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Re-Animations: Instinct and Civility after the Ends of ‘Man’ and ‘Nature’

The cultural boundary separating ‘man’ from ‘nature,’ and humans from nonhuman animals, has been supported by a shifting and unstable array of discursive devices. Modernist and scientific discourses of nature and animality, I argue, have served as a kind of ‘orientalism,’ enframing a realm of otherness that awaits – and requires – colonization by superior, rational ‘man.’ For both scientific modernists, however, and their romantic anti-modernist critics (including many latter-day environmentalists), nature represents an originary realm, one which is both *earlier than* and *prior to* culture. Rather than seeing nature as the repressed other half of civilization, I argue that it is continuity, or an ‘original hybridity,’ which constitutes the ‘Real’ that has been repressed by the conceptual and political practices of modernity. Drawing on work in actor-network theory, ecological psychology, and the biology of cognition, I propose the figure of the ‘anima(l)’ as a key to a more genuinely post-modern, socially and relationally co-constituted nature-culture in which sociality/civility is intertwined with the ‘wild’ and the ‘instinctual,’ language with bodily desire and polyvocality, identity with difference, and the human with the *un*human.

In *Les mots et les choses (The Order of Things)*, Michel Foucault (1973) argues persuasively that the concept of ‘man’ or ‘mankind’ (or ‘humanity,’ as we now prefer) as a unified subject of history, only emerged at the beginning of the 19th century. The ‘figure of man,’ he writes, is ‘an invention of recent date,’ ‘the effect of a change in the fundamental arrangement of knowledge.’ At the conclusion of the same book, Foucault provides a provocative clarion-call for the deconstruction of anthropocentrism: “If those arrangements were to disappear as they appeared ... then one can certainly wager that man would be erased, like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea” (386-7).

Assuming Foucault’s account to be correct, what would be lost with the disappearance of this face drawn in sand? Where animal life is ostensibly characterized by primal instinctual forces, human life is supposed to rise above the instinctual into the realm of reason, culture, civility – and its grand partner, civilization. Indeed, neither ‘progress’ nor ‘civilization’ would be possible if there were not a ‘humanity’ to play the starring role of the historical narrative. Freud’s account of the

civilization/nature nexus, exemplified in his late work *Civilization and its Discontents*, proceeds from this same modern understanding of ‘nature’ as the parent from which humans, Oedipus-like, remove ourselves with difficulty, but to which we nevertheless remain chained by both fear and desire. For Enlightenment optimists like the Marquis de Condorcet or his early modern precursor Francis Bacon, it was only a matter of time before science would allow us to conquer nature and bring prosperity and happiness to all. By the later 19th century, a more pessimistic mood had set in: from Malthus to Darwin to Schopenhauer, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche and Dostoyevsky, the temper of the time had changed. In this context, Freud was both a realist (read: pessimist) and a modernist: a defender of the modernist contract, he believed the threat of instinct could be contained, though not eradicated, through the newly discovered method of psychoanalytic self-understanding.

Critics of modernity, ranging from Rousseauian celebrators of the primitive to many latter-day environmentalists, have overturned the culture/nature dichotomy and reversed its polarities, celebrating nature as a source of good, to be revered, emulated and restored to its rightful position over a defiantly prodigal humanity. In this chapter I will argue that neither of these positions – neither the human-triumphalism of a Condorcet nor the return-to-nature romanticism of contemporary deep ecologists – are tenable. Celebrating a nature that is wild, pure and untainted by humans, over a human social world that is tame, corrupt, or ‘fallen’ – as is done in much of the more radical environmentalist literature – constitutes a mere reversal of the modern human domination of nature. Both leave the nature/culture binary intact: following a logic of priority (nature’s) and overcoming (culture’s), they differ only in whether they celebrate or bemoan this event of overcoming. Nonhumans, in either case, remain always on the other side of the boundary. (In this context, Freud’s tempered ‘pessimist realism’ is perhaps the more reasonable attitude, yet his thought remains constrained by the same underlying duality.)

My intent in what follows will be to outline the shape of the ‘other’ against which the figure of ‘man’ emerged, and to render thinkable the end or *submergence* of that figure. As a certain identity is created – the identity, in this case, of humanity – so it creates its Other, its Shadow, as C. G. Jung would have called it, over and against which to define itself.