



PROJECT MUSE®

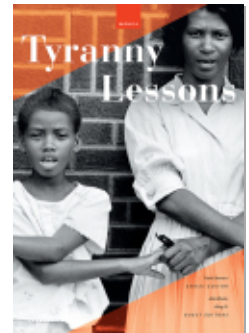
from Acting My Age

Thomas Farber

Manoa, Volume 32, Number 1, 2020, pp. 31-36 (Article)

Published by University of Hawai'i Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/man.2020.0009>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/761364>

from Acting My Age

DOLPHINOLOGY

You remember I resisted using the possessive when referring to the cluster of goatfish. My avoidance was first induced—compelled—by sights seen thirty years ago. Just down the coast, there was a marine mammal “laboratory” *training*—how loaded terms can be!—dolphins. The director, a behavioral psychologist who’d studied monkeys and rats, said he was seeking to “establish two-way communication, admittedly on a very elementary level. We’re not going to talk philosophy.”

In the service of which, two eight-foot, five-hundred-pound females, captured in the Caribbean, were transported to Hawai‘i. For years enclosed (surely intentional euphemism) in separate concrete tanks fifty feet in diameter, five or six feet deep. Within sight, sound, and smell of open ocean, even closer to an adjacent bar’s music and drunk patrons. Late weekend nights in particular must have offered the cetaceans words to learn. Or, if they became fluent enough, to understand what God said about “dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth.”

Consider ambitions’ premises—stated, unstated. This director’s might have read: interspecies communication is important; communication between humans and other species is the most important; dolphins have large brains, which might allow verbal interaction between them and us. Therefore, take them out of their element to find out. Unstated is why interspecies communication, if vital, would require this strategy, or, how careers for humans in academia are advanced.

Meanwhile, observe the *finis* in *confined*.

As Gavan Daws notes in his brilliant “Men, Dolphins, and Biography,” evolution in the water world has evolved “a distribution and processing of sensory information so unfamiliar to humans that we have no way of bringing it together to make it spell conscious-ness, at least in our spelling: oceanic change of temperature, light, color, barometric pressure, chemical and nutritive composition, acidity and salinity of water, and—on a cosmic scale—the pull of sun, moon, and stars, the turning of the earth, acting on the massive ocean currents and the running of the tides.”

About who gets to tell the story: back then, four decades ago, and now. In 1977, former employees of the marine mammal laboratory took these dolphins to the ocean to “liberate” them. Or, as the anguished director put it, “They stole my dolphins.” And, the director said, “You build a life’s work around something to which you’re not only intellectually but emotionally wedded. There is a sense of a death in the family.”

Bear in mind—I’ll try to bear in mind—that sensibilities change, and that the director of the marine mammal center had done great good for at least one cetacean. In 1995, a forty-foot whale, (human-named) Humphrey, entered San Francisco Bay, headed up the Sacramento River, then into a creek. Nearly seventy miles, a dead end. After a month of rescue efforts, it was the director’s strategy of using recordings of feeding whales that lured Humphrey out to open ocean.

No doubt this humpback would sing out on the director’s behalf, if someone could only do the notating, especially because the director helped a second time when the whale ran aground on a mudflat in San Francisco Bay. And later, to his credit, the director was one of hundreds of marine scientists urging the Japanese government to stop the slaughter of the Taiji dolphin hunts. Good deeds . . .

Who, then, can predict whether or not verbally fluent dolphins drawn from a jury “pool” would find the director guilty? Who can guess what stories dolphins might tell, though author Ceridwen Dovey ventriloquizes a U.S.-trained combat dolphin in “A Letter to Sylvia Plath.” And Douglas Adams, in *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy*, has dolphins “perfectly capable of communicating” in human language but choosing not to. Aware of earth’s impending destruction, they abandon the water planet with a message containing these last words: SO LONG, AND THANKS FOR ALL THE FISH.

If—thus far!—we can only imagine what dolphins would say, we might infer something from nonverbal behavior of cephalopods. As Amia Srinivasan writes, “Captive octopuses appear to be aware of their captivity; they adapt to it but also resist it. When they try to escape, which is often, they tend to wait for a moment they aren’t being watched.” And, “If only the octopus were more like us, we might be better at leaving it alone.”

More like us. Little more than a decade since the laboratory director’s death, our culture seems increasingly uneasy about what creatures we dominate. Or selectively, sentimentally, more uneasy. We are or are not vegetarian, wear fur or not, and so on.

Sensibilities do change. Even the recent past can seem long ago. One wonders if the director, bemoaning loss of the captive dolphins in 1977, had seen *Planet of the Apes* (1968). In it, Charlton Heston plays a starship commander who, emerging from a time warp, lands on what seems to be a strange planet. Though the terrain is similar to Heston’s home, Earth, there’s a confounding inversion: here human beings are naked, wild, and without language, whereas apes have an advanced civilization. Are the articulate dominant species.

