

The Sorcerer's Explanation - A Bird's Bullseye.

I am not a sorcerer. There are things I cannot do. For instance, I cannot turn myself into an animal. I cannot wave a magic wand and say, "I am bull, I am wolf."¹ Or perhaps more appropriately, "I am cow, I am she-wolf." I am not a werewolf; I am not a vampire. At most, I can compare myself to an animal, along the lines of Levi Strauss's structuralist model: "I am to man what a cow is to a bull, I am to another woman what the she-wolf is to sheep."² For two approaches dominate our relations to animals, both connected to how we conceive the relations between animals themselves. According to Deleuze and Guattari these are shaped along the lines drawn by natural history and both are mimetic in quality.³ Either we look at the resemblances between animals, comparing the individuals to an archetype of the species in order to draw up a series using the analogy of proportion, or we compare their structural differences. Here in an analogy of proportionality differences between animals are ordered in such a way that these allow for correspondence of relations. For Levi Strauss, the second approach takes precedence, hence "I am to man, what a cow is to a bull."⁴ But "I am cow, I am she-wolf" - is a deviation from the true order of things and thus must be rejected.

But this is the thing, no one - sorcerers included - can turn themselves into animals. An animal is what we become. It is a becoming, a becoming-animal. And this is very real even if it operates outside the bounds that make up our reality. I can really become an animal even if I cannot turn into one. It is a matter of how we think the transformation, or indeed whether we are able to think the transformation at all. For the kind of transformation involved in becoming-animal is only strange for the naturalist with his structuralist terms and corresponding relations. Being so rational, he can only present becoming-animal as the process of turning into animal, which then becomes no more than a kind of magic, a fantasy to be dismissed. But the challenge is to think becoming-animal like a sorcerer, without falling back into mimesis and trying to find resemblances and correspondences. It

¹ Levi-Strauss as quoted in Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus, Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi, (Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 192-207, 237.

² Ibid. Rewriting of Levi Strauss from a female perspective.

³ Ibid. The section *Memories of a Naturalist*, 223-37.

⁴ Ibid., 237.

is to share a secret outside the two models of series and structure. Becoming animal is the sorcerer's secret.

Thus to gain a sense of what it means to become animal, like Carlos Castaneda we must leave the calm waters of structuralist rationalism and head out to the heat of the Mexican desert to seek "the sorcerer's explanation."⁵ This is the promise of knowledge (also held by the merciless chilli pepper of Quetzalzacatenango, setting up an encounter with a coyote voiced by Johnny Cash).⁶ Many trials and tribulations will follow, but afterwards, when we are deemed worthy, the Yaqui guide Don Juan will put on a suit, take us to a restaurant at a large hotel across the street, where after finishing eating his soup, he will rub his tongue against his teeth and say, "I am going to tell you about the tonal and the nagual."⁷

As an aspiring anthropologist, Castaneda understood that in the cultures of central Mexico, both terms have animal qualities. The tonal is generally understood as a guardian spirit, usually an animal, a child is given at birth and accompanies him throughout his life, the nagual is "name given to the animal into which sorcerers could allegedly transform themselves, or to the sorcerer that elicited such a transformation."⁸ But the explanation Don Juan offers suggests more. Here the tonal rather than being a specific animal is more like a guardian that may or may not be represented as an animal. It serves as a principle for us and a guide. Don Juan describes it as an "organiser of the world,"⁹ which sets the chaos of the world in order by establishing of rules with which the world can be apprehended. It gives us a sense of being and guards it. Whereas if the nagual is also an animal, it is one we do not know. "I beg your pardon?"¹⁰ Yes, the nagual is something "we do not deal with at all."¹¹ It is that part of us for which there is no description, "no words,

⁵ Carlos Castañeda, *Tales of Power*. PDF Version 1.0 - public since 21/06/2006. Home Location: <http://controlledfolly.googlepages.com>

⁶ *The Simpsons*, "El Viaje Misterioso de Nuestro Jomer (The Mysterious Voyage of Homer)," season 8, episode 9.

⁷ Castaneda, *Tales of Power*, 68.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid., 69.

¹⁰ Ibid., 71.

¹¹ Ibid.

no names, no feelings, no knowledge.”¹² Then a conversation similar to the following takes place:

“Is the nagual the mind?” asks Castaneda.

