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Independent Scholar

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Liminal

Abstract:

An autofiction, “Liminal” explores the porousness of limitrophy, gesturing towards the more than human world with specific reference to dogs in relation to language, instinct, genre, gender. It brings forward an unstable persona who treads landscapes real and imaginary at the edge of memoir, criticism and dream with irreverence and ironic scrutiny. It is part of “Unleashed: My Life as a Dog”, a work in progress dedicated to Artaud, an Australian Kelpie the author allegedly “rescued”.

Biographical note:

Dominique Hecq is a widely anthologised and award-winning poet, fiction writer, essayist and translator. She lives and works on Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung land (Naarm / Melbourne). Hecq writes in English and French. Her creative works comprise a novel, six collections of short stories and 17 books of poetry. Together with *Volte Face* and *Otopos*, her bilingual sequence *Pistes de rêve* appeared in 2024.

Time is no
arrow and I am
neither a dog nor a
wolf, yet both
reside in me

– Natalie Damjanovich-Napoleon

Sky a molten blur. Daybreak an invisible sea wall. Contours of the coast latticed and crisp. Ruddy earth, flushed, inflamed: a vast Fred Williams. I've run out of movies to watch. Decide to write something from Artaud's point of view. God, I miss him!

Humans have no nose. They can't sniff their way through paddocks all the way to the sheep whose breath is in the wind, pee and poo in the grass. They clomp around in muddy boots and can't even mark their territory. Humans have no ears to flap shut. Eyes? I wonder. They peer and pore through the night and stumble and pull on the leash. Back! It's okay. They tell fibs. Pretend to be tough when they're a flock of fear. They babble on and on. Half the time I don't know what they want. The other day, my human said LEFT. Her body said RIGHT. So, I went right. Then she yelled STOP. I held my right paw aloft, but didn't stop. She was cross, all right. Glared at me. I held her gaze, thinking she'd back off. She didn't. That was scary. Later she said there's a chink in the armour, Artaud *mon amour*, my love. As if! After herding, she was all soft-footed and slow. I reckon she was tired. In the arvo, she plonked herself on the couch. I'm not allowed on the couch, so I sulked on my mat. Watched her from the corner of my eye. She put her feet up and gawped at the Dogs on TV. I snuffled. She turned a blind eye. When the Dogs won, she poured blood in a see-through bowl. I swallowed her stink.

Exiled in your mind, you worry that you are anthropomorphising. Turn on your phone. Allow data. Look at the Great Inquisitor's suggestions. Lots of photos and reels of dogs ... *piebald undulations algorithms of insignificance*.

O – mirabile dictu:

Sunday 9.30 AM–2 PM

Sheep herding workshops for beginners.

We'll bring out the working instinct in your sheep dog. No experience needed as most dogs are from the city and have never seen sheep before, so you'll find the day educational and entertaining. Please message me to book.

I'll be forever a beginner, so I book.

Herding is a bloke's world, you say in your head as you decline the chicken curry a flight assistant offers. Smile at the sight of Chardy. Thanks. What isn't? A bloke's world, that is.

“We don’t have a tradition in the way you blokes do”, I said.

Everybody moved with laughter and relief.

“There must be a line of women’s writing”, said Natalie, “running from beginning till now”.

“It’s a shadow tradition”, I said. “It’s there, but nobody knows what it is” (Jurers, 1996, p. 43).

In Summerville, the sunburnt bloke warned about snakes and sheep: herding’s dangerous business.

First experience for you and your dog.

All disquieting glare. Flies glittering on the back of sheep. Dogs begging cues from lame city folk. Rounding up animals and humans. Diving, hot and exhausted, into vats of water. Artaud, all face-splitting grin.

Then wind swept through the paddock, picked up in a skein of oily wool as the herding assistant, still drunk from the night before and furtive morning nips, stumbled and tripped. Carted off to hospital.

Your first encounter with sheep. Not your first with men warning, berating, snarling, striking.