Captured by ape horsemen, unable to speak due to a blow to his throat,

caged with the primitive humans, Heston struggles to manifest “higher” qualities. Managing to escape, he’s tracked down. Lassos of the ape guards around his neck, he finally regains his voice: “Take your hands off me, you damn dirty apes!”

I suppose you either see the dolphins as Heston or you do not. Back in the late 1970s, the “kidnappers” argued that seizing the dolphins from the ocean had been a crime. As Gavan Daws inquires, “How was capture by humans different in principle from release by humans? And if taking dolphins from tanks was abduction, what was the proper word for keeping dolphins in captivity, in isolation (against their will?) prospectively for life?”

As for how the director expressed his anguish about the “kidnapping” — “It’s like your own child was taken from you” he told a reporter—Daws observes that “in the wake of the loss of the dolphins, [the director] and his wife, childless into their middle years, had a baby.”

About still being disturbed by the sight of captive dolphins thirty years ago. The director had intent/rationale/federal funding. Was demonstrating that dolphins were more cognitively advanced than chimpanzees, work he argued might help us understand the origins of human language and how children learn it.

In that same era, however, after a visit to the director’s marine mammal center and hearing him use the possessive, I stopped in at a beachfront resort describing itself as “the hotel for royalty, heads of state, and legends of the sporting, musical and literary worlds.”

The color of money: as if dollars are always hungry for just a little somethin’ more, why not a dollop of dolphins. Hotels guests, many of them prosperously overweight, left little question which species had more than enough to eat. A species whose members could pay extra to get in the hotel’s “natural ocean water lagoon.” Natural ocean water, true; “lagoon” technically correct, if deliberately evoking South Seas romance in lieu of “manmade.” Failing, however, to cop to the lack of access—escape!—to the adjacent *Pacific* ocean for the “family of playful *Atlantic* [italics mine] Bottlenose dolphins.” In their “home,” human customers could spend “quality time with your new dolphin friends,” have “intimate dolphin encounters,” book “a playdate.”

At the hotel, as at the research laboratory, the trainers/keepers/handlers working with the dolphins were women, talking to—at?—the dolphins as if to infants. Shrill singsong, repetitive exhortation. Hyper-articulation. But . . . the dolphins were not infants. Similar to infants only in that they could not talk back. Were, in the dolphins’ situation, imprisoned. As Philip Larkin wrote about aging humans in his ferocious “The Old Fools,” words that might have applied to these cetaceans could they only have gone verbal: “Why aren’t they screaming?”

I’ll scream for them. When does it end? Science writer James Gorman appeared in a recent *New York Times* video. DOLPHINS MUG FOR CAMERA IN AWARENESS TEST reads the initial screen text. And then, MIRROR MIRROR ON THE WALL.

Snow White, get it? Wicked stepmother. Cute. A human wrote that text. Not dolphins. Don't believe me? Check the credits.

Gorman's describing a three-year *study* by *researcher* Diana Reiss, Ph.D., which found that, like humans, chimpanzees, and elephants, dolphins can recognize themselves in a mirror. And, *mirabile dictu*, can do so at an earlier age than human children! But there's a prudent qualifier: "Mirror self-recognition is often taken as a measure of a kind of intelligence and self-awareness, although not all scientists agree."

Tell *that* to the dolphins, lest they get swelled heads.

Meanwhile, what questions are not asked by Gorman in the *Times* video? Among others, and feel free to add your own: why not instead a three-year study of the humans on *their* side of the mirror, writing up "scientific" "data" about human "self-directed behavior"? About self-regard or the human self, regarded. Think of the self-awareness—or self-love—sustained "mirror meditation" might facilitate! Mugging for the camera to be duly documented.

(One might ask self-aware humans watching Gorman's video to explain why mirrors appear to reverse the left and right side of things, but not the up and down. Perhaps dolphins can clarify. Or perhaps the dolphins perceive that their reflection is who they used to be. Mirror a time machine, though not powerful enough to teleport them out of captivity.)

To her credit, researcher Reiss has been an opponent of the annual slaughter of dolphins in Japan, now opposes capturing dolphins in the wild. And she's "*begun* [*italics mine*] working on ways" to apply her dolphin studies "to autism assessment and intervention." Good for humans, maybe. Still, narrator Gorman did not point out that Lori Marino, Reiss's former collaborator on the mirror experiments, suffered a kind of non-sea change. Marino now argues, "You cannot support dolphin captivity and be an advocate for them." Reiss, however, declines to make the case against continuing to breed captive dolphins.