“No, the mind is the chilli sauce on the table,” is Don Juan’s answer. (“Man is only chilli sauce!” - who knew?)¹³

“Is is the soul?” tries Castaneda again.

“No, the soul is the ashtray,” replies Don Juan.

A final attempt - “Is it then perhaps God?”

“No, God is the tablecloth on which everything stands.”

Sweeping the back of his hand above and across the table, Don Juan reveals, “The *nagual* is there.”¹⁴ It is there, here, everywhere.

We can find a succinct summary of the sorcerer’s explanation, including this distinction between the tonal and the nagual in Deleuze and Guattari’s earlier chapter of *A Thousand Plateaus* “November 28, 1947: How do you make yourself a body without organs.”¹⁵ In this chapter, they present the tonal as consisting of three dominant strata that structure our lives. The first involves organisation, which includes the organisation of the body into organs. The second strata accounts for signification, explanation and interpretation. Finally, the third strata of the tonal is the subject itself, the historical, social and individual person and their feelings. These strata are the rules the tonal makes, through which the world is apprehended. They constitute our guardian animal, the dog that guards us.

Deleuze and Guattari then contrast these constructive qualities of the tonal animal with the more elusive, mysterious quality of the nagual.¹⁶ Precisely because it cannot be defined, operating outside the strata of organisation, signification and selfhood, the nagual is always that which dismantles these strata. Instead of the organism, there is now the body without organs; no more can we ask about significance and meaning as there are no acts to explain or dreams to interpret - there are no memories to recall. No meaning is attached to things - there is only colour and sound and intensity. A dog is just a dog,

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid., 73.

¹⁴ Ibid., 72.

¹⁵ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 162.

¹⁶ Ibid.

Deleuze and Guattari explain - and I do not have to ask - what meaning does this figure of the dog have or how can it be interpreted. It is not my “goddamn mother.”¹⁷ That said, neither is there an “I” in the domain of the nagual, as the self too - the moi - is dismantled. When like Castaneda I trust the nagual and break apart under the spell of Don Juan’s whispers I am only glowing fog. This is the animal of the nagual: a dark yellow mist with feelings.¹⁸

But how does this help us understand what it means to become-animal, the sorcerer’s secret? There is a question Deleuze and Guattari ask and they ask this repeatedly. To recap, at this point of their argument in “Memories of a Bergsonian” they are unsatisfied with the restricted viewpoint of the series and structure models.¹⁹ They believe in what structuralism cannot account for, the becomings-animal that traverse human beings and sweep them away. But they also acknowledge that these becomings affect the animal no less than the human. Hence it is necessary to ask about the animal affected by becoming-animal. In the rapid act of the human becoming animal, what does the animal become? “Human or something else?” they ask.²⁰ This question is then echoed in secondary literature, in different readings of Deleuze and Guattari’s work. For Leonard Lawlor, it is a matter of the zigzag: if I become other then the other can become something else - but what is this something else the animal becomes?²¹ For Gerald Bruns, if becoming-animal affects the animal as much as the human it traverses, what is this metamorphosis?²² And again I must heed Deleuze and Guattari’s warning here, to be careful, so careful not to think in terms of relations and correspondences. It is not that the animal turns into something else, that it stops being one thing and becomes another. Rather, becoming-animal is when I reach out, call out to my nagual animal. Or rather the nagual animal appears to me, finger on mouth in a warning to stay quiet, be secret. In becoming animal I turn away from my guardian animal, I escape from under his guard, because I enter secret

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid., 237-39.

²⁰ Ibid., 237.

²¹ Leonard Lawlor, “Following the Rats: Becoming-Animal in Deleuze and Guattari,” *SubStance*, Vol. 37, No. 3, Issue 117: The Political Animal (2008), 170.

²² Gerald L. Bruns “Becoming-Animal (Some Simple Ways)” *New Literary History*, Vol. 38, No. 4, On Change and Exchange in Literary Studies (Autumn, 2007), 703.

pact with the nagual. I take the disguise offered to me, put on the sorcerer's cloak - the she-wolf's fur - and run fast, invisible.

