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‘Monkey-Advice and Monkey-Help’: Isak Dinesen’s EcoGothic

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ABSTRACT

EcoGothic dramatises the leakiness of systems, the fuzziness of boundaries and the precariousness of habitats, bodies, organisms and identities, as objects, animals, acts and substances that appear to violate the laws of nature take on forms of agency ordinarily attributed only to the human subject. EcoGothic is less a new type of Gothic than it is a matter of examining perhaps very well-known texts with a new and enhanced attentiveness to their environmental significance. In this essay, I study Isak Dinesen’s ‘The Monkey’ (1935) through the lens of this emerging field of critical inquiry. I first consider the story’s haunted architectural setting, then examine the male protagonist’s fluid embodiment, and finally analyse the story’s shocking conclusion. Tackling a notoriously queer and puzzling text, I am concerned less to ‘solve’ the story’s weird mysteries than to show how Dinesen uses specific Gothic conventions—uncanny buildings, disintegrating bodies and supernatural transformations—to adumbrate a way of thinking that conceives of human existence less in terms of enclosure, separation, stability, self-sufficiency and sovereignty and more in terms of uncanny coexistence, permeability, flow, exchange, symbiosis and interpenetration.

Introduction

Karen Blixen/Isak Dinesen’s breakthrough publication *Seven Gothic Tales* (1935) went through various titles including *Nozdref’s Cook: Nine Tales* and *Tales by Nozdref’s Cook* before it ended up under the rubric of ‘Gothic’ (Brantly, 2002: p. 12).¹ Dinesen’s labeling decision has often puzzled critics, especially in Dinesen’s native Denmark, where the term

¹ Working under the male pseudonym Isak Dinesen, Karen Blixen first wrote *Seven Gothic Tales* in English and later rewrote it in Danish as *Syv fantastiske fortællinger* (*Seven Fantastic Tales*). In this essay, I follow the dominant tradition among English-language publishers and academic critics, who generally refer to her by her *nom de plume*.

‘Gothic’ (‘gotisk’) primarily refers to medieval church architecture and has not traditionally been part of the literary-analytical vocabulary. Asked about her nomenclature, Dinesen later explained that ‘[w]hen I used the word “Gothic” I didn’t mean the real Gothic, but the imitation of the Gothic, the Romantic age of Byron, the age of that man [...] who built Strawberry Hill, the age of the Gothic revival’ (Cate, 1959: p. 153). Many critics have recognised Dinesen as a self-conscious latecomer and witty respondent to the rich traditions of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Gothic, fin-de-siècle Gothic and female Gothic (James, 1983; Black, 1985; Stambaugh, 1985; Aiken, 1990: pp. 67-83; Rees, 2006; Kastbjerg, 2009). In this essay, I study ‘The Monkey’, perhaps ‘the most Gothic of [Dinesen’s] tales’ (James, 1983: p. 43), through the lens of the emerging field of critical inquiry known as ‘ecoGothic’ (Smith & Hughes, 2013).

When ecocriticism first emerged approximately twenty-five years ago, participants in the fledgling movement particularly gravitated towards Romantic lyric poetry, pastoral nature writing, and other forms of ‘nature-endorsing’ (Soper, 1998: p. 61) literature, but with few exceptions they tended to disregard or dismiss Gothic. More recent ecocritics, however, have discovered Gothic’s power to ‘question our vaunted humanity as well as the “nature” to which it is conventionally opposed’ (Garrard, 2012: p. 218). Inspired by Jacques Derrida and Donna Haraway, for example, Timothy Morton (2007) interprets Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818) as a text of ‘dark ecology’ that breaks down nostalgic aestheticising conceptions of ‘Nature (with a capital n)’ (p. 162) and forces readers to confront ‘the sticky mess that we’re in and that we are’ (p. 187). Jeffrey Weinstock (2017) similarly reads the memorable opening scene of Horace Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto* (1765), where Prince Conrad is crushed by a massive steel helmet, to suggest that ‘the contemporary nonhuman turn finds its roots precisely in the iconoclasm of the Gothic’ (p. 61) and that ‘Gothic things are finally more lively than people’ (p. 67). ‘EcoGothic’, then, is less a new type of Gothic than it is a matter of examining perhaps very well-known texts with a new and enhanced attentiveness to their significance as ‘environmental texts’ (Buell, 1995: p. 7). In Gothic fictions, ancient curses are fulfilled, integrities are compromised, materialities become insurgent, and beings believed to be dead and inert acquire a troubling, sometimes monstrous vitality. While it may lack the high cultural prestige and direct ecopolitical poignancy of more ‘biophilic’ (Wilson, 1984) genres, ecoGothic dramatises the leakiness of systems, the fuzziness of boundaries, and the precariousness of habitats, bodies, organisms and identities, as objects, animals, acts, and substances that appear to violate the laws of nature take on forms of agency ordinarily attributed only to the human subject.

