

This Auto-bio-graphical Animal That I Am

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Summary

This article is a critical response to Etienne Terblanche's article entitled "That 'Incredible Unanimal/Mankind': Jacques Derrida, E.E. Cummings and a Grasshopper" (2004), in which he argues that Jacques Derrida's deconstructive writing, unlike that of his modernist counterpart, E.E. Cummings, fails as a "de-descriptive" strategy and therefore cannot "render an adequate and dynamic description of an actual animal". I accept Terblanche's critique of the kind of postmodernist thinking that remains lost in the funhouse of language, but I shall argue that deconstructive thinking does not fit this profile. Rather, by means of an alternative logic nicknamed, *inter alia*, "the plural logic of the aporia", Derrida persistently strove to escape the stagnant locking of horns that is the inevitable effect of artificially formed binary oppositions (such as modernism and postmodernism). Were Terblanche to read Derrida without the prejudices that associate his work with an unbridled postmodern "textualism", he would find much to support and enrich his own thinking concerning this difficult, but critically important, mode of thinking. I propose, therefore, to challenge his adversarial stance towards Derrida's style of de-description by showing that it is based on a crucial misunderstanding of both Derrida's ontological commitments and the precise subject of his de-descriptive essay; namely "this auto-bio-graphical animal that I am". Once these misunderstandings are remedied, I believe that Terblanche could quite easily grant that Derrida's essay, as much as Cummings's poem, conforms to the de-descriptive necessity of a sensitive isomorphism between textual style and actual subject.

Opsomming

Hierdie artikel is 'n kritiese respons op Etienne Terblanche se artikel met die titel "That 'Incredible Unanimal/Mankind': Jacques Derrida, E.E. Cummings and a Grasshopper" (2004), waarin hy aanvoer dat Jacques Derrida se dekonstruktiewe geskrifte, anders as dié van sy modernistiese teenvoeter E.E. Cummings, as "de-skriptiewe" strategie misluk en derhalwe nie "an adequate and dynamic description of an actual animal" kan lewer nie. Ek aanvaar Terblanche se kritiek op die soort post-modernistiese denke wat bly ronddool in die gekkeparadys van taal, maar ek sal aanvoer dat dekonstruktiewe denke nie hierdie profiel pas nie. Derrida het eerder – en wel deur middel van 'n alternatiewe logika met die bynaam van onder andere "die plurale logika van die aporia" – verbete bly strewe om die stagnante vasval in woordstryd wat die onvermydelike uitwerking van kunsmatig gevormde binêre opposisies (soos modernisme en postmodernisme) is, te ontkom. Sou Terblanche Derrida lees sonder die vooroordele wat sy werk met 'n onbeteuelde postmoderne "tekstualisme" in verband bring, sou hy veel vind om sy eie denke oor hierdie moeilike dog deurslaggewend belangrike denkwysse te staaf en verryk. Dit is dus my voorneme om sy opponerende stellinginname teenoor Derrida se de-skriptiewe styl uit te daag deur aan te toon dat dit gegrond is op 'n kritieke misverstand van sowel Derrida se ontologiese verbintenisse en die einste onderwerp van sy de-skriptiewe essay; naamlik hierdie outo-bio-grafiese dier wat ek is. Sodra hierdie misverstande

uit die weg geruim is, meen ek dat Terblanche baie maklik sou kon toegee dat Derrida se essay – ewe veel as Cummings se gedig – met die de-skriptiewe noodsaaklikheid van 'n sensitiewe isomorfisme tussen tekstuele styl en werklike subjek konformeer.

1 Binary Thinking and the “Plural Logic of the Aporia”

While written some time ago, Etienne Terblanche’s article entitled “That ‘Incredible Unanimal/Mankind’: Jacques Derrida, E.E. Cummings and a Grasshopper” (2004) still calls for a critical response, since its repetition of common prejudices concerning deconstruction makes it a good example of the misdirected criticism that Derrida has persistently resisted. The challenge to Terblanche’s particular stance outlined here, then, may be extended to other responses to Derrida’s thinking that are similarly restricted by stereotypical misreadings. Terblanche’s article is too wide-ranging to follow his line of reasoning as it unfolds, addressing the points of concern and perplexity in the dialogical spirit of conversation. I shall focus, mostly, on what I take to be his primary interest; namely, the question of the “de-scriptive” power of language, which he defines as the power to write and “un-write” (scribe and “de-cribe”), such that language may “render an adequate and dynamic description of an actual animal”. Offering the example of E.E. Cummings’s grasshopper poem, he argues that modernist poetry, due to its complex but careful economy of expression, succeeds admirably in this de-scriptive act, whereas Derrida’s deconstructive writing, as manifest in his essay “The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)” (2002), fails as a consequence of its complicating, stylistic excess.

Terblanche’s (2004: 230) stated reluctance to entangle himself unduly in “technical deconstructive issues” (here concerning Derrida’s treatment of the paradox associated with the term “supplement”), or to “get caught in the coils of argument underpinning Derrida’s expression that there is no outside-text” (p. 235), immediately strikes one as problematic, if not absurd, since the main thrust of his article is to take a critical stand against deconstruction (mistakenly associated with a one-sided, anti-modernist postmodernism) in favour of modernist poetry when it comes to providing “an adequate and dynamic description of an actual animal” (p. 218). One may justly assume, then, that a clear grasp of “technical deconstructive issues” is the bare minimum due to Derrida. Admittedly, the dues are steep, for Derrida consciously takes advantage of the multiple logical, semantic, and poetic resources of language to mimic the subject of his texts, and exploits the notorious multivocality of French terms to form opening statements of plutonium-density, which he will subsequently unravel in minute detail. The essay at issue here is an introductory text to a lengthy seminar, in which he avowedly proposes “working hypotheses” to be worked out patiently in close readings of Descartes, Kant, Heidegger,

Lévinas, and Lacan (Derrida 2002: 373). Moreover, working through his texts requires sustained concentration to avoid mistakenly attributing to Derrida the very arguments he aims to deconstruct, since he operates by pressing them to the logical extreme at which they become illogical. Reading Derrida, then, demands alertness and patience, since his essays reward only those willing to submit to the slow pace of the deconstruction.

The alternative – and here Terblanche is no exception – is to trot out the same tiresome prejudices concerning deconstruction, taken up unthinkingly by those who depend upon what Heidegger (1962: 197) calls “further retelling” or mere hearsay, rather than independent study. Granted that “fore-structures” or inevitable prejudgements, as Heidegger (pp. 194-195) insisted, inaugurate the hermeneutic circle, prejudices nevertheless become essentially disabling if they are not exposed to the trauma of critical re-evaluation in the actual reading of a text. In the absence of such trauma, readers skip from fragment to fragment selecting only those scraps and snippets that seem to confirm the prejudices, shrugging off conflicting text and complex argumentation which do not fit the profile of what is “already known” by means of some such epithet as “hair-splitting” (Terblanche 2004: 239).

In his opening paragraphs, for example, which address Derrida’s (2002: 397-403) remarks concerning the “logic of the limit” that divides “what calls *itself* man and what *he* calls the animal” (p. 398), Terblanche makes it clear enough that he “already knows” that Derrida promotes “difference” (discontinuity) at the cost of its binary opposite, namely “sameness” (family resemblance or continuity). More specifically, having correctly outlined the basic movement of Derrida’s deconstruction of the binary opposition between difference and continuity, Terblanche (2004: 219-220) ultimately dismisses his arguments as convoluted and “complicated”. It becomes explicit a little later in the text that, in comparison with a notion of “dynamic complexity”, the term “complication” is given the pejorative sense of a polluting, chaotic free play of differences (p. 223).

To elaborate, Terblanche notes accurately enough that Derrida directs his critique towards the philosophical tradition, which has always proposed an absolute difference between humans and “the animal”, between “Man with capital M and animal with a capital A” (Derrida 2002: 398; Terblanche 2004: 219). In Derrida’s words (2004: 408), “never, on the part of any great philosopher from Plato to Heidegger ... have I noticed a protestation *of principle*, and especially a protestation of consequence against the general singular that is *the animal*”. Instead, he notes,

all philosophers have judged that limit to be single and indivisible, considering that on the other side of that limit there is an immense group, a single and fundamentally homogeneous set that one has the right, the theoretical or philosophical right, to distinguish and mark as opposite, namely, the set of the

Animal in general, the animal spoken of in the general singular. It applies to the whole animal realm with the exception of the human.