Cutti

ng

you

off

“It is a fact universally acknowledged that a woman in possession of an opinion must be in want of a correction”, writes Rebecca, citing Jane Austen (Solnit, 2015, p. 157).

A feeling of glee. You doff your hat at Jane and Solnit. For centuries women have been doubly exposed. Doubly deposed, as you, in fact, attempted to say, beating about the bush:

The wolf is a conventional symbol of marginality in many literatures. The wolf is an outlaw. They live beyond the usefully cultivated and inhabited space, in that no-man’s land the Greek called *apeiron*. The goat sometimes shares this affinity, though the no-man’s land she inhabits is located within an inhabited space. (Hecq, 2024, n.p.)

Other. The O of liminality.

Howling wind. Time whips into a gale. No rain, but sleet or hail in the air. *Les giboulées de mars*, known as showers in English as you transition from winter to spring in this other hemisphere, where it is autumn that looms.

You walk Artaud past the factories bordering your neighbourhood for the third time today. Briskly. You envy his fur coat; your parka's too thin. It's a boring stretch of concrete and the dog stops along the way. You wait for him, cast aside your impatience. You might be imagining it, but the stops are shorter and shorter. Dog time? The first is to sniff at oiled graffiti on the corner. All dogs stop there. Strong aroma. The second is on the bridge, let cyclists past, watch the ducks foraging in bulrushes beneath. Throng of frothy water passing by two uprooted gums garlanded with litter. Then there's a muddy track. You rush through the woodlands. Climb the other bridge, the rickety one. Turn towards the cricket ground – you stop at a deserted row of exercise machines.

The man resting one leg on the sit-up bench grins at you. Kelpie? You nod. City or country girl? he asks. You dismiss his pretend gravitas. Fringe-dweller, you say. Gob-smacked, UFO-eyed, he shrugs. Strolls away.

You, that is the three of you back then, moved from an inner suburb of Melbourne to what was then an outer suburb. You crossed Moreland Road, which you renamed Deadland Road in your mind to mark the boundary between before and after death, then the bridge over the Merri Creek. That was thirty years ago.

Within months, weeks and days the first death had occurred. In months, weeks and days, two deaths were pending. Curious venture, you think, stopping in your tracks. Roadworks, when all the talk is about tunnels. Vast new road tunnels further north-west under the sprawling city. *La ville tentaculaire* ... soon, yes, Melbourne will be a tentacular city[1]: there'll be unimpeded motoring through cavernous underground highways for miles and miles. You could say kilometres, but think miles to remind yourself you're about to cross into the future as they've just done in Sydney, bemoaning subterranean thoroughfares coursing under houses and tenements, buses and cars, spaghetti streets and roundabouts, traffic lights and zebra crossings. Pedestrians and tethered dogs.

Maddening wind. You resume your wayward vagabondage across time and space. Sentences fall backwards. Words slip in your mind.

Artaud laps at the leaky tap – you signal it's time to go. At Capp's Reserve, he pulls on the leash. Back, you say, and turn around. You bend to pat his head. The encouragement as much for you as it is for him. You climb to the top of the hill; he pauses at a fallen tree. Nip around the corner past the house where the wheezing woman sits on her porch, puffing on a fag. You wave. She nods. You loop downhill. Home. Up the 39 steps. Through, Artaud. He finds his mat and you stand in the window, waiting for the gloom to thicken.

Kilsyth, where they “will bring out the working instinct in your sheepdog”. Industrial site on the fringe of Melbourne. Huge, corrugated iron fence. You push the door open: paddocks ahead and a dam overgrown with rushes where frogs croak. You chomp through in squeaky boots. Artaud pulls like a train. Such excitement! You try changing direction as Tim, your trainer, showed you. Nope, Artaud signals.

Everyone looks everywhere except at themselves. Everyone in tattered gear, but this couple ambling towards us: Akubra hat, Moleskins, immaculate RM Williams boots, Drizabone – bloke with lambchop sideburns, sheila has a disdainful glare. I want to laugh, but don't. They impersonate the great Ocker myth. Out of place. Out of time.