‘Real art must always involve some witchcraft’ (1978: p. 181) wrote Dinesen in 1929, and in the course of her writing career she deliberately adopted the witch, a ‘key figure of European Gothic literature’ (Johnston, 2014: p. 595), as one of her alter egos (see also Stambaugh, 1988). Dinesen embraced Gothic modes and personae, I argue, because these lend themselves particularly well to questioning deeply rooted conceptions about sexual identity, embodiment, human-animal difference, the status of the natural world, the agentic power of different beings, and the special place of humans as the driving forces of history.² Against the ‘fantasy figure called the human who stands alone: dominant, controlled and powerful’ (Fudge, 2008: p. 15), Dinesen’s ecoGothic aligns itself with ‘the posthuman’, which I understand not in temporal succession to humanism, but as a critical strain that can be traced within a plurality of cultural texts and discourses interrogating what it means to be human (Wolfe, 2010; Braidotti, 2013; Nayar, 2013; Mortensen, 2018). My interpretation of ‘The Monkey’, then, supplements the strong traditions of psychoanalytic, feminist, post-feminist, and poststructuralist Dinesen criticism, even as it challenges dominant human-centred approaches with explicit consideration of her stories’ ‘dis-anthropocentric’ (Iovino and Opperman, 2014: p. 8) stratagems. To explore how Dinesen bewitches her readers, I will first consider the story’s haunted architectural setting, then examine the male protagonist’s fluid embodiment, and finally analyse the story’s shocking conclusion. Tackling a notoriously queer and puzzling text, I am concerned less to ‘solve’ the story’s weird mysteries than to show how Dinesen uses specific Gothic conventions—uncanny buildings, disintegrating bodies and supernatural transformations—to adumbrate a way of thinking that conceives of human existence less in terms of enclosure, separation, stability, self-sufficiency, and sovereignty and more in terms of uncanny coexistence, permeability, flow, exchange, symbiosis, and interpenetration. By blurring the boundaries of the human home, body and identity, I argue, Dinesen plays monkey tricks with modern self-understandings and challenges us to think beyond anthropocentricity.

The Story

Set during the early nineteenth century in one of ‘the Lutheran countries of northern Europe’ (Dinesen, 1994: p. 109), which Aage Kabell (1968) specifies as Prussia (p. 127), ‘The Monkey’

² Black observes that Dinesen used ‘the fantastic mode’ not merely to ‘entertain’ but also ‘to question, criticise, and put into doubt the moral conventions of her age’ (1985: p. 380).

recreates the Gothic's characteristic atmosphere (of unease, foreboding and mystery), reuses many of the genre's familiar physical trappings (a convent, a castle, a dark forest, a magic potion), and resuscitates some of its most familiar characters (a witchlike prioress, an obsessive count, a longsuffering virgin, a melancholic lover). Dinesen's narrative pits older and younger members of two obscurely interwoven families against each other in an amoral story 'full of unspeakable secrets' (Rees, 2006: p. 23) that self-consciously exploits the Gothic's association with seduction, madness, decadence, intoxication, monstrosity, sexual deviance, supernatural excess, and shocking revelation. At the same time, it works towards 'queering' normative conceptions of sexual difference, subjective wholeness, inviolable nature, mind-body dualism, and human exceptionalism.

The young soldier Boris comes from an aristocratic family, but he has disgraced himself by involvement in a homosexual scandal. Now he seeks advice from his aunt Cathinka, who is both the owner of the titular pet monkey and the prioress of a former convent that has been converted into a home for elderly women. Boris has decided to get married, and his aunt concocts a scheme: Boris will beguile and wed Athena Hopballehus, the daughter of a neighboring nobleman recently made wealthy by winning a decade-long lawsuit. The count of Hopballehus and his daughter live in isolation from the surrounding world, but a mysterious exchange of letters hints that there exists a prior, perhaps incestuous liaison between the two families. Boris' proposal places the strong-willed and able-bodied but sexually inexperienced Athena in the vulnerable position of the Gothic heroine, and she rejects his suit, claiming that she 'will never marry' (1994: p. 135). The prioress takes charge, and she invites Athena to a 'great supper of seduction' (1994: p. 139) that she hopes will weaken her defenses and seal the alliance. The prioress plies Athena with rich food and wine, and when she retires to her room the aunt feeds her nephew an aphrodisiac and commands him to go and seduce (or rape) Athena. Boris kisses Athena against her will, a fight ensues, and Boris retreats, having lost two of his teeth. On the following morning, the prioress' machinations are interrupted when the window is broken and her little African monkey enters. The prioress tries to escape, but the monkey pursues her, leaps onto her head and strips off her lace cap, at which point she transforms into the monkey, and the monkey into her.

Uncanny Domesticity

The vogue for Gothic began with an architectural project (the construction of Horace Walpole's faux-medieval Strawberry Hill), and Gothic fictions regularly borrow their titles from specific fictional buildings (Otranto, Udolpho, Northanger Abbey, Usher, Wuthering Heights, Bleak House etc.). The plot of 'The Monkey' alternates between two Gothic buildings: Hopballehus, a 'late baroque' family castle, 'majestic as the Sphinx itself', but 'now baroquely dilapidated and more than half a ruin' with a sense of 'doom [...] hanging over it' (Dinesen, 1994: p. 122); and the prioress' Closter Seven, a centuries-old all-women convent, where it appears to Boris that something is 'not right', 'quite wrong', and 'out of order' (p. 133).

