Prepostrophe:
Rethinking Modes of Lyric Address in Wisława Szymborska's Poetry of the Non-Human

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'Thinking concerning the animal, if there is such a thing, derives from poetry', Jacques Derrida pronounces in his essay 'This Animal that Therefore I Am'.[1] Yet poetry's history of concerning itself with the animal, despite its many imaginative virtues, cannot be said to have been without its biases and exclusions. On the historical limits of poetry's animal advocacy, Polish poet Wisława Szymborska notes in her essay 'In Praise of Birds' that 'The unlucky goatsucker is no less lovely than the swallow, but has had no career in poetry'.[2]

In Szymborska's wryly insinuation regarding the pitfalls and vagaries of naming, allusion, and aesthetic prejudice, it is not so much the 'name' of the animal that gets in the way of its career in poetry; rather, human language itself must be suspected. Language must not be allowed to belie its distorting medium. Szymborska's linguistic misgivings reveal, on the one hand, her allegiance to and her iconic position within late modernist poetics. As Ed Hirsch has noted of her work, 'Repeatedly shifting perspective, Szymborska's poetry embraces the

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[1] Jacques Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, ed. by Marie-Louis Mallet and trans. by David Wills (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), p. 7.
[2] Wisława Szymborska, 'In Praise of Birds', in *Nonrequired Reading: Prose Pieces*, trans. by Clare Cavanagh (New York: Harcourt, Inc. 2002), pp. 96-98 (p. 97).

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modernist position that all views are partial and restricted, all truths relative'.[3] Yet, on the other hand, Szymborska lyrics ceaselessly experiment with ekphrasis, apostrophe, persona, and other modes of poetic object-relations whose repertoire of repartee transcends any easy periodization. Referencing Szymborska's equally distinctive preoccupation with nonhuman perspectives and address, Hirsch deduces from this combination of method and subject matter a distancing strategy, a 'miniaturization' of the human within the landscape of poetry.[4] Extending the modernist project of relativizing human perceptual, mythic, and social truths toward a relativizing, 'miniaturizing' project of countering anthropocentrism, Szymborska's poetic bestiary includes Brueghel's apes, migrating sparrows, sea cucumbers, tarisers, and a yeti, to name a few. Her work resonates with fellow modernist Marianne Moore's radiantly descriptive *blazons* to the nonhuman, which render wondrously relevant (while wholly unfamiliar) the jerboa, the paper nautilus, the pangolin, and the 'estridge' who 'digesteth harde yron'.[5]

Certainly this modernist poetics of the nonhuman can be periodized by contrast with its predecessor, the Romantic paradigm of poems that address 'Nature'. As Mary Jacobus has written of Wordsworth's *Prelude*, 'The voice of Nature permits a loss of individuality which is at once safe and unifying. In Nature, the poet can take refuge against dismemberment'. While this earlier, Romantic relation to the nonhuman succeeds in 'providing a safely trans-subjective voice', Szymborska's late modernist poetics of the non-human perform a precarious minoritization of the human subject.[6] This process leads to dreadful yet instructive impasses as often as it does to wonder. Madeline Levine senses from Szymborska's verse an 'existentialist conviction that each man stands along in an uncaring, capricious universe', while Krzysztof Stala has detected in Szymborska's work a 'negative

[3] Ed Hirsch, *Responsive Reading* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), pp. 109-10, 114.
[4] Hirsch, pp. 109-10.
[5] For the Moore poems, see Marianne Moore, *Complete Poems* (New York: Macmillan, 1981), pp. 10, 121, 117, 99; for Szymborska, see *Sounds, Feelings, Thoughts: Seventy Poems by Wisława Szymborska*, ed. and trans. by Magnus J. Krynski and Robert A. Maguire (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), pp. 21, 97, 137, 101, 27.
[6] Mary Jacobus, 'Apostrophe and Lyric Voice in *The Prelude*', in *Lyric Poetry: Beyond New Criticism*, eds. Chaviva Hošek and Patricia Parker, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), pp. 167-81 (p. 170).

anthropology'—counterpart to a negative theology—in which 'the poet defines identity through negation, through denial', and through 'unraveling, via removal of all anthropomorphisms', toward whatever might remain of humanity's scant specificity.[7] Yet Szymborska writes, 'I'm not yet blasé enough to perceive normality in any form of life. Ordinary animals don't exist at all and have never existed. And so one may say that the work of palaeontologists…is a sojourn in the land of maddening wonders'.[8]

