

II

WHAT IS HUMAN RECOGNITION? (ON ZONES OF INDISTINCTION)

1. *"I am I because my little dog knows me."*¹

Let me begin with Ovid's story of Actaeon from *The Metamorphoses*. You will remember that he is the hunter who stumbles upon the goddess Diana as she is bathing in a stream. Outraged at being seen, or looked at, she transforms him into a deer:

She uttered no more threats, but made horns of a long-lived stag sprout where she had scattered water on his brow. She lengthened his neck, brought the tips of his ears to a point, changed his hands to feet, his arms to long legs, and covered his body with a dappled skin. Then she put panic fear into his heart as well. The hero fled, and even as he ran, marveled to find himself so swift. When he glimpsed his face and his horns, reflected in the water, he tried to say "Alas!" but no words came. He groaned – that was all the voice he had--and tears ran down his changed cheeks. Only his mind remained the same as before. (Loeb trans.)

At this point he is spotted by his dogs, each one of which Ovid pauses to name. Actaeon flees, longing to cry out, "I am Actaeon! Don't you know your own master?" But his words don't form; Actaeon can only groan, "uttering such a

sound which, though not human, was yet such as no stag could produce. The ridges he knew so well were filled with his mournful cries. Falling to his knees, like a suppliant in prayer, he silently swayed his head this way and that, as if stretched out beseeching arms. His friends, not knowing what they did, urged on the ravening mob with their usual encouragements and looked around for Actaeon, shouted for Actaeon, as if he were not there, each trying to call louder than the other.... Actaeon turned his head at the sound of his name. Well might he wish to be absent, but he was all too surely present.”

Let me extract some curious features from this account. The first is that, in ceasing to be human, Actaeon does not quite cease being human; that is, ceasing is in some sense interminable. It is as if Actaeon had entered into a temporality somewhat different from the logical or familiar order of things (think of it as the temporality of suffering or of dying – the temporality of flesh).² At all events he is turned objectively or, let us say, biologically into a stag, but subjectively he remains who he is, or rather “his mind remained the same as before,” but he no longer answers, or can answer, to the name of “Actaeon.” Or perhaps subjectivity is what he loses in the sense that it can no longer be ascribed to him by others. What we have in the story is something like what Stanley Cavell calls the myth (or horror) of *inexpressiveness* (“of the mind unmoored, say unhinged, leaving itself without material in which to realize and communicate itself”).³ Ceasing to be human means losing one’s voice, that is, losing one’s capacity for being recognized as human: imagine belonging to an order of things absolutely unresponsive to your existence. Of course Ovid’s story is about the failure of recognition, but one wonders what would the story have been like had Actaeon’s friends been able to recognize him, changes and all? What would *their* experience have been like? How to respond to someone who is no longer (visibly) human but not, or not yet, wholly otherwise? Actaeon is an anomalous creature of the

between: neither human nor nonhuman but inhuman (or *ahuman*), that is, monstrous. Monstrous, yet in some ways not. The story belongs to the genre of the hunter hunted. The most distinctive feature of Actaeon as a hunter is his gentleness and restraint. His metamorphosis thus expresses a certain side of him; he isn't turned into something completely alien, rather something alien in him—something out of character or out of keeping with his friends and his dogs, not to say his profession—is, so to speak, brought out and exposed to others. Had he been turned into a wolf his dogs might have had a more exacting time of it, but he was never wolf-like, like Lycaon, whom Jupiter transformed into a wolf as punishment for his incorrigible bloodthirsty way of life.

Interestingly, “Lycanthropy” is still occasionally used as the name of a psychiatric disorder in which one ceases to experience oneself as a human being. There is even a book called *The Lycanthropy Reader*, on the prevalence of werewolves in human history: werewolves—and monsters generally—are, it appears, the natural companions of human beings, indispensable to attempts, futile as they may be, at human self-understanding.⁴ In a book called *Monster Theory* Jeffrey Cohen remarks that monsters have always been basic to the fragile equilibrium of human self-definition, and are apt to dominate a culture's most popular images during periods of social and political change or crisis (there are probably no other sorts of period in human history).⁵

Just so, historically the werewolf—*wargus*--is simply someone who ceases to be human by being banished from the community; he becomes, in Giorgio Agamben's expression, a *homo sacer*, sacred in the sense of set apart or accursed. Agamben writes:

What had to remain in the collective unconscious as a monstrous hybrid of human and animal, divided between the

forest and the city—the werewolf—is, therefore, in its origin the figure of the man who has been banned from the city. That such a man is defined as a wolf-man and not simply as a wolf (the expression *caput lupinum* has the form of a juridical statute) is decisive here. The life of the bandit, like that of sacred man, is not a piece of animal nature without any relation to law and the city. It is, rather, a threshold of indistinction and a passage between animal and man, *physis* and *nomos*, exclusion and inclusion: the life of the bandit is the life of the *loup garou*, the werewolf, who is precisely *neither man nor beast*, and who dwells paradoxically within both without belonging to neither.⁶

As if my being human (or not) were dependent, not on knowledge of one kind or another, or on some fact, but on a decision or judgment—a bestowal or refusal of recognition—one determined perhaps by some act or conduct forbidden to human beings (fratricide, incest, banditry, bestiality), but of course anything might count as a taboo, since taboos are always local and contingent (in which case, so would be the condition of being human). What is interesting about the werewolf is that, outcast though he is (if “he” is he word), he remains internal to the order that banished him as the limit-concept of its anthropology. He marks the “threshold of indistinction and passage between animal and man” to which human beings and animals are always exposed.

