

That “incredible unanimal/mankind”: Jacques Derrida, E.E. Cummings and a Grasshopper*

Etienne Terblanche

Summary

Jacques Derrida does not take account of recent discoveries about communication within the animal kingdom. This philosopher shifts the entire debate on whether animals respond, or not, into a complex deconstructive zone. He ignores the fact that animals communicate – including Koko the gorilla and the ants – and this goes together with a couple of uncomfortable complications in his work when it comes to a zoological identity. These complications involve deconstruction on the whole, and in particular Derrida’s long recent essay “The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)”; this article focuses on this essay. One important complication which the article discusses briefly and in some detail is that Derrida unnecessarily undermines the potential of language to describe animals. Deconstruction remains “scriptive” when it should be “descriptive”; that is, when it should un-write to the greatest possible degree in order to write (comprehensively and reciprocally into the actuality of) an animal. The article shows, for instance, that Derrida’s manner of describing an echidna disappoints. It obscures the descriptive labours of language such as stripping and organising itself outwardly, in the direction of this remarkable creature. That is, it fails to write in such a manner that the actuality of the creature influences and resonates within the writing. And a describing zoological identity has flourished prior to deconstruction, in the most (inter)active and open-ended sense in modernist poetry, for example in E.E. Cummings’s grasshopper poem. This article reads this poem, focusing on the full and active describing qualities within it. For instance, it shows how the iconistic centre and a framing of the significant shortcomings of language combine to set the grasshopper free (to let it go, or abandon it in the positive sense) *through* language; a cross-stitching occurs in which language is also free, finally, to render an adequate and dynamic description of an actual animal. With these arguments and this comparison in hand, the article comes to a provisional conclusion that perhaps deconstruction, despite its important illuminations, ultimately does not render a satisfactory zoological semiosis, while the past has already provided us with clarifying and exciting salient points of this ongoing and imperative manner of making signs.

Opsomming

Jacques Derrida hou nie tred met onlangse bevindings oor kommunikasie in die diereryk nie. Hierdie filosoof verskuif die hele debat oor die moontlikheid dat die diere kan antwoord in 'n komplekse dekonstruktiewe sone in. Maar hy ignoreer die feit dat die diere kommunikeer – insluitende Koko die gorilla en die miere – en dit hang saam met 'n aantal ongemaklike verwickelings in sy werk oor ons soölogiese identiteit. Hierdie verwickelings raak die dekonstruksie in die geheel en veral Derrida se onlangse lang essay "The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)" – waarop hierdie artikel fokus. Een van die belangrike verwickelings wat so ontstaan en wat kortliks in besonderhede hier bespreek word, is dat Derrida die potensiaal van die taal om die diere te beskryf onnodig in die skadu stel. Die dekonstruksie is "skrywend", nie "ont-skrywend" (lees ook: beskrywend) nie – en hoewel mens dalk sou reken dat dit daarom meer dinamies en interaktief inspraak sou maak in die diereryk en die ekosisteem in, is dit ongelukkig nie die geval nie. Die artikel toon byvoorbeeld hoe sy hantering van die beskrywing van 'n echidna teleurstel: Derrida forseer hier 'n "skrywing" (self-refleksie) af op 'n beskrywing. In teenstelling hiermee betoog die artikel verder dat 'n beskrywende soölogiese identiteit reeds voor die dekonstruksie gefloreer het in die mees (inter-)aktiewe en oop-eindigende sin, in die modernistiese poësie, byvoorbeeld in E.E. Cummings se sprinkaangedig. Hierdie gedig word gelees met die oog op die ont-skrywende/beskrywende kwaliteit daarvan. Met hierdie betoog en die vergelyking tussen Derrida en Cummings in pag, kom die artikel tot die voorlopige slotsom dat die dekonstruksie, ten spyte van die belangrike insigte wat dit openbaar, op die ou end dalk nie 'n bevredigende soölogiese semiose daarstel nie; terwyl daar in die verlede reeds voorbeelde was van insiggewende en opwindende hoogtepunte van hierdie voortgaande en lewensbelangrike manier waarop die mens tekens voortbring.

1 Complexity and Complication: Derrida, the Philosophers, the Animals

Modern humans have viewed the capacity to utilise the verbal sign for purposes such as the lie and erasure as their privilege and property in most spheres of life, besides fairy-tales. We have taken for granted, more or less, a philosophical chasm between ourselves and the animal-selves, on the basis that we can respond to language, and they not. In his long and dense essay remarkably entitled "The Animal That Therefore I Am (More To Follow)" published in English in 2002, Jacques Derrida (2002: 396) phrases this position or disposition as follows: "the animal deprived of the *logos*, deprived of the *can-have-the-logos*: this is the thesis, position, or presupposition maintained from Aristotle to Heidegger, from Descartes to Kant, Lévinas and Lacan".

Derrida critiques this hierarchical divide in a delicate and strategic fashion. He writes that there is a "limit about which we have had a stomachful, the limit between Man with a capital M and Animal with a capital A", and he feels that one should not question this limit any further, and that it cannot be ignored or attacked frontally or antithetically (Derrida 2002: 398). Instead, he sets out to

complicate this supposed and irrevocable abyss by maintaining a deconstructive position of neither duality (and hierarchy) between those concepts as in philosophy (p. 398), nor a suggested continuity, unity or a radical integrity as found in biology or evolution (p. 415). Of course, this unsettling deconstructive both-and as well as neither-nor “position” *also* entails the maintenance of a steep difference between humans and animals. In this complicated sense the philosophical divide between Man and Animal that he critiques, also remains a strategic premise of his discourse:

To suppose that I, or anyone else for that matter, could ignore that rupture, indeed that abyss, would mean first of all blinding oneself to so much contrary evidence; and, as far as my own modest case is concerned, it would mean forgetting all the signs that I have sought to give, tirelessly, of my attention to difference, to differences, to heterogeneities and abyssal ruptures as against the homogeneous and the continuous. I have thus never believed in some homogeneous continuity between what calls *itself* man and what *he* calls the animal.

(Derrida 2002: 398)

In other words, Derrida insists on a different, deconstructive way of treating the divide between humans and animals. Consider, further, how this passage of the essay enacts his emphasis on difference and discontinuity in the italicised terms: he employs a significantly disjointed grammar of pronouns to make a gender-related point in the passing. Also, the passage signals that it should be measured not only against language, but also against a reality outside language: where else would one find “so much contrary evidence” of a supposed discontinuity between ourselves and animals, even if those differences do indeed take shape in the mind?

One has to agree that animals have evolved virtually fantastic differences to live within their various habitats. And the otherly distance between one’s self and the animal-selves certainly adds a vital excitement to the gift of a lifetime on earth. Nonetheless, it is likely that Derrida accentuates difference at the cost of biological integrity. To mention one thing: the incredibly sophisticated and various differences between the animals have all emanated from DNA – and this molecule and information-carrier also embodies a startling unity, not only a baffling differentiation. It has been established in the biological sciences that fractions of percentages carry the remarkable differences between chimpanzees and ourselves – and this discovery highlights, with shocking recognition, the factuality of a familiarity that humans have felt, for the most part with discomfort or embarrassment, all along.

Even if it forms part of his baffling both-and, neither-nor logic, it is still so that Derrida comes down fairly hard on the notion of biological, evolutionary or ecological continuity. In “The Animal That Therefore I Am”, he declares the

necessary deconstructive recognition that there is "no animal in the general singular, separated from man by a single indivisible limit" (Derrida 2002: 415). He proposes the ungrammatically French "word" *animot* to designate a third deconstructive position hovering somewhere between or beside the opposition of a singular Man versus a singular Animal (p. 415). It should be read as meaning: the animals in the plural-singular. And then he continues:

This does not of course mean ignoring or effacing everything that separates humankind from the other animals, creating a single large set, a single great, fundamentally homogeneous and continuous family tree going from the *animot* to the *homo* (*faber*, *sapiens*, or whatever else). That would be an *asinanity* [animal-stupidity], even more so to suspect anyone here of doing just that. I won't therefore devote another second to the double stupidity of that suspicion, even if, alas, it is quite widespread. I repeat that it is rather a matter of taking into account a multiplicity of heterogeneous structures and limits.

