



Beastly Modernisms: The Question of Animal Speech and Psychology in James Joyce and Virginia Woolf

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ABSTRACT: This essay analyses the ways in which James Joyce and Virginia Woolf addressed from a very early stage key issues related to contemporary posthumanist theories such as the question of animal speech and psychology. Both Joyce's description of human-animal encounters in *Ulysses* and Woolf's depiction of a sentient animal subject in *Flush: A Biography* at first present, and then subvert, the idea of the use of language as evidence of a human surpassing of the animal. By challenging preconceived notions of species distinctions, these authors ultimately decenter the human to focus instead on the centrality of animal subjectivity and sensory experience. While the question of a sharp divide between human and nonhuman animals along the axis of speech can be traceable to the anthropocentric tradition of western humanism and not least to such a possible source as Cervantes (whose novella "The Dialogue of the Dogs" is listed as part of both Joyce's Trieste library and the library of Leonard and Virginia Woolf), the idea of expanding the typically modernist focus on inner life by also including other forms of subjectivity may have derived from the coeval, burgeoning fields of zoology, ethology and comparative psychology. Drawing from these sources



and popular areas of knowledge which formed part of the cultural climate of the time, both Joyce and Woolf explore cross-species intersubjectivity in ways that shift the terms of representation away from anthropocentric views in order to affirm, blur and deny the boundaries between the human and the non-human.

KEY WORDS: James Joyce; Virginia Woolf; posthumanism; animals; language; psychology

This essay analyses the ways in which James Joyce and Virginia Woolf addressed from a very early stage key issues related to contemporary posthumanist theories such as the question of animal speech and psychology. Both Joyce's description of human-animal encounters in *Ulysses* (especially his portrayal of the anthropomorphic, talking dog Garryowen in "Cyclops") and Woolf's depiction of a sentient animal subject in *Flush: A Biography* at first present, and then subvert, the idea of the use of language as evidence of a human surpassing of the animal. By challenging preconceived notions of species distinctions, these authors ultimately decenter the human to focus instead on the centrality of animal subjectivity and sensory experience. Joyce's treatment of animals in *Ulysses*, for instance, goes from anthropomorphism to human animality and debasement, frequently crossing the divide between human and nonhuman animals as far as their mental faculties are concerned. Similarly, in *Flush* Woolf represents an entangled zone of interspecies connections by detailing the ordinary experiences of a dog interacting with humans in a co-evolutionary relationship, in line with our recent efforts to rethink the scope and nature of human-nonhuman companionship. While the question of a sharp divide between human and nonhuman animals along the axis of speech can be traceable to the anthropocentric tradition of western humanism and not least to such a possible source as Cervantes—the master of European literature whose novella "The Dialogue of the Dogs" is listed as part of both Joyce's Trieste library and the library of Leonard and Virginia Woolf—the idea of expanding the typically modernist focus on inner life by also including other forms of subjectivity may have derived from the coeval, burgeoning fields of zoology, ethology and comparative psychology. Drawing from these sources and popular areas of knowledge which formed part of the cultural climate of the time, both Joyce and Woolf explore cross-species intersubjectivity in ways that shift the terms of representation away from anthropocentric views in order to affirm, blur and deny the boundaries between the human and the non-human.