2. Porous Subjects

There are perhaps many zones of indistinction both ancient and modern. Consider, for example, the anthropology implicit in Ovid's text. It pictures the human being as porous and exposed, liable at any moment to be rinsed like a washcloth by whatever surrounds it. It is an anthropology that can properly be called demonic, where the boundaries that pick out the human from the divine on the one hand and from the animal on the other are highly unstable with a good deal of traffic moving back and forth in every direction. This is perhaps a Hellenic rather than Jewish anthropology. There are (to be strict about it) mortals but no humans in Greek antiquity, where heroes regularly show divine ancestry and, in their finest moments, behave like lions. Arguably, being human might just be a biblical concept. I mean that, perhaps owing to the absolute alterity of God, the human is more sharply delineated, has firmer boundaries, in the Hebrew Bible than in ancient Greek culture, at least until the time of Aristotle (even Socrates has his daimon). In the Scriptures people are turned into salt but not into animals or other sorts of creature, and of course the idea of turning into God cannot be thought. If people turn to stone, it is because their hearts have hardened.⁷ By contrast, Ovid's is a non-egocentric anthropology without much interior/exterior structure. The human being is not sealed off from whatever is not itself but is open to invasion from the other (from *Eros* or *Eris*), the eyes being particularly vulnerable in this respect. The "I" – let's call it, out of courtesy to philosophical tradition, the logical subject, the disengaged punctual ego exercising or trying for self-possession or rational control – the "I" is always in danger being lost or overtaken and must struggle to preserve its integrity. Much of Western literature seems to be about this struggle in which failure is frequent and always gripping.

The literary genre in which this anthropology and this struggle are most fully explored seems to be that of tragedy (with no doubt the Gothic novel a close second) in which the human is defined by its condition of exposure or vulnerability to savagery and madness, as if the existence of the human could only be registered in the moment of its disappearance. In ancient tragedy savagery and madness are frequently represented by women absorbed in ferocious acts of murder and dismemberment, most famously perhaps as Maenads in the *Bacchae* of Euripides. In tragedy the “I” or sovereign logical subject is exposed to the feminine; in this event it is no longer an “I” but a “me,” that is, no longer a subject *of* but now a subject *to* experience, all of it bad. Crossing the threshold that separates the public world of action and discourse from the household, the *polis* from the *oikos*, men from women, is a movement from “I” to “me,” from one who acts to one who is exposed, from the assertive to the receptive and the passivity of suffering. It is a movement into a different temporality from that of human action. It is a movement in which being human always enters a condition of crisis of recognition—in the *Bacchae* Dionysus, appearing as a beautiful, androgynous youth, persuades Pentheus, king of Thebes, to disguise himself as a woman in order to observe unobserved the Maenads in their frenzy. But as frequently happens in literature the disguise invades and transforms the subjectivity of the disguised: the mask is magical. Pentheus grows effeminate and weak, and in this defenseless feminine state he is torn to pieces by his mother, Agauë, who in her madness imagines that she is dismembering a bull. The recognition scene consists of Agauë regaining her senses and discovering that she is holding as her trophy the disembodied head of her son. I like to think of this as the purest moment of tragedy in all of Greek tragedy.⁸ It is somewhat easier for male readers to contemplate Oedipus, who has no trouble giving the correct answer to the riddle of the Sphinx, but whose

shame on learning his true identity makes even the everyday experience of human recognition intolerable. And so Oedipus puts out his eyes, which a Nietzschean might read as an escape from the limits or confinement of the human, that is, as a movement of self-transcendence; in any case, he becomes a kind of *homo sacer*, haunting the borders of cities.