Since the time of Matthew G. Lewis' *The Monk* (1796) and Ann Radcliffe's *The Italian* (1797), abbeys, convents and monasteries have been highly conventional (if not clichéd) settings of Gothic fiction. Closter Seven is described in 'The Monkey' as a retreat

'for unmarried ladies and widows of noble birth who here pass the autumn and winter days of their lives in a dignified and comfortable routine, according to the traditions of the houses. Many of these institutions are extremely wealthy, own great stretches of land, and have had, during the centuries, inheritances and legacies bequested to them. A proud and kindly spirit of past feudal times seems to dwell in the stately buildings and to guide the existence of the communities.'

(p. 109)

Closter Seven is not only a house of a certain kind but also a home providing a sense of privacy, comfort and security: 'Closter Seven was a small world of its own, and moved in a particular atmosphere of peace and immutability' (p. 111). According to Mary Douglas (1991), 'home is space under control' (p. 289), while for Yuri Lotman (1990), home 'is one's own space [...] the world of the human personality, a world that stands up to the elements and to anything which belittles and denigrates the life of the individual' (p. 97). In Maria Kaika's (2004) analysis, the very idea of the modern bourgeois home is premised on the need to control and exclude nonhuman factors and influences: 'The purpose of building a home through human history has been [...] to create a familiar environment by establishing a high level of control over the interaction between the edifice and its environment' (p. 272). 'Home' is where humans feel safe, inviolable, and in command.

Closter Seven, however, is a distinctly uncanny sort of home, where the meaning of domesticity, if understood in purely human(ist) terms, is tested and challenged. For one thing, the house is not occupied by the conventional heterosexual nuclear family often deemed synonymous with bourgeois domesticity, but by a community of widows and spinsters led by a 'Virgin Prioress' (Dinesen, 1994: p. 109). In addition to its contingent of 'cloistered women' (p. 111), moreover, the convent houses a sizeable group of nonhuman inhabitants:

'[T]he convent of Closter Seven held, coordinately with its estimable female population, a whole world of pets of all sorts, and was well aware of the order of precedence therein. There were here parrots and cockatoos, small dogs, graceful cats from all parts of the world, a white Angora goat, like that of Esmeralda, and a purple-eyed young fallow deer. There was even a tortoise which was supposed to be more than a hundred years old.' (p. 109)

The nonhumans of Closter Seven comprise a complex and differentiated assortment of both traditional and untraditional pets coming from different countries and belonging to native as well as exotic species. Chief among these is the prioress' monkey, which has been brought to Europe from Africa:

'[A] little gray monkey [...] had been given [to the prioress] by her cousin, Admiral von Schreckenstein, on his return from Zanzibar, and of which she was very fond. When she was at her card table, a place where she spent some of her happiest hours, the monkey was wont to sit on the back of her chair, and to follow with its glittering eyes the course of the cards as they were dealt out and taken in. At other times it would be found, in the early mornings, on top of the stepladder in the library, pulling out brittle folios a hundred years old, and scattering over the black-and-white marble floor browned leaves dealing with strategy, princely marriage contracts, and witches' trials.' (p. 109)

Neither Denmark nor Germany, of course, has native simian species, but the prioress' monkey has made itself at home in the convent and the surrounding grounds, where it moves about as it pleases: 'From time to time, particularly in the autumn, when nuts were ripening in the hedges along the roads and in the large forests that surrounded the convent, it happened that the Prioress' monkey would feel the call of a freer life and would disappear for a few weeks or a

month, to come back of its own accord when the night frosts set in' (p. 110). The monkey's precise relationship to the prioress is the subject of much speculation among characters, but it remains shrouded in mystery until the end of the story (and even after). It is clear, however, that the monkey enjoys a special privilege as 'the Prioress' favourite', whose 'whims' are treated with 'forbearance' (p. 110).

Dinesen was interested in homes and domesticity, publishing stories in the American women's magazine *The Ladies' Home Journal* and the Danish equivalent *Hjemmet (The Home)*, and striking visitors with her eccentric style of homemaking first at her Kenya coffee farm house and subsequently in her home at Rungstedlund north of Copenhagen. In 'The Monkey', Dinesen imagines human spaces ecoGothically, suggesting the participation of nonhuman forces and the ongoing entwining of interior and exterior, living and non-living, public and private, culture and nature. When Boris visits Hopballehus, for example, he notes how '[t]he light of the setting sun seemed to have soaked into the dull masses of stone. They reddened and glowed with it until the whole place became a mysterious, a glorified, abode, in which the tall windows shone like a row of evening stars' (p. 123). The convent parlor's windows overlooking the 'autumnal garden' are covered with 'heavy curtains which had on them borders of flower garlands done in cross-stitch' (p. 113). Supper is served on china 'painted with pink roses' (p. 134) and set on a 'table [that] was prettily decorated with camellias from the orangery', while 'upon the snow-white tablecloth, amongst the clear crystal glasses, the old green wineglasses threw delicate little shadows, like the spirit of a pine forest in summer' (p. 139). Athena's bedroom 'was filled with the scent of incense and flowers', a 'large bouquet decorat[ing] the table near the bed'. Its 'floor had a wine-colored carpet with roses in it, which, near the lamps, seemed to be drinking in the light, and farther from them looked like pools of dark crimson into which one would not like to walk' (p. 151). Rather than shielding inhabitants from the outside world, the convent's décor seems to invite it in. The prioress presides over an architecture of porous boundaries, fractured fault lines and compromising co-habitations.