(Derrida 2002: 408-409)

In his estimation, that which “allows one to speak blithely of the Animal in the general singular is perhaps one of the greatest, and most symptomatic idiocies [*bêtises*] of those who call themselves humans” (p. 409). Accordingly, he intends to register just such “a protestation of principle” on both intellectual and ethical grounds. As he puts it:

The confusion of all nonhuman living creatures within the general and the common category of the animal is not simply a sin against rigorous thinking, vigilance, lucidity, or empirical authority; it is also a crime. Not a crime against animality precisely, but a crime of the first order against the animals, against animals. Do we agree to presume that every murder, every transgression of the commandment “Thou shalt not kill” concerns only man (a question to come) and that in sum there are only crimes “against humanity”?¹

(Derrida 2002: 416)

If philosophers agree that there is an absolute limit separating the generalised categories of “human” and “animal”, when it comes to defining its nature, it is clear that it has a history, and it is precisely the fact of this history that poses the challenge to the thesis of an absolute limit. More importantly for Derrida, this idiocy has serious ethical implications. To group “all nonhuman living things” under the singular notion “the Animal”, no matter what particular differences separate one from another – “in spite of the infinite space that separates the lizard from the dog, the protozoon from the dolphin ... [and so on]” – is a matter of confining to a catch-all concept “*all the living things* that man does not recognize as his fellows, his neighbors, or his brothers” (Derrida 2002: 402). Part of Derrida’s aim, then, is to speak out against the immense wrong that derives from this artificial categorisation. In his words:

Men would be first and foremost those living creatures who have given themselves the word that enables them to speak of the animal with a single voice and to designate it as the single being that remains without a response, without a word with which to respond.

That wrong was committed long ago and with long-term consequences. It derives from this word or rather it comes together in this word *animal* that men have given themselves at the origin of humanity and that they have given themselves in order to identify themselves, in order to recognize themselves, with a view to being what they say they are, namely men, capable of replying and responding in the name of men.

1. Derrida offers an explicit account of these crimes (Derrida 2004: 394-395).

I would like to try and speak of a certain wrong or evil that derives from this word

(Derrida 2002: 400)

Instead of placing “the animal” under scare-quotes to remind us of the wrong committed here, Derrida (2002: 409) proposes a neologism, *l’animot*, as a pejorative term that would designate the monstrosity of the general singular inscribed in it. Notably, this term does not designate, as Terblanche (2004: 221) suggests, some vague “third deconstructive position hovering somewhere between or beside the opposition of a singular Man versus a singular Animal”. Rather, for Derrida (2002: 416), it denotes a chimaera; that is, the multi-limbed monster we have created by ignoring the fact that the multiplicity of living creatures besides humans “cannot in any way be homogenized, except by means of violence and willful ignorance, within the category of what is called the animal or animality in general”. Further, this chimaera is a fabrication; a myth constructed by “we” humans, who have a vested interest in our self-proclaimed superiority. Clearly, then, for more than one reason, Derrida aims to throw the massive weight of his dense text against the thesis of an absolute, abyssal gap that would separate humans as such from “the animal”. As he sums it up (2002: 415), “[t]here is no animal in the general singular, separated from man by a single indivisible limit. We have to envisage the existence of ‘living creatures’ whose plurality cannot be assembled within the single figure of an animality that is simply opposed to humanity”.

Yet, as Terblanche (2004: 219) also correctly notes, he avoids a frontal attack (simple rejection), or an antithetical approach (rejection in favour of a binary opposite). He will not allow his rejection of a thesis of absolute and reified difference, to commit him in consequence to a thesis of the opposite kind, namely that of absolute and reified continuity. In his words (2002: 415) “[t]his 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”. One must remain sensitive to the “but” and to the negative in this deconstructive operation. It is asinine to propose a thesis of absolute difference between humans and animals, *but* equally this does *not* commit one to a thesis of absolute continuity between all living creatures, where one thesis excludes the other as its contradiction, and a choice between them is thereby mandated.

Thus, finally, as Terblanche recognises, Derrida (2002: 398) proposes a different kind of thinking about the relation between humans and animals: “Whatever I say is designed, certainly not to efface the limit, but to multiply its figures, to complicate, thicken, delinearize, fold, and divide the line precisely by making it increase and multiply.” This is an expression of his resistance to absolutes on both sides of the binary opposition, and his insistence upon operating according to another logic, which does not

assume that any border forms a single indivisible line whose defining limits can in principle be finalised, objectified, quantified, and ordered in terms of a sharp-edged hierarchical opposition, but operates instead according to the notion of dynamic, growing, or multiplying systems, that are complex, diacritical matrices and networks within which there is a multiplicity of heterogeneous structures of continuity and difference: sameness in some respects with some other creatures; differences in some respects with some other creatures (Derrida 2002: 399).

Perplexingly, while Terblanche (2004: 220), as mentioned, correctly outlines the basic deconstruction of this binary, he does not find any sense in it, and instead sees Derrida spinning in a baffling circle of self-contradiction. Emphasising that Derrida “comes down fairly hard on the notion of biological, evolutionary or ecological continuity”, and conveniently ignoring the fact that Derrida comes down equally hard on the thesis of absolute difference (for his quarrel is not with either difference or continuity per se, but with absolute values on both sides of this binary opposition), Terblanche decides that such harsh treatment of absolute continuity must mean that Derrida one-sidedly promotes difference and discontinuity. Even if Derrida pretends to take account of continuity, he adds, this is merely as “part of his baffling both-and, and neither-nor logic” and should not obscure the fact that he nevertheless places “emphasis on difference and discontinuity” and “accentuates differences at the cost of biological integrity”. Since Derrida clearly also resists the thesis of absolute difference, Terblanche insists that Derrida inconsistently comes down hard on continuity in the name of an abyssal difference, which he has already rejected.

From this, Terblanche (2004: 220-221) goes on to conclude that Derrida, having rejecting continuity altogether, does not grant that humans and animals belong together as a family. Secondly, as a corollary to this conclusion, he claims that “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” (p. 221). Consequently, then, in writing an essay about animals, Derrida supposedly does not even begin with an adequate understanding of “zoological identity”, since, among other “uncomfortable complications”, he “ignores the fact that animals communicate” (p. 218). Presumably, then, Derrida’s inability to come to an adequate understanding of zoological identity negatively affects the way he sets out to describe animals. (I think that the lengthy discussion concerning animal communication and response is supposed to serve as a corrective.)

I cannot address all of the difficulties associated with this part of Terblanche’s essay; suffice it to suggest that many of them probably arise from an attempt to bend Derrida’s text into the shape of the above prejudices, whose undoing would obviate the need for much of this

argumentation. It is at least clear, however, that Terblanche's first conclusion flies in the face of Derrida's critique of philosophy for corraling into one enclosure all that we (unjustly) do not call *our fellows*. It is also, therefore, insensitive to Derrida's (2002: 410) non-fortuitous remark that Bellerophon (read humankind), "the figure of the hunter ... [who paradoxically] follows *and* persecutes the beast" (my italics), and Pegasus (read animal) descend from the same god, and that, therefore, in holding Pegasus by the bit, in "following and taming a sort of *brother*, an *other self*" (my italics), Bellerophon has committed an evil. Terblanche's corollary, again, does not take account of the fact that Derrida criticises the philosophical tradition for precisely the claim that animals cannot communicate. Terblanche, in fact, does recognise this criticism, and later cites Derrida's remark that "[e]ven those who, from Descartes to Lacan, have conceded to the said animal some aptitude for signs and for communication have always denied it the power to *respond* – to *pretend*, to *lie*, to *cover its tracks* or *erase its own traces*" (Derrida 2002: 401; Terblanche 2004: 226). This remark is directed precisely towards philosophers who deny the fact that animals communicate, or try to reduce "animal communication" to non-linguistic signalling by suggesting that a proper communicative response implies the power of pretence, which is said to be unique to humans. But since Terblanche (2004: 218) already knows that "Derrida ignores the fact that animals communicate", the only thing he can do with this implied criticism of the philosophical premise that animals do not speak, is to throw up a screen of fog in the form of a question, unsupported by arguments that would justify it, and left unanswered: "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" (p. 226).