In the spirit of what we might instead call a 'negative paleontology', Szymborska's view of the peculiarity of human language can be seen as constituting just one more 'maddening wonder' in the longue durée of terrestrial livelihood's myriad adaptations. Szymborska's nonhuman-directed poetry can in fact be differentiated from Moore's by the centrality of explicit voice (or, figures of voice) within her poetic structures. Where Moore taxonomizes, Szymborska extemporizes; her lyrics apostrophize, empathize, address, and are addressed in turn as they unravel the relations between human and nonhuman others. For a critic like Stala, this passion of cross-species voicing presents 'a record of human helplessness, a record of the drama of human alienation and abandonment: it is not our destiny to participate in the inhuman world of nature, we are separated from it by the abyss of misunderstanding...'.[9] Wojciech Ligęga differently interprets this 'cosmic solitude' that haunts Szymborska's poetry, seeing in this 'exile from nature' the path that leads to a limited reconciliation through 'multi-faceted perception of the world' and through 'the participation of the more remote species as well as empathy with one's 'smaller brothers'…. The language of poetry narrows the distance between the many forms of being'.[10] Yet this same discourse of 'exile from nature' has relied on an anthropocentric logic wherein language both exiles

[7] Madeline G. Levine, *Contemporary Polish Poetry, 1925-1975* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1981), p. 97. Krzysztof Stala, 'Wisława Szymborska and her Negative Anthropology: The Quest for Identity', in *Wisława Szymborska: A Stockholm Conference, May 23-24, 2003*, ed. by Leonard Neuger and Rikard Wennerholm (Stockholm: Kungl. Vitterhets Historie och Antikvitets Akademien, 2006), pp. 126-137 (p. 126).

[8] Quoted in Wojciech Ligęza, 'Natural History According to Wisława Szymborska', in *Wisława Szymborska: A Stockholm Conference, May 23-24, 2003*, pp. 138-47 (p. 139).

[9] Stala, p. 129.

[10] Ligęza, p. 145.

and distinguishes humanity within 'nature'. Language has been historically conceived as *creating* the distance between humans and nonhuman animals; if language has been claimed as a force that has exiled humanity, how will this same language 'narrow the distance' it both constitutes and creates? What role could language hope to play in fostering the 'participation' of these 'remote species' and 'smaller brothers'?

Many have tried to ameliorate this problem of nonhuman 'participation' in human existence by a metaphorical extension of the faculty of speech to animals. Just as often, this putatively magnanimous gesture has been descried as being a dangerous projection, an illusion that hides beneath its inclusive vision a tendentious perpetuation of the primacy of speech. The worry is that claiming either that 'nature speaks' or that 'we have silenced it' grants too much power of determination to humans. Any altruistic rendering of nonhumans as speaking subjects, similarly, is faulted with compromised rhetorical moves that 'fall prey to various forms of anthropomorphism, idealism, Romanticism'.[11] Robert Harrison writes that 'if animals could speak, they would no longer be animals but a species of humanity, which is another way of saying that language is the distinguishing trait of human beings'. At the same time, he fears that 'this does not advance us very far, for the nature of language is as much in doubt these days as human nature'.[12] The complexity of this argumentative about-face with respect to humanity is that, while language's own definition is questioned, its *definitional* status—its power to delineate species—remains intact. The argument's decentering force does not doubt that humans are distinguished by their language, rather, it doubts that language itself can be defined.

A rather different approach to this seemingly insurmountable double-bind has been suggested by Derrida. With an apt double-entendre, he cautions against our perpetuating the 'bêtise' of anthropocentric isolationism that results from 'suspending one's compassion… depriving the animal of every power of

[11] Andrew McMurray, '"In Their Own Language": Sarah Orne Jewett and the Question of Non-Human Speaking Subjects', *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, 6.1 (Winter 1999), 51-63 (p. 55).

[12] Robert P. Harrison, 'Toward a Philosophy of Nature', in *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*, ed. by William Cronon (New York: Norton, 1995), pp. 426-44 (p. 427).

manifestation, of the desire to manifest to me…its experience of my language'.[13] That is, even amidst our reverent suspensions of knowledge concerning the animal, we may unwittingly re-inscribe historically violent practices of species-distinction: how much 'distance', after all, is there between this suspension of participation and the 'cosmic solitude' that results from a discourse of 'exile from nature'? Instead of a logic of suspension and distanciation, Derrida emphasizes connection between (1) the animal's *experience* of human language, (2) a power of manifestation accessible to the animal that is not predicated on language. Here, the animal's experience of human language does not preclude but rather provokes a desire within the animal, one that would seek to 'manifest' an experience of human language. Whether this 'manifestation' ought to be understood as communication is implied but in no way ensured by the animal's desiring state that Derrida proposes. Instead of reading the interactions between animals and humans as delimited by lack, silence, and nonappearance, Derrida directs us toward a new grammar of manifestation. Derrida suggests not 'giving speech back' to animals but rather 'acceding to a thinking, however fabulous and chimerical it might be, that thinks the absence of the name and of the word otherwise, and as something other than a privation'.[14]

