

Fractured Reflections: How Lacan, Derrida & Nietzsche sought to overcome barriers of the constructed self

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Derrida's *The Animal That Therefore I Am* is a text commonly noted for revolving preliminarily around concepts of animal consciousness and the appreciation of animal welfare and preservation, a call to shake off antique views of humanity's self-created superiority in the zoological topography of the world. On top of these analyses, it is also important to acknowledge that Derrida uses concepts of the human *self* and psyche to pursue his argument, cleverly planting the narratorial lens of the text upon his own perspective—the human—while the gaze of his cat remains an external factor, something *other* to himself; something *other*, in fact, to all humanity. In this sense, his text in many places overlaps with theories presented by Lacan, as he too challenged older beliefs regarding the human *self* via in-depth analyses of the individual and its place in regard to other individuals and external influences. However, the more modern Derrida takes us further by introducing the concept of the *animal other* to this exploration. The two passages which I will explore as an introduction to this essay—a study of overcoming the barriers of the *self*—show how Derrida's approach intertwines with Lacan's philosophy more closely than one may expect, whilst also shifting the offered perspective in a new direction as an expansion of the realm of psychoanalytical study. This in turn reveals a description of the *self* in conversation between the two: a startling and explosive breach of the

constructed *self* as an epiphany which leaves the subject exposed to according alteration. After this comparison, I will introduce different philosophical and mythological examples from throughout history in order to further explore human understanding of the malleable psyche and the means by which we can overcome its boundaries, including Nietzsche's implications toward the artistic *self* (in relation to *Dionysian* revelry) in *The Birth of Tragedy*.

The first passage to be explored, taken from Lacan's 'The Mirror Stage as formative of the function of the I as revealed in psychoanalytic experience', first delivered in 1949, describes the primary impact of the *self*-regarding or realising itself for the first time. This *self*-realisation in children presents the *I* as 'a primordial form', a 'jubilant assumption of [the subject's] specular image by the child at the *infans* stage'.¹ Lacan also describes the self-confrontation as a 'symbolic matrix in which the *I* is precipitated', relating to the realm in which the psychological construction and interpretation of the external world—the realm of the *imaginary*—must take place: that of the *symbolic* (Lacan, *Mirror Stage*, p. 62). The subject necessarily views itself within this realm—that of spoken or written language, imagery and any type of symbolism which one could label—as it is within it that the subject formulates assumptions or ideals about itself in what Lacan describes as a 'fictional direction' (Lacan, *Mirror Stage*, p. 62). In a term more immediately to the impression of *self*-realisation, this acts as a 'coming-into-being', but also a coming into *self*-resolution, an *imaginary*-led concept of what the subject is from its own analysis and hypotheticalities (Lacan, *Mirror Stage*, p. 62). It is from the two realms of *imaginary* and *symbolic* in conversation that 'the subject anticipates in a mirage the maturation of his power', and an ideology regarding the stubborn construction of the *self* by the *self* is created (Lacan, *Mirror Stage*, p. 62). Lacan briefly highlights from this externality of influence the *gestalt*, or the concept of how an individual is seen through

¹ Jacques Lacan, 'The Mirror Stage as formative of the function of the I as revealed in psychoanalytic experience', in *Ecrits: A Selection*, trans. by A. Sheridan (London: Routledge, repr. 1993), pp. 61–78 (p. 62). Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

symbolic and *imaginary* assumptions as different to its original components. This *gestalt* acts as a *symbolic* representation of ‘the mental permanence of the *I*’, that which keeps the *self* from dissolving into obscurity, as well as something which ‘prefigures its alienating destination’ (Lacan, *Mirror Stage*, p. 62). Lacan thus describes an imagined permanence and direction, a purpose given to something without purpose, a tool utilised to keep the *self* from failing entirely in the physical world. In short, the subject uses the aforementioned assumptions to construct a permanent *I*, whilst also haunting it with ‘the phantoms’ of future possibilities and assumptions (Lacan, *Mirror Stage*, p. 62). All this comes from a juvenile observation within the realms of *symbolic* and *imaginary*, a confrontation of the *self* with the *self*.