Notably, the same pattern of criticism recurs. Terblanche (2004: 230-231) recognises that deconstruction does not give one "license to write anything about animals at all, as if what one writes had no relation to the actual existence of animals", and that Derrida both acknowledges "*the limits* of the book", and the necessity to escape the "prison house of language". Given these theoretical commitments, he accurately adds that one is justified in expecting from Derrida's essay "exemplary use of the semiotic potential of a descriptive interaction between signs and animals". Nevertheless, according to Terblanche, this expectation is disappointed due to "a 'scriptive' complication of description in Derrida's discourse", whereby he adopts the postmodernist strategy of "adding more and more textuality" instead of the, descriptively more adequate, economic strategy of a modernist poet such as Cummings. One might, arguably, grant Terblanche his point if Derrida had set out to de-scribe yellow butterflies or birds, but, as I ultimately hope to show, a "scriptive" writing is the more adequate style

for describing the precise subject of Derrida's description, namely, the "auto-bio-graphical animal".

One can, quite understandably, detect a note of weariness in Derrida's tone every time he is yet again forced to confront this kind of criticism; for it stems from attempts to hammer his thinking into the shape of an imposed either/or structure, to which it in principle has never submitted. Given the number of times he has explicitly and carefully addressed and rejected any form of "either/or" thinking, and stressed that his fundamental aim is to escape it by means of a "third way", which has many nicknames besides the now notorious term "deconstruction", such an imposition can only be the consequence of not having read his texts with sufficient care.² In his essay "Resistances" (1998: 29-30), he grants that the logic of this "third way", which he first announced in linguistic terms, is certainly "called for by a thinking of writing". However, probably as a result of persistent misconstrual, he subsequently maintains that this logic is "better thematized and formalized ... in its relation to the *double bind*, to the *stricture of the double band* and, especially, of a *remaining* that is *not*". This citation is cryptic when taken out of context, and one should refer to his essay *Aporias* (1993) for the detailed explanation that I cannot repeat here. In brief, he argues in this essay that it is preferable to describe the "logic" that formalises his deconstructive strategy in terms of the strictures imposed by three different forms of aporia. Broadly speaking, the first two, namely, the economic aporia (which describes a closed totality) and the aneconomic aporia (which describes an open infinity), characterise the opposing sides of any binary opposition. The third, the "aporia of the aporias", describes the double bind that arises because the first two aporias are joined together as a paradox or dilemma. The final part of the citation ("a *remaining* that is

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2. This resistance to an either/or choice is explicitly reiterated in many texts. To name a few, see Derrida's *Of Grammatology* (1976: 62). Speaking of Husserl's transcendental phenomenology, for example, Derrida insists that a thought of the trace can no more break with a transcendental phenomenology than be reduced to it. Here as elsewhere, to pose the problem in terms of choice, to oblige or to believe oneself obliged to answer it by a yes or no, to conceive of appurtenance as an allegiance or nonappurtenance as plain speaking, is to confuse very different levels, paths, and styles. In the deconstructive thinking of the arche, one does not make a choice.

(Derrida 1976: 62)

See his essays: "Différance" (1982: 19); "Structure, Sign and Play" (1978: 292-293); "Form and Meaning: A Note on the Phenomenology of Language" (1973: 128); "Force of Law: The 'Mystical Foundation of Authority'" (1992: 4).

not”), as I shall explain below, is a multivocal reference to what in Lacan’s psychoanalytic terminology is named the “traumatic real”.

To explain this dilemma succinctly, one may make use of Lacan’s (1981: 210-212) figure of “the mugger’s choice”: the injunction to choose “your money or your life”. This turns out to be no choice at all, for, as Copjec notes (2002: 17), “[o]nce the choice is offered, you’re done for – no matter which alternative you take”. The Hegelian lose/lose structure proposed here, then, is that in choosing one the other is lost; yet, because they are interdependent (one is the necessary condition for the other), this is also thereby to lose the original choice.³ The pattern of this structure derives from the paradox associated with all binary oppositions, which is most clearly articulated in concrete terms: where nothing is dark, there is no light; where nothing is static, there is no movement, and so on. Put differently, when light is absolute, there is no light, since light requires darkness as its defining limit. In a similar vein, Derrida in principle refuses the limitations of a choice between the opposed aporias of economy and aneconomy, exemplified in the case at issue here by continuity and difference respectively. In a situation of aneconomic freeplay, where difference is absolute, difference is eradicated; for difference requires sameness as its defining limit. Like Lacan, Derrida prefers a third stance, which invokes the win/win formulation of “the revolutionary’s choice”, namely “freedom or death” (Copjec 2002: 18). Counter to the commonsensical claim that a freedom that costs a life is not freedom, the revolutionary’s choice issues from the insistence that life without freedom is not life.⁴ Here, to choose to fight for freedom, to the point of risking all for its sake, is to retain the eternal autonomy of a Ché Guevara. On the other hand, to choose death rather than forsake one’s freedom similarly leaves intact forever the freedom of a Socrates.

But what is the meaning of this hard-won freedom, and why does Derrida (1993:20-21) also name the third aporia “the impossible”? To make sense of Derrida’s account of freedom, one must take brief recourse to the notion of transcendental conditions, which in Kant’s (1933: 59-61) terms, are those that are essential to make something possible at all. Such conditions, as Derrida (1998: 29-30) notes, become quasi-transcendental when it is found

3. Incidentally, this lose/lose structure that drives the dialectic, is particularly clear in Hegel’s (1977: 266-294) analysis of the Ethical Order, where the impossible choice between interdependent entities faced by both Creon and Antigone is that between state and family, or community and individual. In contemporary terms, this would be represented as a choice between public and private spheres. Broadly speaking it is also the choice between whole and part or universal and particular.

4. These formulations are lifted from Alejandro Amenábar’s film, *The Sea Inside*.

that the very condition that makes something possible also threatens it by simultaneously making its opposite possible too.⁵ Geoffrey Bennington (1993: 276-277) offers the following succinct formulation of the dilemma that characterises Derrida's notion of a quasi-transcendental condition: "what makes possible immediately makes impossible the purity of the phenomenon made possible". This qualification, as Bert Olivier (2004a: 126-127) points out, accords with Kant's insistence in *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone* that freedom is the essential condition for both ethical goodness and radical evil. In Olivier's words:

Free will, which enables humans to choose to do what is morally good, also prevents the actualization of "pure" goodness, for it enables one to do evil as well. In other words, as long as humans are free (and that would be for as long as they are human), *both evil and good* are "real" possibilities in every situation that requires moral choice.

(Olivier 2004a: 127).

This, moreover, is why freedom is the fundamental condition for ethical action, which requires a genuine decision in face of the unknowable consequences of such freedom, rather than the mere calculative application of supposedly knowable moral rules. Such freedom as a quasi-transcendental condition, then, names freedom *from* either of the paralysing economic and aneconomic aporias. This comes down to freedom from the ideological stasis or paralysis of any preprogrammed discursive stance (whether modernist or postmodernist in general character; whether promoting a thesis of continuity or a thesis of difference). Correlatively it is a freedom *for* decisive action. But this "freedom for", as the only possible freedom, is the paradoxical "freedom" involved in refusing to submit to the constrictions of the either/or choice given by a binary determination of options.

5. The term is elaborated by Rudolphe Gasché (1998: 29-30), who articulates Derrida's quasi-transcendental logic in terms of infrastructures, and argues that "the very concept of infrastructure, as the formal rule that each time regulates differently the play of the contradictions in question, is an intrinsic part of his original contribution to philosophy". One should note that Gasché uses the term "contradiction" in its broader Hegelian/Marxist sense, rather than in the strict technical sense governed by the law of non-contradiction. In this broader sense, a "contradiction" occurs in a system when two of its features together produce an unstable tension. One may, therefore, find capitalism "contradictory", for example, because it requires precisely what it aims to eradicate; namely a degree of unemployment (Blackburn 1994: 81). I prefer to avoid this wider use of the term "contradiction", since it conflates distinct discursive forms, only one of which, I believe (namely aporia or dilemma), accords with what I shall try to articulate in the name of Derrida's thinking.

