggles against oppression” (2008: 76). Animal resistance is much more difficult to represent not only in literature, but in general. However, in this task, one comes back to the very fundamental role of the text: its performative influence.

Derrida’s account of the poem is far from straight-forward in reference to a dominating anthropocentric perspective, despite that there are some “proofs” in his texts and interviews that he did not speculate vaguely and he really took into consideration the ethical aspects of human-animal relationships. What is more, he shows, while reading Lawrence, that the message the text conveys has to be reproduced, extracted and analysed. This is especially important when we talk about representing our nonhuman counterparts and when we want to speak on

their behalf. It is probably not possible to protect ourselves completely from textual constructions, considering doubts and hesitations about what we mean when we talk about animals, because they engage what is understood by the idea of the text: the one such as Lawrence's *Snake* that drags Derrida and others in to combine aesthetics with ethics. Therefore it is worth mentioning that without a specific construction of subjectivity, without sensitivity, empathy, and a readiness to be frank with other living creatures, there would not be any animal issue at all. Additionally, without such texts as *Snake* we would deprive ourselves of the opportunity to exemplify this issue on the aesthetic, closely connected with ethical, ground. The experimental language of poetry helps, after all, to grasp a sense of the reality of the animal because the poem re-creates a situation of meeting with a real snake, once encountered by a poet.

Notes

- 1 Such as Cary Wolfe et al. (2003) in *Zoontologies*, Philip Armstrong (2011) in *Theorizing Animals*, Jodey Castricano et al. (2008) in *Animal Subjects*, or Paola Cavalieri (2006) in *In Defense of Animals (The Second Wave)*.
- 2 Exceptionally in the essay entitled "The Name of a Dog, or Natural Rights", Emmanuel Lévinas (1990) presents a dog named Bobby that strayed into the German camp for Jewish prisoners. His ability to recognise humans despite the inhuman conditions in the camp make him a figure of the last stand of humanity.
- 3 These works usually refer to precursory Theodor Adorno's (1997) *Aesthetic Theory*, or John Berger's (1980) *About Looking*.

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