Herding is a new language. A new code. Here words line up like snarls. Go. Back. Over. Come up. To me. Stop. Wait. Sit. That'll do.

Our turn. Propelled by Artaud's instinct, I enter the pen. Unleash him. I'm disoriented. Left or right? Go, I say. Too late. He's gone. Round and round he goes. Let him go round for a few laps, Charlie yells. That'll tire him. Artaud's busting. I get my bearings. RIGHT. LEFT. RIGHT. STOP. Artaud flaps his ears shut. STOP. SIT.

I move in a figure of eight with the rake as an extension of my arm. Ease into a rhythm. GOOD, yells Charlie. You've got a rhythm. Artaud scurries around, fixed on bringing the sheep to me. THAT'LL DO, yells Charlie. I take the cue: Artaud, sit. Good boy.

Variations on a theme.

I apologise to the sheep for bumping them.

Here, pee is gratitude. Or is it affront? Just need, I guess. Dumb human.

Neonatal research shows that the foetal cells of babies remain as traces in the mother's body for decades after they have left the womb. This shedding of cells begins in the early weeks of foetal development, so that even if the foetus is miscarried or aborted, some trace of their life remains inside the mother's organs and bloodstream.

I wonder if this applies to sheep, for those we are happily herding are, in fact, pregnant ewes, which would mean that each one of them carries a wee flock inside their body as it's not that unusual for them to give birth to twins, or triplets they don't regard as a boon, often abandoning the one that's "too much".

I've lost track of time, but one thing sinks in: Artaud hates the word "stop". Truth is, Charlie says, my body language confuses him.

One of the locals brought a lamb casserole for us to share. I invoked the weather turning nasty to head home.

See ya next week, I yell, overdoing the Aussie accent.

Tight-jawed, I'm chewing dirt. Artaud, COME! The dog gallops towards me, flat ribbon of tongue hanging, trembling. I clunk away in my worn boots, hoping my city dog's pads are not torn.

We make a dash for home in traffic from hell.

Snug with Artaud, I thumb Jonathan Safran Foer's *Eating Animals* (2009). Jonathan opens the book with his recollection, which is also a confession, of "disliking animals", especially dogs. A kind of intergenerational phobia, but not quite, as his feelings towards dogs changed when George, a tiny black puppy asleep on the curb, curled in its ADOPT Me Vest on Seventh Avenue, Brooklyn (Foer, 2009, p. 21). So, Jonathan "adopted" George the way I "rescued" Artaud, sparking questions that take on urgency on the brink of fatherhood. The book is a memoir. At its core is the idea that "we don't simply project human experience onto animals; we are (and are not) animals" (Foer, 2009, p. 47). The book is a hybrid memoir. What I'm really looking for is the bit where he talks about instinct. Ah, yes. He likens instinct to intelligence, broadly defined: "a kind of mental work that matters" (Foer, 2009, p. 64). See, said Charlie, your dog's not playing. It's thinking. Look at his tail.

stun the instant instantly
prevent it hurtling headlong
into next now is
a dog with a whip it will sit
unclutch it
rom the future it will beg crash the clock
against the sun
– Jordie Albiston

Thunder. Lightning into night's soft belly. Do dogs hear the infra-sounds of thunderstorms the way birds do? Artaud stands in the middle of the bed. I expect a beacon bellowing KEEP YOUR DOG DOWN. It! The pronoun exasperates me. I pet him. His silken pelt is soothing. I sniff the air. The more I sniff, the more doglike I'll become. Smell of rain, but it doesn't come. Wind. More wind. Words fall about like broken branches. Piece by piece I gather a shape and memory, turn time into a hollow chamber of silence, guilt, shame.

Granddad's dead, so Grandma comes to live with us for a while. Mum's got a watermelon in her belly. Peggy's got a *niche* now, a gentler word than dog kennel to my ears.