To insist upon such freedom implies a willingness in consequence to brave the anxiety and the burden of responsibility associated with the double bind of the aporia of aporias; or, that is, to acknowledge and face ethical, political, or conceptual paradoxes and dilemmas that can neither be overcome nor evaded, but must be worked through interminably – interminably, because the first two aporias, as poles of a binary opposition, are related as a dilemma, making it impossible to choose one side with absolute justice. At the same time, it is equally impossible to act with justice if one abdicates all responsibility for making choices. While a choice is therefore mandatory, it will always be dogged by some degree of injustice, for which amends must be made, involving other decisions, which will in turn instigate other injustices. Thus, the decisive act is never done with once and for all. Consequently, under the obligation to negotiate the demands of our paradoxical intellectual and ethical freedom – or, that is, to negotiate the demands of the paradox that characterises the border between every binary opposition – Derrida’s readers must expect to find themselves tied up, along with him, in the complex “plural logic of the aporia” that has imposed itself on his thinking with what he calls a “*formalizable regularity*” (Derrida 1993: 13, 20).

Despite the fact that Terblanche is surprisingly unwilling to recognise a dynamic complexity in the logical form of deconstructive thinking, it seems to me that such dynamic complexity is precisely what he aims to achieve in his own, and he could therefore have turned more productively to Derrida’s text for ways to support and enrich his own thinking. This, notably, makes his “acknowledgement” of Bert Olivier’s “intervention” concerning his argument incongruous, for Olivier certainly recognises the logical complexity of deconstructive thinking (see, e.g. 2004b: 80-81). Indeed, there is too much at stake concerning this form of thinking and its implications for understanding fundamental philosophical questions, including that of the relationships between all living beings, to waste one’s intellectual energy on adversarial jousting.

This is perhaps the appropriate point, then, to turn to Terblanche’s primary concern, which has to do with the nature of the bond between actuality and language, understood in terms of de-scriptive adequacy, which he defines as the power to write and “un-write” (scribe and “de-cribe”) such that language may “render an adequate and dynamic description of an actual animal” (Terblanche 2004: 218). Addressing his comparison between E.E. Cummings’s grasshopper poem and Derrida’s deconstructive writing, at least as manifest in his essay “The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)”, I wish to argue that Terblanche could easily enough have found in Derrida’s theoretical stance an endorsement of the relationship of description between the actual referent and the language-using interpreter that he, himself, articulates and approves of. Considering each side of this relation between referent and text in more detail, I hope to show, firstly, in

what sense Cummings's ontology, as derived from his approach to the notions "actual" and "actuality" (Terblanche 2004: 221), is entirely compatible with Derrida's, which, from among countless other choices, I shall describe in terms of the useful Lacanian notion of the "traumatic real" (Lacan 1981: 53-64). This must, accordingly, amount to a categorical rejection of any argument that from a deconstructive perspective, it is "text" all the way down. Secondly, while Derrida has a somewhat broader sense of how this may be achieved, he largely shares Cummings's theoretical views concerning the way that language should work to describe its subject.

These claims do not invalidate Terblanche's (2004: 238) accurate observation that Derrida's essay is contaminated by what he calls "scriptive" elements; that is, self-reflective textual productions (philosophical, mythical, and fabulous). However, I do wish to challenge his general contention that the economic, non-scriptive style of writing adopted by modernist poets such as Cummings, far better than Derrida's scriptive style, succeeds in achieving adequacy to actuality and therefore has greater success in the de-scriptive act for all those subjects of de-description that lay claim to the title "animal". Here, I disagree with him outright, and I hope to show in what follows that this claim is based on an inadequate appreciation of the precise subject of Derrida's de-description.

2 "There Is No Outside-Text": Ontological Issues

Without considering "technical deconstructive issues" nearly carefully enough, Terblanche (2004: 235) is quite willing to apportion at least some blame to deconstruction for a term that has gained a certain currency; namely, the "semiotic fallacy". Insofar as this fallacy is defined as "the idea or the belief that nature amounts to little or no more than a linguistic construct", the charge against deconstruction would conform to the regrettable nonsense commonly made of Derrida's (1976: 158) aphorism "*il n'y a pas de hors-texte*" ("there is no outside-text"). Many take this phrase as confirmation of Derrida's apparently uninhibited celebration of an utterly nominalist, relativist freeplay of differences, supposedly based on the premise that there is nothing "out there" beyond the text, which dooms us to the infinite play of texts upon texts upon texts, all of indifferently equivalent non-value and endlessly referring to nothing but themselves. However, presumably taking into account the many persistent and explicit rejections of this misreading, Terblanche (2004: 235) softens the extremity of this critical claim concerning Derrida's ontological stance, which (absurdly) associates deconstruction with a contemporary version of subjective

idealism (the world is merely a linguistic construct),⁶ by suggesting that the “semiotic fallacy” should be redefined as “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”.

Unlike the charge of linguistic idealism, which one may legitimately dismiss out of hand, Terblanche’s revised stance certainly deserves critical attention. Before I address it, however, I think it is important to challenge the trace of the former charge that nevertheless remains behind; for, having revised his charge, he alludes in the very next sentences to the existence of examples in Derrida’s essay that demonstrate his supposed insistence “that no more is at stake than language” (p. 235). Only one example is explicitly named here, and it is hardly a conclusive demonstration of this claim. Terblanche finds something sinister and slippery in Derrida’s sentence: “An animal looks at me. What should I think of this sentence?” (Derrida 2002: 374). He grants in passing that Derrida might be playing on the juridical connotations of the word “sentence”. Notably, it would not have been at all difficult to find in Derrida’s claim that the look of an animal is an indictment that engenders a sense of shame in me, a critique of Lévinas that, contra Lévinas, extends the epiphany of the face-to-face encounter to living creatures other than human. Had Terblanche followed this train of thought further, he might have come closer to understanding Derrida’s primary concern in this text. Instead, however, his focus is narrowed down to the extent that he only finds here a “deliberate return to the text” in the use of the word “sentence” instead of the word “event”. Since the juridical connotation is merely raised to be left out of account, Terblanche reduces his analysis to the claim that Derrida’s use of the word “sentence” here converts the event of an animal’s gaze into “a little string of pure language”.

I by no means want to deny the significance of the linguistic connotation associated with the word “sentence”. Terblanche observes accurately enough that Derrida deliberately executes a careful twist of one’s expectations (replacing an expected term, “event”, with an unexpected one, “sentence”) in order to remind us of the abyssal gap between an event and the language used to describe it. However, having made this non-contentious point about the distancing effect of switching the word “sentence” for the word “event” (we all know that the weatherman’s

6. Simon Blackburn (1994: 184) defines idealism as “[a]ny doctrine holding that reality is fundamentally mental in nature”. As a derivative of this doctrine, subjective idealism is encapsulated in the aphorism associated with Berkeley: “to be is to be perceived”. In other words, existence is said to be a created effect of subjective faculties. In contemporary terms one speaks of linguistic idealism, where it is said, not that we merely interpret the given existent in which we find ourselves, but that “we ‘create’ the world we inhabit by employing mind-dependent linguistic and social categories”.

predictions are essentially not adequate to the weather itself),⁷ he draws the conclusion that this deliberate distancing act “should make it clear that, from a deconstructive perspective, *things are ultimately textual* – whether in a limited, metaphorical or *profound* sense” (p. 235; my italics).

There is nothing clear about the leap that Terblanche makes in order to draw this conclusion. In fact, precisely the opposite (but equally problematic) conclusion could also be drawn: actual “things” for Derrida are ultimately *not* textual in any sense of the term. Derrida certainly persistently reminds us that our only access to the event is through the artifice of interpretation, which is often or predominantly linguistic or proto-linguistic. But this is a point Terblanche would not challenge: in order to let the spring of a grasshopper “be” in some sense for “us” there must be linguistic description. Further, for Derrida, the very fact that language remains essentially inadequate to the actual “thing” or event preserves its sublime transcendence (its wonder and terror, its surprises, chances, and secrets) from the necessarily artificial domain of calculative fabrication within which language must operate. Derrida makes this point in many ways: for example, in the fact that any system of “laws” can never once and for all instantiate the actual event of “Justice” (1992: 28-29).

