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## ***(Re)Evaluating the Animality of Man and the Animality of Animals in Walter Miller's A Canticle for Leibowitz and Kurt Vonnegut's The Sirens of Titan***

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Skye Cervone

**W**alter M. Miller's *A Canticle for Leibowitz* and Kurt Vonnegut's *The Sirens of Titan* were both written during the Cold war in 1959. This period in American history saw a rise in animal exploitation through the use of technology. The late 40's and early 50's saw the first animals in space, and "many animal lives were sacrificed for space exploration" (Vint "Animal Studies" 180). Today, advancements in technology have allowed animal exploitation to reach heights that would have been unimaginable in the late 50's, highlighting the need for a reevaluation of human and animal interaction. Science Fiction texts are in a unique position to explore human/animal relationships and explore the transformative power of such relationships. Vonnegut and Miller show interest in human/animal relationships and the inherent power within these relationships. Miller uses animals in opposition to humanity to highlight our capacity for destruction, and both Vonnegut present characters that undergo spiritual transformation through their relationships to animals. *A Canticle for Leibowitz* and *The Sirens of Titan* provide an avenue for exploring human and animal identity, and suggest ways that these identities can be reshaped.

In "The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)" Jacques Derrida discusses the position of the animal. As Sherryl Vint notes in her article "Becoming Other: Animals, Kinship, and Butler's *Clay Ark*," there has been

a long tradition within philosophy that defines the human through an opposition to the animal, creating the animal as a category solely to allow what is “unique” or “essential” about humans to emerge. (281)

It is within this dialogue that Derrida focuses as he explores the problems associated with such a minimalist approach. This tradition positions animals as mirrors with no purposes, rights, or importance as beings in themselves, beings that do not possess their own unique traits of importance. It reduces them to a relational identity. Traditionally, animals have been considered “something seen and not seeing” (Derrida 383). Most of humanity, with the exception of Poets, looks at the animal, Derrida insists, without considering the implications of whether or not the animal looks back, whether or not the animal sees man (383). This question has largely been ignored because of the practice of using the image of the animal as a simple reflection of humanity’s “uniqueness.” For Derrida, man is the jealous guardian of uniqueness (383); thus the animal has been subjugated and denied the rights we, all too often in theory rather than practice, grant the rest of our fellow humans.

The term “the Animal” is deeply problematic for Derrida because it implies “a heterogeneous multiplicity of the living” (399). The term “the Animal” leaves no allowance for species individuality.

It follows from that that one will never have the right to take animals to be the species of a kind that would be named the Animal, or animal in general. Whenever “one” says, “the Animal,” each time a philosopher, or anyone else says, “the Animal” in the singular and without further ado, claiming thus to designate every living thing that is held not to be man...each time the subject of that statement, this “one,” this “I” does that he utters an *asinanity*. (Derrida 400)

The use of the singular “animal” denies what is unique about different species and severs as an act of domestication. For Derrida, liberating the terms we use for animals is an important

step in reshaping our relationships with them. In addition, he calls into question “the supposed animality of the animal” (401), and discusses an “animality of man” (405). It is the “animality of man” that is so apparent in our world and in Miller and Vonnegut’s novels. The barbaric nature of human acts so often surpasses the “barbarity” of animal behavior, highlighting the need for the exact rethinking of language that Derrida argues is essential to liberating animals.

In her article “‘The Animals in that Country’: Science Fiction and Animal Studies,” Sherryl Vint states that “(i)n the late twentieth century, sf enthusiastically took up the question of cyborg identity in relation to machines; now in the twenty-first, we are ready to explore sf’s contributions to our kinships to animals” (178). Sf studies are in a unique position to pose a philosophical, rather than purely poetical, consideration of animals as beings in their own right, beings that return the gaze, rather than simple mirrors of uniquely human characteristics.

