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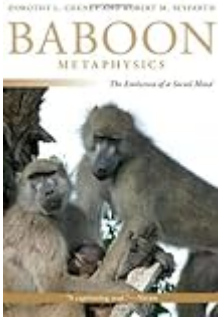

Dorothy L. Cheney, Robert M. Seyfarth. *Baboon Metaphysics: The Evolution of a Social Mind.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007. vi + 328 pp. $27.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-226-10243-6.

Cornelius Medvei. *Mr. Thundermug: A Novel.* New York: HarperCollins, 2007. 112 pp. $14.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-06-114612-1.

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Darwin's Challenge

The jacket description makes it clear that Dorothy Cheney and Robert Seyfarth "aim to fully comprehend [and, one might add, to communicate to human readers] the intelligence that underlies" baboon society and culture. To accomplish this requires, the description rightly claims, "a scientist's precision and a nature lover's eye," what the great nineteenth-century naturalist Richard Jeffers called "the eye of the beholder," as well as a novelist's "narrative" or "sympathetic imagination." The authors themselves acknowledge this complex mix in their second chapter, "The Primate Mind in Myth and Legend." Discovering that "the domain of expertise for baboons–and indeed for all monkeys and apes–is social life" led Cheney and Seyfarth to compare baboon social life with the narratives of human "social intrigue" in novels by Jane Austen and William Thackeray. Through these associations, their readers are helped to see and accept that humans too are apes who survive by "predict[ing] the behavior of others and form[ing] those social relationships that return the greatest benefit" (p. 12). They explain that "Baboons are good psychologists: they recognize their companions as individuals, observe their behavior,

and create, in their minds, a hierarchical representation of society based on matrilineal kinship and dominance rank. The social knowledge of baboons is too varied and complex to be explained by simple learning mechanism. Instead ... natural selection has led to the selection of a mind innately predisposed to search for patterns and rules that underlie other baboon's behavior" (pp. 14-15).

This insight leads these scientific researchers to exactly the main concerns of good animal literature: (1) "What is thought ... like in a creature without language"? and how can creatures with language depict such a "language of thought"? and (2) Might other-than-human vocalizations constitute language and, if so, how do creatures with spoken language translate and depict these other languages? In addressing these questions, animal literature raises the issue of nonhuman subjectivity as well.

In the novel *Mr. Thundermug*, Cornelius Medvei gives his readers a baboon protagonist who actually speaks, and who is likely able to do so because he (or his mother) had been an experimental subject in both language and more invasive laboratory experiments. Medvei's journalist narrator chooses to begin his story with the report of the death of Dr. Alphonsus Rotz. Rotz, first "extend[ing] the theory of total immersion field work" by (not unlike Cheney and Seyfarth) becoming part of a wild baboon troop on the Ethiopian savannah," returned to human civilization nineteen years later. The last of his articles, focusing on "a theory on the origin of language, and a detailed study of baboon vocal chords," offer clues to why he returned, as does his final publication in which he claims to have taught a particularly intelligent female to speak and "consider[s] the possibility of cross-breeding between humans and baboons" (pp. 4-5). The narrator concludes that Mr. Thundermug may well be the "walking vindication of [Rotz's] wildest theories" (pp. 7-8), his "human speech" substantiating the life's work of Dr. Alphonsus Rotz (p. 25).[1] Thundermug's relationship to Angela Young, his teacher, explores the sexual aspect of Rotz's theory.[2] Could Thundermug be the offspring of Rotz and his extraordinarily intelligent female baboon? The possibility suggests a radical change in how we see the human-animal divide and understand what it means to be a social primate.

Considered as a satire or satyr figure, Mr. Thundermug automatically echoes the hybrid nature of the satyr in classical Greek drama and, just as automatically, links Medvei's *Thundermug* with the underlying ecocentric and animistic message of satyr plays. In his foreword to Cary Wolfe's *Animal Rites: American Culture, the Discourse of Species, and Posthumanist Theory*, W. J. T. Mitchell concludes that, because we live in a world full of satyr-like reminders of our increasingly unbalanced life, "an age of sensitive apes and talking ants, neurotic Batmen and leather-loving Catwomen, animated frogs and singing trout, purring television sets and dinosaurs with family values, ... we need a new term to designate the hybrid creatures that we must learn to think of, a 'human/animal' form predicated on the refusal of the human/animal binary."[3]

It is suggestive that when Edward Bell, an interviewer for *Scientific American*, asked Alan Weisman, author of *The World Without Us* (2007), "If humans were to disappear, could another species evolve into a tool-making, crop-raising, language-using beast that would dominate the planet?" Weisman's answer proves germane to the thesis of Medvei's novel. Bell writes:

According to Alan Weisman, who may well have read Cheney and Seyfarth's work, baboons might have a reasonable shot. They have the largest brain of any primate besides *Homo sapiens*,[4] and like us, they adapted to living in savannas as forest habitats in Africa shrank. Writes Weisman: "If the dominant ungulates of the savanna–cattle–disappear, wildebeest will expand to take their place. If humans vanish, will baboons move into ours? Has their cranial capacity lain suppressed during the Holocene because we got the jump on them, being first out of the trees? With us no longer in the way, will their mental potential surge to the occasion and push them into a sudden, punctuated evolutionary scramble into every nook and cranny of our vacant niche?"[5]

Hollywood, with its long series of *Planet of the Apes* movies (1968-73, 2001), seems to agree with Weisman. A second out-of-Africa series could play out hundreds of years after the first. One wonders what the baboon archaeologists of the future would make of the extraordinary human artifacts–sculptures, cutlery, plastic bags–buried just beneath their feet. Weisman guesses that "the intellectual development of whatever creature digs them up might be kicked abruptly to a higher evolutionary plane by the discovery of ready-made tools."[6] Even as ghosts we could continue to shape the future.

A novel's narrator determines a good deal of how readers respond to both storyline and characters and, consequently, to the themes of a novel. Medvei's narrator is a journalist, someone like Cheney and Seyfarth, professionally trained as both observer and reporter.[7] To the extent that the reporter identifies and empathizes

with Thundermug's dilemma, caught or captured between species, Thundermug seems less a satiric than a tragic figure who shares human isolation from other species, even his own.

The cause of his dilemma is his unexplained ability to speak, but the city's bureaucrats are responsible for tangling him in the net of the local law. "If Mr. Thundermug is an animal," comments reviewer Bernard Kiley, "[the law says] he should be in a zoo. If he is a person, he is committing animal cruelty by illegally keeping three exotic animals. Mr. Thundermug is 5 human years old, and should be in an orphanage. But he is 378 baboon years old and eligible for a pension. It's all very Kafka-for-Simians…. It ends, of course, in a trial."[8] In the process Medvei points out some of the obstacles to considering rights for nonhumans under the laws of human cultures that at present tolerate nonhumans only in captivity of one kind or another (ownership, domestication, entertainment, or instruction). Thundermug's captivity is emphasized even further by the decision to put the baboon family in the local zoo. There, unlike other species who have become members of the urban communities humans have created in spaces that were once their natural habitats, the baboons become experimental objects to be observed, learned from, and used.

Notes

[1]. Other than Michael Crichton's *Congo* (1980), novels that explore language and bio-experiments (including breeding) on primates include Douglas Preston's *Jennie* (1994), Peter Goldsworthy's *Wish: A Biologically Engineered Love Story* (1995), Peter Hoag's *Woman and Ape* (1996), and W. Michael Gear and Kathleen O'Neil Gears' *Dark Inheritance* (2001).

[2]. The ape as student is an ancient trope. The use of "aping" for "imitating" is related. Cheney and Seyfarth point out that the Bavians (Baboons) in *Two Noble Kinsmen* (1614), a play by John Fletcher, possibly co-authored by William Shakespeare, are cast as a student of a human Schoolmaster (p. 217).

[3]. W. J. T. Mitchell, "Foreword: The Rights of Things," in *Animal Rites: American Culture, the Discourse of Species, and Posthumanist Theory*, by Cary Wolfe (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2003), xiii-xiv. Equally suggestive is Mitchell's term for this phenomenon–"totemism"–a synonym for zoocentrism or animism.

[4]. See also Nicholas Wade, "How Baboons Think (Yes, Think)," *New York Times*, October 9, 2007.

[5]. Edward Bell, "An Earth Without People: Interview with Alan Weisman," *Scientific American*, July 2007, 76-81.

[6]. Ibid., 78-79.

[7]. It is interesting that the first extended report on baboon behavior comes from Eugene Marais (1872-1936), a journalist who had observed baboons in their natural habitats in Africa for many years. Both his *The Soul of the Ape* (1922) and *My Friends the Baboons* (1939) were condemned by scientists as "anthropomorphic in the extreme" but are reevaluated by Cheney and Seyfarth because, like them, Marais "realized that the essence of baboon life was their society" and that therefore it was natural to translate his knowledge about them by analogy with that other social ape, the human (p. 29).

[8]. Brendon Kiley, "An Eloquent Baboon: Mr. Thundermug is Kafka for Monkeys," *The [Seattle] Stranger*, April 10, 2007.