Yet, one must remain vigilant concerning this alternative reading; for Derrida is just as readily accused (by Žižek, for example) of hypostatizing the Absolute Absence of the referent, thereby promoting a new, undeconstructible form of spirituality; a “relationship to an unconditional Otherness that precedes ontology” (Žižek 2002: 65). In Žižek’s assessment, one here encounters the same religious matrix as ever, an irreducible divide between earthly and sublime – in this one may hear Terblanche’s (2004: 236) “text” and “actuality” – just deprived of a positive figure of “God”. Thus, the Absolute Other is supposedly determined, not indeed in terms of pure presence, but in terms of its exact opposite, namely a hypostatized Absolute Absence. Derrida is here charged with privileging a sublimely inaccessible “actuality”, a deliberately absented referent – Justice itself, for example – over the fabricated, interpreted (that is, textual) “here and now” of concrete reality.

Using the example of “Derrida’s ‘fidelity’ to the spirit of Marxism”, Žižek (2002: 65) goes on to argue that Derrida insists on the necessity of saving or reasserting the Absolute Other by overcoming or renouncing any particular, historical shape, involving real people in real circumstances, or, to return to the textual metaphor, by “leaving behind the letter” – for example, of the law. In his words:

[R]easserting the authentic spirit of the Marxist tradition means to leave behind its letter (Marx’s particular analyses and proposed revolutionary measures, which are irreducibly tainted by the tradition of ontology) in order

7. The image is Friedman’s (quoted by Terblanche 2004: 222).

to save from the ashes the authentic messianic promise of emancipatory liberation.

Žižek (2002: 65)

Thus, instead of exaggerating and celebrating the self-reflexivity of the text, Derrida has also been accused of making the opposing error of a misanthropic denigration of all that lies within the domain of the human “text” (legal systems, political measures, interpretations) for the sake of preserving the absolute “purity” of transcendent actuality. “Derrida’s operation”, for Žižek, goes hand-in-hand with the renunciation of all contingent, determinate, historical shapes, in order to save, redeem, reassert the purity of this “absolute other”; or, that is, the purity of its status as “the impossible”.

In contradictory senses, then, deconstruction is charged with an essential incapacity when it comes to the matter of mediation or appropriation of Otherness. If, on the one hand, Terblanche argues that Derrida does not do justice to “the actual” because he prioritises the greater “reality” of the playful text, for Žižek on the other, Derrida does not do justice to the hard reality of the text because he prioritises transcendent actuality. While this double, contradictory accusation might at first seem perplexing, one may make sense of it, on reflection, as opposite sides of the same coin. The underlying charge that sustains both accusations is that Derrida sharply divides “text” from “referent”, supposedly allowing the domain of the “text” to take on a life of its own, while leaving the referent untouched.

Depending on the use one wants to make of deconstruction as a foil for another argument, one can now accuse Derrida of either celebrating or denigrating textuality, and accordingly of either disregarding the referent altogether or striving to preserve its essential purity. Yet again, then, this spectrum of contradictory criticism indicates the attempt, either way, to hammer deconstructive thinking into the shape of an imposed either/or structure, to which it in principle has never submitted. Derrida insists (1992: 28-29), instead, that one cannot abdicate the responsibility for making decisions, interpretations, linguistic constructions, or laws just because any particular system can never finally instantiate, or be fully adequate to, the actual event. The point is – and this, as we shall see, is consonant with what Cummings strives for in de-description – to aim at a fabrication, construction, or interpretation that hopes for adequacy, that appropriates an actual event to the best of its power, while acknowledging its own limitations by pointing to an excess in the event that cannot be reduced to any linguistic or interpretative device.

To return to the relationship between text and actuality, it is important to note that, unlike the stronger claim that for Derrida it is text all the way down, Terblanche’s revised stance, which acknowledges Derrida’s resistance to the charge of subjective idealism, means that his charge against deconstruction does not in principle exclude the contention that Derrida’s

ontological stance is entirely compatible with Cummings's. It is impossible to compare the two, however, without first taking special care to establish precisely how they use multivocal terms and make complex distinctions. Cummings's theoretical terminology, as gleaned from Terblanche (2004: 221-222), may be a little difficult to make sense of as it stands, since the terms he uses are not at all synonymous with the Aristotelian meanings that have found their way into what we rather carelessly call "common sense". This is not cause for complaint. To the contrary, his seemingly idiosyncratic (but ultimately justifiable) reversal of sense concerning the terms "reality" and "actuality" brings his ontological stance precisely in line with Derrida's.

The ontological distinctions at issue here become clearer if one takes into account that the (ultimately unjustifiable) "common sense" or Aristotelian position so subverted articulates a relation between three terms. The domain of so-called concrete reality is characterised by a harmonious, teleological relation between actual and potential (real and possible), and it therefore encompasses all that has already been actualised in the Aristotelian sense of "realized" (that is, the perceivable phenomena already in existence), as well as phenomena that potentially *can* be actualised (that is, possible phenomena). On the other hand, Aristotelian common sense relegates the fantastic, or that which is considered to be impossible (fantastic tales in which animals speak, for example), to the domain of mere fictional construction. In other words, Aristotle's teleological relation between actual and potential stands on the same side of a (suspiciously) clear division between so-called concrete reality (the domain of what is possible) and mere fictional construction (the impossible).

By contrast, Cummings reserves the term "actuality" for an entirely more complex and dynamic, or even paradoxical, existent, which transcends the strictures of any overly clear distinction between "hard facts" and "fictional construction", since it incorporates an element of excess or sublimity. Thus, in Cummings's universe, "actuality" in principle exceeds the bounds of perceived and potentially perceivable phenomena, thereby opening itself to the potential for finding truth in what is commonly, but often mistakenly as history has shown, dismissed as merely fiction (the "merely possible" in his terms). Further, "harsh reality" paradoxically becomes the fiction.

The subversive switch made by Cummings (and, notably, thinkers like Derrida) draws from the radical reshaping of our self-understanding inaugurated by Kant's "transcendental turn", which was given impetus by many subsequent thinkers, not least of all Freud. It is enough for my purposes here to note that the upshot of this transcendental turn is an insistence upon the constructed or interpreted nature of what we so blithely call the "hard facts" of phenomenal reality. This is not to say that we create what exists; rather, in response to what is there, but unavoidably under the sway of what Freud so appositely called "the pleasure principle" (and more fundamentally, the death drive), we selectively record and ignore data,

emphasise and repress sensations, attend to or filter perceptions, and so on. In other words, the way that we tend to constitute phenomenal reality – that is, in Kant’s (1933: 136-137) terms, the way we tend to interpret and synthesise sense data in order to come up with a spatio-temporal manifold, is hardly adequate to what is actually given (for which he offers the term “*object=X*”, so marking its essential unknowability in theoretical terms, p. 137). Sensitive to this turn in thinking, Cummings, as Terblanche notes (1994: 222), is acutely aware that “harsh”, calculable, phenomenal reality is a “regimented and joyless” fiction of “realism” that we have constructed for our own security, efficiency, convenience, and ultimately therefore, for our own imprisonment. To refer again to Friedman’s felicitous image (quoted by Terblanche 1994: 222), the difference between the fiction of realism and “actuality” is as striking as that between the weatherman’s prediction and the actual weather.

Accordingly, for Cummings, “the actual” takes on the Kantian sense of the noumenal “*object=X*”, which, strictly speaking, remains in excess of what, at any point in time can be “actualized” in Aristotle’s sense (that is, realised, made phenomenally real, construed, interpreted, understood, or theorised). In other words, in contrast to the Aristotelian sense of the term, Cummings’s “actuality” includes more than what exists already and what is potentially realisable. His use of the term implies an awareness that, in the very impossibility of complete appropriation, every phenomenal event, everything concrete and present, opens out to the sublime. All actually perceivable phenomena intrinsically include an unknown quantity, making it impossible to determine how much of what belongs at some present point in the domain of the “fantastic” could enter the domain of “the possible” in the future.