3. *The Vanishing of the Human*

Many years ago the critic Northrop Frye introduced a picture of literary or cultural history that seems worth preserving: namely that Western culture “has steadily moved its center of gravity” from a mythic or heroic anthropology to one that is ironic, where a threshold waits to be crossed into the no-longer-human.⁹ Robert Musil located this threshold in a scathing satire, *The Man without Qualities*—notice again the metaphor of the porous subject:

For the inhabitant of [any] country has at least nine characters: a professional one, a national one, a civic one, a class one, a geographical one, a sex one, a conscious one, an unconscious and perhaps even too a private one; he combines them all in himself, but they dissolve him, and he is really nothing but a little channel washed out by all these trickling streams, which flow into it and drain out of it again in order to join other little streams filling another little channel.¹⁰

The irony here registers a judgment like Max Weber’s idea that modern bourgeois culture—or modernity for short—is, whatever else it is, a powerful mechanism of disenchantment, that is, a rationalized system for draining away human subjectivity, leaving behind a social torpor of “routinized habitual blind

ethical obedience and passivity.”¹¹ These words belong to a political theorist who made a list of Weber’s metaphors of modernity: “Petrification, darkness, mechanization—emptiness, inner death; no spirit, no vision. Routine, non-creative energy; a world of shadows without true substance. An iron cage. Prisoners of a denatured culture, subjects of massive, bureaucratized institutions, victims of the ferocity and impersonality of capitalist market economy; prisoners oblivious to the meaning of freedom. Exiles unable to recall visions of the promised land. Modern urban life: totally detached from Nature, insular, dispirited, lonely” (BR231). With less hyperbole, Stanley Cavell in *The Claim of Reason* refers to this condition as “the vanishing of the human,” and he thinks of it as a futurist fantasy in which one day the experience, or fact, of ceasing to be human would no longer fill people with alarm, or even with dissatisfaction, because nothing would any longer give them “the idea that living things, human beings, could feel. So they would not (any longer) be human. They would not, for example, be frightened upon meeting [other human beings]—except...under circumstances in which they would be frightened upon encountering bears or storms, circumstances in which bears would be frightened. And of course particular forms of laughter and amazement would also no longer be possible, ones which depend upon clear breaks between, say, machines and creatures” (CR468).

Naturally one thinks of Kafka’s great story, “The Metamorphosis,” in which Gregor Samsa awakens after a night of “unquiet dreams” to find himself transformed into a bug. It is interesting to know that, except for Arachne, no one in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* is turned into an insect (and a spider, strictly speaking, is not a bug). A major irony of Kafka’s story is that Gregor’s transformation is merely a case of biology struggling to keep pace with social evolution and the hypertrophy of an administered world. This perhaps explains what is most

unsettling, namely that Gregor is not horrified by what has happened to him. Recall that upon discovering that he is now a bug Gregor's first thought is of going back to sleep, and his second is that now he will surely be late for work and "be sacked on the spot."¹² Gregor's parents and sister remember him as someone who liked nothing so much as reading train schedules, which he did almost every evening until bedtime. Max Weber would say that our culture had done a superb job in preparing Gregor psychologically for his transformation (although Deleuze and Guattari see the change as a "line of escape" from the regimes of office and family).¹³ In any case, Gregor, like Actaeon, retains his first-person perspective—being a *me* who worries, as no one else can, about *me*—even though he has ceased to be recognizable (is no longer an "I"): his speech, after all, is now only "an unbearable hissing noise" (CS104) that makes people chase him with a stick. The reason he keeps hold of his inwardness is that, appearances aside, his family for a while continues to treat him as (something like) Gregor, occupying (at least) Gregor's place. His sister feeds him, for example, and of course he is allowed to stay in his room; he responds by crawling under his bed at feeding time in order to spare his family the sight of his repulsiveness. But then suddenly things change. The crucial moment occurs when Gregor's mother and sister formally withdraw their recognition of him as Gregor by removing his furniture from his room. Here, if anywhere, is where Gregor is taken across the fatal threshold that defines the existence of the human: "They were clearing his room out; taking away everything he loved; the chest in which he kept his fret saw and other tools was already dragged off; they were now loosening the writing desk which had almost sunk to the floor, the desk at which he had done all his homework when he was at the commercial academy, at the grammar school before that, and, yes, even at the primary school" (CS118). As if, in strict moral accord with the bourgeois order of things, Gregor's identity, his

inwardness, his being human, were *in* his furniture.¹⁴ So much for the first-person perspective, which is perhaps capable of floating freely outside the subject, or folding inside-out.¹⁵

Recall that Jacques Lacan, in an essay on “The Freudian Thing,” asks, “Is the difference between the desk and us, as far as consciousness is concerned, so very great?” After all, a richer story of human life can be got from a desk, with its accumulation of letters, receipts, overdue bills and yellowed photographs, than by interrogating the interior of the psyche, supposing there to be such a place.¹⁶ Wittgenstein meanwhile imagines a “chair thinking to itself” –but where, exactly, does its thinking occur?

WHERE? In one of its parts? Or outside its body; in the air around it? Or not *anywhere* at all? But then what is the difference between this chair’s saying something to itself and another one’s doing so, next to it? –But then how is it with man: where does *he* say things to himself? How does it come about that this question seems senseless; and that no specification of a place is necessary except just that this man is saying something to himself? Whereas the question *where* the chair talks to itself seems to demand an answer. –The reason is: we want to know *how* the chair is supposed to be like a human being; whether, for instance, the head is at the top of the back and so on” [*Philosophical Investigations* §361]).

