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Goats, Badgers and other Beasts: Turning animal and performing the limits of the human

Lourdes Orozco and Jen Parker-Starbuck

In Animal Studies literature 'the animal turn' is described as the increased attention to the non-human subject, and conferences, scholarly monographs, critical anthologies, book series, university degrees, new journals and special issues are now dedicated to this 'turn' (see, for example, Ritvo 2007). The focus on the non-human animal attempts to move beyond the notion that the animal facilitates a better understanding of human subjectivity, and instead considers the animal itself. There is undoubtedly an activist engine behind 'the animal turn', which is generated by the recognition that animals have been, as Derrida (2002) suggests, disavowed. As performance scholar Una Chaudhuri suggests, the impetus for the animal 'turn' is linked to the 'animal rights movement and to the accelerating environmental crisis' (2014: 1). However, as human-centric and human-driven as these two areas are, and perhaps need to be, what scholars working within/for 'the animal turn' seek to produce is also a care for the non-human animal that does not only start from the human (out of guilt, self-preservation and so forth) but emerge, as Wendy Wheeler and Linda Williams explain, following Giorgio Agamben, from a place that 'involves not only the recognition of "care" (as caring, concern, caritas, minding) for animals, but also the recognition of animal care and consciousness as part both of our own, and also of their strange consciousness' (2012: 5).

'The animal turn', then, is a challenge to both anthropocentrism and anthropomorphism, which has included, for example, debates around the granting of personhood for non-human animals, the banning of these subjects in certain scientific and entertainment practices, reconsiderations of kinship and the species divide. This is a turn that, as we have argued, can often be best explored through performance—a putting on of the animal, a turning into an animal and a turn toward the animal. As we noted in our edited collection Performing Animality, 'performance can be central to how humans engage with animals in wider societal contexts' (Orozco and Parker-Starbuck 2015: 2). A turn toward non-human animals has also contributed to an emerging field known as interspecies performance represented by the practical works of Kira O'Reilly, Rachel Rosenthal, Deke Weaver, Holly Hughes

and Jess Dobkin, among others. In scholarship, our own work and the authors of our collection, alongside that of scholars such as Una Chaudhuri, Michael Peterson, Alan Read, Nicholas Ridout and others has been an attempt to take seriously the non-human animal as a subject of study. An animal turn, we argue, may remain human driven, but may also offer possibilities for humans to better understand the affinities across species, and to turn towards the animal.

Work within this 'turn' seeks to trace and challenge the animal–human division, to 'con-figure' the human and animal 'animal act', as Jennifer Ham and Matthew Senior have written, in a 'flight from a humanistic definition of man, a descent through the body out of the subject/object world... a quest for another kind of language which merges with the sounds and gestures of animals' (1997: 2). It is this 'quest for another language' that we hoped to find within the potential animal turn found in Thomas Thwaites's (2016) GoatMan: How I took a holiday from being human, and Charles Foster's (2016) Being a Beast, both released in 2016. Thwaites's attempt to live like a goat, and Foster's to live like a badger, an otter, a fox, a deer and a swift, followed others who have attempted transformational human-to-animal efforts from histories of shamanism, freak-show acts or physical bodily enhancement.^[note]¹ However, despite the media attention around these two books and the practices that they document, Thwaites's and Foster's seem a world away from the central discourses of 'the animal turn' and were instead more of a 'turning-into animal'. Foster and Thwaites decide to document their journeys into animality through the writing of books, while clearly emphasizing the embodied experience as a way of getting closer to the animal. Their privileging of the physical over the discursive signals the experiential as a more exciting and thrill-seeking mode of engaging with the animal that has undoubtedly produced a sensationalist reading by the mainstream media. However, that privileging also situates embodiment as a truer and perhaps more authentic way, as both Foster and Thwaites remind us at various points in their accounts, of apprehending the non-human outside the rational discourses of science. The favouring of embodiment is also a recognition of the openings that performance, pretence and mimicking bring about as a potential reaching out towards the animal. The focus of what follows is an attempt to chronicle their successes and failings in that journey.

