

CROCODILE TEARDROPS.

THE FAN IS THE ANIMAL OF READING.

1.

Confronted with thieving crows, singing whales and comedic African grey parrots, most people of sense would agree that only written language remains the final measure of our separation from the animals. The fan proves most people of sense deluded. The fan is the Ishmael of animals, whose wandering into text has led it back to Nature.

Reading that purports to be non-animal, philology for instance, fantasizes a pure grid out of nature and its bodies wherein texts commune like Platonic ideals, ever removed, only potentially described by other texts. The fan celebrates the implausibility of this fantasy, profits from it. By collecting, archiving and preserving, the fan demonstrates no illusions concerning history. The harsh realities of Darwinian existence in the Einsteinian Universe are the animal's inheritance.

The fan is never not an animal. The fan lurks in the heart of the human reader reclining in sloth-like comfort. The fan hoards (in hordes). The fan stalks. The fan bristles. The fan nests among trophies. The fan lionizes. The fan horses around. The fan is asinine. The fan herds, is herded. The fan is the bull in the china shop. The fan chews at the bit. The fan is dogged. The fan rubs its hind legs together, etc.

For the fan every text is a singular artifact that can be preserved, collected, remembered and re-birthed by the clade to fulfill its totem's messianic victory over death. No more, no less. For the fan the original is a repetition and the repetition is original.

Preserving identity only in the particular extravagance of its ecstasy, the fan breeds. One thinks of the snails that the 20th century suspense writer Patricia Highsmith kept with her through her shadowlike motion through dozens of houses and apartments the world over. The misanthropic Highsmith had studied zoology and, to put it mildly, "throughout her life she felt a strong tenderness for animals."¹ Highsmith was fascinated by the sexuality of her snails. She would smuggle them into France on airplanes, a handful of the creatures hidden under her breasts.² The snails are a symbol of the natural family of reading animals this solitary lesbian and freelance writer nourished all her life.

In Highsmith's 1966 story "The Snail-Watcher," the main protagonist Peter Knoppert watches two snails slated for dinner copulating in "voluptuous intensity" — replicators immune to destiny, committed to desire. Fascinated, Knoppert takes up snail breeding and is eventually consumed by the proliferation explosion of the gastropods

¹ Andrew Wilson. *Beautiful Shadow: A Life of Patricia Highsmith*. New York: Bloomsbury USA, 2004. pp. 134-5.

² *Ibid.*, 267.

that he himself initiates. Literally drowning in snails, the last thing Knoppert sees is two of the creatures copulating, “and right beside them, tiny snails as pure as dewdrops emerging from a pit like an infinite army into their widening world.”³ A piece of writing Highsmith’s agent deemed “too repellant to show editors” found a home in a science fiction and fantasy magazine.⁴ In later versions of the story, Highsmith would have the snails wrenching control of the Earth itself from corrupt humanity.

If the vertical growth of a text in culture is plantlike in some respects, then the fans are the bees that swarm to make its horizontal growth possible. For the fan the time is always right for expansion. From the 1920s until the 1940s, science fiction and fantasy fandom numbered no more than 500 individuals the world over. By the 1950s, their numbers reached the thousands; today they are purportedly uncountable – divided as they are into innumerable subsets and expansions via electronic media and film.⁵

3 Patricia Highsmith. *The Snail-Watcher and Other Stories*. New York: Doubleday, 1970.

4 *Ibid*, 135. It was published in the April 1966 edition of London’s *Nova*.

5 Peter Nichols and Peter Roberts. “Fandom.” *Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*. New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, 1995. 402–403 (A Hugo Award Winner).

6 Douglas Harper. *Online Dictionary of Etymology*. Internet: Lancaster, PA. 2001

There is nothing particularly literary about the fan’s way of reading. Fans of science fiction have pretensions to grandeur, but the term “fan” first came of use among American sports enthusiasts in the 19th century.⁶ For the fan, like the bee, honey is ecstasy torn from the jaws of Darwinian reduction and preserved. The fan moves through time refusing not to look back. The fan is the animal of the angel of history.

The fan’s ecstasy gives it the unjust reputation of fanaticism. The fan is in no sense the animal of religion, (though religion often preys upon the fan). As the animal of reading, the fan knows that its totem is not real. Only the artifact is real — the sum total of its imperfections. Thus the fan is the moth of criticism and the gadfly of the philosopher. A follower of Derrida sleeps with a copy of *Of Grammatology* under his pillow.

2.

“The confusion of all nonhuman living creatures within the general and common category of the animal is not simply a sin against rigorous thinking, vigilance, lucidity, or empirical authority; it is also a crime.”⁷

Currently the fan, like every non-human living creature, is threatened with extinction at the hands of the conceptual divide between human Dasein and the biosphere. As animal, the fan joins an insurrection, a non-violent revolution against the canonical flow of memorial decay. An animal that collects, produces and preserves objects for singular celebration, the fan now operates within a global sea of generalized products equalized by easy locatability. Though the fan’s own economics culminate in trade and barter, today capitalism controls the distribution of all ecstasy. As an animal the fan is the ideal consumer, more profoundly manipulated than the horse or synthetic rat. As totems turn mainstream one by one, more and

7 Jacques Derrida. *The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)*. David Wills, tr. *Critical Inquiry*. V. 28, No. 2. Winter 2001.

more fans are indistinguishable from consumers. The fan doesn’t need to forage anymore. Hunting has dropped away, and the old sort of gathering with it. Everything is “at the fingertips.” The fan no longer moves; the fan is moved (by melodrama or spectacle). The callous manipulation of fandom by capitalist concerns is analogous to the corporate aquatic farming practices currently obliterating the North Atlantic Cod whose survival they depend on. At the last WorldCon I attended, the fan’s potential obesity necessitated golf-carts for its ambulation.

But the fan remains immune to destiny. The fan has one recourse differentiating it from other victims of History. Even as the art itself is forgotten, the fan, the animal, writes ...