In early twentieth-century Britain, the biological sciences enjoyed a new flourish, and zoology, emergent ethology as well as comparative psychology became part of the “spirit of the age,” permeating both popular and intellectual culture. The interest in animals’ physiology, behaviour, social life, emotions and consciousness, along with the belief that animals exercise agency even in a world largely shaped by humans, pervaded the cultural climate of the time and concerned scientists and writers alike, showing that the “great divide” between science and literature—to borrow a notion from Bruno Latour (12) also discussed by Donna Haraway—“flatten[s] into mundane differences” (Haraway, *Species* 15). Drawing from Darwin’s attentive study of animal behaviour in *The Descent of Man* (1871), which he considered subject to natural selection exactly as morphological structures and physiological processes were, ethology was one of the branches of zoology which emerged in the early twentieth century in the wake of Victorian theories of evolution. Notions of “Umwelten”—the term the German biologist and ethologist Jakob von Uexküll used to describe animal environment-worlds—penetrated early twentieth-century scientific debate also thanks to the works of the British zoologist F.W. Gamble, the author—among several books and reviews popularising scientific thought among non-specialist readers—of *The Animal World* (1911), a treatise the Woolfs had in their library.¹ Closely related to ethology, animal psychology also took inspiration from *The Descent of Man*, as well as from another foundational text such as Darwin’s *The Expression of Emotions in Man and Animals* (1872). While in the former Darwin studied the presence in nonhuman animals of ostensibly human characteristics such as attention, memory, imagination, the ability to learn and the power of reason, reaching the conclusion that biological continuity between man and other species applies to physical as well as mental traits, in the latter he further challenged the Cartesian divide by studying human and animal consciousness as points in a continuum of experience. His fundamental claim that “the difference in mind between man and the higher animals, great as it is, is certainly one of degree and not of kind” (105) was further substantiated by systematic observation of several species in various circumstances, through which Darwin proved that animals use voluntary physical movements as gestural communication of emotions, exactly as humans express feelings of joy, anger, or despair. Darwin’s disciple George Romanes and his colleague C. Lloyd Morgan attempted a more systematic study of the inner life of animals than Darwin had, helping to establish the domain of comparative psychology in the late nineteenth century. Romanes’s study *Animal Intelligence* (1883), as well as Morgan’s treatises *Animal Life and Intelligence* (1890) and *An Introduction to Comparative Psychology* (1894) played a central role in formalising the investigation of animal minds, dealing with such issues as sense impressions, feelings, association of ideas, reasoning and memory. Drawing on the empiricist and associationist psychology of J.S. Mill and Alexander Bain, great emphasis was placed on sensory perception and associative mechanisms. As Morgan contended, “the sense-experience [...] forms the foundation of our psychical life; and it can hardly be questioned that it forms the foundation of the psychical life of animals” (157); moreover, “it would seem difficult to underestimate the

¹ See *The Library of Leonard and Virginia Woolf: A Short-title Catalog*.



importance of the association of ideas in the early life of animals. It is the means—the sole means—by which experience is made available for the guidance of action” (90). Aimed to understand both human and animal minds from the inside, comparative psychology continued to flourish until the rise of behaviourism in the 1920s. In her treatise *The Animal Mind: A Text-book of Comparative Psychology*, which reached its third edition in 1926, Margaret Washburn defined the scope of the subject as “knowledge of how the world looks from the purview of our brother animals” chiefly through their sense-impressions (22). It is mainly for this reason that Caroline Hovanec has labelled comparative psychology “a modernist discipline,” being it “aligned with modernist literary themes such as a plurality of perspectives, an exploration of consciousness, and a desire to denaturalize our own point of view and see the world through different eyes” (162). As the critic demonstrates, such extensive theorisation of the inner life of human as well as nonhuman beings significantly influenced early twentieth-century writers and scientists alike. Most importantly, the fact that sustained attention was paid to nonhuman perspectives on the world in scientific as well as literary domains is perhaps even more significant than the empirical evidence obtained: giving special prominence to sensory perceptions and cognitive abilities, comparative psychologists might have fairly consistent ideas about what animal consciousness and subjective experience were like, yet they were also forced to admit that sometimes substantiating these ideas could prove particularly difficult.

Even so, peculiar to this moment of intersection between literary and scientific culture is not only a generalised interest in animal inner behaviour and the literary adaptation of the Darwinian and post-Darwinian theories that twentieth-century authors more or less directly knew, but also the modernist encounter with animals as creatures whose compelling otherness led to recognise the limitations of human perception and representation, and yet to renew commitment to perceiving and representing animals. In this perspective, modernist authors can be said to address through literary discourse some central concerns of our contemporary posthumanist theories and their impulse to question Enlightenment ideas about knowledge, subjectivity and language. Several scholars have convincingly argued that modernist writers describe a biocentric trajectory that elevates animality and challenges anthropocentrism. In her thought-provoking study *Stalking the Subject: Modernism and the Animal*, for instance, Carrie Rohman places animals and animal subjectivity at the centre of modernism, where they disrupt the assumptions of western humanism. However, while such scholarship has successfully drawn attention to the importance of animals in modernist literature, it has not fully elucidated the ways in which modernist authors appropriated the scientific discourses of coeval zoology, ethology and comparative psychology. Although Joyce and Woolf were probably not directly acquainted with the works of Romanes and Morgan or the scientific literature on comparative psychology, they were certainly familiar with Darwinian evolutionary theories which formed its bedrock. Bonnie Kime Scott (45) has recently attested that Charles Darwin and several of his descendants were regular connections of the Stephen family exactly as Thomas Huxley, the noted populariser of Darwin’s theories at the beginning of the twentieth century. In an analogous vein, Kelly Sultzbach deems *The*