We could say that Kafka re-enchants the world by causing people in it to cease being human, but only almost or not quite. To put it perhaps more simply, the characters in his world inhabit a boundary where humans and animals (or even things, like Odradek) are interchangeable. In “The Burrow,” a burrowing creature of some indeterminate kind constructs an underground home for itself

(again according to meticulous bourgeois protocol), but the possession of the house, that is, the experience of possession itself, or perhaps one should say the attempt at self-possession, produces so deep an insecurity in the animal that it cannot rest, cannot keep still, but in fact has to maintain an endless vigil outside his entrance against possible invasion from an imaginary “great beast” (CS353). In fact an invasion occurs, but in the form of a mysterious incessant humming sound that cannot be closed out (noise as a parasite). It is as if Kafka were resurrecting the ancient anthropology of the porous mortal. As the sound cannot be kept out, so neither can the mind be kept in: it drains away in an interminable paranoia. Of course, the beast is, in every respect, already within—and it would not be difficult to show that this is a basic and persistent trope of modern anthropology: the inhuman is internal to the human as part of its deep biological, psychological, and even moral structure, and what we call civilization consists in the mechanisms of repression and sublimation or, alternatively, of social evolution and cultural formation, that make it possible for us to inhabit human society. The human Id is not, so to speak, human. As if we were porous not with respect to the external powers of gods and demons but inwardly with respect to our alien or at all events plural selves (“The alien being must be in me,” Kafka writes in his *Diaries*) [p. 58]). Human beings are, let us say, hosts of the inhuman.¹⁷ The human is not made of anything human (the moral, in a way, of Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, not to mention Daniel Dennett’s “anti-homuncularism”).¹⁸ Every Jekyll has his Hyde. Anyway the question is, How to keep others out of the first person? Perhaps this is modernity’s version of the old Greek or tragic dilemma.

Kafka’s “Report to the Academy” is a wonderful parody of modernity’s dilemma, a kind of upside-down behaviorist allegory of civilization and its discontents. The report is an ape’s address to a scientific gathering in which he

explains how he ceased to be an ape. An expedition to Africa took him captive, and during his confinement in a makeshift cage on board the ship that transported him to Europe it came to him (he can't recall how) that the only way out of his predicament was "to stop being an ape" (CS253), that is, to imitate the behavior of humans, which he does without the least trouble by mimicking the antics of the simian sailors who gather around his cage each night to amuse themselves by teaching him to spit and smoke and drink and rub his belly; in other words he learns how to perform, as if the human were simply a matter of conditioning, a performative product. The critical moment occurs when the ape gets drunk one evening and accidentally shouts "Hallo!" With this outburst, he says, "I broke into the human community" (CS257). We must understand that this is not a moral achievement but simply a strategy of survival, as is the ape's first crucial decision: "When I was handed over to my first trainer in Hamburg I soon realized that there were two alternatives before me: the Zoological Gardens or the variety stage. I did not hesitate. I said to myself: do your utmost to get onto the variety stage; the Zoological Gardens means only a new cage; once there, you are done for" (CS257-58). And so, with the help of tutors (one of whom goes mad and has to be confined), he enlarges his repertoire—"one learns when one has to; one learns when one needs a way out; one learns at all costs. One stands over oneself with a whip; one flays oneself at the slightest opposition. My ape nature fled out of me, head over heels and away.... With an effort which up till now has never been repeated I managed to reach the cultural level of an average European. In itself that might be nothing to speak of, but it is something insofar as it has helped me out of my cage and opened a special way out for me, the way of humanity" (CS258). He becomes a celebrated and wealthy entertainer, and now enjoys fine wine, admiring visitors, sophisticated conversation (good breeding, as they say). Moreover, he now keeps a pet or, more accurately

(European that he has become), a mistress — “a half-trained chimpanzee.” “I take comfort from her as apes do. By day I cannot bear to see her; for she has the insane look of the bewildered half-broken animal in her eye; no one else sees it, but I do, and I cannot bear it” (CS259).¹⁹

4. On Being Monstrous

Naturally one has to ask: What can he not bear to see in the eyes of his mistress? One might suppose it is his own monstrous condition, which is that of someone who has become (by sheer force of will?) human, but who still resides in an animal body. One could do worse than take recourse again to Agamben’s conception of “bare life,” that is, life as it is lived on the other (perhaps hither) side of being human: a border that, unfortunately, is not fixed or settled in itself but can only be located by a decision of judgment, namely whether or not to grant something of oneself to the other that would extend the border a little further — open it — in the other’s behalf. In Kafka’s story, human beings seem to have accepted the ape as, more or less, one of them, a fact which may reflect either favorably or poorly on us depending on who we are. But what would it mean for the ape to respond (and not just react) to the look in his mistress’s eye? What does it mean to respond?