(Derrida 2002: 415)

No matter how carefully formulated or ironically quotable these lines are, they treat the remarkable, approximate fact of biological continuity harshly. One of the most non-sentimental and intriguing implications of the evolutionary tree that Derrida refers to here is the recognition that humans and the rest of creation are actively related: we are *family*. It seems to me that Derrida treats that notion with too much abrupt familiarity. A multiplicity of heterogeneous structures and limits puts evolution too squarely in the mouth of deconstruction, so to speak, and this smacks a little of a self-serving approach. He goes too far, perhaps, in a reaction to Hitlerian geneticism. Hitler must be incorrect to think that manipulation of the supposedly pure genetic code would lead to a perfect world – that world is too horrible to imagine. Even so, it cannot be correct to continue to represent matters with lines of thought, no matter how delicately, strategically, and with how much complexity those relations are presented in deconstruction.

For whichever reason, then, Derrida does not squarely consider that the premise about the hierarchical abyss between humans and animals, especially where it centres on communication and semiosis, is literally mistaken. Fairytales in which animals speak may be closer to the actuality than we suspected for a number of centuries. With these recognitions (to be expounded briefly and presently) one approaches the words "actual" and "actuality" much as the modernist poet E.E. Cummings (1894–1962) meant them. A synopsis of these words as meant by Cummings must include the following: most importantly, Cummings's distinction between the real and the possible differs from the usual. We would say that there is the real and there is the dream, and they are separate. For Cummings, there is the actual and the real, and the actual is a kind of real that includes the possible, the dream and above all the present –

now. In the words of Norman Friedman: Cummings has a “vision of the possibilities of human life, and this he calls the ‘actual’ world; and there is around him the spectacle of a regimented and joyless life, and this he calls the ‘real’ world” (Friedman 1980: 115-116). “Realists” have lost their “wonder” according to Cummings (Cummings in Friedman 1980: 116) – and in the context of his poetry this means that they have lost their sense of a dynamic wholeness and integrity. In the context of modernist poetry at large, as found in the green thought of T.S. Eliot (1980: 291) especially, it would further mean that they have lost their sense of awe in the natural realm. The “actual”, for Cummings, relates directly with the verb: dynamism, liveliness, a moving nature. And it combines what we would usually call the real – the concrete and the present – with the dream: for it is as much about growth and what humans can be as it is about a flower. Flowers give Cummings this actual universe of the present imagination (Cummings in Friedman 1980: 115).

Mere poetry, wishful thinking, a fool’s paradise? An obsolete modernist poetry, eclipsed now, finally, by a much more sophisticated if less poetic post-modernist mindset? No: there seems to be, indeed, a more direct (even if it is a complex, changing and open-ended) connectivity between the realm of signs and the realm of concrete nature. Cummings is right to view language as a vehicle of that sensibility which still knows, as Friedman writes, that the weather itself is more actual than the weatherman’s prediction (Friedman 1980: 115).

Biological research of the past decades has come up with results that are surprisingly *semiotic*, centring on the communication of animals as different as the gorilla on the one hand and the ants on the other. In a manner worthy of serious consideration (as the article will demonstrate), animals communicate. In this sense, human semiosis forms a radical part of a relatively thriving communicating community with and within the ecosystem. (This broader category of communication which includes and supersedes human language should be referred to as *ecosemiosis* and the study thereof as *ecosemiotics*.) Erasing one’s presence or tracks, attempting to manipulate events by means of signs, even lying for the sake of obscuring a potentially negative effect – these potentials and more do not belong to human semiosis in any singular manner.

This article will argue – from a vigorously *ecosemiotic* perspective as informed by these recognitions – that Derrida remains within a static zone of a *complication* of the philosophical divide between Man and Animal, despite himself, and despite all appearances of a deconstructive *movement*. In the process he overlooks both important simplicities and complexities of the relations and boundaries between humans, animals and semiosis. Somewhat in the spirit of the Norwegian eco-philosopher and mountaineer Arne Naess (1995: 5), also when it comes to a semiotic approximation of the animals, this article accepts a principle that both over-simplification (i.e. the simplistic) and

over-complexity (i.e. *complication*) inevitably lead to unnecessary impediments of the human-animal relationship and a zoological identity. In an attempt to direct the article towards an actual simplicity and complexity as found in the ecosystem, it is necessary to uncover one or two crucial complications or "pollutants" as found in Derrida's essay, such as an interfering and deliberate reluctance to *describe*. (For reasons that will become clear as the article unfolds, I withhold the transitive object that should follow on that verb for the moment.)

In other words, the deconstructionist's noble – and self-admittedly, playfully or supposedly inconsequential – attempt to destabilise the entire Western philosophy by complicating its basic zoo-semiotic premises (Derrida 2002: 407) shows a lack of a sense of ecological complexity despite its many informative moments. As this article hopes to show, this lack begins with an ignorance towards zoological actualities such as the discovery of an undeniable zoological semiosis which includes erasure. Taking a larger view, it further involves a failure to differentiate between complication (pollution) and complexity (an inherent, vast and highly dynamic intricacy of interrelations and interactions on earth). An analogy of drinking water could illustrate this important difference.

The act of drinking water is at once one of the most simple and complex events in the ecosystem. Simple, because one can assume on a second-nature basis (without taking it for granted, of course) an integrity or an active unity of the water-drinking event – in plain terms, "it works" for the most part to drink water. Highly complex, because the details of the physiological procedures of making water with its unique chemical composition and flowing substance part of a living creature's cells are as staggering as the anatomical feat of drinking it. The various interactions that centre on competition and co-operation to access water in the ecosystem are equally mind-boggling in their vastness and interrelatedness – not to mention the fact that all of the universe with all its enormous and delicate forces must remain intact for one to take a sip of water. Inwardly and outwardly, then, drinking water is an event of profound simplicity, complexity and dynamism.

All of this turns into *complication* the moment when, due to ignorance – due to taking simplicity for granted or under-estimating the actual complexity of the situation – humans add pollutants to water which make the already-complex event of drinking water dangerous. A threat arises of the derailment of the *complexity* of the event itself. Frequently, such complication (which involves further processes such as the greenhouse effect) will involve an ignorance in a particular sense: such as an ignorance that cannot possibly calculate the effects of (say) adding pollutants to water in time or space, precisely *because of* the awe-inspiring complexity of the event and the existence of water. In other words, it would typically involve an ignorance

towards the scale and inherent dynamism of one's continuing and interactive position within nature. Polluting water may hold severely negative consequences for generations to come and for all the humans, plants and animals in a given area. Such an area may be quite remote from the actual spot of pollution, since the water may travel far in time and space, carrying the pollution with it; not to mention the speed with which toxins such as POPS (Persistent Organic Pollutants) are imported into the water, soil and blood of so-called Third-World countries (Osibanjo 2001: 3-5).

Ultimately, an under-estimation of the sheer scale and vitality of *inter-relatedness* as such lies at the root of such ignorance, for everything affects everything else in the ecosystem (Begon, Harper & Harper 1996: vii). When Derrida turns (perhaps deliberately) gullible in his appetite for his heterogeneous structures and limits, when he seems to hammer biology and common sense unnecessarily, and when he simultaneously writes in a way that interferes with natural communication of the human kind, he may well be in danger of crossing from semiotic complexity into semiotic complication. He may cause a pollution of words and the semiotic spirit with a view to the ecosystem. For it is precisely where and when the sign touches upon and, in its way, "infiltrates" the actuality of the ecosystem that it acknowledges a necessary complexity of the sign-nature interaction, without turning that interaction into mere complication.

After all, the human mind and its language have been both a result of and smaller than the energetic activity of the ecological realm on the whole, throughout known history. When Koko the gorilla *erases the quality of her deeds by means of the quality of her thoughts and language* as the article will explain, it is a manifestation of the distribution of that ecological energy which has been communicative within a considerable expanse of earthly space over a considerable period of time. In a sense, humans have certainly received an unfair share of this – Derrida and the philosophers are right to imply as much. Nevertheless, that unfair share should not be used to deny, obscure or complicate, however philosophically or subtly, the natural actuality of communication, also and especially in the sense that human language involves an outwardly purpose, propelled from within even on a biological level, towards its natural origin and hence its continuing and radically open-ended destination.