Derrida confronts an idea very similar to that which we described from the above passage as a key theme in *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, as is acutely described in the chosen passage. Starting with a description of the ‘bottomless gaze’ of ‘the other’, Derrida argues that ‘the gaze called animal offers to [our] sight the abyssal limit of the human’; in other words, reminding us of everything we are not, the antithesis to the *self*.² This takes us to the very limit of what language—or the *symbolic*—can describe, ‘the bordercrossing from which vantage man dares to announce himself to himself, thereby calling himself by the name that he believes he gives himself’ (Derrida, p. 381). This description resonates heavily with concepts introduced by Lacan in the prior passage, in particular the concept of man naming himself symbolically and the previous construction and maintenance of the self through the *imaginary*: the border at which *self*-consideration is brought to light. What is different, however, is the method by which this enlightenment of *self* is achieved (and there are different aftershock effects as a result of the initial impact, too); the *animal* gaze, the gaze of the *complete other*, is what causes this confrontation, rather than the reflection of the *self* on to the *self*. The confrontation is the

² Jacques Derrida, ‘The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)’, *Critical Inquiry*, 28 (2002), 369–418 (p. 381). Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

opposite of internal, and the impact reflects theories from Lacan regarding the realm of the *real*, or of unutterable truth. This lies beyond the realm of the *symbolic*, as it cannot be accessed in any perceptive way, and to Derrida, it can be reached through the gaze of the *animal other*: ‘in these moments of nakedness, under the gaze of the animal, everything can happen to me, I am like a child ready for the apocalypse...that is to say the ultimate and first event of the end, the unveiling and the verdict’ (Derrida, p. 381). The subject becomes nude, primordial; under the gaze of the *animal other*, they again become plastic, as they were before Lacan’s mirror stage. The truth is unveiled, but only in an ‘instant of extreme passion’ which quickly passes, a flash of sublime (Derrida, p. 381). This encounter of the *self* should not be reduced to simply being looked upon by an animal, but instead as a sudden realisation of the gaze of an utterly different *other*, a gaze of life from a perspective even further detached from the subject than simply that of another human. It is more an instant of realisation than a mundane happening.

This flash of exposure to the *real* (to Lacan, accessed in moments of dreaming) is described by Lacan as a confrontation with ‘Medusa’s head’: a ‘revelation of...something which properly speaking is unnameable’. This petrifying, non-linguistic epiphany, the ‘ultimate real’, is an ‘essential object which isn’t an object any longer, but...something faced with which all words cease and all categories fail’.³ To Lacan, the flash of truth regarding the *self* is made feasible by the dream state’s ‘alleviation of [...] imaginary relations’, and as a result, the ‘masked’ ‘mirror image’ of the subject, a truth regarding the constructed *self* which is hidden under layers of imaginary workings, is in a single moment exposed; the effect is as if the subject is ‘torn apart’, and ‘his isolation in relation to the world has been attained’ (Lacan, ‘Dream of Irma’s injection’, p. 167). There is a remarkable relation between this description and the moment of confrontation with the *animal other* as described by Derrida; a truth is

³ Jacques Lacan, ‘The dream of Irma’s injection (conclusion)’, in *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book II: The Ego in Freud’s Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis 1954-1955*, trans. by Sylvana Tomaselli (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1991), pp. 161–75 (p. 164). Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

revealed in a blinding, indescribable flash, man is confronted with the edge of *symbolic* and *imaginary* comprehension. In the case of Lacan, however, the moment comes internally, from within the environment of the dream-state, whilst Derrida's example is triggered externally, a sublime moment of *self*-realisation triggered by the gaze of the *animal other*.