In the final section of *The Claim of Reason*, “Between Acknowledgment and Avoidance,” Stanley Cavell writes: “Being human is the power to grant being human. Something about flesh and blood elicits this grant from us, and something about flesh and blood repels it” (CR397). For Cavell, there are upper and lower limits to being human but nothing like an idea that could “be captured in a definition which specifies a genus” (CR398). With respect to the first (the upper limit): as a thought experiment Cavell imagines a craftsman who constructs an automaton (referred to as “our friend”) that to all appearances

looks and moves like a human being (he can light up and enjoy a cigarette, for example) but in fact when opened up for inspection is shown to be a machine, all wires, gears, and pulleys; but the craftsman tinkers away, producing improvements. One day he calls me in to look at his latest version:

He insists that I pay special attention to each of our procedures. The leg and the hands are now really astonishing. The movement of the legs crossing and of the cigarette being lit are simply amazing. I want to see it all again. And as for the voice, I would bet anything that no one could tell. So far I'm dazzled. Then the craftsman knocks off the hat to reveal what is for all the world a human head, intact. He rotates it through about 45 degrees and then stops himself with an embarrassed smile. The head turns back to its original position, but now its eyes turn toward mine. Then the knife is produced. As it approaches the friend's side, he suddenly leaps up, as if threatened, and starts grappling with the craftsman. They both grunt, and they are yelling. The friend is producing these words: "No more. It hurts. It hurts too much. I'm sick of being a human guinea pig. I mean a guinea pig human." (p. 405)

Cavell's question is: "Do I intervene?" What is my responsibility toward an automaton who can nevertheless experience the fear of pain—or, for all we know, can experience pain itself? That is, real pain. But what is that? How to tell real from artificial pain? The line between real and artificial (where parts leave off and mere flesh begins) may be irrelevant: the situation calls for a moral decision on my part, not for further inspection of the automaton, who may be said to have crossed a border into "my" form of life. A question that one derives from Cavell is: what if there were (in principle) no one or nothing to which this

border is closed? What if I were the border guard with no settled criteria as to who or what may be allowed to enter?

As if the upper limit of being human were an open border that we nevertheless close for no good reason. Recall Montaigne's famous complaint, in the *Apology for Raymond Sebond*, that human beings are niggardly when it comes to acknowledging the gifts and virtues of other creatures: we human beings refuse to see that animals are not deficient in relation to ourselves, rather it is the other way around: we are deficient with respect to others. The assumption that animals are incapable of speech is simply a consequence of our inability to understand them—the way we are helpless to understand the intricate singing of whales. Hassan Melehy writes: "For Montaigne, it is in our lack of understanding of the actions of animals and of the languages they may well be using that the border between us and animals must lie. This border, however, is not strictly a discernible one; it is more of a limit that indicates a gap, an extension of the gap that often enough makes a human being incomprehensible to another and even to him/herself.... It is a border in constant flux with respect to human understanding, as is reason itself."²⁰ So it is just possible that the difference between ourselves and animals is cultural rather than (strictly) natural, and therefore open to specific judgments as to how we should live rather than to logical determinations as to what goes where within ready-made conceptual frameworks. In this event empathy trumps cognition in our dealings with others, whether human or otherwise, which is why the question of suffering looms so large in longstanding controversies concerning our responsibility to and for others, however these others are conceived.²¹

So much (for the moment) for the upper limit. What about the lower? "The lower limit upon humanity," Cavell says, "is marked by the passage into inhumanity. Its signal is horror" (p. 434).

What is the object of horror? At what do we tremble in this way? Fear is of danger; terror is of violence, of the violence I might do or that might be done me. I can be terrified of thunder but not horrified by it. And isn't it the case that not the human horrifies me, but the inhuman, the monstrous. Very well. But only what is human can be inhuman. _Can only the human be monstrous? If something is monstrous, and we do not believe that there are monsters, then only the human is a candidate for the monstrous (CR418).

Can only the human be monstrous? The question has some application to Kafka's ape, who is never more human (because never more inhuman) than when he is unable to look his mistress in the eye, with its "insane look of the bewildered half-broken animal." Being human means the power to grant being human, but the experience of flesh (sexuality, bewilderment, my own as well as the other's) is a limit-experience: on which side do I fall? What if the ape's mistress had looked at him with a cool nod or smile of recognition?