By foregrounding nonhumans' (especially the monkey's) presence in the (un)making of human space, 'The Monkey' works towards Gothicising the meaning of 'home'. We may think that homes provide 'ontological security' (Giddens, 1990: pp. 92-100), and we may imagine that we are safe, inviolable, and in control of the things that surround us in our home spaces. Indeed, '[v]iews of home as a place that is separate from nature have long been central to

Western cultural understandings of home as a safe, secure, and comfortable space' (Power, 2012: pp. 6-7). But some recent thinking suggests that home is also infiltrated and shaped by the nonhuman rhythms, forces and agencies that inhabit, traverse and become part of the house-as-home. Kaika (2004), for example, argues that a home does not exist as an autonomous space separate from its environment and governed by disciplinary interiority, but emerges in a process involving the materials that it is built from, the energy flows that it utilizes and the various creatures (human and nonhuman) who come to live in its nooks and crannies. Derrida (2002) deconstructs domesticity, when he analyses how an animal's (his cat's) powerful gaze and presence in the most private space of human habitation (the bathroom) begins to destabilise the human sense of power and complacency. And Haraway (2008) imagines homemaking in terms of 'naturecultural' exchange, reciprocity and relationality always being made and remade, never finished or closed. Haraway's proposition is that homes are 'contact zones' produced by relationships between human and other-than-human 'companion species', spaces of multicity and heterogeneity where a host of agents with an array of different intentions meet, coexist and jostle.

Dinesen's Gothic tale recasts the domestic habitat as less 'an oppressive *domus*' than an 'inter-species *oikos*' (Acampora, 2004: p. 220), or even a 'beastly space' (Philo and Wilbert, 2000) where nonhumans begin to evade or resist the placements assigned to them by humans. The prioress' pet monkey is both literally and symbolically messy, disarranging the library and upsetting the structures that underpin human thinking and practice. Both wild and domesticated, African and Danish, the monkey straddles boundaries and oscillates between human and nonhuman spaces, disrupting the territorialisations associated with the social order. A foreign importation, it defamiliarises the familiar landscape of 'lawns and avenues' (Dinesen, 1994: p. 113), 'fir plantation[s]' (p. 117), and 'sunny slopes' (p. 120), and it undomesticates the homely interior of 'cozy room[s]' with 'lamps of blue china' (p. 134) and 'table[s] prettily decorated' (p. 139). It is typically seen in movement, 'swiftly mounting the branches to disappear in the crowns of the forest' (p. 110), running 'across the road and [...] into the deeper black shadows of the Prioress' shrubbery' (p. 133) or 'squirm[ing] up the doorcase' (p. 161) and 'jump[ing] onto a pedestal' (p. 162).

As an anomalous and contradictory 'man-animal' (Leach, 1966: p. 45), the monkey draws attention to the hybridity that characterises Closter Seven. A hybrid of the Danish 'kloster' and the English 'cloister', 'closter' derives from the Latin 'claustrum' ('enclosure').

‘Convent’, on the other hand, stems from the Latin ‘conventus’, which means ‘assembly’ or ‘company’. Like other privileged spaces in Dinesen’s fiction and non-fiction, Closter Seven is less a cloister than a convent, a more-than-human community where different beings convene, contend and mesh with each other. Impure and multiple, its culture is the product of several coexisting (but not always collaborating) presences:

‘It was the general opinion, or a standing joke amongst the ladies of the convent, that the Prioress, during these periods [of the monkey’s absence], would become silent and the victim of a particular restlessness, and would seem loth to act in the affairs of the house, in which at ordinary times she showed great vigor. Amongst themselves they called the monkey her *Geheimrat*, and they rejoiced when it was to be seen again in her drawing-room, a little chilled after its stay in the woods.’ (p. 110)

Dignifying the monkey as the prioress’ ‘Geheimrat’ (privy councilor) in this way suggests that Gothic houses and indeed all human *oikoi* (households) are only in part human-made and -controlled. Whether castles or convents, Gothic buildings are not the exclusive products of the human builders who designed them and the owners who inhabit them. Such structures invariably host the ‘other’ in the form of nonhuman beings, materials, elements or processes that are simultaneously inside yet outside, recognisable yet unfamiliar, homely yet unhomely. For Dinesen as for Freud, the human ‘ego is not the master in its own house’ (qtd. Royle, 2003: p. 59). Things in the domestic sphere are less domesticated than they might appear. There is always monkey business in progress and other-than-human strangers to be reckoned with.

