Animal Acts
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Commentary: What Happened to the Black Dog?

There comes a time near the ending or not-ending of a long-term relationship, a time after both partners have settled into routines that bore them, when at least one partner wonders whether she will resign to the inertia or go on to something else, whether the wish to stay derives from love, fear, or laziness. Stay! likens such partners to “coal miners in a collapsed relationship,” and its two performers rehearse the ways in which some of us rehearse love: through the formulas of doggy obedience training and film noir. Who’s the master? Who takes the lead? Is a relationship more than habit—or, perhaps, is habit both enough for and essential to a happy life? The piece’s pastiche of Elizabeth Taylor’s films and Paula Rego’s paintings puts its sources’ animal metaphors not only into play but also into productive conversation. Rather than simply creating and living out a new binary (master versus dog), these two women shift around, alternating in the roles of human and dog. At other times they become dogs together: on hands and knees atop the table, faces ravening in cereal bowls.

Stay!’s opening scene plays with the boot polishing depicted in Paula Rego’s painting The Policeman’s Daughter (1987). As John McEwen writes, in Rego’s painting, “the jack-boot strikes forward as if caught up in a march; the raking street-light is as pitiless as a searchlight. [. . .] The girl polishes the phallic boot. Her arm is rammed into it almost up to her shoulder. The window is open, but it offers no means of escape. The view from it is as empty, and as hopeless, as the interior.”¹ A stage direction in Stay! says that Liz “scratches the boot with the brush like a scratching dog.” And in a video of the performance, Liz (Stacy Makishi) and George (Jack Russell) can be seen kneeling together, each with an arm inside a boot, raising and then slam-
ming down the pair in unison.\textsuperscript{2} Observing that the submissive domestic task of boot cleaning (if not quite licking) also features the girl’s “violating hand” and “muscular arm . . . brutally rammed” into the boot, which is “all that remains of the man in this enclosed space,” Maria Manuel Lisboa analyzes the image in relation to the authoritarian Portuguese culture in which Rego spent her early years: “The submissive daughter, busily going about the domestic activities which sustain the father’s career, becomes the raping demoness who breaks every last taboo, and who, disturbingly, does so while paradoxically continuing to fill the role of angel in the house.”\textsuperscript{3} McEwen, though, draws attention to the animal in this painting: “The confined girl’s predicament is symbolized by the cat: the outside world of the night calls, but the cat cannot respond; it, too, is trapped.”\textsuperscript{4} I take as emblematic \textit{Stay!’s} erasure of that particular animal. Liz and George could leave if they wished to, either through the open window or more conventionally through a door. But as Liz says, “Then came the rain. Day after day. Raining cats and dogs. No cats! Just dogs.” These two are not cats confined to the house but tussling dogs who choose to stay. The image accompanying the script in this collection (see fig. 1) mimics \textit{Girl Lifting Her Skirt to a Dog} (1986), in which McEwen sees the “frustration and anger that often smoulders within relationships based on dependency of one sort or another. The dog looks blank, the girl is angry; she is, at one and the same time, willing the dog to react and jeering at him for his inability to do so.”\textsuperscript{5} Photographer Vick Ryder has switched around the painting’s viewpoint. Rather than seeing a dog’s profile and the girl’s angry face, we view Makishi’s back as she lifts her skirt to a menagerie of taxidermy specimens—all of them hoofed species of prey.

Liz intermittently channels Elizabeth Taylor, through whom she plays with both the George of \textit{Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?} and the eponymous collie of \textit{Lassie Come Home}. Note that the character designation is not Richard (Burton): “George” serves as a placeholder for whoever “Liz” needs her to be, at some times making her a dog-surrogate. The \textit{Woolf} material in \textit{Stay!} initially conjures for me an image of Albee’s George as the dog in that relationship, patient and well trained, barely yelping as he endures Martha’s teasing and abuse. Poor George, tail tucked between his legs, biding his time as Martha seduces one of the puppies they’ve brought home (Nick), with the Honey-puppy cast as the runt, dominated and shut out of the game. Upon further reflection, though, George appears to be controlling Martha as she goes through her tricks: \textit{Roll over, Martha. Play bitch. Fetch the daddy stories, fetch our made-up son—let’s play catch with that one, it’s the most fun. But we don’t play with it when there are puppies in the house!} George obliterates this
favored toy because Martha doesn’t play by the rules. He teaches his bad dog a lesson.