The furry, feathered, scaly, whooping and swooping: Charles Foster's Being a Beast

Charles Foster's Being a Beast (2016) documents the ex-vet and barrister's adventures into the world of the animal. A world that, as in Thwaites's case, has fascinated him since he was a child. There is a very clear shared narrative between the two accounts of turning animal that takes both men back to their childhood years. Perceived as a time of freedom and pre-socialization, childhood enables a different relationship with the animal—one that is more attuned to play, to the irrational, to pretending. In some ways, the transformations performed by Foster—some of which are co-performed by his son and witnessed by his other children—offer him the opportunity to return to that time thus allowing him to abandon not just his humanness but his adulthood. From the early stages of his project, Foster openly declares the limitations that both scientific and literary approaches have to really understand the animal, and it is only by getting down to the ground and becoming animal that humans can get closer to imagining what it must be like to be them. Foster's clear division between 'them' and 'us', the non-human and the human, is accepted from the beginning. However, Foster's becoming animal, while described as 'a kind of literary shamanism', is far from the dismantling of such categories (human and animal) proposed by Deleuze and Guattari's 'becoming animal'. In Foster's project the human and the animal are clearly differentiated and the intention is quite clearly to turn animal to understand—in some ways—the human and the animal better as separate subjects. In this way, while Foster does recognize that a better understanding of the animal and its life experience needs to take place, the knowledge acquired from that experience serves the human in more ways that he is ready to recognize. While early in the book, in the Author's Note, he admits his failure to decentre himself from the narrative by writing—'I'd hoped to write a book that had little or nothing of me in it. The hope was naïve. It has turned out to be (too much) a book about my own rewilding, my own acknowledgement of my previously unrecognised wildness, and my own lament at the loss of my wildness' (xv)—he also begins his first chapter admitting the desire that underpins the entirety of his project: 'I want to have a more articulate talk with the land. It's just another way of knowing myself better. A good way to go about this is to have a more articulate talk with the furry, feathered, scaly, whooping, swooping, screaming, soaring' (20). This is a clear

example of Foster's paradox, a continuous loop throughout the narrative in which his turning is trapped. It begins under the activist, left-wing, slightly eccentric call for getting close to the animal to fight together for a greener future and it ends back towards the human having acquired a greater understanding of how inadequate, unnecessarily complex and physiologically limited humans are.

What begins as an attempt to understand the animal better is actually a journey of self-discovery in which Foster realized how suburban and domesticated he is. The experience ends up teaching more about his own humanity in contrast to his imagined notion of animality than about reaching closer to how animals live their lives. The sleepless nights, cold days, lack of food and the taking on of awkward bodily positions and movements come across as an accomplished feat and make the animal invisible, locating Foster's invasive physicality at the centre of the experience and its documentation. The outcome of Foster's turning into animal experiences only reinstate a view of animal life as idealized, placing the animal even further away from the human and solidifying a division (them and us) that is clearly demonstrated in the narrative's constant use of dichotomies.

Foster's turning animal becomes an exercise in style. When he describes his son, Tom (who accompanies him in his turning badger), asleep 'curled fetally in old bracken, his paws, earth brown from digging, clasped under his chin' (38), forms of hybridity are brought into the narrative. However, assumptions of what and how badgers are quickly take over: 'like one of those sun-stunned day badgers, I watched nothing in particular; I was a lump of idling software in a box made of meat' (38). Turnings are based on assumptions of what being the other must be like. Even when Foster allows himself the space to 'become' a badger he still does so in ways that are based on pre-conceived ideas of the badger that have been produced by an amalgamation of the discourses of science and the arts that he so often dismisses.

Thomas Thwaites: A goat-man holiday

From his privileged position as a temporarily unemployed, white male designer and self-described 'trustafarian' (12), Thomas Thwaites decided to 'take a holiday from being a human' and applied for funding from the Wellcome Trust to become a goat and go 'galloping across the landscape: free!' (15).^{[note]²} Thwaites's 'turning Animal' was an attempt to feel as free as he imagined animals feel—to roam freely

and not worry, which he understood as a particularly (adult) human trait. GoatMan: How I took a holiday from being human is his chronicle of this journey towards turning-goat, yet, despite its series of beautiful photos from his experience, the book undoubtedly reinforces his humanness.