Fluid Embodiment

In addition to making human built environments strange, ‘The Monkey’ also Gothicises the human body, foregrounding its ‘trans-corporeal’ (Alaimo, 2010) interconnectedness with other bodies and with the biological-material world. The main plot of ‘The Monkey’ centres on the prioress’ machinations to ensure the marriage of Boris and Athena to unite the two families – a scheme that can only succeed if she is able to manipulate the independent-minded Athena into compliance. This narrative recuperates familiar storylines from Gothic texts, where scenes of menace, constraint, entrapment, and violation are common, and where a vulnerable young woman, such as Emily St Aubert in Radcliffe’s *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794) or Lucy

Westenra in Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), frequently finds herself beset by an older, implacable authority figure. Throughout these proceedings, Boris, who is the main focaliser of the story, is positioned in ways that trouble common humanist understandings of the human body as a bounded, autonomous, intact, and substantial entity.

The posthumanist feminist Stacy Alaimo (2010) coins the concept 'trans-corporeality' to situate the human body as always already enmeshed and entangled in material exchanges with other bodies and with the physical and biological world. As embodied beings, Alaimo argues, we are literally part of our environment, which 'is always the very substance of ourselves' (2010: p. 4). In 'States of Suspension: Trans-Corporeality at Sea', Alaimo writes about the fluids that flow within and across human bodies and nonhuman environments, as she revisits Rachel Carson's claim that 'each of us carries in our veins a salty stream in which the elements sodium, potassium, and calcium are combined in almost-the same proportions as in sea water' (qtd. Alaimo, 2012: p. 482). A certain powerful western tradition holds that human bodies are (and should be) solid, separate, stable, closed, and controlled, Alaimo argues, but thinking about flows and fluidity 'renders the human permeable' (p. 477) and suggests that we are not sovereign masters of our own bodily destinies. The fact that '[t]he sea surges through the bodies of all terrestrial animals, including humans' (p. 482) thus helps conceptualize the human self as 'substantially and perpetually interconnected with the flows of substances and the agencies of environments' (p. 476).

Seven Gothic Tales opens with 'The Deluge at Norderney', a story of watery environmental apocalypse in which fluidity overwhelms solidity both in the nonhuman and the human worlds (Dinesen, 1994: pp. 3-98). 'The Monkey' similarly contests the anthropocentric ideology of the 'sealed up, impermeable body' (Grosz, 1994: p. 199) with a 'whirlpool' (Dinesen, 1994: p. 122) or 'maelstrom' (p. 158) of flow. Streams in this story, in other words, do not stay safely on the outside. Rather, they constantly flow *into* the human body, crossing its boundaries, modifying its composition, compromising its autonomy and manifesting its material imbrication in external environments, systems, process, and substances. In the course of this story of 'wine-begotten hopes and moods' (Dinesen, 1994: p. 127), for example, characters ingest substantial quantities of alcoholic drink and other powerful fluids. During the visit to Hopballehus, the Baron compares their meeting to 'the wedding of Cana' and toasts his guest in a 'golden bottle' (p. 126) of wine. Later, during the 'great supper of seduction', Athena struggles to maintain her composure under the influence of the prioress' potent drink:

‘She had drunk very little wine in her life, and had never tasted champagne, and with the amounts which the hostess of the supper party poured into her, she ought rightly not to have been able to stand on her legs. But she had behind her a long row of ancestors who had in their time lain under all the heavy old oak tables of the province, and who now came to the assistance of the daughter of their race. Still the wine went to her head.’ (p. 140)

Boris, ‘who could drink more than most people’ (p. 140), is shown enjoying ‘two glasses [of wine], which did him good’ (p. 116), drinking ‘his wine in a happy mood’ (p. 128), and ‘pouring himself out some more coffee’ (p. 134). When Athena escapes to her bedchamber, ‘more than a little drunk’ (p. 140), the prioress orders Boris to approach her, force himself upon her, and thereby compel her to marry him. When Boris questions his ability to perform this task—“‘Aunt Cathinka”, said Boris, “you do not know, perhaps, but there is a limit to the effects of will-power in a man”” (p. 149)—his aunt prepares a liquid ‘love philter’ (p. 155):

‘The old woman kept staring at him. She stretched out her dry delicate little hand and touched him. Her face twisted in a wry little grimace. After a moment she moved around to the back of the room and brought back a bottle and a small glass. Very carefully she filled the glass, handed it to him, and nodded her head two or three times. In sheer despair he emptied it.

The glass was filled with a liquor of the color of very old dark amber. It had an acrid and rank taste. Acrid and rank were also the old dark-amber eyes of the woman, watching him over the rim of the glass. As he drank, she laughed. Then she spoke. Boris, strangely enough, afterward remembered these words, which he did not understand: ‘Help him now, you good faru’, she said.’ (pp. 149-150)

Gothic fiction is rife with scenes of poisoning, drugging, and intoxication, attesting to the genre’s preoccupation with questions of bodily (in)stability, (im)permeability, and power(lessness) (see for example Davidson, 2010). ‘Faru’ is Swahili for rhinoceros, and the story ‘The Dreamers’ tells us that ‘rhino-horn [...] is highly valued as an aphrodisiac’ (Dinesen, 1994: p. 339). As this passage of ‘Gothic pharmacology’ (Davidson, 210: p. 206) reveals, Boris’ body is less a protective armor (like a rhinoceros’ skin) than it is a permeable membrane

allowing for constant ‘trans-corporeal’ traffic. When Boris ingests the prioress’ compound, external substances enter his bloodstream, alter his body’s chemical balance, and cloud his judgment: ‘His blood leapt up to his brain; he hardly knew where he was. With failing breath he wondered if this was an effect of the Prioress’ love potion’ (p. 151).

