

Stung by Anthropomorphization

by Theodore Dalrymple (September 2017)



Orgueil et bassesse, from the book *Les métamorphoses du jour*, by Jean Ignace Isidore Gérard, 1869.

There are for me few greater pleasures in life than to browse in a good bookshop (of which fewer and fewer exist, alas), reading the first few pages of many books and deciding to buy one or more of them of whose existence I had not previously been aware. Selecting and reading books in this manner can no doubt turn one's mind into a *pot pourri* of obscure, miscellaneous and seemingly disconnected information; but over the years I have learned to trust to a kind of instinct as to what will one day, even years later, assume a great significance for me. The obscure suddenly becomes highly apposite, and I congratulate myself on my unconscious faculty of foresight.

But one must read for present pleasure as well as for future benefit; and, like works of art, books should have an immediate appeal as well as a deeper meaning. Recently I was captivated by a little book by a pseudonymous author called Vera Hégi, first published in Geneva in 1944 and republished seventy years later in Paris, titled *Les Captifs du Zoo: Souvenirs d'une Gardienne de Jardin Zoologique* (Prisoners of the Zoo: the Memories of a Zoo Keeper).

Both the author and her book were extraordinary. She was born Émilie von Bachst, probably of Baltic German stock, in eastern Siberia, where her father was a railway engineer. She probably also spent some of her childhood in China, about the time of the Chinese Revolution in 1912. Her father dying, her mother (a gifted pianist) did not return to western Russia but went to live in the Caucasus, where Émilie learnt to ride with the Cossacks and where her mother married a Russian lawyer who specialised in the defence of Caucasians who defied the Russian law in favour of their own customs. But come the Revolution and the subsequent Civil War her father joined a Tsarist regiment and she, Émilie, fled to Moscow, never seeing her mother or her stepfather again, and hoping to study natural sciences at the university. She was deemed to be of the wrong social origin, however, to study at the university, and was excluded (positive discrimination in American universities is a pale imitation of this Soviet policy). Instead, she found a job as junior keeper at the Moscow Zoo, which somehow survived the turbulent years.

Émilie somehow managed to emigrate from the Soviet Union to France, presumably in the late twenties, for in 1930 she met married Henri Ellenberger, a doctor and historian of psychiatry later to be famous for his book, *The Discovery of the Unconscious*. She never spoke of the means by which she

escaped Russia.

When France was occupied in 1940, Ellenberger was forbidden to practice as a doctor, not because he was Jewish (in fact, he was Protestant), but because he had been born in Southern Rhodesia, then British territory. He was thus deemed an enemy alien, and the Ellenbergers moved to the German-speaking part of Switzerland in 1941. After the war, Henri was appointed professor at the University of Montreal, where after some years Émilie rejoined him and where she died in 1998, five years after he died. In Montreal, she became an established artist.

To have survived so many vicissitudes, to have started her life over so many times, to have continued striving nevertheless to do something of value, and to have lived so long, is about as fine an example of the human spirit as one could well find. My only regret is that she wrote no autobiography; it would shame one out of one's petty complaints (at least for a short time, though of course not permanently nothing will do that).

I picked up her book in a Parisian bookstore. I read first the preface and then the postscript, the latter by her son Michel. I was struck immediately by two omissions or absences from these two short essays: the first was the absence of reference to any possible political meaning, even if only oblique, to her book; and the second the absence of remark that the caged tiger who was the subject of the only drawing that she published with the book (and which is mentioned in the postscript), is obviously starving. The tiger's shoulders and its pelvis are sticking out through its stretched skin; its flanks are concave. I have only once before seen a big cat in so starved a condition. It was in Botswana, many years ago, as I took a casual walk through the bush as if it were an English

park. I came across a lioness under a tree, obviously about to die. She was mere skin and bones, a pitiful sight, but in the circumstances I was not altogether sorry that she was not healthier.

It seems to me almost incredible that someone who had lived through what Émilie Ellenberger had lived through by 1944 should not have infused at least *some* political meaning, if only *sotto voce*, in her book, which is a denunciation of the way in which animals were kept in Moscow Zoo. Certainly of noble origin herself, born into a cultivated and accomplished family, but forced by the revolution into a life in which the proletariat was duped into believing that it was triumphant, she identified closely with those caged aristocrats, the tigers:

. . . all of them hated the presence of humans, and only returned to life during the hours of solitude.

She continues:

All day long, an immense, annoying and noisy crowd traipsed past the cages. This multitude, which would have been seized by a mortal panic on seeing at a distance a single one of these beasts at liberty, took delight in seeing them thus harmless, humiliated, degraded. It revenged itself for its own cowardice by snapping their fingers at them, by calling them in a loud voice, by shaking their chains [evidently, then, they were chained], and the objections of the keepers ran up against this argument without answer: 'I've paid.'