Derrida offers multiple nicknames (for example, the present and the gift) for a clearly isomorphic ontological distinction between phenomenal reality and “actuality” (in Cummings’s sense of the term).⁸ One may add that this distinction matches Lacan’s (1981: 53-64) distinction between the “automaton” (his term for what we have already named phenomenal reality) and the *tuché* (which he also calls “the impossible real”, or the traumatic real). Understood according to the “plural logic of the aporia”, Derrida places the closed Aristotelian relation between “the actual” and “the possible” under the auspices of the economic aporia. As does Cummings, he sees the “harsh reality” of the economic as a necessary imposition driven by calculative reason. Its paradox, as mentioned, is that it remains merely the fiction of realism; an economic fabrication that weaves the threads of an “imaginary” narrative around an aneconomic “actuality” that, in a psycho-analytic mood,

8. Derrida analyses the gift in *Given Time: 1. Counterfeit Money* (1994: 11-16).

may be described in terms of ineradicable trauma.⁹ As the “traumatic real”, aneconomic actuality equally manifests as a paradox.

Through the paradoxical figure of trauma, then, one may gather together the incompatible senses of aneconomic “actuality” (as repetition, resistance, and rupture) in a way that demonstrate their necessary, but uncomfortable, interconnection (Sheridan 1977: x; Lacan 1981: 167). By definition, a trauma is an event that is too far beyond ordinary experience to be accommodated within its discursive framework. The imperative, nevertheless, to accommodate “unspeakable” events imposes the hermeneutic task of making sense, of converting aneconomic events into the meaningful phenomena of economic “reality”. This is the sense in which the perceivable phenomenon, and not the trauma “itself”, is the thing in the world. This implies, as mentioned, that there is always already a bit of Nietzschean fabrication of sense in every hermeneutic appropriation of the event.

In principle, the traumatic event exceeds the constituted world of the affected person or group, and cannot, therefore, be fully assimilated. For this reason there is a remainder after and beyond every possible construal. This remainder (that is *not*) acts as a surplus that challenges any hermeneutic appropriation, repeating itself as a rent in the fabric of this world, which calls constantly for further hermeneutic work. Even after the various operations of interpreting have brought the phenomenon into being, it is this unspeakable “remaining behind” that keeps calling again and again for a repetition of the operation by which a phenomenon is brought into being. In other words, even if one were to erase all of the hermeneutic appropriations by means of which an event is first made present as something for “us”, one is not left with nothing, but with that which happened. This is the non-essentialist sense in which “actuality” may be understood as that which repeats, or remains constant, over various possible symbolic and imaginary appropriations.

While a traumatic event constantly repeats, in the sense that it can be neither ignored nor resolved through assimilation, it is impossible ever to define it precisely, and it remains more or less resistant to different hermeneutic construals. In this sense, resistant “actuality” becomes that before which hermeneutics falters. The hermeneutic appropriation, then, does not quite overlap with, and cannot replace, the trauma. Yet, discourse does genuinely appropriate the event in some way. There is a measure (if not a positive measure of authenticating essence, then at least the negative measure of resistance) according to which some interpretations may be called more appropriate than others. For example, while one cannot say of the traumatic event marked by the nominal unity “9/11” precisely what it is,

9. Notably, “trauma” does not necessarily denote only “negative” events of pain and suffering. Extreme joy or unexpected success, for example, can be equally traumatic.

there is sufficient resistance in the event itself to ensure that I will make little headway if I construe it as a propaganda drive, engineered by the Chinese government to showcase the insanity of in-fighting among Western religions in order to sell more copies of the *Tao Teh Ching*. If one cannot make this claim, then one is simply lost in the funhouse of solipsistic inventive fantasy, which defeats the purpose of hermeneutic appropriation.

Finally, “actuality”, understood as that which remains behind as the ineradicable residue after and beyond all articulation, may be identified as that which makes it impossible to say the whole truth about it (Lee 1991: 136). As Lee explains: “Saying the whole truth is impossible not simply because words ultimately fail to reflect the multifaceted character of the real, but because the very fact of language has so ruptured the real that there is no whole to be described.” As suggested here, “actuality” does not simply remain there, in its already constituted integrity as an essentially static and perfect thing-in-itself, too large and too perfect for finite linguistic powers. Rather, it must be understood as a dynamic, interconnected system to which interpretative (linguistic, etc.) appropriation by humans contributes as one among many shaping forces. As may be gathered from many sources, inter alia Derrida’s (2002: 394-395) account of the consequences associated with our self-appointed “right” to shape the world of living creatures by imposing a sharp, hierarchical division between humankind and *l’animot*, such appropriation is an unpredictable force that places actuality at high risk in multiple ways. Derrida’s call, on these grounds, for a radical revision of the way we understand our relationship to other living creatures, is entirely in accord with Terblanche’s.

To sum up, Derrida has always maintained that something not created by “us” must occur before there can be interpretation (i.e. texts). Following Kant, his argument is only that there are no uninterpreted phenomenal objects for us because it is precisely through the process of interpretation that sense data is registered and synthesised to constitute the recognisable elements that belong to “our” (human) phenomenal reality. Further, following Freud among others, he argues that language, beginning developmentally with the proto-language of the primary process, is primordially (a priori) implicated in the synthetic, hermeneutic process. Hence his words:

I believe always in the necessity of being attentive first of all to this phenomenon of language, naming, and dating, to this repetition compulsion (at once rhetorical, magical, and poetic). To what this compulsion signifies, translates, or betrays. Not in order to isolate ourselves in language, as people in too much of a rush would like us to believe, but on the contrary, in order to try to understand what is going on precisely *beyond* language and what is pushing us to repeat endlessly and without knowing what we are talking about, precisely there where language and the concept come up against their limits.

(Derrida 2003: 87-88)

If Derrida differs from Cummings in any respect, it will be that, following Kant, he thinks that sublime actuality has both an awesome beauty (the complex, dynamic, lively integrity of Cummings's actuality) and a dreadful terror (something unspeakable, paralysing, contaminating), both of which must be acknowledged through the power of language.

3 The Third Way: "De-Description"

Turning to Terblanche's primary interest in the de-descriptive power of language, one must ask how language, as an economic means of hermeneutic appropriation, could offer an adequate description of actuality, given its paradoxical, aneconomic character. Terblanche (2004: 232) begins by asking, in effect, whether description comes down to a "mugger's choice" between two opposing "potentials of language" for referentiality or linguistic purposivity, and erasure of reference. Are we bound, he asks, "to pretend that the text has no meaning, or to pretend that the text approaches a referential direction towards an actual animal existence"? Unsurprisingly, he again tries to assess Derrida's deconstructive position in the restrictive terms of the binary opposition he has set in place, only to find it wanting. Remarking that "Derrida cannot decide which route to adopt", he interprets this reluctance to decide between absolutes as a matter of discrepancy and mutual interference between the two potentials of language just listed. In consequence, he argues, "erasure interferes on crucial descriptive occasions. It clutters the actual direction of the text". Moreover, since he "already knows" that Derrida promotes a textual freeplay which erases the referent and leaves almost no room for linguistic purposivity, he concludes that Derrida's essay "fails to evoke the significant meaninglessness that it seems to need and that, certainly, it strives to achieve".

Terblanche (2004: 242-243) implicitly presumes, therefore, to teach Derrida how to avoid the "mugger's choice" between referentiality (meaning) and erasure (meaninglessness), by proposing instead a "third way" tied to his notion of "de-description", and exemplified in his discussion of Cummings's grasshopper poem. Notably, I have nothing against his notion of "de-description". I like it very much for the most part, and believe that, with a broadening of its sense in certain respects, and some discussion, it appropriately describes Derrida's theoretical commitments concerning the relationship between referent and text. In other words, what I object to here is a fairly typical pattern, whereby a critic first tries to hammer deconstructive thinking by assessing it in terms of a binary that it in principle resists, and then goes on to propose a remedy along the very lines that Derrida has consistently adopted throughout his writing.