Dinesen’s ecoGothic body is fluid rather than solid, permeable rather than closed, extensive with rather than separate from the nonhuman environment. Liquids in ‘The Monkey’ flow not only into but also *from* the human body into the external world. Most notably, when Boris confronts Athena in her bedchamber and insincerely declares his love—‘Athena [...] I have loved you all my life’—he is forcibly rebuffed, and a physical confrontation follows:

‘For a moment the light-eyed girl stared at him, bewildered. Then she drew herself up as a snake does when it is ready to strike. That she did not attempt to cry for help showed him that she had a clearer understanding of the situation, and of the fact that she had no friend in the house, than he had given her credit for; or perhaps her young broad breast harbored sheer love of combat. The next moment she struck out. Her powerful swift and direct fist hit him in the mouth and knocked out two of his teeth. The pain and the smell and taste of the blood which filled his mouth sent him beside himself. He let her go to try for a stronger hold, and immediately they were in each other’s arms, in an embrace of life and death.’ (p. 152)

Boris’ hemorrhage has been carefully prepared by the images of drinking, seepage, staining, and spilling that recur throughout the story and especially during the ‘great supper of seduction’, as when ‘in her excited state of mind [Athena] overturned her glass, breaking the stem of it, and the wine flowed over the tablecloth’ (p. 145). The flow of blood from Boris’ mouth, moreover, parallels the décor of the bedroom, whose ‘floor had a wine-colored carpet with roses in it, which, near the lamps, seemed to be drinking in the light, and farther from them looked like pools of dark crimson into which one would not like to walk’ (p. 151).

Previously ‘blood leapt up to his brain’, but now Boris feels blood leaving his body: ‘The blood kept coming into his mouth [...] Gasp[ing] for air, his mouth full of blood, he saw the whole room swaying from one side to another’ (p. 154). Mishler (1985: p. 443) and van Hees (1984: p. 20) analyse this climactic scene as a symbolic castration, while other critics (for

example Heede, 2001: pp. 200-201) comment on Dinesen's ironic reversal of the defloration plotted by the prioress. I interpret the blood flowing from Boris as a manifestation of bodily openness, materiality and environmentality, and thus as an important step in the story's Gothic unravelling of the sealed-off, armored, anti-ecological body. 'All orifices of the [classical] body are closed' (Bakhtin, 1984: p. 320), but Boris' corporeality is inscribed as 'a mode of seepage' (Grosz, 1994: p. 203). Boris' body is wounded, opened and unfinished, an abject body that ingests and emits, absorbs and leaks. His 'bleeding mouth', which is 'swelled badly' (Dinesen, 1994: p. 155) even at the end of the story, remains a tell-tale sign of the human body's incompleteness, fragility and inescapable participation in environmental processes.

More-than-Human Identity

Critical readers of 'The Monkey' must inevitably grapple with the story's conclusion, where a shocking supernatural transformation appears to take place:

[Boris] rose to open the window for it. "No! No!" shrieked the old woman in a paroxysm of horror. The knocking went on. The monkey obviously had something in its hand with which it was beating against the pane. The Prioress got up from her chair. She swayed in raising herself, but once on her legs she seemed alert and ready to run. But at the next moment the glass of the window fell crashing to the floor, and the monkey jumped into the room.

Still holding her frock with both hands, and bending double, as if ready to drop on all fours, madly, as if blinded by fright, she dashed along the wall. But still the monkey followed her, and it was quicker than she. It jumped upon her, got hold of her lace cap, and tore it from her head. The face which she turned toward the young people was already transformed, shriveled and wrinkled, and of dark-brown color. There was a few moments' wild whirling fight. Boris made a movement to throw himself into it, to save his aunt. But already at the next moment, in the middle of the red damask parlor, under the eyes of the old powdered general and his wife, in the broad daylight and before their eyes, a change, a metamorphosis, was taking place and was consummated.

The old woman with whom they had been talking was, writhing and disheveled, forced to the floor; she was scrunched and changed. Where she had been, a monkey was now crouching and whining, altogether beaten, trying to take refuge in a corner of the room. And where the monkey had been jumping about, rose, a little out of breath from the effort, her face still a deep rose, the true Prioress of Closter Seven.