A Canticle for Leibowitz depicts a world reshaped through nuclear destruction. The three books, “Fiat Homo,” “Fait Lux,” and “Fiat Voluntas Tua,” all end with the image of buzzards eating, and in the case of “Fiat Voluntas Tua,” preparing to eat, the carcass of a man. In “Fiat Homo” and “Fiat Lux” the buzzards function as a symbol of the endurance of the natural world in spite of human death. Brother Francis is murdered, yet the buzzards will endure long after his death, and will feed on his corpse. All buzzards sustain their lives through the death of another, yet here Miller explicitly gives the image of the buzzards receiving life from the death of a human. He writes of the buzzards that “Earth had nourished them bountifully for centuries. She would nourish them for centuries more” (118), that is until humans destroy the Earth in the conclusion of “Fiat Voluntas Tua.” Humans will die, and human death will nourish the buzzards. Thus, the death of man is nourishment to the natural world in the literal sense of the buzzards receiving their meal, yet also in the

metaphoric sense of there being one less human life that can cause pain and destruction. Indeed it is important to note that it is Francis' discovery of the fallout shelter that allows mankind to eventually rebuild atomic weapons, his need and desire to find more knowledge. "Miller criticizes not Francis the man, but the impulse that drives him. His one small impulse resonates over the course of the novel's post-apocalyptic history" (Hiller 172). Francis has no way of knowing what the knowledge he finds will lead to, and he is simply following the tradition of his order by trying to find and preserve fragments from pre-fallout civilization, yet Francis must still die to pay for his sin of what he releases, albeit unknowingly and will good intent, into the world. Miller uses the character of Francis to suggest that human destruction is an inescapable cycle and a natural product of human evolution and learning. Humans will ultimately embrace their barbaric nature, yet the buzzards can be sustained through human death.

Miller's message of life through death is solidified by the problematic image of the rise of the doomed city-state.

Pickings were good for a while in the region of the Red River; but then out of the carnage, a city-state arose. For rising city-states, the buzzards had no fondness, although they approved of their eventual fall. (Miller 118)

The city-state rises among the death in the desert; unlike the buzzards that are nourished by death, the city-state, a symbol of humanity, is built in spite of death. Nature works together in a cycle; humanity often perceives the need to "triumph" over nature in order to prosper. Miller offers a clear juxtaposition of man and animals, with animals approving of humanity's failures. The buzzards "have no fondness" for the prosperity of man, and it does not serve them. Man has no fondness for buzzards, and man's prosperity as a result of the city-state is tenuous; prosperity eventually heralds in the destruction of man and the animals, for even the buzzards are not safe from man's radioactive poison. At the end of "Fait Voluntas Tua,"

Miller notes it will not be long “before the bird itself became a meal for another” (332), again highlighting the importance of a natural cycle. The buzzard has an injured eye, singed wings, and is covered in radioactive rain (332), showing that human destruction harms far more than just humanity; it poisons the land and animals, as well. Anne-Marie Thomas notes that “humanity is marked by the virus” and that “the virus’s transformative powers result in the debilitation or death of the host organism” (143). For Miller, man is clearly a virus that destroys its host, the Earth. Humanity does nothing that helps the planet in Miller’s novel, and despite all efforts not to, continues the cycle of destroying the planet with nuclear weapons.

The final image of “Fait Voluntas Tua” is that of a shark. The ashes of humanity are washed into the ocean as the shark hunts for food. The shark suffers from the effects of nuclear destruction, and “(h)e was very hungry that season” (Miller 338). However, the shark’s hunger is a symbol of his endurance; life may be harsh for him, but he still has lived, and will continue to live, through humans’ atomic destruction of the Earth. When discussing Miller’s use of the shark, Russell Hiller makes note that “(s)harks, like buzzards, have no politics, ethics, science or religion” (169). The point that sharks and buzzards have no ethics is accurate in a societal way; animals are not able, like humans, to write or create a system of ethics, but this does not mean that animals are not ethical creatures. Sharks do not commit the crimes that humanity does and are not guilty of rampant destruction. Hiller’s point, however, is that while human systems have failed the Earth and humanity in general, Miller leaves living beings behind who operate out of the systems of science, religion, and politics; man is the only political animal. The non political animal is left with the destruction caused by the political animal. The shark, combined with the image of ash falling into the sea (Miller 338), indicates a cleansing of the Earth, a removal of the viral infection, a reverting to what is left of the natural world after atomic destruction. In her article “Science Fiction’s