Expression of Emotions in Man and Animals “a text Woolf likely read” (105). Moreover, ideas about knowledge and subjectivity related to animal perspectives in modernist scientific thought largely permeated intellectual culture and were ardently debated by members of the Bloomsbury group. As for Joyce, not only has his knowledge and adaptation of theories of evolution been well documented, but his Trieste library also featured Michael Maher’s *Psychology: Empirical and Rational* (1890), a compendium of preceding and coeval psychological doctrines that Joyce plausibly applied to his representation of mental processes in *Ulysses*. The text includes a supplement—quoting Darwin and Romanes, among others—on animal and comparative psychology, evolutionist theories on animal instinct, animal souls and the dichotomy between animals as irrational or sentient beings. Joyce’s and Woolf’s engagements with the contemporary life sciences illustrate their sense of a shared outlook linking modern developments across the arts and sciences, and their belief that shifts in focus occurring in one field could provide new perspectives in another.

Within the emerging theoretical approaches known as posthumanism and animal studies, which challenge “the ontological and ethical divide between humans and non-humans that is a linchpin of philosophical humanism” (Wolfe 8), critics who pursue questions about human-animal relations from literary angles have focused attention on changing depictions of “the border between human and animal” (Agamben 21) or human-animal encounters, showing the various and subtle challenges posed by animals to basic human categories of culture and identity. If, as Haraway claims, “by the late twentieth century [...] the boundary between human and animal is thoroughly breached,” to the point that nowadays “nothing really convincingly settles the[ir] separation” (“Manifesto” 151-152), Joyce was perhaps among the originators of this breach in early twentieth-century literature, representing—in more or less visionary ways—species existing in a state of protean flux or hybridity, rather than as fixed forms. Recent scholarship has often focused on the human-animal boundary in Joyce’s works, which David Rando, for instance, perceives as indistinct: “*Ulysses* consistently attempts to represent animals in ways that resist or destabilize the opposition between humans and animals” (533). In her thought-provoking analysis of “Bodies” in *Ulysses*, Vike Plock remarks that “with a view to challenging anthropocentric viewpoints, Joyce also reserves space for the representation of bodies belonging to non-human species,” and concludes that “animals are at the forefront of the novel’s conceptual agenda” (193). Echoing Haraway’s cyborg imagery as “a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction” (“Manifesto” 149), Maud Ellmann further claims that “throughout *Ulysses*, machines and animals encroach upon the heroes’ consciousness, fraying the edges of the human universe” (76). Building on these important claims, in this essay I am primarily interested in discussing the several instances of animal anthropomorphism and human animality which occur in *Ulysses*. These undermine the apparently antithetical binary of animal and human and, more generally, an anthropocentricity governing human attitudes to the natural world.

It is particularly remarkable, therefore, that Leopold Bloom’s first verbal exchange of the day is, in fact, not with a fellow human being but with his cat, in an interspecies encounter which, to any reader familiar with the burgeoning area of animal studies,