The monkey crawled into the shade of the back of the room and for a little while continued its whimpering and twitching. Then, shaking off its misfortunes, it jumped in a light and graceful leap onto a pedestal, which supported the marble head of the philosopher Immanuel Kant, and from there it watched, with its glittering eyes, the behavior of the three people in the room.’ (pp. 161-162)

The subject of endless commentary, this scene seems to place the reader in ‘a narrative space of absolute undecidability’ (Aiken, 1990: p. 134). It is clear that Dinesen’s final ‘metamorphosis’ asks to be read with keen awareness of similar scenes of human-animal transformation in fantastic and Gothic texts including Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* (8 AD), Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897), Franz Kafka’s *The Metamorphosis* (1912), and David Garnett’s *Lady into Fox* (1922).³ Yet even as this hair-raising tableau provides some semblance of closure, letting us see ‘the true Prioress of Closter Seven’ (p. 162), it compounds uncertainties and raises more problems than it resolves. Has the monkey, we wonder, occupied the prioress’ body consistently throughout the story, or only intermittently? Is the scheme to mate Boris and Athena the brainchild of the prioress or the monkey (or both), and will the ‘true prioress’ continue or discontinue the project to heterosexualise Boris and ‘put [Athena] in a cage’ (p. 142) now that she has taken (or resumed) her legitimate place? How can we trust that this denouement provides a ‘true’ revelation and not another twist in the prioress’ (and Dinesen’s) mystification of characters and readers? And what, if anything, does the prioress’ final quotation from Virgil’s *The Aeneid*—‘Discite justitiam, et non temnere divos’ (‘Learn justice, and do not feat the gods’) (p. 163)—prophesise for Boris’ and Athena’s future?

³ In an analysis strongly informed by critical animal studies, Ann-Sofie Lönngren places Dinsen’s story in this literary context (2015: p. 127-165).

Simians make frequent appearances in creative literature, where they often carry complex symbolic, satiric, and allegorical meanings (Romero, 2016). This crucial scene in Dinesen's story is, in the end, less a transformation or substitution, where one entity ('the true Prioress') replaces another ('the monkey'), than a revelation of irreducible interdependence. In the course of the story, Dinesen provides several clues suggesting that we understand the prioress-monkey relationship not in terms of stable, solid identities, but rather in terms of non-dualistic 'contamination' (Rorai, 2005: p. 126). The prioress, for example, has decorated her dining private dining room with exotic and oriental scenes, 'in a style that would appeal to a creature from Zanzibar' (Brantly, 2002: p. 35), and while still in human guise she confesses a strong, monkey-like preference for the forest environment:

'She sat for a little while in deep thought. Then she turned to the boy, her dark eyes clear as glass. "You have come through my new fir plantation", she said with the animation of a person talking about a hobby. "What do you think of it?" The planting and upkeep of forests were indeed among her greatest interests in life. They talked for some time pleasantly of trees. There was nothing for your health, she said, like forest air. She herself was never able to pass a good night in town or amongst fields, but to lie down at night knowing that you had the trees around you for miles, their roots so deep in the earth, their crowns moving in the dark, she considered to be one of the delights of life.' (Dinesen, 1994: p. 117)

At another point, the prioress goes 'up to the window, as if she meant to throw herself out' (p. 138), and when eating '[f]rom time to time she made use of a little gesture peculiar to her, of daintily scratching herself here and there with her delicately pointed little finger' (p. 144). As Brantly notes, '[l]ooking back over the tale, it is difficult to tell at any given time with whom one has been dealing' (2002: p. 35).

'What if what is "proper" to humankind were to be inhabited by the inhuman?' wonders Jean-Francois Lyotard (1991: p. 2). 'The Monkey' lets Aunt Cathinka's and the monkey's identities blur and bleed into each other from the beginning, making the prioress' status as a 'full' and 'pure' human being always-already problematic. Dinesen adds to the ambiguity surrounding the prioress' humanity, and humanity in general, by describing both the prioress and other human characters with a wide range of metaphors and similes drawn from the

nonhuman world.⁴ Thus, Boris notices how the prioress' 'eyes darted up and down the walls, like a rat that is shut up and cannot get out' (p. 160), while kissing her cheek makes him feel 'as if he had touched an electric eel' (p. 119). The prioress' mouth is 'like a very dainty little rosebud' (p. 139), and Boris and his soldier comrades are characterised as 'young flowers of the land' (p. 111), while the Count of Hopballehus cuts 'a striking figure [...] scrutinizing his visitor, like an old man gorilla outside his lair, ready for the attack' (p. 124). Athena, too, is imagined zoomorphically, as a 'young dove, a bird of the night' (136) 'standing [...] on one leg, like a big stork' (p. 130) or a 'young creature' having 'a pair of eyes for a young lioness or eagle' p. (129) and a voice like 'the lioness' roar' (p. 159). When Boris wrestles her in her bedroom, we are told that she draws herself up 'as a snake does when it is ready to strike' (p. 152).

Conclusion

Recent ecocritics' move towards 'the darker side of nature writing' (Hillard, 2009: p. 688) no doubt in part reflects the darkening mood among those who mourn the irretrievable losses to the world's ecosystems and understand that humanity's window to forestall catastrophic species extinctions and runaway climate change is rapidly closing. Gothic's blighted landscapes, treacherous environments and dysfunctional social relationships in many ways provide fitting objective correlatives to the ever-more apocalyptic prognostications for our environmentally precarious existence in the Anthropocene.