The cover of the 1990 hard copy of the extraordinary universe of a book entitled *The Ants* presents a photograph (in stunning detail) of a major worker of the weaver ant which faces the photographer in a threat display. The picture shows an important and remarkably frozen glimpse into the unbounded and actively communicating nature of nature. The communicating intensity and tension of the ant's thin, angular body and the directness of its gaze are unmistakable. It shows the all-important reciprocity of communication within

nature: the ant looks via the camera into that outside which contains us, in no uncertain terms and (indeed) beyond purely linguistic terms. In describing this, words have to acknowledge their limitations – and the question arises whether the deconstructive spirit does not misconstrue this positive, descriptive capacity of language when it comes to the maintenance of a zoological identity (also) through human language. Here is a reason why an examination of the manner in which Derrida constructs his zoological identity must include an inquiry into the role of description in his work.

These stirrings of a sense of dismay at the recognition that Derrida and his philosophers (from Aristotle to Lacan as he advocates) have either misconstrued or ignored biology increases when one further considers that an acutely self-aware and ecologically aware modern semiotic sensibility had already developed before Derrida. A salient era of this modern zoological identity is to be found in modernist poetry, notably in the cases of poets such as Marianne Moore, Wallace Stevens, D.H. Lawrence and Cummings.

Although Derrida appears to acknowledge his debts to the poets in general (Derrida 2002: 377), his bold assertion that he is the only philosopher who strives to enter their zoological space (p. 377) holds the likelihood that he would disappoint us by virtue of the ways in which *poetry* has achieved and continues to achieve a zoological identity. By comparing Cummings's much-anthologised and often poorly understood grasshopper poem (among others) with Derrida's zoological essay, this article will conclude provisionally that part of the complication that deconstruction brings about involves a degeneration of a modern ecological sensibility and a modern zoological identity. Of course: at a time of an increasing awareness of the powerful, vulnerable and dynamic interactions within the ecosystem, and some crisis or turning point in our ecological perception of which Derrida (p. 397) also takes note in his way, a deliberation on the semiotic nature of one's zoological identity seems of heightened interest and necessity.

Let the following working definition of the phrase "a zoological identity" suffice for the purposes here: the stable (but not static) set of differences and similarities which directs one's interaction or living-together with animals on earth, including its vital semiotic aspect. As we are bound to see in following Derrida and Cummings in their divergent manners, they offer illuminating textual insights into the nature of going about such a much needed sense of identity and ecological responsibility. In line with this attitude, it seems probable that the existence and behaviour of an actual animal may organise, tighten or strip a text or a chunk of text in its direction. It follows that the article argues that a result may be an essential approximation of one's zoological identity and/or an adequate direction or directedness towards the actuality of an animal or animals – in some defiance of a currently fashionable and self-serving semiotic spirit which maintains that nature boils down to

“little or no more than a linguistic construct” in the words of the green critic Laurence Coupe (2000: 2). Language, also in the process of acting out the fact that it remains smaller than all of nature, can be one of the most valuable orienting instruments that humans may employ. There is a danger, as this article hopes to demonstrate, that the deconstructive spirit will eclipse this valuable potential unnecessarily, in possible defeat of its own strategic aims with a view to a renewed zoological identity – an identity which must lead to a better dispensation not only for animals, but also for ourselves who breathe the air with them.

2 Selected Examples of Communication in the Animal Kingdom

When a gorilla manages to communicate with a person by means of five hundred active and five hundred passive signs as in the case of Koko (Fischer, 2000: 29), and when she uses the sign to lie, then the distinct metaphysical chasm which has been envisaged between humans and the animal kingdom for the past centuries in terms of the philosophy of language closes considerably. “Even those [philosophers] who, from Descartes to Lacan, have conceded to the said animal some aptitude for signs and communication”, writes Derrida (2002: 401), “have always denied it the power to *respond* – to *pretend*, to *lie*, to *cover its tracks* or *erase its own traces*”. The question remains whether, obviously in his manner, Derrida does not further entrench this philosophical premise at least as much as he manages to criticise it. And this question exerts increased pressure on semioticians to take note of communication in the animal kingdom: once more, humans may not be isolated on a communicative island.

Koko begins to chew a red crayon. Francine Patterson, her human partner, enters, notices the bad behaviour, and asks: “You’re not eating that crayon, are you?” (Fischer 2000: 28). In reply Koko signs “Lip” and applies the crayon first to her upper lip, and then the lower. Koko suggests in no uncertain terms (or in terms that are *only* and profoundly uncertain) that she is merely putting on lipstick as she has seen Patterson do (p. 28). In some way or another she is aware of an error and Patterson’s possible displeasure, and she is going to do something about it by means of signs. In fact, Koko tries to use sign language to cover her tracks and deceive Patterson, thus employing one of the oldest tricks in the book of language – and also one of the surest signs of semiosis according to Umberto Eco (1976: 7) among others.

Clearly there is no more at stake here than a scale of difference between animals and humans when it comes to communicating. Steven Roger Fischer (2000: 29) in his *A History of Language* further states that gorillas like Koko,

along with chimpanzees and other apes, obtain the linguistic level of human toddlers despite severe physical restrictions such as the fact that an ape's larynx does not sag like ours do to make articulate spoken language possible.

Koko's IQ was measured in a test as ranging between 85 to 95, on par with average toddler intelligence – and then there were unfair anthropocentric aspects to the test which turned up in retrospect, such as the fact that a tree and not a house would be the natural shelter from rain in the gorilla's world (Fischer, 2000: 29). And in the study of something as apparently far removed from humans as the insect kingdom, an explosion of a different kind is occurring: the beginnings of an increasingly sophisticated entomological knowledge of insect communication which includes the usage by insects of semiochemicals. This word sounds instantly familiar to the semiotician, and is an entomological term designating the usage of chemicals among insects in order to evoke various responses (Hölldobler & Wilson 1990: 227).

Here the difference of scale in comparison to human language is steep, but the fact remains that insects communicate by means of chemicals and gestures which could qualify as signs in the weakest sense – but signs nonetheless. Perhaps one would not have thought that they communicate at all, given the depth of the philosophical doubt that animals, not to mention the insects, could respond. Never mind, of course, an entertainment of the notion that they could induce responses from each other in their different manner. Consider the "tappings, stridulations, strokings, graspings, nudgings, antennations, tastings and puffings and streakings of chemicals among the ants that evoke various responses from simple recognition to recruitment and alarm" as described by the foremost myrmecologists of our time Bert Hölldobler and Edward O. Wilson (1990: 227) in *The Ants*.

These recognitions have far-reaching implications. The sign – far from amounting to a human appendix or quirk that puts us out of touch with the ecosystem – is a vital part of survival and of a qualitative natural existence. Contrary to the popular conception, for instance, poetry (perhaps the most charged form of language that we know) could be a vital part of ecological being. Poetry could indeed act as the green leaves of semiosis as William Rueckert writes, storing semiotic energy within its density for individual or collective future semiotic consumption (1996: 111). It is time to restate that poetry feeds one of humankind's innermost needs: semiotic "hunger" – in line with Cummings's suggestion that we should "eat flowers [digest poems]/ and not be afraid"! (1994: 262). To Derrida it is also clear that "thinking concerning the animal, if there is such a thing, derives from *poetry*" (2002: 377; my italics). Evidently he does not consider that "thinking concerning the animal" could be a condition, in varying degrees, of zoological being. He seems to regard (his) deconstruction as the first (real, comprehensive and philosophical, albeit playful) thought in the direction of a proper zoological identity:

As for the other category of discourse [about the animals], found among those whose signatories are first and foremost poets or prophets, in the situation of poetry or prophecy, those men and women who admit taking upon themselves the address of an animal that addresses them, before even having the time or the power to take themselves off [...], to take themselves off with clothes off or in a bathrobe, I know of no *statutory representative* of it, that is to say no subject who does so as theoretical, philosophical, or juridical man, or even as citizen. I have found no such representative, but it is in that very place that I find myself, here and now, in the process of searching.

(Derrida 2002: 383)

Clothed in his remarkably discursive discourse or “scriptive” writing as I shall call it later in this article, Derrida here claims no less than to be the first fully-fledged *poetic* philosopher whose foremost concern is the animal gaze (“response”) which strips us naked. He also claims, as if in the passing, that he is the first zoological philosopher proper. In playing the game of acting as a slightly immodest, daring, dashing or ego-textual textual persona, Derrida now comes close to a purely egotistic (and not merely autobiographical) textuality – despite all pretences of an *ecological* and even private kind of writing.