Remember, the nagual is described as "everything" with the sweep of an open hand facing upwards. A Sorcerer's gesture accompanied by Don Juan's slightly mocking laughter. But what is this "everything" if it is not the strata - the body, signification and meaning, the sense of self? Already in this earlier chapter, Deleuze and Guattari suggest that when the geology of the strata undergoes a transformation, this is best understood in terms of multiplicities and collectives, as a population or a pack, in relation to the diversification of phylogenesis.²³ Later in the chapter on becoming they confirm that the becoming-animal always involves a population or a pack, "in short, a multiplicity."²⁴

What the sorcerer knows is that in becoming-animal, we experience not the one animal, but many, not one wolf but several. Troops of monkeys, schools of fish, mischief of rats,²⁵ and birds, so many birds. At stake here is the too narrow definition of the animal that we have inherited from natural history. This is not even an individual animal that might be known to us personally, the family pet, the domesticated cow or even Freud's oedipal animal representing father or mother. Instead, the animal is presented as a member of a species with certain fixed characteristics. Only an animal with fixed characteristics can be compared using either of the two models of series and structure and then classified accordingly. Similarly, only such characteristics can then be organised and given significance. But a population in evolutionary biology is first of all, diverse, as it allows for genetic variation, and secondly, it incorporates historical change. A population is not static but develops according to the various environmental pressures of the time. Characteristics - the phenotype of the species - have a role to play but the same characteristics might be developed by different species, or one species may codevelop with another, taking its characteristics, all depending on the species's environment. This is Deleuze and Guattari's best known example of the the orchid and the wasp, the orchid taking on the visual and olfactory characteristics of the wasp in order to bring about pollination.²⁶

²³ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 47-8.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 239.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 12, 25, 44, 69, 190, 238.

The trick is - and this is the magic of the sorcerer's trick - to experience the animal as a population, with all its remarkable diversity. It is to understand that the characteristics of an animal are not reducible to the one species, but can be adopted by, played with and utilised by other species. Hence Deleuze and Guattari talk about the "wolfing" of a population and not a "wolf."²⁷ The animal of becoming-animal is this population that wolfs and it should be no surprise that in becoming-animal I too can participate in the activity of wolfing. Wolfing is what the natural offers, the mantle I put on, the sorcerer's cloak, the she-wolf's fur. As Deleuze and Guattari argue, the same kind of characteristics used for classifying animals are also used by the State to classify people.²⁸ So in order to accommodate the multiplicity of animals we too must undergo a change to become more than a set of properties and traits. Thus on the one hand, Deleuze and Guattari present the example of rats from the fictional letter of Lord Chandos written by Hoffmannsthal, and on the other, the many Carters "human and non-human, vertebrate and invertebrate, conscious and mindless, animal and vegetable" Lovecraft describes.²⁹ In the experience of becoming-animal, the animal begins to populate me and I too become a population. The term Deleuze and Guattari use is "contagion."³⁰ It is as if becoming is a virus that spreads from one animal to many, from many animals to me and from me to my many different me's.

I cannot turn myself into an animal, but I can become one. I can become a becoming-animal. But this experience of the animal as a population or a pack does not happen often, so strong is the mimetic impulse of structuralist models, so heavy the strata of organisation, signification and subjectivation. Such an experience of the animal is an anomaly, or as Deleuze and Guattari describe it, the anomalous.³¹ This is not the same as the abnormal (to think so, is to again think in terms of characteristics). Neither is the anomalous an exceptional individual, like the special pet or the psychoanalytically privileged animal taking over the role of a parent. And again, the anomalous animal does not fall under the banner of the species exhibiting specific characteristics. No, what makes

²⁷ Ibid., 239.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid., 240.

³⁰ Ibid., 241.

³¹ Ibid., 243-9.

the anomalous the nagual we do not know, the animal we cannot deal with, is its outsider position. Monstrous because featureless, the outsider is what does not fit. The anomalous inhabits the border, hovering on the line, neither one thing or another, but defining both. Brun relates the heterogeneity of the anomalous to the wolf man or werewolf described by Agamben in *Homosacer*, the Wargus bandit excluded by the community.³² But it is not the sorcerer that is the anomaly. Rather, anomalous is this pact made with the exceptional individual that allows for the inter-populating of becoming.

I mentioned once that I saw a bird, a blackbird with a yellow beady eye just outside the window, soon after it happened. I know the bird to be him but it could only be him as a population, as an anomaly. But for the bird to be this anomalous population, I also had to change, in my moment of crisis, in order to see the bird in this way. Not a sorcerer exactly, but I had to form this bond with the bird in which the bird could be a a population, an anomaly for me, where no one me exists.

³² Brun referring to Agamben's *Homo Sacer* in "Becoming-Animal," 706.