While thinking concerning the animal, as Derrida asserts, has indeed occupied a unique place in poetry, poetry has often fallen prey to the unconsidered notions of linguistic primacy discussed above. It easily presumes the transparency of human language for its purposes of staging, conveying, or describing encounters with nonhumans. Philosophy, no less than poetry, has been guilty of a similar error; Derrida accuses philosophers from Descartes and Kant to Heidegger, Lacan, and Levinas of erring 'when they made of the animal a theorem, something seen and not seeing. The experience of the seeing animal, of the animal that looks at them, has not been taken into account'.[15] Yet Derrida's prioritization of the communicative or perhaps 'manifestational' affinity between poets and animals returns us to the question: if poetry is an art whose tool and substance is language,

[13] Derrida, *Animal,* p. 18.
[14] Derrida, *Animal*, p. 48.
[15] Derrida, *Animal*, p. 14.

and if language has been made to play the merciless role of policing species-boundaries and hierarchies, then how might the thinking produced by this linguistic art ever connect with those same creatures its tools have been called upon to exclude? How will poetry's thought, which is first and foremost a thinking *of* and *about* language, avoid more deeply entrenching the alienation concerning those beings its own ontological premises have definitively, taxonomically, even *generically* expelled? Why should it be that poetry would offer this privileged arena of thought?

To answer these questions, we might turn to a consideration of the rhetorical device used by lyric poetry to stage and speculate upon encounters between those with language and those without language (whether contingently or definitionally): the device of lyric apostrophe. Defined as the address of a poetic speaker to an addressee who cannot reply—gods, the dead, the absent, the object, the nonhuman, the abstraction—the tradition of lyric apostrophe can also be said to enable poetic demonstration of attunement toward the mute other. What is clear in this act of demonstrating poetic attunement is that the vocative nature of the apostrophic speech act—that is, its manifestation of a desire—is provoked by a desire that cannot be characterized as a desire 'to be heard'. John Stuart Mill has canonized the idea that poetry is 'not heard but overheard', yet here I would suggest, in reference to Derrida, that this apostrophic poetic striving toward invocation seeks neither hearing nor over-hearing, but rather to manifest an *experience* of language defined by a disparity that is not a disability. Lyric apostrophe thinks the absence of any commensurate language, the impossibility of receiving any reply, not as lack but as 'something other than a privation'. Lyric apostrophe posits a reciprocity that lies within desire; its hypothesis is a shared desire, not to speak but to *manifest* the 'experience of language'. Crucially, this 'experience' is not owned by any speaker, nor does it manifest solely in the domain of the addressee. Through the address but not *as* the address, language provokes this desire for manifestation. Not only, then, is the lack of speech something other than a privation, lyric apostrophe construes the *presence* of language as something other than a possession.

Here we may return to apostrophe's privileged place within lyric poetry as it encounters the nonhuman. With respect to lyrics concerning and addressing the animal, this tradition primarily has involved poetry *about* animals or poetry *to* animals. In contradistinction to these poems, Wisława Szymborska's poem 'Tarsier' engages in a mode of apostrophe whose effects are unique and intriguing as they are instructive. [16] While apostrophes almost exclusively move from the human-poet speaker to the non-human or absent realm beyond speech, Szymborska's poem performs an involution of this custom. In 'Tarsier', it is an *animal* and not a human who does the apostrophizing.

Apostrophe, as a generic device, has been implicated by scholarship as underwriting lyric poetry's most basic structures of address. In *The Pursuit of Signs,* Jonathan Culler notes that apostrophe's power to animate non-human or absent objects addresses them 'independent of any claims made about the actual properties of the object'.[17] Within poetic apostrophe, the being addressed attains an organizing power that functions independently of its analogical, physical, epistemological, or narrative powers and properties.

'What is at issue is not a predictable relation', Culler continues, 'between…a form and its meaning'. Poetic apostrophe gives 'commands which in their explicit impossibility' construct a 'sign of a fiction which knows its own fictive nature'.[18] It is the self-conscious enchantment of lyric apostrophe that saves it from what otherwise might appear as panpsychism, delusion, or childlike naïveté. Bruno Bettleheim in his book *The Uses of Enchantment* outlines a situation much like apostrophe: 'To the child, there is no clear line separating objects from living things… it seems reasonable to expect answers from those objects which arouse [the child's] curiosity. … A child is convinced that the animal understands and feels with him'.[19] This conviction in the child evanesces, yet some have argued that

[16] 'Tarsier' (Tarsjusz) was first published in Szymborska's 1967 *Sto pociech*. I use the English translation by Krynski and Maguire throughout, as taken from their 1981 dual-language edition, cited above.
[17] Jonathan Culler, *The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), p. 141.
[18] Culler, pp. 152, 146.
[19] Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1976), pp. 46-47.