The claim is that deconstruction embodies a first theoretical response in the right direction of being with and being among animals. Perhaps one cannot simply counter that there have been philosophers (such as Lévinas, whom Derrida quotes in his essay), not to mention poets, who have done well in positioning themselves among animals in a most sensitive and responsive manner. To have argued thus would be to possess a historical philosophical knowledge which one cannot claim as swiftly as Derrida does. Nonetheless, one should state that animal responses now appear to have been an active part of existence all along, and this calls for a renewed look at the exact way in which Derrida views and complicates the question of whether animals can respond; this question is tied up, clearly, with the question of whether humans have been able to respond to the existence of animals, or not.

3 Derrida and the Responding Animals

As a part of his attempt to displace the entire discourse about it into a deconstructive zone, Derrida tends to complicate – that is, “over-complexify” (for lack of a less unspeakable term) – the question of an animal responding. Humans (or those humans that are, therefore, animals) do not really know what the word “response” means. The animal (like the future) is the *wholly* (completely, utterly) other (Derrida 2002: 380) – again the implication is that

one does not really understand enough about them to say whether they respond or not. Along the convoluted or strategic line of the same intriguing argument Derrida (p. 381) finds invaluable, or, in his own terms, apocalyptic (unveiling or revelatory) insights such as the following: the gaze of the animal confronts one with the "abyssal limit of the human: the inhuman or the ahuman" – one is struck by the word-play which combines the absence of knowledge or language about animals with the horror of human cruelty to animals.

It follows that the onus for a response lies squarely on the shoulders of humans. Derrida consequently argues that all is a matter of the human response to our own "calling" (2002: 382), namely our calling the animal a name that renders it mute and exploitable on the most violent scale. Indeed, deconstruction in its entirety is such a response according to its father (p. 383). Having thus opened the necessary space or silence, Derrida is free to argue that animals respond in various manners, after all.

In another deconstructive sense as suggested first by Michele De Montaigne (De Montaigne in Derrida 2002: 375), the very muteness of animals amounts to a response. Derrida's cat "recalls" him, it reminds him of the "awful tale of Genesis, without breathing a word" (p. 387) – the tale which Derrida expounds in detail. The rather elaborate and over-worked reading of Genesis in this essay boils down to this: Genesis is the very beginning of time, guilt, thought and naming the animal. One sees one's otherness, one's future in the eyes of the animal, so to speak – an otherness akin to (looking into the eyes of) God (p. 387). Towards the conclusion of the essay Derrida equals the human "I" of human language to a "mirror" which reflects the animal (2002: 418). In more technical terms, Derrida displaces the subject-master and muteness-response dualism as found at the root of Western philosophy in this manner among others. Seeing, according to this argument, and being seen as being seen by another (such as a cat) are in "essence" responses or, to put it creatively, recollections of one's very animality or (in)humanity.

It may seem that Derrida "speaks for" animals, but he boldly denies this. He forbids himself "thus to assign, interpret, or project" a language to or onto animals (Derrida 2002: 389). This would be equal, he feels, to a form of "violence or stupidity [*bétise*]" (p. 389). On balance, his main caveat remains that the animal is a *word that men have instituted*. Consequently he shifts the focus persistently to that other animal, the human animal, who is still only beginning to respond to or take *responsibility* for its own de-humanisation or de-animalisation against the stark background of animal exploitation in the *name* of the word "animal" (that which cannot respond). And he subsequently continues to shift the issue of whether animals respond (or not) into further zones of deconstruction – for instance, by replacing the word "respond" with the word "suffer".

“Can they suffer?” he asks so simply yet so profoundly with Jeremy Bentham (Derrida 2002: 396). His essay changes the question from response to suffering: Derrida argues that the question should not read whether animals dispose of the “can-have” (of the *logos*, word or response), but rather whether they share with us this weakness or this mortal “not-being-able” of suffering (p. 395). Suffering is the response that precedes all other questions, including whether animals can respond or not (p. 297). The animal looks at us, we are naked (guilty) before it, and thinking (perhaps) begins here (p. 397).

To prevent it from stalling into a stasis of contradictions – underpinned, for example, by (so to write) both difference and neither difference between humans and animals! – it seems that a somewhat mechanical shift sustains these “movements” of the deconstructive mind. As is known by now, that shift involves the interpreting manoeuvre itself: the supplement, that “extra something” within thought. Without getting tangled unduly into these technical deconstructive issues, the question begs whether *extra* should still be understood as a vital *outside* of the mind which *enters* it for the very reason that it actively belongs in the ecosystem.

I have begun to argue that description as it occurs in Derrida’s essay boils down to an obstruction of these interactions. It can be viewed as a symptom or a pollutant, a kind of indicator that all is not well in the realm of a deconstructive zoology.

4 Zoological Description in Derrida’s Discourse: A Species of Complicated Writing

A feature of the semiotic interaction between humans and animals is the ability of human language to describe animals, a potential virtue which has been cultivated carefully over numerous millennia. As poetry in general (and Cummings’s poetry especially) shows, this descriptive activity, far from a lame and quietistic deed of monotony, can be one of the freshest and most moving human activities – and also one of the most interactive and significant when it comes to an ecology, that is, an ongoing integrity of living on earth.

Often where he seems to need it most, Derrida strangely complicates this potential of language in “The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)”. Deconstruction is not a licence to write anything about animals at all, as if what one writes had no relation to the actual existence of animals, and as if one may live and write in denial of the positive tension between the human sign system and the communicative ecosystem. That much is clear, among other texts, from Derrida’s letter in response to Anne McClintock and Rob Nixon with regard to the then government and apartheid, where he achieves a surprising level of lucidity, even simplicity, and where he states that decon-

struction certainly does take a very wide reading of the word "text" (Derrida 1986: 167), but that this is done in order to *open up* textual "analysis" and not 1) either to deny *the limits* of the book 2) or to *close one down* within a prison-house of language (p. 168). One may therefore be justified in insisting that Derrida should make exemplary use of the semiotic potential of a descriptive interaction between signs and animals in his (dis)seminal zoological essay. One accepts that he refuses to prescribe or describe as if one may view the animals from a category outside one's self, but the direction he adopts of adding more and more textuality within the "betweenness" of those "categories" may thwart the descriptive powers of language, whether the language be that of a book, a text or whatever.

The word "describe" is of an interesting species, since it can also be read as the event of taking away, stripping or tightening words: it marks the implicit linguistic potential of *de-writing* (de-description) in the process of coming to a fuller form of writing. I wish to focus in this creative way not merely on a tension of or a balance in word economy – the constant battle between too many words and too little – but upon how this kind of economy and much more may be regulated, so to say, by an outwardly direction towards an active, refreshing (even upon re-reading) semiotic re-entrance into one's natural, ecosystemic existence. It is here, I believe, that one can learn much both from a "scriptive" complication of description in Derrida's discourse, and from a marvellous form of description (in the full-empty sense of a de-description) as found in modernist poetry and Cummings.

Faced with the actual, historical or present presence of an animal, even if the human mind acts as the go-between, words frequently show a tendency to organise themselves in the manner of such a description. They are directed more clearly towards the actual creature, and some of the features that allow us to notice this include a lessening or a greater economy of words as well as a tightening, since they are focused towards and may be tested against the actual creature. I shall go as far as to say that even when one does not know the actual creature, one can on occasion infer from such de-descriptive writing that there has to be or must have been an actual creature to which the text relates itself. An example could be the surprisingly accurate (albeit poetic) description of a pair of yellow butterflies in Ezra Pound's version of Li Po's "The River Merchant's Wife: A Letter", about which R.F. Terblanche and I reported elsewhere (Terblanche & Terblanche 2002: 97-116).

Familiar texts in which one witnesses this process of de-description include natural scientific manuscripts such as the descriptions of new species and, perhaps to a slightly lesser extent, field guides in which interfering language, that is, language which would clutter one's perception of the appearance and behaviour of an actual creature such as a bird, limits itself if not to a minimum, then at least towards a level of adequacy in the descriptive direction of the

actual animal – and once more, let it be stated that the direction itself can be adequate in the human mind as a description, a satisfying and dynamic correspondence, or whichever other term one would prefer; living in the animal kingdom would not be possible for our semiotic species without this kind of adequacy. And I mean, as simply as possible, that a proper and active description (or de-scribing) is also a very interesting and often illuminating form of un-writing; I shall demonstrate in the case of Cummings's grasshopper poem that the same process functions in poetry, too, in its unique and unravelling manner.