"Horror," says Cavell, "is the title I am giving to the perception of the precariousness of human identity, to the perception that it may be lost or invaded, that we may be, or may become, something other than we are, or take ourselves for; that our origins as human beings need accounting for, and are unaccountable" (CR418-19). Horror in this sense is what is inspired by (or which inspires the social production of) outcasts—those (Cavell mentions Oedipus, who perhaps comes too easily to mind) who violate, and so help to define, the boundaries we have drawn that separate us from the other (Agamben's wolfman, for example). But what interests Cavell is, interestingly, horror as a species of self-experience: "The outcast is a figure of pity and horror; different

from ourselves, and not different.... We should try looking at him as a figure of horror to himself" (CR420-21). Which is how one could, arguably, look at Kafka's ape, who might, after all, have regarded his mistress's dilemma with some compassion (that is, humanely: helped her out, or along the path she finds herself; but of course we don't know her story).

Opposed to horror, in Cavell's thinking, is empathy, which is what I feel, not when I identify you *as* a human being, but when I identify *with* you—a capacity for fellow-feeling that I have, naturally, when it comes to my dog, James (in contrast to one or two humorless colleagues I could mention, among other expressionless faces in the crowd). Cavell wonders what would it be for empathy to go astray—"You might, for all I know, be a mutation, or a perfected automaton or an android, or a golem, or some other species of alien" (CR422): in other words, disguised, an impersonator of the human, like Kafka's ape, with whom Kafka enables us to empathize, if with some disquiet, perhaps, since the ironic thrust of Kafka's story is to disqualify us, his readers, as edifying creatures (what's so great about being human if an ape could do it? What's so great about it if an ape proves to be superior to us in the order of culture or good breeding? Or capable, as only humans are, of bestiality?)

Cavell shares with Kafka something like a philosophical disquiet (or possibly a Montaigne-like skepticism) concerning the criteria—or the powers of reason—available to us when it comes to picking something out, or responding to it, as a human being. "Obviously," Cavell writes, continuing his thought experiment concerning horror and empathy, "you can never be certain that other human beings exist, for any one you single out may, for all you know, be something other than you imagine, perhaps a human, probably a human if you like, but possibly a mutation, and just possibly an automaton, a zombie... [etc.] The world is what it is. And whatever it is, so far as you take it as inhabited by

candidates for the human, you are empathetically projecting. This means that you cannot rule out the non-human (or human non-being) possibility” (CR423-24).

The idea of a *candidate* for the human is worth a second thought, particularly against the background of narratives, like Cavell’s story of the craftsman and the friend, in which an artifact approaches a threshold of being human and requires only a final and imperceptible alteration, not so much perhaps in its material or machinery as in how it is regarded, as in the Pygmalion story, in which the artist’s lunatic love for his creation moves Venus to incarnate the statue with life. Here one thinks of “The First Appearance of the Machine in Humanity,” which is the title of a chapter from Villiers de l’Isle-Adam’s *L’Ève future* (1886), a novel in which Thomas Alva Edison, the genius of Menlo Park, creates a “female” android named Hadaly that is fully conscious, able to hold intelligent conversations, yet is not a finished work. What is missing is someone who will “animate” her affectively by responding to her as if she were human. Whereupon Lord Celian Ewald unexpectedly arrives; he is, as it happens, in a dilemma that has him on the verge of suicide. He is passionate about Miss Alicia Clary, an actress and a staggering beauty who, sadly, possesses (or is possessed by) a thoroughly obnoxious personality. Fair without, foul within, as Shakespeare once phrased the paradox. By contrast Hadaly, because she is electro-magnetic all the way through, “offers none of the disagreeable impressions that one gets from watching the *vital processes* of our own organism.”²² So, in Lord Ewald’s behalf, Edison sets to work, photoculpting Alicia Clary’s magnificent flesh and fitting it neatly onto Hadaly’s wireworks, thus to transform the android into a creature who transcends the defective original—a more suitable candidate for the human, so one might put it, than the merely human itself. Incarnated now in Miss Clary’s image, Hadaly pleads with

Lord Ewald: "You ask, 'Who I am?' My being in this low world depends, *for you at least*, only on your free will. Attribute a being to me, affirm that I am! Reinforce me with yourself. And then suddenly I will come to life under your eyes, to precisely the extent that your creative Good Will has penetrated me. Like a true woman, I will be for you only as you desire me.... My ethereal flesh, which awaits but the breath of your spirit to become living, my voice within which the soul of harmony lies captive, my undying constancy..." (TE199-200). Happily, Lord Ewald is able to overcome his common sense ("Since when has God permitted machines to usurp the right of speech?" [TE201]). As he himself puts he "resign[s] from the human race" (TE204), as if the embrace of a cyborg entailed the repudiation of the very idea of being human.²³

However, it appears that in zones of indistinction the very idea of being human or anything at all loses its application. In such zones, creatures of whatever origin are, so to speak, free of their origins, which is to say free of borders, boundaries, or unbreachable gaps that separate them from others (free of what Giorgio Agamben calls "the anthropological machine").²⁴ In zones of indistinction, there are no others because no one is the same as anything else: no one is anything, and so (as if in an existentialist fantasy) one is free to create something like a new form of life. Being *this* or *that* sort of being is conditional upon *being-with* one another as a form of *phronesis* or practical reason, something one learns not by cogitation but by habitation: in other words, how to live.