its superseded structure operates like the psychic equivalent of a vestigial tail, capable of making uncanny returns. In her essay, 'Apostrophe, Animation, Abortion', Barbara Johnson posits a 'primal apostrophe' lying buried yet active beneath all lyric apostrophe; this primal apostrophe is a relic of psycho-biological links between animation and demand, and it tropes the original dependence of the infant on the mother into signification and alienation as the child matures. Johnson argues that demands emitting from the Other come to structure apostrophe's animating message. Thanks to this primal apostrophe, for Johnson, lyric poetry resembles 'the fantastically intricate history of endless elaborations and displacements of the single cry, "Mama"!'[20] Johnson also notes apostrophes tendency to 'undo' the morphology of its addressee.[21] Haunted by 'the desire for the other's voice', apostrophe's 'ventriloquism…[turns] silence into mute responsiveness', and yet its fate is a tragic one: Arising from its connection to the alienation which predicates human entry into the symbolic, Johnson sees apostrophe as a philosophical challenge: 'Can this gap be bridged? Can this loss be healed, through language alone?'[22]

If Bettleheim is correct, it is not only the Mother that is lost to the child on entering the Symbolic: a whole host of interlocutors equally vanish, a chimerical world replete with sentience and demand, inclusive of all creatures and objects. Animals are good to *think* with, one might say, only after animals are no longer any good to *speak* with. Here we return to what transpires in an apostrophic lyric where the animal is the speaker, and the impossible addressee is not some absent or nonhuman entity, but is instead the human reader. This apostrophe from a creature supposed incapable of speech strikes us as impossible not because its cry cannot be *heard* but because it cannot allegedly be *spoken* in the first place. Szymborska's 'tarsier' speaks, while humanity is silent. Because this lyric employs the structure of apostrophe, while at the same time transvaluing and transposing its terms, I will call this device a 'prepostrophe', meaning to allude not only to its

[20] Barbara Johnson, 'Apostrophe, Animation, Abortion', in *A World of Difference* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), pp. 184-99 (p. 199).
[21] Johnson, pp. 185, 187.
[22] Johnson, p. 187.

'unthinkability', but also to the Latin etymology of the word for 'preposterous'—meaning 'in the wrong order'.

What does it mean for a poem to speak 'in the wrong order?' In 'Tarsier', we are presented with reversal of priority, as the human who receives the poem blurs into the poem's stated addressee, a 'humanity' caught between personification and abstraction. The tarsier calls this abstract humanity into being—anonymous, 'universal'. As this apostrophizing animal induces humanity to serve as the poem's mute receiver, the human reader is also forced by species-interpellation to identify with this abstraction, getting a sense of the tables to be turned, being addressed as a disindividuated member of a species. Moreover, this encounter is defined by a structuring of language (the trope of apostrophe) that precludes all reply.

> Dzień dobry, wielki panie,
> co mi za to dasz,
> że mi niczego nie musisz odbierać?
> Swoją wspaniałomyślność czym mi wynagrodzisz?
> Jaką mi, bezcennemu, przyznasz cenę
> za pozowanie do twoich uśmiechów?
>
> Good morning, lord and master,
> what will you give me
> for not having to deprive me of anything?
> For your magnanimity how will you reward me?
> What value will you place on me, valuable and valueless,
> for posing for your smiles? (pp. 100-101)

In this poem, apostrophe's traditional movement or tropological force of 'turning-aside' comes to be complexly redirected by a force of cross-species interpellation. This animal's apostrophe to humanity turns *onto* its human reader who, caught in the act of reading, feels herself suddenly revised. The reader finds herself not only reading, but suddenly also presumed mute by the force of apostrophe. And yet this poem creates, at first, a specific human addressee, gendered male by grammar: 'wielki panie' ('unto the lord and master', or more literally, 'distinguished sir').[23]

[23] The implied human addressee in the vocative case, 'panie', is gender-marked male.

As the poem progresses, the reader who may at first have felt separate from the specific address to a 'distinguished sir' becomes more complexly implicated with the tarsier's shift to humanity as his true addressee. At the level of species-belonging, the reader comes to be interpellated, just as Althusser's man on the street, beset by a distinctly non-lyric scene of 'overhearing', becomes subject to power at the moment of responding to the interpellative force of hailing.[24] For Althusser, the subject who turns becomes *subject by turning*. What interpellative transformations might occur in the 'turning aside' of apostrophe (from the Greek απο-στροφή, 'to turn aside')? According to lyric tradition, we might say that the poetic speaker of apostrophe represents a subject who turns *to become subject beyond belonging*. Apostrophe undoes the species-belonging defined by language. That is to say, in the case of the human, apostrophe dismantles the importance that linguistic capacity is said to hold in defining the human species. The linguistic form of human species-belonging is predicated upon an interpellative scene of human language that apostrophe reveals to be highly unstable. According to the strictest criteria of linguistic hailing, success at interpellation is only accorded to one who is able to re-produce something considered a linguistically *legitimate* response. Apostrophe turns aside from this legitimacy, it changes legitimacy's parameters. It presumes that a wider field than the presently human may turn in response, turning in order to manifest 'experience' of its language that is something other than comprehension, reply, or acquiescence.