A proper description of Derrida's intriguing reluctance and frequent failure to describe well should begin with a critique of his conception of "infinite semiosis". As Umberto Eco (1990: 37) has shown in his important book *The Limits of Interpretation*, Derrida misappropriated this concept as coined originally by C.S. Peirce when he adopted it from Peirce for deconstructive purposes. Eco writes that in Peirce's conception of the infinite potentials of the sign, language, involves a purpose, and

a purpose is, without any shade of doubt, and at least in the Peircean framework, connected with something which lies outside language. Maybe it has nothing to do with a transcendental subject, but it has to do with referents, with the external world, and links the idea of interpretation to the idea of interpreting according to a given meaning.

(Eco 1990: 38)

In order to understand more comprehensively Eco's protection of Peirce's infinite semiosis from Derrida's usage of that phrase, one must state the other pole of Eco's perception of the powers of language: as much as language may involve a purpose or direction outwardly, which in return means that the reader can read the text against its implied outside, so much does Eco (1990: 7) also assert from the outset: "Let us be realistic: there is nothing more meaningful than a text which asserts that there is no meaning."

Eco implies that language has two potential forces which may increase its significance: a potential that points the language outwardly along the trajectory of a purpose (towards an actual ecosystemic phenomenon, for example), and a potential that pretends that there is no such potential or purpose at all. Eco implies that Derrida leaves too little room for the former potential, whereas he makes too much of the second, at the expense of Peirce.

It seems to me that the descriptive problematic in Derrida's work lies somewhere between these two potentials of language (among its many other potentials). Put plainly, Derrida cannot decide which route to adopt: to pretend that the text has no meaning, or to pretend that the text approaches a referential direction towards an actual animal existence. It is an essential peculiarity of

this zoological *textus* – which presents the summary of his career according to Derrida (2002: 383, 402) – that he weaves it with threads which are undeniably referential in their direction and counter-threads which are supposed to erase such a direction. There is a remarkable discrepancy throughout most of the text. It hovers on the brink of referentiality with greater force than can be mustered by its procedures of erasure – hence erasure interferes on crucial descriptive occasions. It clutters the actual direction of the text. In other words, it fails to evoke the significant meaninglessness that it seems to need and that, certainly, it strives to achieve.

I focus on this aspect because the manner, the way of one's going about a semiotic zoological identity is all-important. *How* becomes imperative. For instance, the way in which language falls short of a description of an animal can determine the impact of such a description. The actual existence of a given animal may direct (or attract) signs in such a way that they form a dynamically adequate semiotic approximation of that animal (for instance, its appearance and behaviour). Describing and predicting cell behaviour is an instance where this kind of description becomes quite thrilling and fruitful: on the one hand a compact, highly specific terminology is needed to name various intriguing new organelles (such as mitochondria) and to describe their functions, and on the other, obscuring or cluttering language must be reduced to a minimum – often painstakingly, with bursts of improvement, over time. *In the process* words become dynamically less, and the referent actually more. To continue the example of the cell: one is able to look at it (under the microscope or in terms of the behaviour of living creatures, with one's present eye) with greater perception in actuality because of a more advanced description, and one is able to describe it better because of a more streamlined perception; a biological hermeneutics in the full sense of both terms in this phrase. Derrida is right, of course, to imply that in the past this process has been viewed too much as if it was closed with firm (positivist) finality. But the fact that the process is open-ended and dynamic does not take away its potential adequacy. Cummings's grasshopper poem (to be read in the subsequent section of the article) provides a different case in point of an open-ended, exciting and highly adequate description: a poetic depiction of a grasshopper leaping.

The question to be answered first is how successful Derrida's way or how – of a "central frame" – it is when it comes to a zoological identity, also and especially with a view to description. One may speak, as I have begun to argue, of a *de-description*, a writing that is more effective precisely because it becomes less in the presence of an actuality (such as a grasshopper), or a writing that falls *significantly* short of its living referent, to the full. Here, as in the case of much modernist zoo-poetry, lies a true alternative to John Ruskin's pathetic fallacy as Robert Langbaum may very well have intuited (1970: 104) in his landmark essay on modernist poetry entitled "The New Nature Poetry" of

1959. Langbaum discusses modernist poets such as D.H. Lawrence, Marianne Moore and Wallace Stevens – his perhaps incidental exclusion of Cummings provides a reason for that nature poet’s inclusion here. In any event, such poetry, to my mind, unlike Derrida’s writing, succeeds in avoiding to the greatest possible degree a projection, through language, of human elements onto a natural phenomenon, without refraining from speaking into the animal world of which we form a practising part.

As has been mentioned, Derrida promises not to project his deconstructive language onto animals, but the success thereof is doubtful, also in the sense that his particular weaving of a “scriptive” text may very well fail to convince. The problem with this kind of projection when it is excessive or when it turns pathetic is that it clutters one’s perception of the natural actuality: as Ruskin has shown in 1856, it happens only too readily that we create a falseness, due to language, in our perception of natural phenomena – his example is a wave. From Charles Kingsley’s *Alton Locke* Ruskin (2000: 485) cites the following attempt at describing a wave: “They rowed her in across the rolling foam – / The cruel, crawling foam”. “The foam is not cruel, neither does it crawl”, writes Ruskin (p. 485) with admirable brevity, precision and straightforwardness.

The state of mind which attributes to it these characters of a living creature is one in which the reason is unhinged by grief. All violent feelings have the same effect. They produce in us a falseness in all our impressions of external things, which I would generally characterize as the “pathetic fallacy”.

(Ruskin 2000: 485)

The perceptive insight here is that language begins to act as an obscuring, interfering or complicating befuddlement, and indeed as a barrier between oneself and nature, instead of a speaking-into or a speaking-with-and-within nature; a further insight worth noting is that description cannot be taken for granted. Langbaum’s observation is that, however paradoxically, the modernist poets avoid the pitfall of this kind of projection to a remarkable degree, and that they achieve an excellent depiction of one’s co-existence with the otherly animals through the non-pathetic distance that they maintain in their work (Langbaum 1970: 104).

In the case of “The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)”, and perhaps deconstruction on the whole, a new fallacy is emergent: not so much a projection from and a weakness for emotions, but a projection from and a weakness for the surface textures of language and the relations of thought that go along with this. However much and convincingly Derrida claims that he does acknowledge and move along the limits of language, a full reading of his *manner* of doing this leaves little doubt that he undermines biology and “over-

mines" language. Indeed, he signals that this is a central part of his strategy. The question remains – especially since Derrida puts himself in the shoes of a poet and a biologist of philosophy – whether this manner to be associated with his strategy works, or whether it always works.

Moreover, there has been, along with deconstruction and as far as one can see not without some blame to be apportioned to deconstruction, the rise of what some green critics have begun to term the "*semiotic fallacy*": the idea or the belief that nature amounts to little or no more than a linguistic construct (Coupe 2000: 2). One should not get caught in the coils of argument underpinning Derrida's expression that there is no outside-text. Instead, let me follow the line of argument that the semiotic fallacy must be redefined with Ruskin in mind: a state of mind, a weakness for signs, in which the external world is perhaps not so much unhinged by language as it is hyper-ironically flattened (made shallow, deresonant) into an excessive awareness of the importance and role of language.

Frequently in some examples of Derrida's centre and frame manoeuvring, the centre of the argument involves a moral concern about the actual animals; hence the text directs itself towards a referent or a complex set of referents. In many of these instances, the frame is self-reflexive: it insists that no more is at stake than language. In a deconstructive "context", centre and frame can, moreover, appear to oscillate indefinitely as it does, already, in that pinnacle of modernism, T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (Brooker & Bentley 1990: 78).¹

The deadly serious play of centre and frame within "The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)" can be traced in its minutiae as well as its more comprehensive chunks of interweaving. For example, consider the sinister dexterity and supple (seal-like) slipperiness of the following seemingly inconsequential utterances introducing a paragraph: "An animal looks at me. What should I think of this sentence?" (Derrida 2002: 374). A careful twist of one's expectations occurs: one expects the word "event", but instead the text confronts one with a subtle shift: the rather linguistic and/or legal word "sentence". (Assuming that the expectation is that when an animal looks at one, one would usually refer to this as an "event", and not as a little string of pure language and/or a legal indictment.)