When the crowd disappeared, however, "an inert and apathetic

mass metamorphosed into supple and vigorous creatures, full of breath and contained strength." They became individuals, unlike the crowds that had tormented them. It was the mass of humans that appalled Émilie, and of course it was the glorification of that mass, and the creation of *Homo sovieticus*, that was then the aim of all Soviet policy. She did not wait to see its apotheosis later in the 1930s her fellow-keepers in the Moscow zoo were mostly hangovers from the *ancien-regime* which, dictatorial as it may have been, did not aspire to mould the human personality into a crass uniformity, and permitted eccentricity of character to flourish but she must have guessed what was coming.

Not that her book is by any means a straightforward political tract, far from it. It is also an implicit plea for mankind not to treat animals as mere objects or playthings for its amusement. I suppose philosophical critics of her book might find it in far too much anthropomorphism: she attributes human thoughts and emotions even to quite lowly animals; and when she speaks of her beasts that were captured in the wild and then brought to the zoo as being nostalgic for all that they have lost, I suppose stern philosophers might demand evidence of so complex an emotion being harboured in so small a brain. And yet, by the same token, there can be no definitive evidence of its absence either. For myself, I think it does more honour to a person to believe in its presence than its absence, for the Cartesian notion that animals (unlike Man) are mere automata appals me.

I confess to facing in two opposite directions on the question of animal thought and emotion, however. I believe, for example, that Man is a different order of beings from all other animals: his self-consciousness and his ability to use propositional language marks him out from every other kind of creature and is at the root of his phenomenal, if not

necessarily enduring, success in the sense of having so brilliantly gone forth and multiplied. Howsoever it may be that Man evolved from the lower animals, evolution stops at Man and may soon come under Man's control. This is so whether for good or evil: something does not cease to be true merely because it is pregnant with consequences that we might not like. And it is my belief also that evolution has neither explanatory or predictive value where the life of Man is concerned, despite the ingenuity expended by evolutionists to show, to the contrary, that it has. Moreover, I am not obliged, in pointing to evolution's failure as a theory, to provide any other, better schema to explain Man, any more than the defence to a charge of murder is obliged to demonstrate who it was, if it was not the accused, who did it.

My belief, based I think on argument, that man is unique among the animals should make me proof against all forms of anthropomorphism of the Vera Hegi type, but in fact it does not. On the contrary, the moment I stop arguing that man is completely different from all other creatures, I invest practically every creature I encounter with human qualities, thoughts and emotions, down to the amoeba straggling under the microscope against a drop of acid or other substance noxious to it. I don't go in quite for panpsychism, investing trees and stones with a mental life; I don't hear strawberries scream in my mind's ear as I bite into them, or hug trees, or speak to my roses, or anything like that. But insects I do think of as moral beings, there being some which are good by nature and some which are bad. I blame the nasty ones for their own nastiness.

Who, for example, can quite expunge from his mind the absurd idea that wasps are wicked? I don't think I have ever heard anyone express a liking for wasps, though the famous sexologist, Dr. Alfred Kinsey was a specialist on gall wasps

until he turned his attention if not to the habits of Man, at least to those of some men and some women.

Bees, of course, are another matter: bees are as good as wasps are bad. This is odd in a way, because they are both black and yellow, and both can sting. I don't think, either, that our difference in attitude is because of their different habits: wasps get stuck in jam, for example, while bees usefully pollinate flowers. I think it is because bees are warm and furry and therefore cuddly, insect teddy-bears, while wasps are cold and shiny like snakes, and therefore heartless. Even though we know that bees *en masse* may be dangerous, we are willing to forgive them. The English poet, Robert Gittings (1911 – 1992), wrote a poem about a woman stung to death by a swarm of bees:

Whatever way to die
Invented could be more grotesque, malevolent
Than this obscenity out of a black heaven sent?

But still we love bees.

We, or at any rate I, divide animals into good and bad: rats are arrogant, but mice are modest and even humble, always the underdog (or the under-rodent); cockroaches are sly and devious, but beetles are straightforward and manly. Many a beetle have I rescued when I have found it upturned on its carapace, its legs kicking helpless in the air in the attempt to right itself. I feel sorry for it, I think it is Gregor Samsa. I wouldn't be at all surprised to learn that Kafka compassionated beetles in real life.

Vera Hegi invests all the creatures under her purview with

characters of their own, and gives them thoughts and emotions that one part of my mind rejects as being impossible, but which with another part of my mind I do likewise. I think it is probably better to err on the side of anthropomorphism than that of animal automatism, though I know of cases of people who became too sentimental about bears and tigers and snakes and crocodiles, and who paid the price, having imagined that if you were nice to a beast, the beast would be nice back to you. This isn't even true of humans.

A story told by Vera Hegi struck a particular chord with me. One day a man gave an elephant in the zoo three bread rolls, into the last of which he, from sheer malignity, he insinuated a razor blade. The elephant managed to remove the blade with its trunk. I was reminded of the case of a man in the prison in which I worked as a doctor, who repeatedly tried to cut himself, sometimes dangerously. He was under the constant watch of two guards, but a prisoner slipped him a razor blade embedded in a potato which he managed to extract from it, and with which he cut his throat.

Yes, Man is definitely different from all other animals.

Theodore Dalrymple's latest book is [The Proper Procedure](#) from New English Review Press.

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