Szymborska's use of this trope of apostrophe, all while inverting the classic human/non-human coupling of speaker and addressee, has the effect of revealing to us deeper species-criteria of language, of violent exclusions through its animal speaker. We begin by imaginatively installing this tarsier (whom we know to be a fictitious voice of Szymborska's) in the place normally occupied by a 'speaker', an act of imaginative suspension of disbelief that reveals the expected but otherwise hidden term of 'human' normally behind this speaker. Beginning by invoking a 'distinguished sir' (later, 'Wielki pan dobry-- | wielki pan łaskawy' or 'Great lord

[24] See Louis Althusser, 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes Towards an Investigation)', in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays,* trans. by Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971) pp. 127-86.

and master-- | great kind lord') in a highly formalized tone, the tarsier's ensuing argument is far from flattering to his addressee, meditating with acerbic politesse on the arbitrary vicissitudes of cruelty and instrumentalization meted out by humans on the nonhuman world. In the first stanza, immediately before the apostrophic moment quoted above, the tarsier itemizes his pedigree and his qualities. As though attempting to translate himself anthropomorphically for the benefit of his human audience, he makes himself known as 'syn tarsjusza' (son of tarsier) and locates himself within a filial chart that, at the same time, gives a sarcastic commentary on his putatively undifferentiated species-belonging' 'I tarsier, son of tarsier, | grandson of tarsier and great-grandson' (Ja tarsjusz syn tarsjusza, | wnuk tarsjusza i prawnuk). At the end of the first stanza he positions himself (and his kind) in a very specific and metaphorically concrete relation to humanity: sitting 'alive and well on the finger of man' (żywy na palcu człowieka).

Krynski and Maguire here translate 'człowiek-' as 'man', but this would perhaps be better translated as 'mankind' or 'humanity'—in Polish, 'człowiek' gestures universally to the human species; at the same time, the poem's initial address to the 'sir' of 'wielki panie' already implies the effaced gender-specificity of its allegedly 'abstract' subject: 'Man'. Immediately after declaring himself perched precariously upon the human (człowiek) comes the tarsier's apostrophe to a distinguished sir (wielki panie). Caught between the specificity of the 'wielki panie' and the species-category of 'człowiek', the general reader may suddenly perceive the explicit *indirection* on which lyric forms of address traditionally thrive. Though the reader may not identify as a 'distinguished sir', this reader will experience an implicit re-direction, being hailed by the tarsier as human by virtue of responding to language.[25]

Having begun by announcing his pedigree, the tarsier next itemizes his qualities:

[25] Should the 'imaginative' nature of this re-directed poetic hailing seem, at first glance, disqualified from comparison with Althusser's political theory of interpellation, we may remember that Althusser, like Marx, is at pains to reiterate that ideology is 'the *imaginary* relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence' (Althusser, p. 162; my emphasis). In the case of poetry, especially poetry concerning the borderline between human and nonhuman, language constitutes this real condition of existence.

zwierzątko małe, złożone z dwóch źrenic
i tylko bardzo już koniecznej reszty;
cudownie ocalony od dalszej przeróbki,
bo przysmak ze mnie żaden,
na kołnierz są więksi,
gruczoły moje nie przynoszą szczęścia,
koncerty odbywają się bez moich jelit…

a tiny little animal, composed of two pupils
and only the most indispensable rest;
miraculously saved from further processing,
no tasty morsel I,
for fur collars there are bigger,
my glands bring no joy…. (pp. 100-101)

Sitting 'alive and well' on the finger of man, the tarsier insinuates, does not mean truly to be safe. The tarsier's relative safety implies only that the tarsier is not yet *of use* to the human species. The tarsier's precarious perch is contingent upon the fact that 'for fur collars, there are bigger'.[26] And yet, from this tarsier's litany that hopes, apotropaically, to turn the acquisitive gaze of the human away from his own embodied existence, we see that this tarsier performs this speech act by employing a thoroughly internalized criteria of potential usefulness. The tarsier describes himself to the human addressee as being composed of nothing saleable; the tarsier is a 'compound of' (złożone z) *no exploitable raw materials*. To express his own right to live, the tarsier offers to the appraising eye of the 'człowiek' (human) a spectacle of worthlessness. That is, the tarsier is forced to try to articulate the worth of his own life through terms of his temporary worthlessness to another.