In this instance, Derrida seems to erase his tracks even before they appear. One may read this as a rather deliberate return to the text: it follows on the preceding paragraphs in which Derrida writes of his own cat, really a "real cat" (2002: 374). The insertion of the word "sentence" in the passage under consideration may therefore be seen as a deliberate re-introduction of a gap which should make it clear that, from a deconstructive perspective, things are ultimately textual – whether in a limited, metaphorical or profound sense. Of course, one may wonder why the insertion is necessary in the first place. If one has to orchestrate the self-reflexivity of the text over and above its own self-

reflexivity, does it not imply that the text is perhaps more related to actuality than one is willing to admit?

One could argue further that Derrida's procedure paradoxically sharpens one's awareness of the referential direction of language through its deliberate absence. Again, this seems to be more or less consistent with Derrida's thoughts. The point argued in this article, however, is at once more simple and complex: that the sheer deliberation of Derrida's manoeuvres – such as this little switch in direction from reference (an event) to reflection (a sentence) – interferes with one's reading of his establishment of a renewed zoological identity. A sense of over-deliberation enters the writing. For example, it is not enough to compare the echidna and the hedgehog – instead, Derrida must mention that the quills of the latter are part of his name (2002: 404). We meet "Freud's snakes" and "Kant's horse" (Derrida 2002: 405) within an intricate and aesthetic labyrinth of intertextual or philosophical animals. They further include a sponge which "passed through [his] work earlier" (p. 206) – a supremely textual sponge. On the one hand, the freeplay of signs and metaphors, the sheer doing of it, dazzles one: deconstruction can be read as an excessive modesty (coyness) or a modesty of excess. On the other, it boils down to the literalisation of a metaphor: an underestimation of the nature of metaphors, since metaphors often seek, find, commingle with their outside. Metaphors "know" that a sponge cannot pass through a text: they "respect" (also in the sense of "checking themselves" or looking again – re-spect) their levels of functioning within the ecosystem; and for the good reason that humans and their language have functioned there or here for a long time.

Certainly there is the momentary enjoyment of this impossible manner of combining language and animals, yet it should not go by unnoticed that the joy comes at the expense of two or three different, vital and intrinsically related forces of existence: the ability of animals to be themselves outside language, the ability of language to relate to animals in accordance with their ability to remain themselves outside language, and the communicative condition of zoological being. And these forces and their interrelatedness are neither esoteric nor lame: they combine well, as has been advocated here, in a good description. When affected strongly by the glow of self-reflexive language, however, a lesser description will result.

Echidna is also the name that is given to a very special animal found only in Australia and New Guinea. This mammal lays eggs, something quite rare. Here we have an oviparous mammal that is also an insectivore and a monotreme. It only has one hole (*mono-trema*) for all the necessary purposes, urinary tract, rectum, and genitals. It is generally agreed that the echidna resembles a

hedgehog. Along with the platypus the five species of echidna make up the family of monotremes.

(Derrida 2002: 409)

Perhaps surprisingly, since one has become accustomed to a convolution of Derrida's *écriture*, the centre of this passage consists of a somewhat straightish description of the extraordinary Australian echidna – not unlike so many passages in books on animals which aim at an adequate level of factuality such as, say, a field guide to Australian mammals. The passage lists aspects of the echidna's anatomy, behaviour and appearance in a language which leaves little doubt that it aims at an actual creature. We read here, no, we participate in what Peirce would have called a "purpose", a direction towards the ecosystem as an outside within which language takes place. Hence the language is stripped, concise, carefully aware that it can be tested against an actuality. Every aspect of the passage signals that the signs are on their way, so to speak, towards a referential connectivity, however complex it may be, with a creature that actually lives within the ecosystem. The echidna is a "very special animal" within the animal kingdom, geologically confined to Australia and New Guinea – and we expect to read more about the fact that it is so "special". Are not all animals, even those that may seem more mundane or "ordinary" at first glance, special? William Blake comes to mind: "How do you know but ev'ry Bird that cuts the airy way/ Is an immense world of delight, clos'd by your senses five?" (1953: 124) – even in the case of the gray and quiet thrush in the branches, one must add, or the sparrow bouncing on the lawn. In any event, the phrase "a very special animal" directs the reader's attention to the outside of language, now remarkably within language. When we read that the echidna is at once a mammal and that it lays eggs, we are bound to agree that it is a unique animal, precisely because we can measure these facts against our expectations of what animals are like within nature – we are surprised, and the very organisation of Derrida's text here wants us to be surprised. The point is that the surprise depends radically on the tension between language and its outside, and it is better to let that tension speak for itself than to pretend that it merely lapses into a Franco-English self-reflexivity: it is better to admit that the sign needs the fresh air of its outside.

Now that Derrida has come around to committing a description of an animal, it strikes one that something is lacking in his how – his going-about – this. On a second or third reading, the echidna passage wears thin in patches. It turns glib, superficial even, a writing of the kind one would expect from a glossy coffee table book on nature in Australia, and not from a text written by one with the incisive writing gifts of Derrida. And even if this was deliberate, so that one could sit back with a sigh of relief to say that at least he remains "true" to an important aspect of deconstruction, at least there is still the thread of text

commenting ironically on itself with a glint of glibness – if one were so inclined – then one would also still feel slightly cheated, quite aware that the discrepancy between the actual echidna and the merely textual echidna for once neither convinces nor satisfies. It is as if he describes without putting his writing heart into the description – yes, we must agree that the echidna is special, but not because Derrida has done anything extraordinary in depicting it. Rather, his description is very standard, and could be found in a magazine, a field guide, or an average science paper. It tapers with a lame succession of encyclopaedic details (in the worst sense) about the echidna: “This mammal lays eggs Here we have an oviparous mammal that is also an insectivore and a monotreme. It has only one hole It is generally agreed that the echidna resembles the hedgehog. Along with the platypus the five species of echidna make up the family of monotremes” – this reads like a monotonous caption under a sketch or a photograph somewhere, hammering out the facts in a slack, staccato fashion.

One of the reasons for this readerly discomfort with Derrida’s description must be that he is not a descriptive animal but rather a “scriptive” one. And “scription” can interfere with actuality, despite its potentials. Instead of taking the reader all the way into a view of the echidna as described by Derrida, the reader must be kept aware at all costs that even a descriptive centre belongs within a “scriptive” frame, a place where everything turns into the final irony of a mere sign of a sign of a sign, always further and further away from the immediacy or the actuality of a biological, zoological existence on earth. Look at the many ways in which he attempts to reverse the referential direction of the passage. “Echidna is also the name that is given”, the passage begins, thus carefully and rather clumsily attempting to alter its referential direction (towards the actual echidna) under a network of “mere writing” or name-giving. It is a tautology to write that “echidna” is a name. Perhaps it is not (only) a name in the final, undetermined analysis. To refine this point: why does Derrida not let the limit of the sign speak for itself, overcome itself, when he describes thus?

Furthermore, the word “also” marks the fact that Echidna also happens to belong within the soap-opera-like genealogy of Greek mythology: a true poet would have combined these levels perhaps more seamlessly and with greater impact. Chimaera, with whom Derrida feels a personal affinity (2002: 415), is the child of Echidna in this mythology – so the frame thickens with a plot, in the manner, direction or “movement” that Derrida foresees for the limit: an increase, a thickening or curdling (p. 398). The echidna, Derrida suggests, is therefore as much an actual Australian animal that lays leathery eggs in its pouch, and which looks like a hedgehog, as it is the relative of a treacherous snake-like woman within Greek mythology. Jamming Echidna and the echidna together has to obscure, somehow, the differences between the level of

existence and the level of ancient mythology. As if the text is not involved in biological reality at some (quite exciting) remove already, Derrida simply has to take another deliberate step away from the actuality. How swiftly the human mind finishes off and leaves behind its biological root! As the child of Typhon and Echidna, Derrida (p. 410) asserts, "Chimaera interests me therefore because chimerical will be my address" – he is indicating that his treatise on animals comes home as a chimera, a juxtaposition of unlikely parts, phenomena or creatures, or an unlikely combination or a mixture of levels of (among other things) words, ideas, mythical figures and actual creatures. This tendency to shift things to a disjointed extreme, perhaps in an attempted poetry, forms another important layer of Derrida's framing of the actual echidna into a zone of textuality which somehow has to *continue to* end up (so to speak), even if it is by margin of the supplement, as at least slightly more textual than actual.

