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John Berger tells the story of the relationship between the human and the animal as it has evolved across time. He does this by describing the way the human and the animal have regarded each other – how they have *looked* at one another. At the beginning, they regarded one another with caution, looking across a void of incomprehension. Their relationship was bound by dependency and fear (vaguely: who was going to eat who?). This look between one and the other carried a powerful charge. In his 1977 essay ‘Why Look at Animals?’, Berger wrote the following about this look:

The eyes of an animal when they consider a man are attentive and wary. The same animal may well look at other species in the same way. He does not reserve a special look for man. But by no other species except man will the animal’s look be recognised as familiar. Other animals are held by the look. Man becomes aware of himself returning the look.

Much is loaded into this look between the human and the animal, or what we might call ‘the one’ and ‘the other’. But it is only the experience of the one that can really be described (because the other is, of course, an animal). From the perspective of the one, the other could only be understood as bits that came from inside the one’s own mind. The other was perceived as a whole made up of different abstract parts: qualities, abilities, feelings. These were familiar in some way, that is, they came from inside the one, but were attributed to the other. The one perceived the look that was returned to them by the other as familiar, that is, it held something of the same qualities. In this sense, it was a mirror to the one, but also contained something else completely and utterly separate. It was this complete and utter separateness which gave it great power.

The first subject matter for painting was animal. Probably the first paint was animal blood. Prior to that, it is not unreasonable to suppose that the first metaphor was animal. If the first metaphor was animal, it was because the essential relationship between man and animal was metaphoric.

In this stage of the story, the other (in its many different shapes and forms) was seared into the mind of the one. As such, it became culture. It was spiritual, metaphorical: it was a way to represent parts from the interior of the mind of the one. And yet there was also this additional thing that was completely and utterly separate about the other because it had its own experience and material existence which was unknowable to the one. When this unknowability became an actual thought in the mind of the one, it didn’t carry very much meaning, and what meaning it did carry was probably a bit frightening. In general, thoughts like these tend to get pushed away. The other was kept more in the mind of the one only in the way that it made sense - as an extension of parts of the mind belonging to the one itself.

Animals came from over the horizon. They belonged there and here. Likewise they were mortal and immortal. An animal’s blood flowed like human blood, but its species was undying and each lion was a Lion, each ox was Ox. This – maybe the first existential dualism – was reflected in the treatment of animals. They were subjected and worshipped, bred and sacrificed.

Mentally, one can put parts of oneself into another. These parts might be feelings, qualities, or experiences that one might not even recognise to be originating from within one’s own self. This other is then felt to possess the part of one’s self entirely. This is what psychoanalyst Melanie Klein calls

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Projective Identification. This other might be any kind of other – it might be another who is a different species, even. In fact, that might be preferable. This is because if this other is very, very far from one's own self, in its qualities, then it can represent that parts of one's own self that are felt to be very remote, from an inaccessible part the mind. That means the part that is split off is safely deposited somewhere else.

Eventually, Descartes' model was surpassed. In the first stages of the industrial revolution, animals were used as machines.

In this stage of the story between one and the other, the other is severed from its own separate existence. The one has taken away all of the power the other formerly held, and installed within it a different kind of value, derived for and by the one. Here, the look cast from the eyes of the other to the eyes of the one is probably not felt to be particularly pleasant, understandably so (after all, it has been turned into a machine). For this reason, all those bits (feelings, qualities, experiences) is contained in the look from the other is gotten rid of in the mind of the one, along with the rest of the other's separate existence.

The pet offers its owner a mirror to a part that is otherwise never reflected. But, since in this relationship the autonomy of both parties has been lost (the owner has become the special-man-he-is-only-to-his-pet, and the animal has become dependent on its owner for every physical need), the parallelism of their separate lives has been destroyed.

We have jumped ahead now, to a much later stage of the story. Here, the look of the other has been crafted perfectly (over centuries) to hold within it all the bits of the one that the one likes to see in the other. These are the parts the mind of the one does not want to get rid of, in fact the opposite – it wants to conjure them in what could be imagined as a special kind of trick mirror. If all goes well, the look is lop-sided, but what the one sees in the other is nevertheless charming, beautiful and loyal all at the same time. She sacrifices herself, and works tirelessly in the service of pleasing the one with whom she is completely and utterly infatuated. There is a sweet and funny dumbness as stares back at the one, but both one and the other know she has secret intelligence behind those eyes. She can be outrageously cute. Here, parts from inside of the one are held by the other, and the other puts parts of herself back into the one. For the most part this relationship is harmonious, and within the gaze between one and the other is real dependency and affection. There is, blissfully, very little awareness of any separation between the one and the other anymore: the other could even be considered a self-portrait of the one in a delightful, private masquerade.

- Alex Davidson, 2023