Returning to Ligęza's claim that 'the language of poetry narrows the distance' between human and nonhuman life forms, we may wonder if a narrower distance what is desired by the tarsier? Nervously perched for now on the finger of man, the tarsier seems to desire *more* rather than less distance between his species and the grasping human. Ligęza's understanding construes distance between the animal

[26] The Krynski-Maguire translation adds the word 'fur' to their translation to preserve the clarity of the line 'na kołnierz są więksi' (for collars there are bigger).

and the human is ontological, part of a definitive 'exile from nature' that defines our species.[27] The gap may be narrowed through poetry, but never crossed.[28] The tarsier rereads the allegedly 'tragic' dimensions to this human distance, casting it instead a space designed for the unfolding of instrumentality and harm, a space that the recounting of damage, violence, and horror must acknowledge. We are told at the end of the third stanza:

> Ależ to, co już o sobie wiecie,
> starczy na noc bezsenną od gwiazdy do gwiazdy.
>
> Why, what you already know of yourselves
> is enough for a sleepless night from star to star. (pp. 100-101)

The tragic distance between man and nature is here rewritten as the nearly infinite—but not strictly incalculable—literal distance between one star and another. The image evoked seems to allude to a sleepless night of guilty conscience, in which humans proceed from one star to another, in search of a habitable planet after having destroyed their own.[29] Reconceiving mankind's species-distance from nature as not ontological but historical, the tarsier suggests that humanity's position within the celestial spheres consists of a finite, contingent, and wholly temporal measure. Thus, the brief flicker of species duration that humanity has had on the planet maps metaphorically onto the time it would take to recount all humanity's wrongs, a temporal interval that would last 'from star to star' (od gwiazdy do gwiazdy).

At the end of the next stanza, this sleepless nightmare from star to star is reworked yet again:

> I tylko my nielizcne, z futer nie odarte,
> nie zdjęte z kości, nie strącone z piór,

[27] 'Only human beings can experience cosmic solitude', Ligęza, p. 143.
[28] The poetic apotheosis of this post-Enlightenment secular lapsarianism can be found in Rilke's *Duino Elegies*, especially the 8th Elegy ('Mit allen Augen sieht die Kreatur | das Offene. Nur unsere Augen sind | wie umgehert und ganz um sie gestellt | als Fallen, rings um ihren freien Ausgang'). Rainer M. Rilke, *Duineser Elegien* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1975).
[29] The Cold War apocalyptic context of this poem (published 1967) is doubtless relevant here.

uszanowane w kolcach, łuskach, rogach, kłach,
i co tam które jeszcze ma
z pomysłowego białka,
jesteśmy—wielki panie—twoim snem,
co uniewinnia cię na krótką chwilę.

And only those few of us unskinned of fur,
unstripped of bone, unplucked of feather,
respected in our quills, scales, horns, tusks,
and whatever else some of us may have
of ingenious albumen,
we are—great lord and master—your dream,
which absolves you for a brief moment. (pp. 100-101)

Making use of the image of a sleepless distance, the tarsier describes a particular form of relation to humanity. He includes within this conjectural form of relation not only tarsiers but any and all nonhuman creatures who survive in precariously 'worthless' states. When the sleepless night from the third stanza encounters itself as a dream in the fourth stanza, it is the nonhuman subjects of apostrophe who appear as both agents and objects of this dream: 'we are, great lord and master, your dream' (jesteśmy—wielki panie—twoim snem). This dream in many respects presents a dream of non-relation; at the heart of vivid manifestation, the non-relation and non-attunement of humans to the creatures without language exerts a cold gravity. It is a dream that purports to absolve (*uniewinnia*: exonerates, acquits), locating a small handful of animals at a remove from harm, unused. Yet even in this dream of non-relation, as the tarsier cannily notes, these untouched animals are still compelled into usefulness. They are asked to exonerate the human guilt they have narrowly managed to escape.

The tarsier describes this non-relation as occult action at a distance, a gravity that keeps him from ascending to the stars, 'into the heavens' (w niebo). Indeed, the tarsier would already have made his exodus into heaven, we are told, 'if time and again I had not had | to fall like a weight from hearts' (gdybym nie musiał raz po raz | spadać kamieniem z serc). Here, Krynski and Maguire use 'weight' to translate Szymborska's more concrete word 'kamienem' (stone). The concreteness of the figuration indicates that the tarsier has, once again, been forced to translate

himself into a kind of worthlessness, into an inanimate object void of agency. Transfiguring himself in this way, he nonetheless serves as a positive or redemptive metaphor, figuring the feeling of guilt's 'weight' as it lifts from a heavy heart. His redemptive value, for humanity, is gained at the price of his transformation into volitionless matter.

In the final instance, the tarsier and the other unused creatures are not 'saved' so much as made to stand in for mankind's putative labors of exoneration. As the dream of a non-relation, they do not enjoy the non-relation of autonomy, but rather, of being a guilt that drops away. The sleepless human species seeks a salvific power for its trip from star to star by re-imagining its relation to other life forms as an *absence* of responsibility, an absence of repercussions or consequence. Is there any other (non)relation to be imagined? What other form of non-relation might the tarsier suggest, one that could embrace not a drama of human innocence but a future ethics of nonviolence?