Thwaites attempts to turn away from being a human, but this turn does not equate to a turn towards goat. His concerns are centred around how he may physically move as an animal, with the underlying goal being galloping across the Alps. This is perhaps unsurprising for a designer whose initial intention was to become an elephant for 'practical' reasons.³ As a designer he hoped to 'turn elephant' because, first, his human frame could fit into an elephant-sized apparatus, but also because the slow speed of the creature would be an asset in his adjustment to elephantness, and, finally, because he understood that, unlike a giraffe, the elephant's neck length was similar to that of humans, so it was possible he may be able to eat as an elephant. However, once he was able to 'study' elephants (on safari in Africa) he realized that not only would the trunk be a design difficulty, but that elephants actually mourn their dead, and since being free from worry was his primary concern, Thwaites turned to a shaman to help him find his spirit animal.

Thwaites's 'turn' was then always more a 'putting on' of an animal. Despite his attempts to walk, eat and think like a goat, Thwaites documents an exercise in design and technology. Do we know if goats worry? Or mourn? These questions become less important than the fact that goats can run and they are also accessible to him. In reading GoatMan it also becomes clear that to entertain is an underlying factor of the project—Thwaites tries hard to be funny, perhaps masking any real seriousness behind the project. It takes the trip to a shaman friend to help him realize that he is searching for a goat and when he visits shaman Annette Høst (who is only referred to as the Shaman, or Annette in the text), she asks him what, for us, is the crucial question in considering a human turn towards non-human animals:

You have to decide if your project is really about trying to make a costume, or is the most important thing trying to find a way for people to feel their kinship, to bridge the gap, to feel like an animal? Because then you're gonna do everything much simpler. Then it's the mystical thing. Then it's an education.

Like Charles Foster's shamanistic leanings in Being a Beast, Høst reminds Thwaites that 'people have been trying to bridge the gap between animal and human always. Always'. (34) She tries to explain the sense of thinking like an animal, or knowing an animal, even in order to hunt an animal, yet Thwaites remains the joker, and when she suggests a 'between-the-worlds state', or 'trans-ecstasy' to attempt a shift in consciousness, Thwaites can't help but respond, on the pages of the book at least, 'I'm wondering how I'm going to enter into a state of trans-ecstasy without visiting one of London's more insalubrious nightclubs' (33). It is as if he cannot actually imagine himself knowing an animal, as Høst suggests, and despite his envy at the worry-free life he perceives, he is too comfortable in his humanity to try to enter an animal consciousness. He turns instead to technology, and, in the end, it is a 'technological turn' that allows Thwaites to spend his week in the Alps with an unsuspecting goat herd.

This turning is from the outside in. Thwaites experiments with designs to allow him to move on four limbs, he seeks advice from prosthetics designers, he adjusts the balance of weight and he finally settles on four prosthetic limbs to allow him to move like a goat. This is moderately successful seeing as he only rehearsed the movement on level surfaces and was facing tricky up and downhill impasses. Additionally, his intent is to eat like a goat and he researches possibilities for an artificial rumen and reticulum, the organs that allow goats to process the grass they consume into nutrients. Here, biologically, arises an impossibility in becoming a goat, and his solution—to cook his chewed-up grass in a pressure cooker—is decidedly un-goat-like.

Thwaites's approach to turning-goat rehearsed many possibilities. Like theatrical performance he created a costume, adopted a manner of becoming via the time-passing activity of eating and created a solution for consuming the food that he was eating, at least once (the book is vague about the trip beyond the first two days). However, in the end, this project feels as if he performed a role and then moved on. He relied on the tools at his disposal in this turning--technology--but was reminded by Høst, the shaman, that 'trying to use technology to get closer to nature, is a paradox'. She said to him: 'No one would get such a crazy idea like this fifty years ago. This estrangement from nature has gone to completely idiotic extremes already, and it continues down the abyss' (44).

Idiotic? Perhaps. Gimmicky? To be certain. The book ends with a series of breathtaking photos of Thwaites crossing into the Alps. Alone. A human wearing goat's clothing.

Conclusion: The animal-turn, or turning-animal

I want to know what it is like to be a wild thing... Nature writing has generally been about humans striding colonially around, describing what they see from six feet above the ground, or about humans pretending that animals wear clothes. This book is an attempt to... learn what it is like to shuffle or swoop through the landscape that is mainly olfactory or auditory rather than visual. It's a sort of literary shamanism, and it has been fantastic fun.

—Charles Foster (2016: xiii)

Wouldn't it be nice to escape the constraints and expectations of not just your society, your culture, your personal history, but your very own biology? To escape the inevitable worries of personhood? ... Living without the trappings of civilisation and without all the complications either... Wouldn't it be nice to be an animal just for a bit?

