

Homo Homini Lupus: The Relationship between Man and Animal as a Topical Challenge to Ethical Literary Criticism

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Abstract In Ibsen's dramatic works the fictional self is divided into two opposing representations. On the one hand there is the character, representing the idea of a *semper idem*, somebody who, independent of the changing situations, remains in the same mood, always sticking to the ideals of a constant idealistic personality. On the other side the person, who continually switches from one state of mind to another without linking the single moments of existential expression together to a chain of being. These two types of human representation, the ideal and the existential, have found their main configurations in Henrik Ibsen's dramas *Brand* and *Peer Gynt*. In these two plays Ibsen intends to show how this moral guideline leads into human catastrophes and decline. Life understood as an uninterrupted succession of ethical sameness is due to Ibsen the best guaranty of destroying what you want to take care of. Brand's wife and child become victim to his way of acting consequently and last not least he is punished by God, whose voice tells him that he is "the God of love." Finally I intend to show how the inherent beast in man turns out to be even more beastlike than that of wild animals then in opposite to the wild beast man has the ability to control and domesticate their animal instincts

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In daily life it is quite common to use animal metaphors to describe human behavior: he looks like a beast, you dirty pig, monkey tricks, bird of ill omen etc. Such designations mostly don't do justice to the animals then most of them don't do harm to or attack other species of wild-life. Quite in opposite to human beings, who are able to attack and kill intentionally in order to defense and protect their privileges and their territories.

In the world of animals one has to make a distinction between beasts of prey, which chase, kill and eat other animals in order to survive, and domestic animals like dogs and cats, which enjoy a peaceful existence in family surroundings. My purpose to day is to draw attention to a special kind of wild animals, which differ from all other since they have an inherent killer instinct. Especially the wolfs are terrifying because they attack flocks of sheep and goats and kill them only for the sake of killing thus satisfying their natural urges. It is in this context remarkable that an old Latin proverb compares the human being with a wolf: *Homo homini lupus*, which means; the man is like a wolf to other men. I was reminded of this comparison as I once left the big monkey house in the zoological garden in Frankfurt am Main. After having left the last cage with the gorillas I was suddenly looking at myself in a big mirror with the following art description: "*The human being, the most dangerous beast in the world.*" This perspective is interesting because man regains his status as animal among animals. It is striking that from this point of view the opposition man: animal don't function any more.

Regarding the split structure of the human mind it may prove to be a challenging task to show how it is possible to include the bestial nature of man in a theory of ethical literary criticism. In the following I want to take my point of departure in professor Nie's use of the sphinx figure as a symbolic representation of the human duplicity and figure out whether ethical literary criticism as a theoretical doorway to literary texts is capable of throwing light on the unethical potentials of fiction as well.

By the following considerations it is important to keep in mind that the human being is a changing unity of cultivated and bestial qualities and to be aware of the fact that men incorporate capacities which are far more dangerous than those of every beast on four legs. It is important to pay attention to this inversion of human and animalistic qualities and examine to which extent this anti-humanitarian derailment can possibly influence the theory of ethical literary criticism. In the Freudian theory of the human mind the animal part of the human psyche is named "id", which include all mental energies that have been suppressed and stored in the subconscious part of the mind. The cultivation of the libidinous and aggressive energies of the

“id” results in what Charles Brenner calls a “reduction” of impersonal powers. Experience shows however that the fight for bringing the “id”-powers under permanent self-control is a futile attempt. Even though there are no exact and permanent borders between the different levels of the mental energies and the body is captured in a continual process of interacting powers. It looks like men on the long run are not able to escape the “id”-regulated energies and establish a mental stability, which keeps the beast in man under constant intellectual control.

In the history of mankind the most significant symbol of this duplex unity is the sphinx figure that in the history of art has amounted to be the most prominent symbol of a split creature. No wonder that my late friend and colleague Asbjørn Aarseth called his study on Henrik Ibsen’s *Peer Gynt* *The animal in the human being* (Dyret i mennesket), thus calling attention to the bestial components of the main person. At the end of the 4th act of Ibsen’s play *Peer Gynt* on his way to the Egyptian capitol Kairo senses a voice, which he identifies as belonging to the sphinx of Gizeh. The sphinx is invisible, only recognizable on its voice. It seems like Peer looks upon the sphinx as an oriental adaptation of the Norwegian Mountain King. There is however a big difference then the sphinx is a two-sided creature, consisting of a human and an animal part, in opposite to the troll-figure, which has abandoned the human nature and threatens Peer that “han må i kur mot denne hersens menneskenatur.” Or in English translation: “Well, well, my son, so there’s treatment to do/curing that damned human nature in you.”

Only for analytical reasons it makes sense to separate the layers of the human psyche. Freud in his theory of the human mind distinguishes between three levels, which form an intertwined mental whole. What Freud calls the “id”-level corresponds roughly to what professor Nie Zhenzhao summarizes under the designation “the sphinx-factor” that include all urges, which sleep at the depth of the unconsciousness. Consequently the human being is due to most theoretical studies a mixture of higher and lower stages, of man and animal.

By the following considerations it is important to keep in mind that man is a changing unity of human and bestial qualities. In the Freudian theory of the human mind the “id”-level contains the animal part of the psyche, which includes all mental energies that have been suppressed and stored in the subconsciousness. Considering this duplex construction of man it is obvious to draw the conclusion that the cultivating process depends on the reduction of the “id”-occupied powers of the mind. However successful this withdrawal of the bestial urges proves to be, the total extermination of the beast in man is impossible because the “id”-character of man consists of inherent bricks in an intertwined totality of biomorphic entities.