Eons ago—actually, a mere forty years ago—John Berger pointed out that zoo animals "constitute living monuments to their own disappearance."

Stay with that thought for a moment.

And with this one:

"The animals, isolated from each other and without interaction between species, have become utterly dependent upon their keepers."

Novelist John Fowles argued, "There is a deeper wickedness still in Voltaire's unregenerate animal. It won't be owned, or more precisely, it will not be disanimated, unsouled, by the manner in which we try to own it. When it is owned, it disappears."

Words. Shapeshifting, evolving. Or, one's self suddenly awakened to, inquisitive about, a word. For instance, in my early thirties I had a funky ocean-going trimaran. Of which, given endless scraping and painting—sun and salt water corrode, rust, rot—I was both captain and slave. When I registered the trimaran with the Department of Motor Vehicles, the appropriate category was not boat or ship but “sailing vessel.”

Vessel. I was acquainted with the word: high school biology class; wall charts of the circulatory system. I also had four years of Latin, but don't remember bumping into *vasculum*, a small container, diminutive of *vas*, “ship.” Things containing things.

I was in my late twenties when my physician-father died. In the aftermath, my mother gave me a copy of the autopsy report. Professor of pathology, having spent much time in the dead-house, the morgue, and the autopsy room to understand disease in the hope of curing it, my father had himself written many such documents.

As for the “680 grams” of my father's heart, “Post-mortem examination revealed severe, multi-vessel atherosclerotic coronary artery disease, with old occlusions partly recanalized, and two major old infarctions fibrotically healed. The left ventricle was markedly hypertrophic with a large, thinned portion posteriorly . . . [His] terminal episode was probably an arrhythmia, or a very recent extension of his infarctions.”

Thus my father's heart vessels. Heavyhearted, heartbroken, heartsick, sick at heart, I soon forgot the terms of the report.

Writing about my pathologist father fifteen years later, however, I quoted from his book *The Postmortem Examination* (1937): “The heart is grasped by the left hand and drawn upward and forward. The great vessels are then severed by horizontal knife strokes.”

Vessels. In my early fifties, I was surfing all the time, felt not just strong but powerful. But then one day I abruptly had to lean against a building for . . . dear life. Angina, as it turns out, from the Greek *ankhonē*, “strangling.” A hurry-up coronary procedure averted a heart attack.

As I recovered, one doctor told me the stress of being a writer was my problem. “You're writing your heart out,” he argued. Another doctor noticed me inspecting a life-size model of the heart on his desk. “From a pharmaceutical company. You want it?” I did. Kept it on a shelf in my study, but soon seldom remembered the *ankhonē* that had brought it there.

Now, twenty years later, I'm more attentive. Blood vessels are part of one's vascular system—there's the Latin *vas* again. Among the five types are arteries and veins, channels carrying blood away from or toward the heart. Occlusion of a blood vessel means insufficient blood supply. Blockages create eddies—circular movements counter to blood flow—which form deposits on the artery wall. More impediments.

My recurrent occlusions. Throttlings. Suffocations.

Angiograms: invasive look-sees. Angioplasty: brilliant technique to repair. Angi-, from Greek *angeion*, diminutive of *angos*—"jar, vat, vase." Vessels once again. And heart-bypass surgery, blocked arteries replaced with the body's other blood vessels.

Lately, I remember the *Messiah* from childhood, Handel's oratorio a Boston perennial as Christmas approached. In Part II, after the bass sings "Why do the nations rage so furiously together?" and before the "Hallelujah" chorus, there's a brief aria for tenor. The libretto is from Psalms 2:9: "Thou shalt break them with a rod of iron; thou shalt dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel." Just one sentence for two minutes, tenor over and again running up and down the scale while singing the "po" of "potter's." Landing, finally, on the word "vessel."

In D. H. Lawrence's "The Ship of Death," composed not long before he died, the poet wrote, "We are dying, we are dying, so all we can do/is now to be willing to die, and to build the ship/of death to carry the soul on the longest journey." Self-exiled from Britain, traveler heading for Sardinia from Sicily, Lawrence described "that long, slow, waveringly rhythmic rise and fall of the ship, with waters snorting as it were from her nostrils, oh God what a joy it is to the wild innermost soul."

In Acts 9:15, the Lord tells Ananias that Saul-become-Paul "is a chosen vessel unto me." Of Lawrence's commitment to his art, one might say he was the vessel of his muse.

Tubercular, the poet died in 1930 at age forty-four. As a sailor familiar with warnings to mariners, I read "The Ship of Death" as a small-craft advisory. When Lawrence describes a "little ark" on the sea of death carrying his soul into oblivion, I picture a sailing vessel.