A recognition that language can follow a direction towards an actual animal such as the echidna, and since it can create a dynamic and adequate approximation in the process, means that a kind of ground zero not only organises language, but infiltrates it in a cross-stitching, intersecting or interactive manner. Perhaps we need to call it something else, but a "ground zero" effect exists in the sense that nature includes language. Derrida's theoretical hair-splitting on this issue and even the enormous frame/s that he erects in order to marginalise and erase such interaction or continuity fail to persuade in the most imperative moment and place, namely where and when language needs to overcome its shortcomings – *through* its shortcomings – in order to speak and write into, describe, one's co-existence with animals. Once more, as I have attempted to demonstrate, this lies in his manner of so-doing.

Of course Derrida does well, on occasion, to adopt his unique approach with its penchant for providing fresh insights into a very topical issue: our relationships with animals, and our zoological identity. To be sure, meaning can be created through meaninglessness, modesty can be achieved by way of immodesty, morality by means of an approach that denies it, and so on – but these procedures will not work on every occasion; they may also fail in a rather straightforward manner. And sometimes, they interfere and clutter even if they may be aimed at intervention and clarity. In other words: the ability to describe, and the capacity to refresh and sustain that ability, cannot always be opened up and thwarted, not even in the name of deconstruction; instead, it needs to be protected in the most open-ended manner, that is, in the manner of the continuing ecosystem with its abundance of active and interactive creatures and forms of communication.

nature of language? Or should we view it as a decisive semiotic irony and an insurmountable semiotic dilemma, of the inherent inability of language to refer to a grasshopper? When the word finally rearranges itself on the page in front of our eyes and in front of our puzzled minds, after the relative shock of the preceding semiotic procedures, does it provide a sense of closure, of having at last secured the beast, whether it be the beast of a living grasshopper (a considerable beast) or the beast of the sign "grasshopper"?

Is it not so that the penultimate line states an aesthetic satisfaction of coincidence? Decoding it, one finds that the speaker identifies with the "becoming" quality of the grasshopper's rearrangement and the rearrangement of the word into its familiar and more conventional sequence of letters. This line enacts a simultaneity of "rearranging(ly)" and "becoming(ly)": that is, a co-eventuality of change, stillness (the arranged grasshopper and word) and handsomeness (to look attractive) or aesthetics – all still on at least two levels: the settling grasshopper and the poem settling in the word "grasshopper". Should we therefore take the poem to mean that conventional words embody a human artistic achievement, or should we read it instead as an ironic and ambivalent sign of failed human creativity, and a failure of coming to grips with our surroundings and our fellow creatures?

One or two obvious answers suggest themselves. One is that, indeed, this poem illustrates the aesthetic and pleasing orienting values of even the most arbitrary sign. The final sign in the poem, the perfectly arbitrary "grasshopper", folds into the mind with a satisfying and integrating familiarity, not unlike a grasshopper alighting and bringing its limbs and wings to perfect, living rest. One has the additional reassurance that within this arbitrary sign one may now – upon having read this particular poem – hear and see its rich and no longer so dormant iconistic and onomatopoeic flickerings of the actual creature in motion.

For, in the centre of the poem one finds various semiotic devices which contribute to a heightened sense of directness towards an awareness of the grasshopper: the two o's in Line 3 depict a coincidence of the speaker's two human eyes (circles, entrances) meeting the compound versions of the same in the grasshopper, with the ensuing leap resulting from this reciprocity of a natural awareness. Various whirring and clicking sounds of the leap, familiar to anyone who has been surprised by it as has the speaker in this instance, are onomatopoeically suggested by the creative rearrangement of letters on the page: examples include "r-p", "s-s", "g-r", "RHR", "SS", "Ph", "rr" and "gRr". In particular, the sequence "p-o-p" (Line 1) carries a simultaneous suggestion of the inherent tension within the creature which leads to and carries its leap, indicated by the elastic dashes that separate and combine the sign, as well as the surprising strength of the leap and the surprise of the sounds that accompany it.

The ample blank space of Line 10 presents the visual surprise of the space that the grasshopper travels: “S a”. In effect, blankness is the very centre of the centre of this poem. It embodies a dynamic acknowledgement that we can say nothing about the grasshopper leaping; and that we can therefore *say* that there is only the jump – with great clarity and precision as this poem indicates. (It needs to be argued elsewhere whether Cummings’s sense of nothing is at all similar to Derrida’s sense of absence.) The whole “inner poem” with its fragile and significant frame fuses into that blank space.

These and other aspects of the poem present an enhanced sense of the actuality of the grasshopper’s leap, and may even provide a renewal of one’s awareness of that actuality. In the words of the Cummings scholar Richard D. Cureton, these are *interlevel* poetic devices, also on the iconistic level. Instead of merely creating a parallel, intratextual correspondence, one may argue that these interlevel iconicities or onomatopoeias create a correspondence outwardly, towards actual nature. Cureton (1980: 250) mentions as examples that a Cummings poem “will fall down the page like a falling leaf it describes, or, on a smaller scale, Cummings will frequently write *moon* as *mOOn*, so that it contains orthographic moons”.

On the one hand we approach here, with the similar iconicities and onomatopoeias mentioned, a terrain which Derrida has excluded from his deconstructive critique with reference to Ezra Pound, namely an ideogrammatic way of writing (Derrida 1976: 90; see also Kern 1996: 7; Terblanche 2002: 90) – an issue which calls for further investigation. On the other hand, we approach the question, evidently of more immediate importance in this article, as to the referentiality or not of this poem. And here two routes seem to set the parameters of one’s decision: one could argue quite convincingly, based on the interlevel directions of the poem, that it is essentially referential in the sense that it embodies a clear outwardly purpose towards an actual grasshopper. From this perspective, the poem should be viewed as mainly and/or adequately referential. Nonetheless, it is always possible to argue for an opposite panorama: that the various procedures and actions in the poem merely serve to demonstrate the arbitrariness and fundamental irony of a communication system (that is, human semiosis) which fails to point at – never mind connect or interact with – a so-called “outside” realm such as nature and its grasshopper. From this angle it may appear that the various manoeuvres to intimate the grasshopper in the body of the poem merely manage to peter out into the conventional sign “grasshopper”, and it will then appear further that this conventional sign at the end of the poem relativises the foregoing dynamics into a stasis of referential incapacity.

These two answers reflect two fairly ubiquitous views of the nature of language: the first somewhat Adamic and clumsy, denoting a view of language

that was apparently held to be true before the advent of Saussurian linguistics, and the second somewhat postmodernist and current, to be associated with the late (that is, recent) impact of Saussurian linguistics and a "linguistic turn" which started with the modernists, and which has reached its heyday now by all appearances. The former view would hold language as a list of linguistic items corresponding on a one-on-one and static basis with a list of things in the world out there, whereas the second critiques this clumsy perception in favour of either a complex or a complicating view that the space between language and nature is more or less infinite – an endless vacuum, so to speak, of differences and postponement. Depending on one's taste, whether somewhat conservative or somewhat postmodern, the current notion is that one would be inclined to choose either of these two views of language.

But there is a third way of reading the grasshopper poem on the basis of its description and, in fact, the active and appealing view of the nature of description which it manages to communicate. Cummings sent an annotated version of the poem to his Brazilian translator, Augusto de Campos (Webster, 2000: 113).² The most important annotation on this proof page clearly indicates that the "S" and the "a" in Line 10 must fall outside the margins of the main body of the poem. Careful examination of properly printed versions of the poem will also show this.

As Michael Webster (2000: 113) writes in his article "E.E. Cummings: The New Nature Poetry and The Old", this annotation means that the "end of the grasshopper's leap and the beginning of its arrival cannot be contained within the formal boundaries of the poem". I take this to mean that the grasshopper's movement defies language no matter how much one stretches language in the attempt to capture the leap, or: the poem activates a view that language falls *significantly* short of the leap of the grasshopper. In falling short of describing its leap and by pointing at this shortcoming, the poem sets the grasshopper's movement free: it suggests that language interacts within a dynamic realm of nature which lies (strictly speaking) outside its dynamic extremity or limit. In this manner the dynamism of language may flow and speak into the dynamism of nature, after all.