Yet interest in ecoGothic also flourishes because Gothic writing—the literature of collapsing boundaries, atavistic hauntings, contaminating invasions, and uncanny entanglements *par excellence*—offers instructive and potentially beneficial models for understanding human, more-than-human and perhaps especially posthuman being-in-the-world. Dinesen wrote to one of her correspondents in May 1954, expressing her misgivings about western culture's deeply entrenched separation of humanity and nature:

'Concerning my relation to nature: I cannot see that there is any boundary between nature and man. But I do not stupidly fail to understand that others

⁴ In another essay (Mortensen, 2018), I consider the problem of Dinesen's human-animal comparisons at greater length and with special emphasis on *Out of Africa* (1937).

perceive this boundary clearly, nor am I entirely ignorant what they mean by it [...] They say that nature is without memory – but I have often wished that I had a memory like a tree, which wears each annual ring carved into its being. In general I am not very capable of comprehending any “dualism”.’ (Dinesen, 1996, vol. 2: p. 213)

Dinesen’s Gothic tales, on the whole, are prominently concerned neither with celebrating the beauty of the natural world, nor with delineating the ramifications of humanity’s actions for the environment. Set in a highly artificial, meta-literary eighteenth- and nineteenth-century world of jaded aristocrats, disreputable clerics, impoverished opera singers, treacherous wet-nurses and clairvoyant gypsies, these stories neither problematise our capacity to either destroy or save the natural world, nor do they adumbrate a politically consistent environmental ethic for the troubled twenty-first century. But (and this is a key insight) this apparent lack of concern is not the expression of a philosophy that considers humanity to be raised above, or even clearly distinguishable from, the nonhuman world. On the contrary, the continual fascination and enduring power of these Gothic stories may stem precisely from their ability to remind us ‘that we are shaped not only by where we come from, but by [...] how we interact with the environment and all forms of life’ (Del Principe, 2014: p. 2).

Readers would write to Dinesen, begging her to decipher her cryptic tales, and on such occasions, she would invariably offer sphinxlike responses:

‘I am, as always when a reader asks me what a story means, quite uncomfortable, since I feel the only honest answer would be: “There is no meaning”. I think it would be a shame if an author could explain a story better with outside information than it explains itself! [...] If one is looking for a deeper meaning to ‘The Monkey’ it would probably be this: When human relations become unusually complicated or completely mixed up, let the monkey come [...] This is not a good explanation, but you are free to come up with a better one.’ (Dinesen, 1996: vol. 2, p. 433).

In this essay, rather than seeking to ‘explain’ the story, I have found meaning—what Dinesen calls ‘monkey-advice and monkey-help’ (ibid.)—in the story’s ‘proto-posthuman’ (Roden, 2015: p. 133) engagement with human domesticity, embodiment, and identity. In the final

scene of the story, the monkey in a defiant gesture mounts ‘the marble head of the philosopher Immanuel Kant’, and from there watches, ‘with its glittering eyes, the behavior of the three people in the room’ (Dinesen, 1994: p. 162). In Kant’s philosophy, rational thought, self-consciousness, and moral freedom are the unique and unifying characteristics that decisively separate ‘man’ from all other beings. ‘The fact that the human being can have the “I” in his representations’, Kant writes, ‘raises him infinitely above all other living beings on earth’ and makes him ‘an entirely different being from things, such as irrational animals, with which one can do as one likes’ (2006: p. 127).

A reply to Kantian anthropology is invoked at a previous moment in the story, during Boris’ visit to Hopballehus, when the conversation once again turns to monkeys:

‘The old Count started to speak of the Wendish idols, from whose country his own family originally came, and of which the goddess of love had the face and facade of a beautiful woman, while, if you turned her around, she presented at the back the image of a monkey. How, he asked, had these wild Nordic tribes come to know about monkeys? Might there have lived monkeys in the somber pine forests of Wenden a thousand years ago?’ (pp. 130-131)

On hearing this, Athena asks: ‘But how [...] did they know, in the case of that goddess of love, which was the front and which the back?’ (p. 131) – a question that ‘hangs suspended over the whole tale, implying [...] the impossibility of distinguishing front from back, proper from improper, human from animal’ (Rorai, 2005: p. 129).⁵ Dinesen’s writing in ‘The Monkey’, I have argued, removes her from the Kantian position and brings her closer to her Gothic predecessor Robert Louis Stevenson, who famously penned *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886) and whose writing suggests that ‘man is truly not one, but truly two’ (2006: p. 52), and to the posthumanist theorist Anna Tsing, who argues that ‘human nature is an interspecies relationship’ (qtd. Haraway, 2008: p. 19). In its ‘humanimal’ indeterminacy and multiplicity, Dinesen’s pre-Christian statue presents characters and readers with a possible alternative to the modern ‘idol’ of the unified Kantian subject. Both human and nonhuman,

⁵ As Hans Brix notes, Dinesen must have learned about this ancient pagan idol, called ‘Sieba’ or ‘Siwa’, from B. S. Ingemann’s *Grundtræk til en Nord-Slavisk og Vendisk Gudelære / Fundamentals of a North-Slavic and Wendish Mythology* (1949: pp. 64-65).

woman and monkey, the Wendish deity foreshadows the story's ending and symbolises ecoGothic's implied challenge to all hierarchical dualisms.

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