Terblanche (2004: 233-234) proposes three main, overlapping desiderata in defining the process of "de-description". It is a writing that: (1) "falls

significantly short of its living referent”, (2) “is more effective precisely because it becomes less in the presence of an actuality (such as a grasshopper)”, (3) “succeeds in avoiding to the greatest possible degree a projection, through language, of human elements onto a natural phenomenon”. Failing these three desiderata, he argues, one ends up with a “scriptive” text that “clutters one’s perception of the natural actuality”, for “language begins to act as an obscuring, interfering or complicating befuddlement, and indeed as a barrier between oneself and nature”. Discussing each in turn, I shall try to show in what sense Terblanche’s proposed remedy is, in fact, Derridean in character, and where their paths diverge somewhat.

3.1 “Falling Short”: The Text and the Sublime

Terblanche (2004: 218) defines the de-descriptive power of language as the power to “un-write to the greatest possible degree in order to write (comprehensively and reciprocally into the actuality of) an animal”. As the word suggests, to “un-write” necessarily presupposes writing, just as the word “de-cribe” presupposes scripture. Economic language/writing is a necessary condition for rendering the aneconomic “other” (in this case, particular animals). For Terblanche (pp. 231-233), then, to de-cribe adequately, textual production must un-write in the sense of writing in such a way that writing unveils that it veils the ineffable. In other words, language must both render the actual and fall short of it; it must be there and step aside in one movement. More accurately, it has to be there as stepping both inside and aside in order to let the other be in its sublime actuality.

The exemplary character of Cummings’s grasshopper poem, for Terblanche (p. 240), resides in its power to show that the spring of the creature is both literally in the text and beyond it. To achieve this, he argues, Cummings employs intricate poetic and iconic devices and textual manoeuvres to imitate the spring of a grasshopper. As he puts it succinctly: “The grasshopper poem opens with the radically rearranged sign ‘r-p-o-p-h-e-s-s-a-g-r’, moves through the various movements of the grasshopper as it gathers itself and leaps, and rearranges and settles itself (along with the portrayed grasshopper) with the familiar final sign ‘grasshopper.’” Here, he notes, it is plausible to interpret the text as “essentially referential in the sense that it embodies a clear outwardly purpose towards an actual grasshopper” (p. 242). Again, in his words,

the final sign in the poem, the perfectly arbitrary “grasshopper”, folds into the mind with a satisfying and integrating familiarity, not unlike the 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 the rich and no longer so

dormant iconistic and onomatopoeic flickerings of the actual creature in motion.

(Terblanche 2004: 241)

He concedes, however, that it is equally plausible to argue that the poem demonstrates, to the contrary, only language's referential incapacity:

[I]t 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.

(Terblanche 2004: 242)

Rejecting an either/or choice between what he sees as the modernist tendency to assume the possibility of perfect referentiality or linguistic purposivity, and the postmodernist tendency to emphasise the abyss between text and reference, which erases the referent and confines language to the funhouse, Terblanche (p. 243) insists "that there is a third way of reading the grasshopper poem". He refers here to Cummings's notes to his Brazilian translator, to the effect that the outer characters in the tenth line must fall outside the margins of the main body of the poem, which 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" (Webster quoted in Terblanche, p. 243). For him, this means

that the grasshopper's movement defies language no matter how much one stretches language in the attempt to capture the leap ... 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 lives (strictly speaking) outside its dynamic extremity or limit.

(Terblanche 2004: 243)

Before I can show how the sublime is equally both veiled and revealed by language in Derrida's essay, it is necessary to examine and broaden the second of Terblanche's desiderata.

3.2 The "Becoming Less" of the Text

If language must both render the actual and fall short of it, then, as Terblanche (2004: 233) notes, a text "is more effective precisely because it becomes less in the presence of an actuality". Speaking generally, one could say that a text "becomes less in the presence of an actuality" in the sense that it renders a descriptive service to the actuality in question, whereby words "step back" in order to reveal its "truth" (bearing in mind that truth is

a matter of revealing an open-ended, dynamic actuality). Notably, in “stepping back” to reveal such truth, it is clearly not that the text loses itself entirely, in the sense of becoming utterly transparent (it is a mirror not a window). Rather, one must be able to “perceive” in the artfully constructed text of a poem, not only the phenomenal spring of a grasshopper, but also its truth as a sublime event. The composition of a text is of course entirely artificial, a matter of artifice or art. However it is only in the artifice itself that the truth can be revealed at all, even if, one may add, it is often unconscious, and manifests in the form of symptoms. It is, paradoxically, the truth inscribed in the artificial device (an interview, a photograph, a poem) that Cummings taps into, as does Derrida. An interview, as Derrida (1995: 133) notes, “is a totally fabricated effect, but through which a certain number of symptoms or spontaneous, uncontrollable things come across, as in a photo for which one composes one’s face: through the composition, there is a certain ‘truth,’ as one says, that comes across”.

Still broadly speaking, one may say that the service rendered by language to actuality, its “becoming less”, is a matter of a certain consonance between subject of description and writing style. Derrida, like Cummings, is acutely sensitive to the necessity for a writing that reveals in its construction the truth of its subject, and, allowing for the impossibility of total control over this (he is under no illusion that one may direct or control the unconscious), he has scrupulously tried to ensure that his writing style adapts to its subject. Considering how to speak of an actual experience of imprisonment, for example, he notes that he has written books with several columns or several voices, and he adds that “for this multiplicity of levels or tones, one would have to invent still other forms, other kinds of music”, which would go against the grain of a dominant demand for “more linearity, cursivity, flattening A single voice on the line, a continuous speech” (Derrida 1995: 130). He points out a bit later that the “multiplicity of levels” referred to here “does not always require a stage device or labyrinthine typography” (p. 131), for this very multiplicity can cause a very simple sentence, word, or tone of voice to tremble. I am alluding here, of course, to the sublime word “sentence”.

I doubt that Terblanche would disagree that for different subjects of description, one requires different textual styles that will reflect in their very construction/artifice the difference between subjects. Presumably, if Cummings were to de-scribe a tiger or a wave, his de-scriptive style would have to change in comparison with his grasshopper poem, according to the internal demands of this new subject. I will return to this point, for I am assuming, then, that it is not contentious that were Cummings to describe that animal we call human, he again could not have adopted the same style of construction, the same technics of artifice that he applied to his description of the grasshopper.

What remains contentious, however, is Terblanche's (2004: 233) claim that de-descriptive success depends upon "the way in which language falls short of a description of an animal"; that is, the way in which it renders actuality and points to its truth as something symptomatic, uncontrollable, open-ended, dynamic, or, in a word, sublime. In his view, the service rendered by language to actuality, the "falling short" which reveals the truth, should, stylistically speaking, be a matter of linguistic economy, where "obscuring or cluttering language must be reduced to a minimum – often painstakingly, with bursts of improvement, over time". In fact, it seems, greater de-descriptive adequacy goes hand in hand with greater linguistic economy, for here "words become dynamically less, and the referent actually more". This is not, of course, an argument for a positivistic descriptive totality. One should bear it in mind that an adequate de-description of actuality, as exemplified by Cummings's grasshopper poem, would have to be open-ended and dynamic. Here, as he puts it later,

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, minimalist 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.

(Terblanche 2004: 243)

If Derrida poses a challenge to Terblanche's articulation of the service rendered by language to actuality, it would be that this service, stylistically speaking, is not a one-sided matter of linguistic economy, for an open-ended and dynamic description that engenders the sense of the sublime may be achieved both through economic beauty and through aneconomic terror. To make sense of Derrida's challenge, it is necessary first to take account of the third of Terblanche's desiderata.

3.3 Linguistic Narcissism

If language has to be there and step aside in one movement in order to render the sublime actuality of the referent, it is obliged to achieve this without itself getting in the way of the rendering, so to speak. In de-scribing the actual, which is also in principle "the other", a text must not narcissistically reflect on its own being-there, but serve as a self-effacing/withdrawing mirror (a mimic) for the being-there of the other.

In this respect, Terblanche (2004: 236-239) finds such descriptions of particular animals as do occur in Derrida's essay (from the cat and the echidna, through "Freud's snakes", "Kant's horse", and his meditation on his "bestiary", to his recourse to mythology) to be disappointingly obscure. I cannot repeat or discuss each of the many perplexing claims he makes here;

suffice it to note his general argument that instead of stretching unpretentiously in an outward direction towards the complex actuality of the animals described, and rendering them in a way that both frames them and sets them free, Derrida's descriptions are complicated and contaminated by so-called "scriptive" elements, which do indeed get in the way of the rendering of these animals, and ensure that his writing takes a "deliberate step away from the actuality" and remains in a "zone of textuality".