An uplifting and rare paradox may very well be at the root of the semiotic statement that this poem makes: if it is employed in the descriptive, minimalistic manner that Cummings uses here, the more human language lets go of nature, the more it can connect and interact with it. By setting the movement of the grasshopper free as Cummings does through language, language may finally be set free to point to the other with maximum effectiveness. A moving cross-stitching of supposed opposites such as the sign and nature thus involves a movement on an integrated level beyond those opposites, where dynamic signs and the living ecosystem commingle in the moving mind.

This exact and open-ended *how* of going about a zoological identity achieves

it to a highly satisfying and adequate degree. Here, the pretence of not meaning anything (which may confront one at first glance when one notices the unrecognisable extent to which Cummings stretches grammar and other rules) leads to a process of persistently maximum de-scription (in this case, of a grasshopper). The poem increasingly (hence also dynamically) results in a growing awareness of the actuality of a grasshopper and its marvellous leap precisely *through* or via a dense, compact mediation of signs that are fully aware of their limitations. The signs are organised by the implied presence of the grasshopper to the extent that they become an adequately dynamic approximation of that presence in at least two relatively simultaneous movements of the poem: 1) iconicity and onomatopoeia, and 2) pointing suggestively at language as a meaningfully limited system. The poem approaches, adequately, the grasping of a shared, dynamic essence of being (with a grasshopper) on earth.

Differentiating language does not necessarily preclude a complex and uplifting identity, also a zoological identity, with and within nature. Derrida's interfering insistence that differentiating language differentiates more and integrates less, inadvertently obscures this limitation of the sign and may prevent it from doing its zoological work. Therefore, despite its various uniquely illuminating aspects, deconstruction may involve a regression of a modern zoological identity. As far as one can see, this involves one or two crucial further questions: for example, the question as to the differences or similarities between Cummings's sense of a dynamic unity beyond opposites – his modernist third voice – and Derrida's concept of a deconstructive third term that hovers "outside" neutralisation or synthesis.

A reading of Cummings's grasshopper poem published in 1935 reveals much about the human ability to get in touch with nature via poetic communication. And it reveals that the relations of the poststructuralist mindset with and within nature may well and at once be its Achilles heel and its potential Archimedes leverage – as has been suggested in a different context by Manfred Pfister (1991: 221). One of Cummings's sonnets (with its Blakean principle of a powerful, spontaneous and non-coercible nature) reads:

when serpents bargain for the right to squirm
and the sun strikes to gain a living wage –
when thorns regard their roses with alarm
and rainbows are insured against old age

when every thrush may sing no new moon in
if all screech-owls have not okayed his voice
– and any wave signs on the dotted line
or else an ocean is compelled to close

THAT "INCREDIBLE UNANIMAL/MANKIND" JACQUES DERRIDA, E.E. CUMMINGS AND ...

when the oak begs permission of the birch
to make an acorn – valleys accuse their
mountains of having altitude – and march
denounces april as a saboteur

then we'll believe in that incredible
unanimal mankind (and not until)

(Cummings 1994: 620)

That "incredible/unanimal mankind" is more often than not the intended recipient of Cummings's satire. If Cummings's poetry has a solid, steely core, then it is his satire of a contra-ecological, artificial modern world. In this particular sonnet the speaker states in one breath his admiration for nature which simply continues to be, and his bright non-admiration for the disproportionate importance that humans attach to activities such as signing on the dotted line, and striking and hating one another for various "attitudes" or "altitudes". A human tendency, that is, to be blinded to the continuation of nature because we are trapped in our own devices, schemes, and rational-oppositional or strategically relational conceptions. This sonnet mocks humanity's attempts to control and stifle nature's flow and hence to end up in self-fabricated spatial confines – also what we today term semiotic spatialities; however dizzying the impact of these abysses and ruptures seem to be, and however exciting or frightening that may yet turn out to be. Cummings is giving voice to nature's vast humility or its intrinsic and silent continuation; in this sonnet he pricks the pretentious ego of modern humans "living" in non-spontaneous ignorance of their complex nature and an authentic, growing inner life directed by the outer. As has been demonstrated, he gives positive motion to the same principle in de-scribing a grasshopper. Upon having read the poem, we cannot look at the word "grasshopper" again without recognising its orienting values and its flickerings of a cross-stitching correspondence and integrity with an actual grasshopper. Perhaps we can also not help but be impressed by its ability silently to depict how its very arbitrariness amounts to a deep relation with nature. Reading that incredible textual (un)animal Derrida from these perspectives again confirms that, despite his best philosophical-poetic intentions, he unnecessarily complicates the relations between humans, animals and semiosis through a process of excessive and intrusive semiotification or "scription". Of course, it remains to be said that only one such as he, acutely aware of these things in the first place, could go ahead and complicate them.

* Acknowledgements:

- I wish to thank Bert Olivier for his timeous and necessary critical comments on this article.

- My gratitude to Reinier Terblanche and Henk Bouwman of the School for Environmental Sciences at the Potchefstroom Campus of the North-West University in Potchefstroom, South Africa, for providing me with much-needed natural-scientific materials; and to Michael Webster of the English Department at the Grand Valley State University of Michigan in the US for pointing out Norman Friedman's passages on Cummings's employment of words such as "actual" and "actuality".

Notes

1. The link between the discourse of high modernism and Derrida's deconstruction needs to be examined further.
2. An electronic picture of this proof page can be viewed at <http://www.gvsu.edu/english/proof1.html>.

References

- Begon, Michael, Harper, John L., & Harper, Colin R.
1996 *Ecology*. 3rd edition. London: Blackwell.
- Blake, William
1953 *Selected Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, edited by Northrop Frye. New York: The Modern Library.
- Brooker, Jewel Spears & Bentley, John
1990 *Reading "The Waste Land": Modernism and the Limits of Interpretation*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press.
- Coupe, Laurence (ed.)
2000 *The Green Studies Reader: From Romanticism to Ecocriticism*. London: Routledge.
- Cummings, E.E.
1994 *Complete Poems 1904-1962*, edited by George James Firmage. New York: Liveright.
- Cureton, Richard Dozier
1980 *The Aesthetic Use of Syntax: Studies on the Syntax of the Poetry of E.E. Cummings*. PhD dissertation, University of Illinois.
- Derrida, Jacques
1976 *Of Grammatology*, translated by G. Spivak. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.
1986 But, Beyond ... (Open Letter to Anne McClintock and Rob Nixon). *Critical Inquiry* 13: 155-170, Autumn.
2002 The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow). *Critical Inquiry* 28: 369-418, Winter.

- Eco, Umberto
1976 *A Theory of Semiotics*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
1990 *The Limits of Interpretation*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Eliot, T.S.
1980 *Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot*, edited by Frank Kermode. London: Faber & Faber.
- Fischer, Steven Roger
2000 *A History of Language*. London: Reaktion.
- Friedman, Norman
1980 *E.E. Cummings: The Growth of a Writer*. Illinois: Arcturus.
- Hölldobler, Bert & Wilson, Edward O.
1990 *The Ants*. Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.
- Kern, Robert
1996 *Orientalism, Modernism, and the American Poem*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Langbaum, Robert
1970 *The Modern Spirit: Essays on the Continuity of Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Literature*. London: Chatto & Windus.
- Naess, Arne
1995 The Shallow and the Deep, Long-range Ecology Movement. In: *The Deep Ecology Movement: An Introductory Anthology*, edited by Alan Drengson & Yuichi Inoue. Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, pp. 3-9.
- Osibanjo, Oladele
2001 Regionally Based Assessment of Persistent Toxic Substances: Report of the First Regional Team Meeting, Sub-Sahara Africa. Meeting held at the Department of Chemistry, University of Ibadan, Nigeria. [Copy of the proceedings in possession of the author – JET.]
- Pfister, Manfred
1991 How Postmodern is Intertextuality? In: *Intertextuality*, edited by Heinrich F. Plett. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, pp. 207-224.
- Rueckert, William
1996 Literature and Ecology. In: *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, edited by Cheryl Glotfelty & Harold Fromm. Athens: University of Georgia Press, pp. 105-123.
- Ruskin, John
2000 Of the Pathetic Fallacy: The Victorians (An Anthology of Poetry and Poetics), edited by Valentine Cunningham. Oxford: Blackwell, pp. 481-494.
- Terblanche, Etienne
2002 E.E. Cummings: The Ecology of his Poetry. PhD dissertation, Potchefstroom University for CHE.
- Webster, Michael
2000 E.E. Cummings: The New Nature Poetry and the Old. *Spring: The Journal of the E.E. Cummings Society* 9: 109-124, Fall.