NOTES TO "WHAT IS HUMAN RECOGNITION"

¹ "What Are Masterpieces and Why are There So Few of Them?," *Gertrude Stein: Writings and Lectures, 1909-1945*, ed. Patricia Meyerowitz (London: Penguin Books, 1967), p. 149.

² In Maurice Blanchot's work this is the temporality of the "between," or *entre-temps*, as in the figure of *le pas au delà* — "Let there be a past, let there be a future, with nothing that would allow the passage from one to the other." See Blanchot, *The Step Not Beyond*, trans. Lycette Nelson (Albany, N.Y.: SUNY Press, 1992), p. 12.

³ *The Claim of Reason* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 472.

⁴ *A Lycanthropy Reader: Werewolves in Western Culture*, ed. Charlotte F. Otten (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1986), esp. Harvey A. Rosenstock and Kenneth R. Vincent, "A Case of Lycanthropy," pp. 31-34. There is a harrowing case history, "The Wolf! The Wolf!," in *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, I: Freud's Papers on Technique 1953-54*, trans. John Forrester (New York: W. W. Norton,

1988), pp. 89-106, in which a young child experiences himself as a wolf. Cf. Freud, *Totem and Taboo: Some Points of Agreement between the Mental Lives of Savages and Neurotics*, trans. James Strachey (New York: W. W. Norton, 1950), chapter IV, "The Return of Totemism in Childhood," esp. 126-27. "There is a great deal of resemblance between the relations of children and of primitive men toward animals. Children show no trace of the arrogance which urges adult civilized men to draw a hard and fast line between their own nature and that of all other animals. Children have no scruples over allowing animals to rank as their full equals. Uninhibited as they are in the avowal of their bodily needs, they no doubt feel themselves more akin to animals than to their elders, who may well be a puzzle to them." See also Sabine Baring-Gould, *The Book of Were-Wolves: Being an Account of a Terrible Superstition* (London: Smith-Elder, 1865), and Adam Douglas, *The Beast Within: A History of the Werewolf* (London: Chapman's, 1992).

⁵"Monster Culture (Seven Theses)," *Monster Theory: Reading Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), pp. 3-25. Compare Noël Carroll's *The Philosophy of Horror; or, Paradoxes of the Heart* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

⁶*Homo Sacer*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), p. 105.

⁷Elaine Scarry has a nice paragraph on the kind of metamorphosis one is apt to see in the Scriptures. After citing a number of passages on the hardening of the heart or the stiffening of the neck, she writes: "In all of the passages cited above, the withholding of the body—the stiffening of the neck, the turning of the shoulder, the closing of the ears, the hardening of the heart, the making of the face like stone—necessitates God's forceful shattering of the reluctant human

surface and repossession of the interior." See *The Body in Pain: The Making and the Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), pp. 203-204. In the Bible the human is vulnerable not to transformation into something alien but to the physical alteration of the body through wounds inflicted by (ultimately) God.

⁸Greek tragedy might be thought of as the trespass of a male hero who embodies the definition of the human into an alien feminine space that marks the borderline of the human or where the definition cannot be sustained. Froma Zeitlin is thinking somewhat along these lines in her essay, "Playing the Other: Theater, Theatricality, and the Feminine in Greek Drama," *Representations*, 11 (1985), 63-94; rpt. in *Playing the Other: Gender and Society in Classical Greek Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), pp. 341-74.

⁹*Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), pp. 33-34.

¹⁰ Trans. Eithne Wilkins and Ernst Kaiser (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1980), p. 34.

¹¹Alkis Kontos, "The World Disenchanted," *The Barbarism of Reason: Max Weber and the Twilight of Enlightenment*, ed. Asher Horowitz and Terry Maley (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994), p. 227. See Georg Simmel's famous essay, "The Metropolis and Mental Life," *On Individuality and Social Forms*, trans. Donald E. Levine (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), pp. 324-29. Simmel's thesis is that the city evacuates human subjectivity but paradoxically provokes eccentric behavior as a mode of individual self-preservation. See esp. p. 338.

¹² *The Complete Stories*, ed. Nahum N. Glatzer (New York: Schocken Books, 1971), p. 90.

¹³ *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, trans. Dana Polan (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), p. 14.

¹⁴ Kafka in his diaries speaks of the “complete citizen” who cannot be separated from his property (“whoever destroys the connexion destroys him at the same time”). *The Diaries: 1910-1922*, ed. Max Brod (New York: Schocken Books, 1975), p. 23.