obviously resonates with the one Jacques Derrida describes in “The Animal That Therefore I Am” (2002). In his reflections on the relationship between humans and animals, Derrida uses the encounter with his pet as a starting point to investigate the systematic marginalisation and subjugation of animal species in western humanism. Indeed, Bloom’s interaction with his cat can also be read as an interesting example of what Haraway labels “becoming with” animals, namely an epistemological condition that replaces the usual debasement of animal life with a shared, mutually fulfilling sense of empathy and connectedness among “companion species” (*Species* 16-17). In *Ulysses*, the characters’ earlier encounters with animals are characterised by the projection of human thoughts and feelings onto them. This is the case, for example, with “Calypso,” where Bloom perceives and interacts with his black cat in ways that are highly influenced by his personality, and even projects his own anxieties about his wife Molly onto her. These early instances of animal anthropomorphism in the novel are worth analysing in that they are somewhat preparatory to its culmination in later episodes such as “Cyclops” and “Circe,” with their representation of talking, anthropomorphic dogs along with hybrid human creatures displaying animal body parts. For Derrida exactly as for Joyce’s protagonist, the feline gaze provides an impetus to reflect on the animal’s inner life. In “Calypso,” the cat invites Bloom to ponder her feline behaviour—especially her utterances “Mkgnao!” (*U* 4.16), “Mrkgnao!” (*U* 4.25) and “Mrkrgnao!” (*U* 4.32)—and also enter her mind, which in turn prompts Bloom to explore his own psyche. Bloom, for instance, understands the first vocalisation as a greeting; then, mimicking what he believes the cat is thinking, he thinks in turn: “Prr. Scratch my head. Prr” (*U* 4.19-20). In the middle of this interaction, Bloom again takes a moment to enter the cat’s mind, trying to imagine how she perceives him: “Wonder what I look like to her. Height of a tower? No, she can jump me” (*U* 4.28-29). Presumably, a feline would not imagine a cultural construct like a tower, which shows the projection of Bloom’s own thoughts and knowledge of the world onto her. Though, as we have seen, animal intelligence was widely recognised at that time, the fact that the cat is anthropomorphised becomes manifest when Bloom not only gives her credit for understanding, but also attributes aspects of Molly’s character to her. In a series of thoughts about the general underestimation of animal ability to process human communication, Bloom remarks to himself: “They call them stupid. They understand what we say better than we understand them. She understands all she wants to. Vindictive too. Cruel. Her nature. Curious mice never squeal. Seem to like it” (*U* 4.26-28). Here Bloom projects sharp human feelings onto the cat (who is of course unaware of the traits being assigned to her) because he is clearly thinking about Molly, as the subsequent musings on his marriage and his wife’s upcoming infidelity demonstrates. At work in Joyce’s text is the modernists’ curiosity about animal minds, their attempts to adopt animal perspectives and to see the world from different points of view, as a form of empathic epistemology which challenges traditional anthropocentric attitudes. Such representations clearly reflect an understanding of animal subjectivity that was informed by scientific predicaments of biological continuity between species and by the new zoological subdisciplines which studied animals as active, agentive and mindful creatures.



Another instance of attribution to animals of qualities and connotations by human characters—in the sense that the perceived animal reflects aspects of the human perceiver—occurs in “Proteus” and concerns the dog Tatters encountered by Stephen Dedalus while walking on Sandymount strand. In the entire scene, canines are attributed human anxieties and morbid thoughts, thus blurring the line between the human and the non-human. For instance, when Tatters comes upon the “bloated carcass of a dog” (U 3.286), Stephen imagines the animal’s thoughts (which he renders in his own words and imagery linked to the loss of his own mother) and how the animal might react to death, thus assuming that dogs have some fundamental understanding of the idea: “Ah, poor dogsbody! Here lies poor dogsbody’s body” (U 3.351-352). Finally, when Tatters starts digging in the sand, Stephen reverts once again to mortality and speculates that the animal is looking for “Something he buried there, his grandmother” (U 3.360-361), echoing a riddle he frequently associates in his thoughts to the unpleasant memory of his mother’s death. Another hybrid creature portrayed in the novel, the canine Garryowen featuring in “Cyclops” is himself a protean, mutable being. In this episode he is described as unequivocally beastly, a “bloody mangy mongrel” (U 12.119-120), “a savage animal of the canine tribe” (U 12.201), a “Mangy ravenous brute sniffing and sneezing all round the place and scratching his scabs” (U 12.485-486). However, such negative portrayal and attribution of exaggerated savagery is completely reversed in “Nausicaa.” Here the dog is anthropomorphised by Gerty McDowell, who depicts him, in line with the sentimentalism of the episode, as “grandpapa Giltrap’s lovely dog Garryowen that almost talked it was so human” (U 13.232-233). It is noteworthy that, according to Gerty, the line between human and animal is drawn between talking and not talking. Nevertheless, animal anthropomorphism reaches its climax in “Cyclops,” when Garryowen undergoes a brief transformation into a poet in a newspaper announcement of the strange exhibition of an extraordinarily talented dog:

All those who are interested in the spread of human culture among the lower animals (and their name is legion) should make a point of not missing the really marvellous exhibition of cynanthropy given by the famous old Irish red setter wolfdog formerly known by the *sobriquet* of Garryowen and recently rechristened by his large circle of friends and acquaintances Owen Garry. The exhibition, which is the result of years of training by kindness and a carefully thoughtout dietary system, comprises, among other achievements, the recitation of verse. (U 12.712-719)

Though displaying the faculty of human communication, Garryowen actually offers a kind of performance described as “cynanthropy.” The word properly designates a species of madness in which a man imagines himself to be a dog, while here it is used to refer to a dog acting like a man. In my view, the passage is not totally unambiguous: is Garryowen able to speak like a human, or are we confronting a cynanthropic human who imagines being a dog capable of speech? Either way, the reader is presented with the verse of a hybrid creature, rendered into an English that is admittedly incapable of fully articulating the complexities of the “metrical system of the canine original, which recalls the intricate alliterative and isosyllabic rules of the Welsh englyn” (U 12.734-735).



The poem eventually reveals that, though anthropomorphised and endowed with the gift of poetic recitation, the creature is nonetheless just a thirsty dog asking for water. Moreover, it seems interesting to remark that Garryowen bears a striking resemblance to the talented canines portrayed as skilled orators and storytellers in the last tale of Cervantes's *Exemplary Novels* (*Novelas ejemplares*, 1613), entitled "The Dialogue of the Dogs" ("El coloquio de los perros"). The text, whose protagonists show a singular merging of canine appearance and rational mind along with distinctive human qualities such as speech, is listed as part of Joyce's Trieste library² and might have inspired, among other sources, his representation of blurred boundaries between human and nonhuman animals in *Ulysses*. As the title indicates, the narrative deals with two dogs who, finding themselves miraculously endowed with the gifts of rational thought and speech, agree to tell each other their life stories over two successive nights, aware that they will lose their prodigious power at daybreak. In stark contrast to the idea—dating back to the classical world and typical of the anthropocentric tradition of western humanism—that the faculty of speech is reserved exclusively to humans, "The Dialogue of the Dogs" subverts traditional hierarchies and uses the language of non-humans to undermine human dominance over words. If we want to trace the origins of Joyce's interest in the boundary between the animal and the human—a boundary that is constantly affirmed, blurred and denied in *Ulysses*—we could then turn to Cervantes's novella as one of the possible sources for his peculiar conception of the "leaky distinction" (Haraway, "Manifiesto" 151)—between the human and the non-human in *Ulysses*, alongside Darwinian and post-Darwinian theories of comparative psychology focusing on the cognitive faculties of animals.

Joyce's Garryowen reappears briefly in the visionary nightscape of "Circe," a dreamworld where both people and inanimate objects have their own distinctive voices and in which the dividing line between human and non-human is manifestly blurred. Since this episode represents both a synthesis and a perversion of the day's events, exactly as dreams do, here canine figures are a reflection of actual dogs from earlier in the novel, as well as of previous intersections of humanity and animality. Several dogs, or possibly one metamorphic dog, return in "Circe" to mark crucial Bloom-oriented hallucinations. Moreover, in this episode readers witness animal anthropomorphism to its utmost degree, since animals are not just assigned human actions and abilities like speech, but may display parts of a human body. In a singular scene, Bloom meets a dog metamorphosing into the figure of the deceased Paddy Dignam. The character comes back from the dead transformed into a human-sized, corpse-like beagle:

(The beagle lifts his snout, showing the grey scorbutic face of Paddy Dignam. He has gnawed all. He exhales a putrid carcased breath. He grows to human size and shape. His dachshund coat becomes a brown mortuary habit. His green eye flashes bloodshot. Half of one ear, all the nose and both thumbs are ghoul-eaten.) (U 15.1204-1208)

² As attested by M.P. Gillespie in his invaluable catalogue *James Joyce's Trieste Library* (70), Joyce actually owned the text of Cervantes's novella in an Italian translation titled *Il dialogo dei cani*.