Renegade Becomings,” Carol McGuirk notes that “all writers who use a post-nuclear setting emphasize the destructive potential of advanced technologies” (302). Miller clearly uses this emphasis. Like the fiction of Hoban, Heinlein, and Smith that McGuirk considers, Miller’s novel presents “animals who ‘judge’ us; beasts serve as wiser alternatives to self-destroying humans” (302). The shark and the buzzards contrast with the foolishness of humanity. Man is the only animal in this text that uses technology; man is the only animal that will kill itself for political reasons, all of which are trivial when compared to complete annihilation. By contrasting the wisdom of animals with the foolishness of humans, Miller inverts typical perceptions. What is “unique” to humanity is not positive here; rather, the novel values what is unique to animals.

Humanity loses all technology after the fallout, including electricity. In “Fiat Lux” a monk in Abbot Dom Pallo’s abbey is working on creating an electric light. As Dom Palo goes to the basement to see a demonstration of this light he imagines “that he had heard a frightened bleat from the Poet’s goat” (146). While the bleat of the goat does not actually take place, it is striking that the abbot imagines the goat’s fear right before this technological demonstration. This is another clear instance of Miller’s animals acting as wise “judges” of humanity. The rediscovery of electricity can only have one outcome, the reintroduction of technology into the world, and the eventual destruction of life. There is wisdom the Abbot’s imagined perception of the goat’s cry. The animal represents a clear warning to humanity that the cycle of technology breeding death will ultimately continue because there is no other alternative in this world.

In a later passage the Abbot chides the Poet for bringing the goat to a party at the abbey. The abbey holds the party to learn about and celebrate the knowledge the Scholar has discovered in their records, the Memorabilia. The Abbot wants the goat brought outside,

because he sees no need for the goat to be at the feast. The Poet objects; claiming there is an “obvious” need for the goat he states,

(t)he goat is to be enshrined and honored, not blamed! Crown him with the crown  
Saint Leibowitz sent you, and thank him for the light that is rising. Then blame  
Lebowitz, and drive him into the desert. That way you won't have to wear the second  
crown. The one with thorns. Responsibility, it's called. (Miller 205)

The Poet claims the goat should be thanked for the “light” of civilization’s rising, suggesting there is a wisdom that can be attained from emulating the ways of animals. Animals do not destroy their environment; animals do not senselessly kill each other; animals are not capable of creating nuclear weapons. The fallout results from man’s actions, and man’s actions will be the cause of cycle repetition, and the poet shows a clear awareness of these facts. Here Miller again shows us the value of what is uniquely animal, rather than the value of what is uniquely human, through the voice of the Poet. As Derrida argues, it is the Poets who traditionally have imagined the animal as a being capable of “looking back” at man (383), and Miller is sensitive to this fact. The poet, a man who is fortunate enough to have a close relationship with an animal, is one of the few humans who can see the inevitability of human destruction and the foolishness of humanity clearly. His relationship with his goat gives him a unique wisdom and insight denied to the other characters in the novel.

In the *Sirens of Titan*, Malachi Constant, also named Unk, and his fellow soldier, Boaz, become stranded on Mercury after leaving Mars. Mercury is home to small creatures by the name of harmoniums. Harmoniums are pure creatures who love and live off of music and possess “a willingness to deploy themselves in the service of beauty” (Vonnegut 190). They achieve this by arranging themselves in beautiful patterns on cave walls. The harmoniums are simple creatures and do not share characteristics of humans; the harmoniums are closer to animals than humans. For Derrida, animals are absolute others of humans (380),

and the harmoniums are clearly othered. They do not look like humans; they do not communicate like humans; they do not eat like humans; they do not think like humans. The caves of Mercury are “uninhabited by anything remotely human” (Vonnegut 195). Most alien life in sf at least shares sentience with humanity, and there is no evidence in the text that the harmoniums share human sentience. The harmoniums can simply carry messages to Unk and Boaz from Rumford, not create their own messages. There is usually some characteristic in the alien that humans can relate to, that makes them something like us, yet the harmoniums do not have these human characteristics, most notably through what Vonnegut intends to be their lack of intelligence. This seeming lack of intelligence is often wrongly associated with animals. The harmoniums are examples of “little animals” on Mercury (Vonnegut 217).