¹⁵ The French writer Maurice Blanchot gives us a slightly more up-to-date version of Kafkaesque metamorphosis in *Thomas the Obscure* (1941; 1950) in which the eponymous character happens at one point to be reading a book whose words suddenly begin reading *him*, setting in motion a process of consumption that turns him into a obscure lexicon:

For hours he remained motionless, with, from time to time, the word “eyes” in place of his eyes: he was inert, captivated and unveiled. And even later when, having abandoned himself and, contemplating his book he recognized himself with disgust in the form of the text he was reading, he retained the thought that (while, perched upon his shoulders, the word *He* and the word *I* were beginning their carnage) there remained within his person which was already deprived of its senses obscure words, disembodied souls and angels of words, which were exploring him deeply.

Trans. Robert Lambertson (Barrytown, NY: Station Hill Press, 1988). P. 26.

¹⁶ *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: W.W. Norton, 1977), p. 131-35).

¹⁷See Michel Serres, *The Parasite*, trans. Lawrence R. Schehr (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), which pictures the human organism as, essentially, an ecological system of parasitic inhabitants:

It happens, in particular, that an infectious disease is provoked by the arrival of a parasite, a virus, a protozoan, a metazoan, or a fungus. Introduced either permanently or temporarily in the organism of its host that is henceforth its environment, it intercepts flows, sometimes accelerating them, turning them in its favor at every level. This one is specific—in the digestive tract—for the oral cavity or for intestinal movement; that one is specific for the circulation of blood; a third is specific for the sebaceous glands; I shall stop this enumeration, which would last for volumes on end. The sum or synopsis of these living creatures and their activities would tell us, I guess, that there are no channels, paths, or flows, that, at least in principle, do not have their interceptors. Each one has its niche, and few niches remain unoccupied (p. 198).

¹⁸Dennett's "anthropology," just to call it that, pictures us as intentional systems to be described in physiological rather than phenomenological language. The problem is that physicalists sometimes cheat when describing how the brain works by appropriating phenomenological language, and so often figure the brain as inhabited by a little man—a homunculus—who experiences brain processes as mental events. See *Consciousness Explained*, esp. pp. 261-62. ("Homunculi—demons, agents—are the coin of the realm in Artificial Intelligence, and computer science more generally.")

¹⁹ In *The Third Chimpanzee: The Evolution and the Future of the Human Animal* (New York: Harper Collins, 1992), Jared Diamond, summarizing a good deal of research, notes that chimps are genetically closer to humans than to gorillas and apes: "For example, the common and pygmy chimps differ in about 0.7 percent of their DNA and diverged around three million years ago; we differ in 1.6 of our DNA from either chimp and diverged from their common ancestor around seven million years ago; and gorillas differ in about 2.3 percent of their DNA from us and from chimps and diverged from the common ancestor leading to us and the two chimps around ten million years ago" (p. 21). We are, genetically, a third species of chimpanzee. See Tom Tyler, "Four Hands Good, Two Hands Bad," *Parallax*, 12, 1 (2006), 69-80, for a good reading of "Report to the Academy," and on the physiological proximity of humans and chimpanzees, who (in contrast, like us, to other primates) do not have prehensile feet. (This issue of *Parallax*, by the way, is a special number devoted to "the question of the animal.") See also Richard Dawkins, "Gaps in the Mind," *The Great Ape Project: Equality Beyond Humanity*, ed. Paula Cavalieri and Peter Singer (London: Fourth Estate, 1993), pp. 80-87.

²⁰ Hassan Melehy, "Silencing the Animals: Montaigne, Descartes, and the Hyperbole of Reason," *Symploke*, 13, nos. 1-2 (2005), 275.

²¹ See, for example, *Zoontologies: The Question of the Animal*, ed. Cary Wolfe (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003); *Animal Philosophy: Ethics and Identity*, ed. Peter Atterton and Matthew Calarco (New York: Continuum, 2004); Michael Marder, "Taming the Beast: The Other Tradition in Political Theory," *Mosaic*, 39, no. 4 (2006), 48-60; and Elisa Aaltola, "Personhood and Animals: Three Approaches." This essay (unpublished as of this writing) is available online at <http://www.cep.unt.edu/ISEE2/aaltola.pdf>.

²² *Tomorrow's Eve*, trans. Robert Martin Adams (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1982), p. 82.

²³ Compare Marge Piercy's novel, *He, She, and It* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991), in which a young woman named Shira is given the task of interacting with a cyborg named Yod in order to humanize it, that is, to teach it how to respond to things and to others like a human being (in other words, how to have feelings). Naturally, Yod excels mere humans in everything human, including, as Shira discovers, lovemaking.

²⁴ *The Open: Man and Animal*, trans. Kevin Attell (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), pp. 33-38. In human history there have been any number of "anthropological machines," whose task is to separate out those creatures who, for example, do not have language, do not cry or laugh, do not mourn or bury their dead, are not capable of eye contact, and so on down the line. See p. 37: "the anthropological machine of the moderns...functions by excluding as not (yet) human an already human being from itself, that is, by animalizing the human, by isolating the nonhuman within the human: *Homo alalus* or the ape-man."