Largely on this basis, he argues that the linguistic "mirror", so to speak, that deconstruction holds up to nature, is tainted, clouded, or contaminated by an excessively self-reflective focus on the linguistic process. I take this criticism to be the crux of his objection to a deconstructive style of writing when it comes to the task of describing actual animals. More specifically, he objects to "a sense of over-deliberation" in Derrida's essay, marked by such things as the above-mentioned deliberate "switch from reference (an event) to reflection (a sentence)"; "an intricate and aesthetic labyrinth of intertextual or philosophical animals"; a self-consciously dazzling, even momentarily enjoyable, but ultimately disrespectful, "freeplay" of metaphor and self-reference (Terblanche 2004: 236). In other words, a kind of deflecting, narcissistic enjoyment of the text occurs at the expense of an adequate description of actuality: "When affected strongly by the glow of self-reflexive language, however, a lesser description will result." A "lesser description", in his view, is one in which language fails to render both the sublime transcendence of the actual animal beyond its reach and its own power to relate to animals in this way. He adds that a lesser description adversely affects "the communicative condition of zoological being". He ultimately concludes that a deconstructive style of writing as such is guilty of just such a "lesser description", and "ultimately does not render a satisfactory zoological semiosis" (p. 218). For this reason, it fails "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" (p. 239).

It is important to note at this point, however, that Terblanche's argument crucially misses the mark, because he misrecognises the precise subject of Derrida's de-scriptive essay, or, if you like, the actual referent against which one can test his de-description. He does not take it into account that Derrida's text is the introductory essay to a lengthy, slow meditation on the kind of question posed by Plato in the *Phaedrus* (1995: 5; 230A): "Am I a beast more complicated and savage than Typho, or am I a tamer, simpler animal with a share in a divine and gentle nature?" This question inaugurates the quintessential philosophical task, namely, "know thyself". Derrida's question in this meditation, accordingly, does not primarily extend outwardly towards the nature of any other particular animal (an echidna, etc.), but dwells inwardly, or self-reflectively, on what kind of an animal "I" am. He is, of course, in agreement with the philosophers that one cannot pose

the question of the human subject without addressing the question of living being, and therefore of the relationships of coexistence between this animal that I am and other kinds of animals. It seems to me that an adjusted interpretive framework that does not impose a subject of de-scription on Derrida's text, but takes account of Derrida's own subject, gives the lie to Terblanche's contention that Derrida's writing represents a "lesser de-scription" that is unsatisfactory for the reasons outlined above.

Part of what Derrida argues at the level of content in his essay, as already mentioned, is that hand in glove with religious discourse, philosophy has sought to establish and justify the essential quality that would clearly differentiate the human animal from all other living creatures, and implicitly, always, elevate it above them. Thus philosophy has always tried to capture the human essence in a definition that displays the same kind of sublimely economic beauty and clarity that characterises Cummings's poem. What he argues, against the grain of the philosophical tradition, is that such efforts, when evaluated against the actual referent, turn out to be mere self-serving fabrications in which an essential quality is always left out: namely, the quintessentially human potential for contaminating, polluting evil.

Derrida mimics and thereby parodies traditional philosophical attempts to isolate the specific difference that isolates the species "human" from other species, by suggesting that we can call ourselves the auto-bio-graphical animals. His text, then, is a slow meditation on both the beauty and terror of my (*autos*) dreadful power to stand at a reflective distance vis-à-vis my own life (*bios*), and write (*graphos*) its course; that is, by means of a uniquely complex and sophisticated linguistic ability, as yet unmatched by any other animal, to interpret it, fabricate it or make of it an artifice. But due to the quasi-transcendental nature of human freedom, discussed earlier, the power this entails is intimately associated with its underside, namely, the potential for shame and guilt. In fact, humans are the kind of creature whose power is intrinsically polluted. Importantly, however, Derrida takes the term "pollution" to be more nuanced than the merely pejorative sense attached to it by Terblanche. For him, it is best represented by the paradoxical figure of the "pharmakon" (simultaneous poison and cure). The power vested in the auto-bio-graphical animal, then, is a pharmakon; its beauty resounds in Mozart and space travel, its terror lurks in the shame of Hiroshima or Rwanda. In so arguing, he undermines the traditional philosophical and ideological over-confidence that the specific difference that marks us out as human indicates our undeniable superiority over other animals, and the legitimacy of our self-chosen role as "masters and possessors of nature".

Clearly, then, the point of comparison in Derrida's descriptive essay is not at all the animals that Terblanche lists, but the self-reflective, auto-bio-graphical animal (Derrida 2002: 415). Just as he treats Cummings's poem as a "whole", perhaps Terblanche ought to have looked at Derrida's essay as a

“whole”, rather than selecting scraps and snippets for comparison. I leave the word “whole” in scare-quotes, because, as we have seen, Cummings points to what remains in excess of the whole, and I believe the same can be said of Derrida’s text. At least insofar as both endeavour to elicit the sublime, one could say that Derrida de-scribes his subject in a way that is structurally isomorphic with Cummings’s grasshopper poem, where the “traumatic real”, marked by apparently disconnected, unintelligible signs, or “nonsense”, is gathered up to form an intelligible, “phenomenal” phrase at the end. By the time the end is reached, however, the phenomenon has been both settled in shape, and unsettled by its brush with the sublime; for along the way, the text has pointed to its own shortcomings by pointing to something ungraspable outside its frame. Thus the reader’s grasp of the phenomenal grasshopper is elevated in the process of reading. Clearly there is more to contend with in the de-scriptive journey towards “the auto-biographical animal that I am” than there is in the de-scription of the grasshopper’s spring, but the pattern of the journey, from cryptic, disconnected signs, to the “true” subject of the text, through the unsettling vale of sublimity, is much the same.

In relation to Derrida’s subject – the auto-bio-graphical animal who writes its own subjectivity, who has freedom for good and for evil, and who therefore faces an abjection related to shame and guilt – the artifice of de-scription could not achieve adequacy if it emulated the kind of elevating, economic linguistic purity exemplified in Cummings’s poem and striven for in modernist poetry in general. The auto-bio-graphical animal is not sublime merely in the economic sense of transcending beauty, but also in the aneconomic sense of contaminating terror. Human being cannot match the beauty and clarity of the paradoxically simple complexity represented by the elevating, guilt-free spring of the grasshopper. The consequence of nevertheless pretending to such clarity in a description of human being, based on the thesis of an abyssal gap between humans and *l’animot*, tyrannises both humans (particularly those who supposedly do not make the grade) and other living creatures.

It seems to me, then, that a “scriptive” style of writing, while indeed inappropriate for the subject chosen by Cummings, is precisely consonant with Derrida’s specific subject matter. In other words, Derrida’s polluting, complicating, textual strategy serves a precise de-scriptive function for which there is adequate justification in the subject itself. Just as Cummings’s poem mimics at the level of style what he takes to be the essence of a grasshopper’s movement, so Derrida’s contaminating textual style mimics what, at the level of theoretical content, he takes to be the quintessential trait that marks humans out from other living creatures; namely, the capacity for pollution (with its undeniable curse and its shame, but, paradoxically, perhaps also its chance). To de-scribe the human animal, writing must be both beautiful (elevating in the modernist sense) and

contaminated, polluted, viral, in a “postmodernist” sense. It must not fail to be writing that unveils the abjection of the autobiographical animal; the seed of decadence that, as Hieronymous Bosch recognised, must have been already there in the hearts of the innocents at the origin. Again, to repeat a common theme, there is no question of choosing between the two, nor finding a resolution to their conflict, since the relationship, taking the form of a dilemma, is incorrigibly aporetic. In this case, one may happily grant Terblanche his point that “scriptive” writing is inappropriate for de-scribing the kind of guiltless life-form represented by the spring of a grasshopper, without going on to make the further, unacceptable, claim that Derrida’s style in principle “undermines the potential of language to describe animals”. Quite to the contrary, there is at least one animal (but arguably, given Terblanche’s discussion of animal communication, there may be more) in relation to which a “non-scriptive” style of writing would be found to be inadequate when compared with its referent.

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