In professor Nie Zhenzhao's interesting theory of ethical literary criticism he introduces the concept of the sphinx factor as a duplex energy, which one ought to defeat on one's way of acting ethically. The most significant symbol of a mixed up character is the sphinx-figure, in which beast and man exist in a fast changing interrelation. In order to abandon the evil one need to identify and make clear in which arenas the beast in man occur. As far as man is the most dangerous animal in the world it seems to be an almost impossible task to domesticate his urges and keep him within the limits of ethical regulations. In almost all fields of daily life one can observe the domination of man's evil activities. The aggression of mankind manifests itself in constant offense against ethical commitments, in warfare, social conflicts, pollution and what with reference to suicide has been called "ecoside," all of which contribute to make our world more and more uninhabitable.

In this context it is worthwhile to remind of Peter Sloterdijk's warning, due to which all of us have to change our life radically otherwise there will be no future for nobody. This warning from one of the most outstanding philosophers of our time requires from all of us an ethical turn according to the moral philosophy of Immanuel Kant, who claims that you should do to others what you want others to do to you. All human experience shows however that the *modus operandi* of this idealistic demand goes beyond human exertion. As far as man and beast, good and bad overlap each other there remain seemingly rather few possibilities to apply ethical methods on topics that deal with the bestial side of the human activities.

Before I go on to discuss this problem more completely I want to draw attention to a sociological study in four volumes, written by the German physicist Hans-Peter Dürr, who received the alternative Nobel-price for his excellent achievements in the field of nuclear physics. According to his theses the civilized behavior of men only forms a thin surface, behind which the uncontrolled instincts prevail. In the preface to the fourth volume of his sociological study *Der Mythos vom Zivilisationsprozess* (The myth of the civilizing process). He declares that the idea that modern people have tamed their animalistic nature in a better way than have pre-modern man rest on a wrong idea. He rejects Norbert Elias' theses that the growing labor market and the stronger cooperation on all levels of social activity and trade circulation have promoted a better regulation of working conditions and sexual behavior. Taking this statement for granted it seems impossible to sustain the comprehension of man as a civilized version of an animal, then the domestication of the bestial urges is successful within a very limited scale.

Such conclusion is however wrong and based on insufficient assumptions. The theoretical applicability of good and bad depends on the changing references. It is

necessary to make a difference between content and form. An evil and bad content can as such never be subject to ethical evaluation, with one exception. The evil can be described in an outstanding and perfect way, what means that the unethical through formal transformation can be changed into good art. In analogy to the theater of the cruel one find in the history of art and literature a lot of such inversions. Many of the world's leading authors in their works establish a narrative frame-work that in analogy to the theater of the bestiality let terrible scenes occur in the light of an excellent presentation. When successful such scenarios may be helpful. It is a well-known educational principle widely used by narrators to draw attention to the terrible in order to replace it with alternative solutions.

In the following I want to make some reflections on the narrow borders between bad and good with my point of departure in modern German history. For many people it is still mysterious how one of the most civilized nations in the world could fall victim to the barbarian ideology of the Nazi party of Adolf Hitler., and the "people of authors and thinkers" changed into "the people of judges and executors." Historians declare that the reason for the 2nd world war is to be found in the peace agreement in Versailles 1918, which made Germany the only guilty in the outbreak of the 1st world war and burdened the country with war repairs, which were highly unfair and made the inhabitants disposed for the anti-French emotions, which were further stimulated through the French occupation of German territory west of the river Rhine in the years after the war. The humiliation of the German people resulted in a radical atmosphere that furthered the rise of Adolf Hitler and the takeover of power through the Nazi movement. World famous German artists were driven away and their works declared "entartet" and burned in the public. The German word "entartet" means a work of art, which has lost its character of being art. Thus the Nazis paved the way for a de-cultivation of art and literature and a re-cultivation of the arian superman. Under these circumstances art and culture were subject to barbaric decay. Symptomatic for this devaluation of moral standards and ethical norms is the following confession from Hanns Johst's play *Schlageter* from 1933, in which the main figure expresses his cultural disgust with the words: "When I hear the word culture I draw my colt (revolver)."

The collapse of civil society and the foundation of a terror regime initiated the decline of one of the most outstanding cultures in western European history and proved once and for all that no nation seems to be immune against the threat from ideological seductions. The Nazi-regime in Germany shows how narrow the border between man and beast is and how the lack of resistance against the powers of the evil turns ordinary people into uncritical followers

Confronted with such serious breakdown of civilized manners one may, like Iris Murdoch, ask whether morality is epi-phenomenal, superficial, just a matter of historically induced conventions or irrational emotions” (4) or if “morality is fundamental to human nature” (ibid). She underlines however that anti-moral attitudes “are probably not really held by any one” (ibid). Never the less, all catastrophes and disasters of our time are caused by human hybris and arrogance. The men-made catastrophes have brought nature and the civilized world on the verge of a total collapse. The transgression of moral standards has erased the borders between human and bestial behavior and paved the way for human bestiality, by which man has been enabled to exterminate what has been called “invaluable men, such as jews, slavish people, gipsis etc. Such bestial topics can never be subject to ethical literary evaluation. But, and this is my central concern it is absolutely possible to work out the ethical qualities inherent in the work and evaluate the work as a sort of counterpart to Baudelaire’s “the flower of evil.” As an example of a successful esthetic transformation of the evil I want to mention Peter Weiss’ documentation of the Auschwitz process 1965 in Frankfurt am Main, Leni Riefenstahl’s documentary films from the Nazi-party’s self-celebrations in Nürnberg or the film version of the Nürnberg tribunal with Spencer Tracy and Maximilian Schell in the main roles. These literary and cinematic applications of the evil confirm that even the most terrible incidents can turn out to be subject to ethical literary criticism as far as they are good in the sense of esthetical qualities

Work Cited

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