Peggy's

gone.

Dominiiiique

? *Ouiiii?*

Qui est-ce qui a laissé la barrière ouverte? roars Papa. Who left the gate open?

J'sais pas, which is true.

I am ambushed. SMACK! It stings.

Au coin, says father. Time out corner. Banished, again. I stand, hands folded on my head. I hate the pink wall.

Artaud catches me off guard. *Lick, lick, lick*. I pat him. He flops on the bed. From the fringe, everything is permitted. The dog's both up and down. Yes, I transgress my own rules now. *Pat, pat, pat*. I listen and feel and see with my skin.

My father scraped Peggy's dispersed body off the Gallo-Roman *chaussée* Charlemagne had walked and his horses trotted. The road was now a bus empire. The shovel flashed.

We nestle into the night's monochrome, its smell of overdue rain. Are dogs really colour-blind? Perhaps they just see differently. I trawl animal studies journals. Read Jacques Derrida's *The Animal that Therefore I Am* (Derrida, 2008). A weird book: it's somewhat affectionate of the role that animals have played in Jacques' work, yet it is more focused on critiquing the

relegation of animal life that takes place as a direct result of grouping all non-human animal life under the term “animal” and radically distinguishing them from humans. It’s also indifferent to the feelings and, therefore, suffering, of animals. Pitter patter of rain. I watch Kathy High’s video essay, which also explores limitrophy. Kathy picks up on Jacques’ blind spot and leads me astray.

Elever un enfant, to rear a child, said my father, *c’est comme dresser un animal*. I wondered whether it was like “training” or “taming” an animal ... Was I a dog or a wolf?

Can’t sleep. Unthoughts are scattered gravel drilling under my skin. Am I going mad? I refrain from patting Artaud, fast asleep in the land of sheep: yelp, squeal, click of teeth, run of feet. Shiver. Is it the dog or me?

Le grand Jacques[2] opens *The Animal that Therefore I Am* with a discussion of Genesis, overstating the idea that Adam is naked in the garden until he eats the fruit from the tree of knowledge. Instead of the typical reading of this transgression as a fall from grace, he sees this as the precedent for the creation of humanity. Awareness of nudity, and the accompanying feeling of shame is the focus of his essay.

With the exception of man, no animal has ever thought to dress itself. Therefore, clothing is one of the key “properties” of man: “Dressing oneself” would be inseparable from all the other attributes “proper to man”, even if one talks about it less than speech or reason, the logos, history, laughing, mourning, burial, the gift, et cetera (Derrida, 2008, p. 5).

These “properties of man” are really what is at stake here. Where is woman? Where is dog, wolf, sheep? Nice work Jacques. Man has claimed dominance over women and animals as a God-given right since Adam.

Everyone knows the first thing Adam did with the animals that the Lord formed out of the freshly created earth ... was to give each one a name. And, until Adam assigned them their names, some say, the animals did not exist. (Nunez, 2018, p. 48)

Jacques seems to be in agreement with Adam. Animals are, but don’t exist. Nice work, Adam.

Le grand Jacques circles the issue of being naked in front of “that which we call animal” (Derrida, 2008, p. 9), what it means to be naked, how “that which we call animal” cannot be naked, what it means to be seen by “that which we call animal”, and what it means for a human to see themselves in the eyes of “that which we call animal”, a phrase he finds less reductive than the noun “animal”, period. Fair enough, though what he does is actually reducing “that

which we call animal” to an object in the scopic field. But I err into the Lacanian field ...

O, liminal space. Limit?

This is prescriptive, oppressive language.

Unlike Lacan, for whom ... and it should be no surprise, what separates an animal from a human is language. It's a difference between response and reaction. Animals, Lacan argues, do not respond to questions; they react to stimuli. They do not have a language, rather, they use a coded system of signalling, which is a static system, as opposed to the dynamic, symbolic interaction of the human. He uses bees as an example: the dance of the bee who returns to the hive to direct others to where they might find nectar. Lacan claims that this dance is not an exchange in need of interpretation, as would be the case with humans, but is instead a kind of exchange of data from one (as Derrida puts it) Cartesian machine-animal to another Cartesian machine-animal. For the most part, Derrida is not as interested in refuting Lacan's claim as much as he is interested in blurring the distinction between response and reaction.