On Mars Boaz is cruel and barbaric. He does not care about any of his fellow soldiers, and receives a great deal of joy from inflicting pain and suffering on others. Boaz is described as having a “pantherlike grace” (Vonnegut 117), and he tries to bully Unk, as well as the other soldiers. Feeding off of the other men’s weaknesses, Boaz is very much the human predator. He enjoys inflicting pain on the other soldiers through his control box that connects to the antennas on their heads. While on Mars, and surrounded by humanity, Boaz is a depiction of predatorial animality. Boaz epitomizes what Derrida calls “the animality of man” (405), and Rebecca Bishop notes that “the instruments of science are integral to...the becoming-animal of the human” (248). Humanity brings out the worst aspects of Boaz’s personality, and it is technology that enables this process. It is through the control boxes that Boaz can inflict the most painful acts of torture, and his technological control reinforces the idea that he is entitled to do so. As with Miller, Vonnegut warns against humanity prioritizing advanced technology over the natural.

However, as Boaz lives on Mercury he changes. He and Unk are the only humans on Mercury, and they rarely see each other. Boaz spends the majority of his time with the



harmoniums. It is when Boaz is removed from humanity and advanced technology, and surrounded by animals, that he becomes a better person and loses his predatorial animality. Boaz undergoes a transformation, and he is conscious of this fact. He says of his existence with the harmoniums “I found me a place where I can do good without doing any harm” (Vonnegut 199) and Boaz feels better physically, mentally, and spiritually than he ever has in his life (204). The harmoniums feed off of music, and Boaz cares for them by playing different “concerts” for them. In caring for the harmoniums, Boaz loses his predatorial animality and assumes the role of gentle shepherd. It is through his relationship with the tiny animals that he receives joy from caring for other being, rather than harming them. Boaz could have easily cared for the soldiers under his control, but instead through the availability of technology, and notably the absence of animals, he chose to torture them instead. It is not until he is removed from advanced technology and surrounded by animals that he can change, and His spiritual shift is shown through his closeness to the animals of Mercury.

Boaz chooses to shed his human clothing and live naked among the harmoniums. Derrida, using the roots of Judeo-Christian thought, links nakedness to shame. Derrida states “(i)t is as if I were ashamed, therefore, naked in front of this cat, but also ashamed for being ashamed” (372), yet for Derrida it is nakedness in front of animals that needs to be attained, even if it “perhaps remains untenable” (418). Boaz who stands and lives naked, unashamed, before the harmoniums briefly achieves what Derrida insists all of humanity must. Boaz is naked in front of animals, and he receives his life’s greatest joy through the fact that he can care for them, and “do good without doing any harm.” By assuming the role of caring for them, and striving to only do good for them, Boaz can stand naked in front of them without feeling shame because he is caring for them as he should, as a shepherd.

It is important to note that the shepherd, while caring for animals, still subjects them, for animals cared for by a shepard are in “a space of domestication” (Derrida 402), thus Boaz

is unknowingly harming the harmoniums. Sadly, Boaz does more harm to the harmoniums than just domesticating them. He ultimately fails in his role as gentle shepherd; the harmoniums die when he is arguing with Unk because the “little animals” get too close to the music. It is through the introduction of human technology that the harmoniums die, and there is no question that they would have been better off if humans had never arrived. Technology for Vonnegut, like for Derrida, brings “unprecedented proportions” (394) of violence against animals. The harmoniums lived natural, seemingly happy lives prior to the introduction of man into their world, and it is man and his technology that destroys them. Boaz may mean well, but he is a member of the human race, and the human race is a virus that kills. The introduction of humans into an environment ultimately results in disastrous consequences in both texts. However, the importance of Boaz’s spiritual transformation through his relationship to the harmoniums should not be dismissed because of this fact. Boaz has still learned compassion and humanity through his relationship with animals, and if only for a short while, can stand naked in front of animals without feeling shame.