To return to Derrida's pronouncement that 'thinking concerning the animal…derives from poetry', he adds that this form of thinking 'is what philosophy has… had to deprive itself of. It is the difference between philosophical knowledge and poetic thinking'.[30] Philosophy has neglected the experience of the animal *looking at* the philosopher.[31] Between theorem and poem, between seeing and the other's seeing seen, there emerges a second distance. This distance, as a second distance, is not *subordinate*, it is reciprocal. Its *reciprocity of disinterest* constitutes a structuring distance. By 'disinterest' I do not mean 'indifference'—rather, I refer to a refusal to instrumentalize. Such disinterested distance is located *in* difference, while at the same time refusing to orient itself to that difference in any way that seeks to exploit, harm, or expropriate it. The subjects of this encounter, 'respected in our quills, scales, horns, tusks' (uszanowane w kolcach, łuskach, rogach, kłach) are those for whom, as Derrida suggests, this encounter can transcend the mere *thēorem* (or, seeing) by perfecting what he calls the *animalséance*. Krynski and Maguire have translated 'kolcach' (from 'kolec', thorn or spike) as 'quill', presumably to bring together the 'spikes' of a

[30] Derrida, *Animal*, p. 7.
[31] Ibid., p. 14.

porcupine with the 'quills' that call to mind the writing tools of a poet. Poets, too, have long been spared and 'respected in their quills', seeming so fortunately purposeless that their witnessing is allowed to develop, unnoticed, perhaps, at first. These unobtrusive or even 'ineffectual' quills call to mind another animal that, thanks to Derrida's writings, has become emblematic of poetry: the hedgehog.

Written prior to 'The Animal that Therefore I Am', Derrida's essay *Che cos'è la poésia?* classifies a poetic encounter as 'an event of interruption whose arrival constitutes its receiver, even as it simultaneously institutes itself and is contaminated, risking effacement, by the force of this reception'.[32] For Derrida, this event is represented by a hedgehog trying to cross a busy highway, whose only defense is to curl into a ball, raising its quills. Like poetry, in this logic, while the hedgehog becomes all surface when it wants to protect itself, its defenses will only render it more defenseless. Derrida's description of the poem as 'contamination' where 'arrival constitutes its receiver' depicts linguistic forces bent on complicating the status of both difference and distance. Yet if poetry tends toward complicating distance, how will poetic thinking of the animal manage to *keep* its distance while also confusing it? How will the poem's powers of productive contamination resist figural instrumentalization of its animal subjects? Is a disinterested poetry of the animal even possible?

Again we return to the question of what it means for a poem to speak 'in the wrong order', remembering that the Linnean category of 'Order' glosses not only zoological filiation, but also implies hierarchies and magnitudes of distinction. Yet awareness of rapid climate change, evolutionary manipulability, extinctions, and a technologically-derived ethos of posthumanism have all done their share to level earlier senses of entitlement to match species-centrism. These days an environmental activist like Christopher Manes can declare, without expecting to be contradicted, that 'evolution has no goal, or if it does we cannot discern it, and at the very least it does not seem to be us. The most that can be said is that during the last 350 million years natural selection has shown an inordinate fondness for

[32] Jacques Derrida, *A Derrida Reader: Between the Blinds*, trans. by Peggy Kamuf (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), p. 231.

beetles'.[33] Szymborska, too, is posthumanist in demonstrating her own inordinate fondness for beetles, goatsuckers, and other unlikely species. One of her most compelling poems, on the topic of life amid the cosmic abyss, revolves around the semi-utopian figure of the sea-cucumber.[34] Elaborating her 'negative paleontology', Szymborska's poetic practice shows an enthusiasm for the epistemological moment that emerged when fossilized proof of extinction finally transformed the great chain of being into the melancholia of the missing link.

This historical moment entailed great doubt not only as to the origin but also as to the endpoint of things. If an apocalypse for one species need not mean apocalypse for all, humanity's time on earth may end, Ozymandias-like, with its own eventual ruins and fossils offering a mutely responsive ear now attuned to the apostrophes of some other, latter-day species. Returning to Barbara Johnson's framework, we see that apostrophe's 'desire for the other's voice', 'undoing' the shape of its addressee while 'dealing in life and death', accords its poetry with different potentials, involves it with fears of extinction. The tarsier of Szymborska's lyric prepostrophe plays on precisely such fears. He apostrophizes:

> Wielki pan dobry—
> wielki pan łaskawy—
> któż by mógł o tym świadczyć, gdyby brakło
> zwierząt niewartych śmierci?
> Wy sami może?
>
> Great lord and master—
> great kind lord—
> who could bear witness, had there been
> no animals unworthy of death?
> Perhaps you yourselves? (pp. 100-101)

[33] Christopher Manes, 'Nature and Silence', *Environmental Ethics*, 14 (Winter 1992), 337-50 (p. 347). Manes adds, 'Darwin invited our culture to face the fact that in the observation of nature there exists not one scrap of evidence that humans are superior to or even more interesting than, say, lichen'.