Through these explored similarities we can detect a key factor which Lacan may readily admit: that which causes brief exposure to the *real* (or *sublime*) must originally stem from something outside of the *symbolic* or *imaginary*, even the highest intellectual comprehension. In dreams constructed within the psyche, Lacan describes moments of exposure to the *real* which are unfeasible and symbolically amorphous, yet which are in turn interpreted and accepted as such, an acceptance which can appear from a myriad of different directions within the *symbolic* realm but always represents the same thing. Of course, these flashes of incomprehensibility necessarily effect our internal workings within the comprehensible realms (those not of the *real*), but in order for it to remind us of our plasticity it must first remind us of our beings as grounded, not in the *imaginary*-constructed lofty heavens of deities but in the disregarded dirt and vegetation of earth, rid of ideological constrictions. Hence, the abyss of the *real* isn't hidden in the heavens but our bodies, and in relation to the world they're in. This idea can be aided by Nietzsche's early text *The Birth of Tragedy*, in which we see a duality between the *Apollinian* focus on 'the beautiful illusion of dream worlds'⁴ (that which is ideological, intellectually heightened but necessarily, and perhaps even more directly than normal conscious thought, tied to the *symbolic* and *imaginary*) and the 'primitive...self-forgetfulness' of *Dionysian* music and revelry, in which 'the union between man and man [is] reaffirmed' (Nietzsche, 'Birth of Tragedy', pp. 36–7). This drunken, musical festivity, this thoughtless exposure to the *real* through an utter ignorance of the *symbolic* and in turn the

⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, 'The Birth of Tragedy', in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, trans. and ed. by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Modern Library, 2000) pp. 1–145 (p. 34). Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

imaginary, is felt entirely by the body and in turn is primordial, or earthly, but is transcendent of any ideological barriers constructed by the repressive inner realms. The self in this example, therefore, has proven an artistic, bodily access to the *real* through music and revelry. We can observe such ideas later on in the text, wherein Nietzsche argues that ‘music in its absolute sovereignty does not *need* the image and the concept’ whilst other art forms, such as ‘lyric poetry’, do (Nietzsche, ‘Birth of Tragedy’, p. 55). The *Dionysian* concept of music works outside the realms of the *symbolic* and thus *imaginary*, then, and works as something felt by the body in extreme intensities of emotion.

We can then go further in tying this overcoming of the ideologically created *self* with Nietzsche’s later theory of *will to power*, his ‘secret’ to ‘life’ which is described in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* as ‘that which must overcome itself again and again’.⁵ This *will* is a binding force between all living things, a clear example of a bridge between the *animal other* and human perception. We necessarily need this bridge for Derrida’s confrontation to occur, as that which is the *other* must be in some way comprehensible, in some way empathetically reachable, despite being so far distant from us. Here we can explore Nietzsche’s further utilisation of the body as quintessential in his writings, how we are ‘the body entirely, and nothing beside; and soul is only a word for something in the body’ (Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, p. 61). We can thus observe a link between celebration of the body as a means of truth in a manner that works in hand with the *Dionysian* man, a rejection of the heavenly (or imagistic) soul as anything transcendent, but grounded in the body, in the earth. When Derrida encounters the experience of the *real* under the gaze of the *animal other* he feels an overwhelming feeling of plasticity as ideological barriers are broken, the moment is felt through the body rather than *symbolically* analysed through the intellect, the catalyst of the *real* is experienced externally

⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (London: Penguin, 2003) pp. 61–163 (p. 138). Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

(just as with the music of the *Dionysian*) and we see proven—in this overwhelming, sensuous flash of truth—Nietzsche’s argument that ‘[t]here is more reason in your body than in your best wisdom’ (Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, p. 62).

So, to reduce Nietzsche’s terminology where possible, *Dionysian* revelry and music can act as a gateway for us to catch glimpses of the *real*, through bodily, not intellectual, experience. To Lacan, dreams can offer these gateways, and to Derrida (in the specific text studied) the gaze of the *animal other* is one, too. Yet these examples, though coming from the last hundred and fifty years, only rephrase ideas which have been circulating about the human psyche for thousands; perhaps, they needed re-emergence in the west after the idealisation of man became the pinnacle of its Renaissance movement (Not only this, but Christianity has always celebrated the superiority of man and dismissed animals as minor insignificances, at best products—and thus examples—of God’s power). The close involvement of man to animals and earth is prevalent in many religions and practises from throughout history across the globe, noted in examples of gods with the ability to transform into animals, or the potentiality for man himself to become one, too.