In this passage, a canine with unequivocal animal traits (“snout,” “coat”) undergoes a double metamorphosis: from beagle into dachshund and, at the same time, from dog into human being. He initially acquires a human face, and then his entire body changes into that of a man, albeit a dead one. Moreover, in “Circe” Joyce also shows us that the reversal—that is, men turning into beasts following the Homeric correspondence—may occur. Either way, such an unsettling portrayal of human animals and animal humans seems to confirm that “the bodies he presents in *Ulysses* were similarly designed to disrupt binary thinking,” and that “Joyce’s novel attempts to dismantle established notions of gender and race while developing a sustained criticism about discourses that emphasise the singularity and wholeness of the human” (Plock 184). If speech has commonly been perceived as man’s primary benefit to assert his superiority, the presence of talking animals as well as bestial humans from antiquity to twentieth-century literature undoubtedly questions that superiority. By appropriating the power of speech, talking animals undermine convictions of human uniqueness and, by extension, long-established boundaries and hierarchical structures. In *Ulysses*—his “epic of the human body,” as Frank Budgen called it (21), but also, as we have seen, of animal bodies—Joyce frequently levels the ontological separation between the human and the non-human. The sources for such liminality—which can take the form of either a representation of animals in typical human traits, or a representation of humans in the guise of animals—may have been the most disparate, as we expect from a novel incorporating innumerable references and traditions. Nonetheless, the presence in his Trieste library of an Italian translation of “The Dialogue of the Dogs” along with Maher’s *Psychology*, with its section on animal and comparative psychology, allows us to consider the possibility that Joyce may have drawn inspiration from literary as well as scientific sources for his representation of the indistinct frontier between men and beasts in *Ulysses*.

In a similar vein, Virginia Woolf—who also had the chance, perhaps, to read Cervantes’s “Dialogue” in her personal library as a text deeply rooted in, and at the same time challenging, our western anthropocentric tradition—borrowed and adapted the discourse of comparative psychology in *Flush*, the fictional biography of Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s cocker spaniel, which has recently received sustained critical attention within the context of animal studies. Craig Smith, for instance, claims that the book is an “attempt to exercise modernist literary techniques in the mapping of a canine subjectivity” (349), reading it through the lens of late twentieth-century ethology and animal psychology, but failing to address the way early twentieth-century biological and psychological theories about animal minds might have influenced Woolf. Karalyn Kendall-Morwick argues that, in *Flush*, Woolf uses the figure of the dog “to expose how anthropocentrism underwrites the phallogocentrism of the literary canon” and “to develop a model of literary character that reflects humans’ entanglement in the more-than-human contexts of multispecies life” (508). Her interpretation echoes Jamie Johnson’s claim that the novel mirrors recent interest in the field of animal studies, with its “change in the human perspective of nonhuman animals from hierarchical to relational” (34). Other notable posthumanist approaches to *Flush* explore notions of human-canine “coevolution” (Dubino 131) and “cross-species entanglements” (Ryan



151) in the novel. Equally interesting, in my opinion, is to read *Flush* as a text that engages with early twentieth-century advances in comparative psychology and the epistemological challenge of representing nonhuman minds. In this view, Caroline Hovanec has interestingly traced the influence of Bloomsbury scientists and philosophers such as Julian Huxley, J.B.S. Haldane and Bertrand Russell on Woolf's attempt to explore animal perspectives and uncover less familiar views of the world.

Woolf's descriptions of animal consciousness and subjectivity by means of a narrative voice—that of the biographer—attributing to Flush sensory perceptions, thoughts and memories are often consonant with the theories expounded by comparative psychologists. For example, Flush's mental life is built on a foundation of sensations wrought together through associative mechanisms, a paradigm that, as noted above, animal psychology often used to explain how animals experience the world. When Elizabeth takes her dog for walks in Regent's Park, he tries to run free as he used to do in his puppyhood, but his leash prevents him from sprinting across the grass. However, what are initially perceived in Flush's mind as isolated phenomena soon become interrelated parts of a learned system that governs canine bodies:

Thus before many of these walks were over a new conception had entered his brain. Setting one thing beside another, he had arrived at a conclusion. Where there are flower-beds there are asphalt paths; where there are flower-beds and asphalt paths, there are men in shiny top-hats; where there are flower-beds and asphalt paths and men in shiny top-hats, dogs must be led on chains. (Woolf 31)

Although Woolf uses the terms "conception" and "conclusion" to refer to Flush's acquired knowledge, this is not approached through a process of logical reasoning, but rather through association, or "setting one thing beside another." Flush's learning process in his mundane, embodied life echoes the associationist claims often made by comparative psychologists: he learns from experience to connect flower beds, asphalt paths, men in top hats and his own leash, so that after a few walks he no longer expects to be allowed to run free. At the encouragement of his mistress, Flush even attempts to reach humanlike self-consciousness but, quite interestingly, Elizabeth's strive to infuse the dog's mind with philosophical questions such as the concept of self or "the problem of reality," according to a supposed human superiority to nonhuman animals, ends in a joyous reaffirmation of animal sensory psychology:

Miss Barrett [...] did her best to refine and educate his powers still further. [...] she would make him stand with her in front of the looking-glass and ask him why he barked and trembled. Was not the little brown dog opposite himself? But what is "oneself"? Is it the thing people see? Or is it the thing one is? So Flush pondered that question too, and, unable to solve the problem of reality, pressed closer to Miss Barrett and kissed her "expressively". *That* was real at any rate. (Woolf 45-46)

In addition to the dog being endowed with human understanding, passions and feelings throughout the whole book, in this mirror scene in particular the projection of human experience onto Flush reaches its peak and corresponds to a form of becoming human. However, Flush's practical knowledge clearly rests not on abstract concepts, but



on sensory impressions which combine to form particular constructs in his mind; furthermore, the (perhaps more authentic) body language of affection compensates for his lack of speech. Rather than representing hierarchical relations, and in line with our recent efforts to rethink the scope and nature of human-nonhuman companionship, in *Flush* Woolf depicts an entangled zone of interspecies connections by detailing the ordinary experiences of a dog interacting with humans in a co-evolutionary relationship.

The divide between Flush, in his nonhuman subjectivity, and the human world of both his companion Elizabeth and the anonymous biographer is at the same time affirmed and denied throughout the novel, thus entreating the reader to value nonhuman experience as diverse but equally meaningful. In creating “a contact zone in which human and animal consciousness may meet” (Ittner 194), the book asserts that their inevitable disparity ultimately becomes just as significant as Flush’s human sympathies. As critics have often pointed out, sometimes the dog is clearly anthropomorphised—especially when his flesh becomes “veined with human passions” (Woolf 125), or when he is portrayed as “canine, but highly sensitive to human emotions also” (Woolf 45)—and serves as an uncanny mirror image to his mistress. For instance, in the oft-quoted account of their very first encounter, such condition of affinity across difference, in which the dog is anthropomorphised and at the same time unequivocally a canine other, is emphasised by means of a description of their reciprocal gaze and similar appearance:

For the first time she looked him in the face. For the first time Flush looked at the lady lying on the sofa. Each was surprised. Heavy curls hung down on either side of Miss Barrett’s face; large bright eyes shone out; a large mouth smiled. Heavy ears hung down on either side of Flush’s face; his eyes, too, were large and bright: his mouth was wide. There was a likeness between them. As they gazed at each other each felt: Here am I—and then each felt: But how different! Hers was the pale worn face of an invalid, cut off from air, light, freedom. His was the warm ruddy face of a young animal; instinct with health and energy. Broken asunder, yet made in the same mould, could it be that each completed what was dormant in the other? She might have been—all that; and he—But no. Between them lay the widest gulf that can separate one being from another. She spoke. He was dumb. She was woman; he was dog. Thus closely united, thus immensely divided, they gazed at each other. (Woolf 26-27)

It is particularly remarkable that in this passage Woolf contemplates the possibility for different orders of bodies to be made of “the same mould” and complement each other, but then the “widest gulf” separating Elizabeth and Flush is articulated—as for Joyce’s representation of the dog Garryowen—along the axis of speech: while “she spoke,” “he was dumb” instead; they could be “closely united” in sympathy, but “immensely divided” by differences in their faculties. In other words, the author “simultaneously creates her protagonists’ fantasy and undercuts it by quickly deconstructing this sentimental idyll and exposing it as a delusion” (Ittner 185). However, man’s alleged primacy over nonhuman animals based on the use of language is soon reversed when it comes to imagining sensations beyond human capabilities and describing the richness of the dog’s olfactory perceptions. In accordance with the predicaments of early twentieth-century zoology, ethology and animal psychology,