Chrono, Unk’s son, also undergoes a spiritual transformation through his relationship to animals. Chrono, at 11, is “classified by the Newport Police Department and by the Rhode Island State Police as a juvenile delinquent” (Vonnegut 237). He does not “socialize well with other children,” has commits acts of larceny, possesses and discharges firearms, and has a propensity for selling obscene material (236-237). Chrono’s actions are beyond his years, and the only person he likes and relates to is his mother, Bea. In addition to Chrono’s classification as a juvenile delinquent, he also possesses toughness and survival skills because he and Bea had been stranded in the jungles of the Amazon rain forest for a year (237). When he and his parents are on Titan, it is Chrono that is prepared to kill the alien Salo when he see him approach in the boat, not the adults. Here Chrono is described as a “wild incident,” (297) who possesses “jungle cunning” that he learned in the rainforest (298), rather than as a boy.

Like Boaz, Chrono is removed from humanity and has a certain amount of preditorial animality. Vonnegut characterizes Chrono as a child that cannot survive well within a human society, and it is his removal from that society that redeems him.

Chrono finds peace and transforms at 17 when he runs away “to join the Titanic bluebirds, the most admirable creatures on Titan” (Vonnegut 310). Chrono “wore their feathers and sat on their eggs and shared their food and spoke their language” (310). Chrono does not subject the birds; rather he lives as one of them and does his best to help them. Chrono sheds his human identity, and it is through his shedding of human identity that Chrono sheds his preditorial animality. While he lives among animals, he does not have characteristics that are associated with animality. This seeming contradiction pinpoints the problems with human society. Chrono must separate himself from humanity to transform. Bea says of Chrono that “at least he had the greatness of soul to join the noblest, most beautiful creatures in sight” (312). “Greatness of soul” is not a characteristic that could have been used to describe the Chrono that lived on Earth, nor would it be used to describe animality. This statement also makes it clear that ordinary humans, possessing ordinary human characteristics, would not be welcomed among the birds because the average human is not good enough to join them. When Chrono’s mother dies, Chrono visits her grave and says “(t)hank you, Mother and Father...for the gift of life” (318). Chrono had never previously acknowledged Constant as his father or shown any gratefulness to any character for anything. Chrono’s relationship with the birds solidifies and enhances his relationship with both himself and his parents. It is as a result of living with animals that Chrono is able to change and become a better person, shed his animality, and achieve happiness.

Both Miller and Vonnegut provide a way of exploring animal and human identity. We see in both of these texts the worst of what it means to be human, and the possibilities animals present in locating the best of what it means to be human. Both authors suggest that

it is through compassion to the living in general, compassion afforded to both humans and animals alike, that our positive traits can be brought to the surface. Derrida calls for a rethinking of the terms we use and associate with animals, and sf can provide a unique way for us to explore this language through its depiction of animal and human behavior, as well as human relationships to animals. We are indeed ready in sf studies to turn our attention to animals, and I wish to suggest it is imperative we do so. “In sf, the animals can be given a voice to address and look back at the human. It is important to remember that this voice of the animal in sf is, of course, a voice speaking for the animal” (Vint “Animal Studies” 179). Yet, as Vint tells us “this need not reject the insights of writers attuned to animal behavior and human/animal interactions” (“Animal Studies” 179). Rather, we should take advantage of the unique position sf gives us with regard to the voices and identities of animals. Through exploring these ideas in sf scholarship we can hope to reshape our perceptions on the obligations we have to the living beings who share our world.

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