[34] See 'Autonomia' (Autonomy) from Szymborska's 1972 collection *Wyszelki wypadek* (There But For the Grace); for a poem about a beetle, see *Widzianie z góry* (Seen from Above) from the 1976 collection *Wielka liczba* (A Great Number); both can be found in Szymborska (trans. Krynski and Maguire) pp. 135-36, pp. 162-63.

Referencing an unthinkable 'worthiness' for death, the tarsier also inquires into the worth of what it means to be spared under such a system of valuation. What does it mean to survive, to witness under these horrifying conditions? Must existence within these divisions of value helplessly compel allegiance to the violent means that drawn them? If one survives this division, must this mean that one is 'on the side' of survival?

In a searingly sarcastic yet sobering parody of the means-end thinking that humanity loves, the tarsier purports to offer to his 'great lord and master' a new commodity: the consolations of witness. The tarsier is clearly articulate within the discourse of violent human assessment of worth and worthlessness, yet he uses this language to indict the humanity he prepostrophizes. Falling back to earth as a scapegoat of guilt from heavy hearts again and again, the tarsier insists that these lines of division cannot and must not have the last word. These tarsiers acknowledge themselves to be spared because they are 'unworthy of death' (their physical bodies cannot be rendered into any lucrative product when dead). Yet, 'respected in their quills', they will also persist as witnesses to the nightmare that robs humanity of its sleep. Szymborska's poem suggests that tarsiers and other such 'unprofitable' creatures also serve as *prophet creatures* to any human who will listen.

Who *will* listen? The prepostrophe in this lyric is predicated upon the fact that its dialogue is impossible. The history of lyric poetry conspires to imply that humanity's faculty of attending here may be just as far-fetched as Shelley's west wind paying heed to his exhortations. On the level of the lyric, this prepostrophe consists in a preposterous, even an embarrassing leap of faith made by the tarsier. He hypothesizes phantasmatically that his world is filled with a humanity that will listen—despite all evidence to the contrary. Although already enough is known of that particular species to last 'a sleepless night from star to star', the tarsier endeavors to remind humans that just as the tarsier has thus far been spared, so too humans have been spared. For what end? The tarsier is spared because it serves no purpose, no end. Meanwhile, the tarsier in real-life waits on the long list of endangered species, an 'accidental' victim of humanity's exponentially increasing habitat. The tarsier hovers in a contingent and coerced relation to humanity, while

the tarsier's apostrophe calls to what might be if only humans could revise the meaning of their historical distanciation from other creatures. Though no species-life will be endless, perhaps we might consider this revision of immortal timelines as an encouragement to jettison means-end thinking in favor of thinking about what ends mean.

For Szymborska's tarsier, 'to witness' is the only end that remains—but perhaps from this can emerge new creaturely grammars of belonging. Witnessing is differentiated from recording and cataloguing by virtue of its perspectival difference: it knows itself to be included, regardless of whether its 'participation' is in question, at risk, or denied. If Szymborska's tarsier has our attention, we will hear in its 'prepostrophe' a metaleptic participation in something beyond the contingencies of language, mute witness, and exclusion. Beyond our restricted belonging to the condition of language, a form of belonging that has been used to set us apart from the tarsier, perhaps language's tropological dimensions can be made serve ethically so as to complicate the distance between ourselves, our ends, and our 'smaller brothers', or, under Derrida's tabulation, '*all the living things* that man does not recognize as his fellows, his neighbors, or his brother'.[35]

Of Jeremy Bentham's reformulation of the criteria for animal rights not along the lines of 'Can they reason?' but according to the answer to the question, 'Can they suffer?' Derrida observes that Bentham moves us not towards empathy, but towards a deprioritization of ability in favor of 'a certain passivity. It bears witness, manifesting …a passion, a not-being-able'.[36] 'No longer a power, it is a possibility without power', he explains.[37] The poetic apostrophe, as well as its radicalized inversion as prepostrophe, demonstrates one way in which me might think the absence of the word as something other than a privation—transforming language from an act that seeks a determinate response or a power that bestows immunity and identity, to 'a possibility without power'. Szymborska's poetry of the nonhuman exhorts us to be unafraid to 'sojourn in a land of maddening wonders', inviting us to participate in the *discontinuous* company of species multiplicity and

[35] Derrida, *Animal,* p. 34.
[36] Ibid., p. 27.
[37] Ibid., p. 28.

species finitude, not with an eye to our distinction, but for a vision what manifests once the passion of not-being-able becomes the experience of each other's possibility.