—Thomas Thwaites (2016: 15)

In these almost mystical and idyllic quotations, Foster and Thwaites make associations between the non-human animal and freedom, wildness, inherent goodness and beauty. This discourse weaves throughout the books as humans are presented as violent, selfish, clumsy and inadequate subjects in opposition to these weightless creatures that are much closer to the ground. These experiments into turning (into) animal, whether the result of eccentric middle-class English boredom, the desire to 'take a vacation from being human', or just a gimmick, present a divide, even in their attempt to get closer to the non-human animal, that maintain a separation between humans and non-human animals. Yet, out of their explorations emerge several possibilities for serious understanding and possible 'turnings'.

For both authors, the dedication toward turning into an animal offered them a heightened bodily experience—they live (sleep, eat) like animals—and allowed them to explore what it may be like to be the other. Although these turnings are perhaps, as Foster does admit, always destined to failure, and always within the purview of the human subject, an attempt as a 'becoming', as Deleuze and Guattari provocatively argue, may begin to shift human senses toward the other life around them.

As well, Foster's and Thwaites's interventions are driven by a search for knowledge, although, as the quotes above demonstrate, many of their contributions to narratives of 'otherness' place the non-human animal as some form of mystical 'gift' to expand human awareness. As Cary Wolfe suggests, 'animals are the privileged site of both human knowledge and human gullibility' and, as evidenced in these books, 'human's interactions with animals are mediated by slews of misinformation, prejudice and ignorance' (2014: 160). While always filtered through the human subject, these quests for knowledge about the non-human animal, especially when extended to their physical environs, may be a stepping stone toward a more symbiotic understanding of environmental concerns or animal welfare.

In the end, Foster's and Thwaites's 'turning into' animal, while promising concepts, cannot contribute significantly to an 'animal turn' if driven primarily by an 'escape from humanity' as in Thwaites's case, or 'having a more articulate talk with the land' to know yourself better, as in the case of Foster. For how can these experiments truly destabilize the distinct categories of human and animal if such escapes as Foster's and Thwaites' do nothing but re-instate the centrality of the human through their demonstration of humans' (in)capacity to be other than human? Perhaps turning animal may begin to destabilize (as Deleuze and Guattari's provocative concept of 'becoming-animal' has sought to do) if the 'turning into' the other could become more reliant upon a 'turning' to the other. Perhaps this initial act of respect rather than replacement could offer a turning that facilitates a more transformative embodied experience. Foster's and Thwaites's projects, despite our critique, at least offer human–animal engagements that, for better or worse, try to understand aspects of animal worlds. Their embodied attempts at becoming animal reflect what philosopher David Abram understands as 'becoming animal', that is, a way of 'becoming more deeply human by acknowledging, affirming, and growing into our animality'. And

while they may not succeed in convincing us of any long-term transformative effect (although Foster is more convincing than Thwaites in this regard), these are projects that approach animality in order to transform. Their approaches don't fully succeed, we argue, because, although embodied, they work from the outside in unlike Abram, who proposes an internal shift through a sensual exploration of the natural world and toward 'a way of thinking enacted as much by the body as by the mind'. Ultimately, turning animal requires first a turning to that shifts our sensibilities so that we may approach an embodied understanding and are able to initiate a turning into that begins from within.

Notes

1 There is a long history of human–animal transformations, including, but not limited to, for example, Horace Ridler (1882–1969), or 'the Great Omi', or the 'Zebra Man', who transformed himself into a zebra through full body tattooing and body modification. A more recent version of this can be found in Dennis Avner (1958–2012) or 'Stalking Cat', who went through a slow process of body modification to increase his resemblance to a tigress. Prosthetics have also led to human–animal transformation such as in the case of Nadya Vessey of New Zealand, who was born with a condition that prevented her legs from developing properly and has had a prosthetic tail fitted for swimming. Additionally, technological transformation allowed British conservationist Sacha Dench to undertake a 4,500-mile bird migration route following a thousand Bewick's swans in a paraglider that was tracked by satellite.

2 See Thwaites (2016). Actually, the proposal was to turn elephant but this idea was quickly transformed once a bit of anatomical study made him realize that his own anatomy wouldn't have allowed him to actually eat as an elephant.

3 Thwaites is most recognized for his Toaster Project, where he documented his attempts to build a toaster from scratch.

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