To bed.

Artaud, splayed on his back, snores. I'm more tolerant of my dog than a man. Put on my PJs in the dark.

I Nel mezzo del cammino di nostra
vita Mi ritrovai per una selva
oscura Che le diritta via era
smarrita
– Dante, *Inferno* I, i-iii

A dream of lostness. Somewhere in the Italian Alps, Gustav Mahler roamed. Someone, yes, human, animal, ageless, voiceless, possessing nothing except what she has lost, completely naked, destitute, solitary and whose exile is confused with solitude, walks along a winding road.

Language is like this road. We are in it, but we can't perceive all at once because it unfolds hairpin-like in time. This thing I'm writing makes writing like coursing through that landscape in ways walking and painting don't.

En marge du nom du père. On the fringe of the name of the father.

“The exile ... exists in a median state, neither completely at one with the new setting nor fully disencumbered of the old, beset with half-involvements and half-detachments” (Said, 1996, p. 49).

We like to think of human beings as agents of their own lives, rather than passive pawns in social games or unconscious transmitters of cultural scripts and models of identity. Consequently, we tend to read memoirs as proofs of human agency, relating actions in which people exercise free choice over the interpretation of their lives and expressing their “true” selves.

Rubbish.

Day breaks at the back of the moon, spangling the wetlands. The goat woman gathers up dream fragments, scattering everlastings in the quiet corner where a werewolf crouches under she-oaks. Drops in shadows, licks gleaming paws.

All there is: white space to contain time, the doors between words keeping captivity captive, transparent shadows and distances. We are time itself.

What am I doing here?

Am I making a dog’s dinner or writing a memoir?

Memoirs are narratives of agency, evidence that, as subjects, we can live freely. But how we claim, exercise and narrate agency is far more complicated, for here the narrating feeds on signifiers that are both available through the Other and made available by the other through a process of mirroring and doubling.

David Shields remarks in a review of Ander Monson’s collection of essays, *Vanishing Point: Not a memoir* that “Memoir is dead. Long live the anti-memoir, built from scraps” (2010, n.p.). Perhaps I’m writing an anti-memoir, highlighting those parts that Lydia Davis describes as missing but still “present as empty space” (2019, p. 204), the space to roam about, unleashed.

Lydia, again, whose ex-husband Paul collected “liminal austerities” in *White Spaces* (Auster, 1980), describes fragmentary writing as working to draw focus to writing’s designation as “artifact, or the work as process, rather than the conveyor of meaning” (Davis, 2019, p. 223). We push on, the dog and I, hackles up, goose pimpled. Climb the hill. A hot air balloon roars and from its ballast, drops a man. Electrifying thwack. Splat. Soon sirens blare. Cops cordon

off the scene. We patter away.

It's a matter of falling: the telling of tales that would be better untold, writes Jen. Words take flight and vanish over the horizon; words shrink away when you reach for them. It's a matter of falling, tripping over in public and insisting *I'm fine, absolutely I'm fine*, as passers-by upend bystander syndrome, insistently offering aid. Words take flight. Birds take flight (Webb, 2024).

Notes

[1] *Les villes tentaculaires* is a collection of twenty symbolist poems by Belgian poet Emile Verhaeren, first published in 1895. The theme of the chapbook is modern urban life and the transformation of the countryside by urban sprawl.

[2] *Le grand Jacques* is one of Jacques Brel's early songs. In it, Brel sings of religion, patriotism and love, before reminding himself that he should not speak about such subjects due to his lack of experience. He ends the song with characteristic irony by noting that it's too easy for people to pretend they know about these things when in fact they've got blinkers.

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