Flush is described as a creature of the senses, rather than of the intellect: “it was in the world of smell that Flush mostly lived” (Woolf 122). Yet the acuteness of the dog’s sense of smell, especially when compared to the inadequacy of human modes of representation such as language, overturns long-established hierarchical relationships between human and nonhuman animals, to the point that the biographer is forced to acknowledge his own limitations: “where two or three thousand words are insufficient for what we see [...] there are no more than two words and one-half for what we smell;” therefore, “to describe [Flush’s] simplest experience with the daily chop or biscuit is beyond our power” (Woolf 122-123). Sometimes the disparity between Elizabeth and Flush due to the dog’s lack of speech does not prevent them from establishing a co-evolutionary relationship based on sincere affection and true companionship: “the fact was that they could not communicate with words, and it was a fact that led undoubtedly to much misunderstanding. Yet did it not lead also to a peculiar intimacy?” (Woolf 38). On other occasions, despite the closeness of their bond, Elizabeth and Flush reach limits in their empathic understanding of each other, perceiving instead only the strangeness of species differences:

And yet sometimes the tie would almost break; there were vast gaps in their understanding. Sometimes they would lie and stare at each other in blank bewilderment. Why, Miss Barrett wondered, did Flush tremble suddenly, and whimper and start and listen? She could hear nothing; she could see nothing; there was nobody in the room with them. [...] Flush was equally at a loss to account for Miss Barrett’s emotions. There she would lie hour after hour passing her hand over a white page with a black stick; and her eyes would suddenly fill with tears; but why? (Woolf 36-37)

Here Woolf clearly posits that these gaps in understanding are reciprocal: exactly as Elizabeth cannot always penetrate the mystery of her dog’s mind or simply recognise what triggers his behaviour, Flush, for his part, cannot grasp the meaning of human writing or the link between language and emotion that is so strong for the poet. Flush may be more acutely sensitive to human thoughts and feelings than other dogs; even so, he cannot completely cross species boundaries.

Therefore, *Flush* is at the same time a book dealing with the strong bond of companionship between a woman and her dog, and a novel about species differences, or the mutual strangeness between the human and the non-human. Adopting the biographer’s narrative voice, Woolf would ideally be in a position to represent the normally inaccessible consciousness of the dog and offer insights into those aspects of Flush’s subjective life that even his closest companion could not understand. However, critics have often remarked that the narration is, at times, empathically canine and, at other times, ironically detached. As a human being, Woolf’s biographer on the one hand includes extensive reports of Flush’s non-verbalised thoughts and perceptions, and on the other confronts the limitations of human senses and human language in capturing and describing the full extent of a dog’s experience. As the narrator acknowledges, the richness of the sensations a dog feels far exceeds the powers of the most skilled of poets: “not even Mr. Swinburne could have said what the smell of Wimpole Street meant to Flush on a hot afternoon in June” (Woolf 123), for the simple reason that “not a single



one of his myriad sensations ever submitted itself to the deformity of words" (Woolf 125). According to Dan Wylie, the story ultimately affirms "the necessary failure of the imagination to *be Flush*" (118), exactly as comparative psychologists often expressed doubts about the possibility of penetrating nonhuman minds or using the scientific method as a tool for investigating animals' inner behaviour. Sharing David Herman's view, I would rather argue that "Woolf uses a nonhuman reflector to suggest interspecies differences in ways of encountering the world" (557); in so doing, the text "underscores the fundamental continuity between human and nonhuman experiences: members of different species (and different members of the same species) encounter the world in ways that may differ in their quality but not their basic structure" (558). This non-anthropocentric exploration of the interactions between human and nonhuman animals in a shared environment brings Woolf into conversation with both coeval scientific discourse related to the domain of comparative psychology and posthuman critical approaches.

As this essay has tried to show, at the beginning of the twentieth century both literature and the life sciences were open to their common cultural environment, and such openness enabled them to collaboratively reshape notions of subjectivity or the relationship between human and nonhuman animals. Both Joyce and Woolf explored the possibility of perceiving the world from animal perspectives, describing human-animal encounters in which human characters attempt, more or less successfully, to penetrate animal minds exactly as scientists did. Regardless of the results obtained, it is remarkable that the representation of nonhuman subjects in both *Ulysses* and *Flush*, addressing questions of animal speech and psychology, blurs long-established boundaries between the human and the non-human in favour of a new, horizontal dimension of relationality linking "companion species." Rather than inscribing a hierarchy of minds in which human modes of consciousness take precedence over nonhuman modes, these authors explored and foregrounded the plurality of ways of world-making within as well as across species.

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