A prime historical example of utilising bodily transformation is Greek mythology, which commonly describes gods morphing into animals in order to carry out their (typically sexually oriented) plans, ‘[Demeter, who had transformed into a mare to hide from gods and titans] did not...deceive Poseidon, who transformed himself into a stallion and covered her, from which outrageous union sprang the nymph Despoena [...]’.⁶ Humans can also be subject to this zoomorphism: ‘[...] distraught with grief, [Alcyone] leapt into the sea. Some pitying god transformed them both [her and Ceyx] into kingfishers’ (Graves, p. 309). The former example implies a great power behind the unknown of the *animal other*, not just through the

⁶ Robert Graves, *The Greek Myths: The Complete and Definitive Edition* (London: Penguin, 2017), p. 120. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

direct implications of a god being present in the shape of an animal, but also of the potentiality for any animal to be so. This aids in our argument of the *animal other* as a form of mysterious externality to the human and their constructed self, one which can expose to us in a wondrous flash (just as Zeus descended upon Danaë in a shower of gold); a brief exposure to the sublime, to the truth (*symbolically* metaphorical as it is in mythology), a feeling that can only be sensuously experienced rather than *symbolically*, which is perhaps why these transformations often lead to sexual encounters. In regard to the latter of the two transformations, the concept is more direct, with implications that the *self* is fluctuating and variable, susceptible to manipulation via the real (in this case represented by the ‘pitying god’). The *animal other*, although being everything discussed in the former exploration, is close to us in our grounded reality, capable of being reached through zoological bridges between species (just Nietzsche’s *will to power* bonds humans to all living entities).

We can also locate several religions which relate man closer to the status of nature in general, with exemplars including Paganism or, as will be studied here, Shinto. Described by Kuroda Toshio as ‘an indigenous self-consciousness’, this elusive Japanese religion worships a binding spirit, *Kami*, which is directly associated—or seen as *one*—with nature and is a driving force of the universe.⁷ A driving, connective universal force already brings to mind Nietzsche’s *will to power*, however Toshio’s analysis of the religion (alongside ‘including nature worship and taboos against [impurities]’) as having ‘no system of doctrine’, and existing ‘in diverse forms as folk belief but at the same time possess[ing] certain features of organised religion’, certainly opens up conversation regarding spiritual views of the *self* (Toshio and others, p. 1). This discussion of Shinto as vaguer than an unequivocal religion—those which have concrete mythologies and doctrines—and more as a ‘self-consciousness’ defined by

⁷ Kuroda Toshio and others, ‘Shinto in the History of Japanese Religion’, in *Journal of Japanese Studies*, 7 (1981), 1–21 (p. 3). Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

‘practises’ rather than study, immediately implicates it as a state of mind and thus of *self*-identification. Immersing oneself within the physical world and the beauty and power of nature (or, more specifically, a world which is a culmination of both physical and meta-physical, with worship of holy powers and metaphysical objectivity as detected within, or at one with, the physical universe, in a manner quite similar to *Taoism*), is a powerful method of reaching sublime realisations regarding the *self*, something that the British Romantics of the 1800s were so fixated upon. Rather than using the specific feature of the *animal other*, however—and thus unlike the examples within Greek mythology—this method of *self*-realisation is rooted in a grander sense of man in relation to the universe in general; more closely, then, to Nietzsche’s *Dionysian man*.

In regard to the self, all of these examples prove a means by which its ideological constructions can be overcome. Framed in Lacan’s triality of the *imaginary*, *symbolic* and *real*, this essay has explored these methods of truth-hunting regarding the self, and how different thought-processes or approaches have led to the same goal. Whether through dreams, the *animal other*, *Dionysian* revelry combined with *will to power* or celebrations of the natural sublime, the end-goal of finding gateways to the *real* concerning *self*-identity have been explored and celebrated accordingly.

Works cited

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