Like Albee’s Martha, Liz also channels Bette Davis. This persona draws Stay! into a film noir ambience, turning George into a detective. She describes a crime scene in Black Dog Lane, wreckage that might be the cumulative aftermath of Rego’s paintings. Seemingly unable to resist the scenario, Liz reenacts this domestic violence. She begins with The Family (1988), which Mick Brown describes well: “A man in a suit sits on the edge of a bed. A woman . . . is holding up his arm and apparently taking his pulse, while her other arm appears to be smothering his mouth and nose; a girl . . . stands in front of him between his splayed legs.” I first read this confusing and disturbing image as an inversion of child sexual abuse, perhaps a vision of justified revenge. The violence is typical of Rego’s “girls,” although critics do not always sympathize with them. Lisboa observes that Rego’s “serially violent young female protagonists progress from attacks on dogs to crimes against humans, in particular in the family.” I’ll have more to say about this image later, but note here that Stay!’s version is from the start less malignant because George is not a man and Liz is not a girl. Moreover, although I see a mordant humor in Rego’s work, Stay! is funny outright. As George slumps in a chair, inert, Liz moves through the active positions that The Family depicts. A pulse check gives way to a stance between splayed legs. Liz extends this moment into doglike leg humping, her fist up George’s trouser leg, while she verbalizes her frustrated ambitions. The final complaint, “I could have been somebody if I didn’t like to spoon-feed,” brings her to the floor in Rego’s Bad Dog (1994) position. As she lifts her leg on George, though, the tables turn. Instead of being degraded, George revives to deliver a kind of non sequitur punch line that equates habitual sexual violation by Liz to an insect bite: “She likes to take her pleasure silently, like some kind of insect: like a flea or a mosquito, but she only leaves behind the smallest mark of visitation. She doesn’t like to give what’s asked for, so I always close my eyes, for her, and sometimes when I wake up, I itch around the ankles.” Liz “holds this pissing pose for a long time,” responding to George’s commands to “Stay. Stay. Stay. Okay, go.”

When the piece returns to Rego’s images later, Liz gives in to her noir compulsion and slathers George’s face with shaving cream. She then sharpens her big kitchen knife on a pillow, slits the pillow rather than the goose held by The Soldier’s Daughter (1987), and finally shoves the pillow onto George’s face. What begins as smothering turns to shaving, with feathers as whiskers and the knife doing the razor’s work from Rego’s Untitled (1984).
Lisboa notes “the dog’s gritted teeth” and the uncertainty as to whether the girl is shaving the dog or cutting his throat. McEwen reads the shaving as “the clue, if any were needed, that this is no baby but an invalid, a man in the guise of a dog.” Indeed, Rego has said that these six pastels from 1984 are “about” her husband, who was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis in 1966. She explains that “you have to hurt the dog in order to give him his medicine,” and “there’s often a violence in trying to help people. I even dressed one little girl up as a little fascist girl. I did like doing them very much indeed.” Rego painted The Family in the year that her husband died, and her original title, The Raising of Lazarus, points to her own interpretation of the scene depicted: “the woman is, in fact, dressing the man; the girl standing between his legs is rubbing herself against him, trying to excite him sexually in the hope it might bring him to life.” Rego ends by noting that “of course, it didn’t” and considers this a “shame.”

Although for Rego these images refer to her life with the painter Victor Willing, a biographical explanation does not exhaust their resonance. They also speak to her experience more broadly conceived: as a woman, as a citizen, as a human being. As she puts it, “I can only understand ideas in terms of human relationships—I don’t understand political abstractions.” The aspects of human relationship that she depicts have political significance and are capable of translation into forms other than the experiences that she happens to have lived through. Stay! performs just this sort of translation. Its shaving scene leads into a revision of Taylor’s final scene in Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?, but she addresses her weepy monologue to Lassie rather than to George or the imaginary son that George has killed off. The child was imagined in order to fill the void at the heart of this marriage and perhaps within each of the partners. One can hardly help thinking that they might have been better off with a collie. George and Martha are not actual people but dramatic figures, of course, which facilitates Stay!’s smooth slide from one phantasm to the next.

The impulse toward biographical explanation turns human as well as nonhuman characters into easy-to-read (if not very satisfying) metaphors. George and Martha’s alcoholic, abusive, wit-ridden marriage has often been understood as a barely disguised representation of a gay male relationship—an interpretation that Albee not only rejects as overly reductive but expressly forbids in the casting for productions. Una Chaudhuri notes that audiences and critics find comfort in reading the extramarital love affair in Albee’s more recent The Goat; or, Who is Sylvia (2000) as a stand-in for homosexuality, enabling them to elide the storyline’s explicit reference to interspecies sex. Whatever else may be going on, the goat Sylvia offers to
Albee’s protagonist Martin an emotional fulfillment not available in his human relationships. Like Martha’s imaginary son, Martin’s goat compensates for a lack. That Albee centers each of these plays on a dysfunctional heterosexual marriage may represent his comment on the inadequacy of such arrangements, but that comment does not exhaust the plays’ meanings any more than Paula Rego’s biography provides a fully adequate explanation for her paintings.

The two women of Stay! are trapped within a sexual economy that they might have expected to have little to do with their relationship. The structures of heterosexuality have formed the imaginary from which they draw their sources, but at the same time they—and their sources—push back against all the edges of those structures. I think of Paula Rego’s endless drawing, begun as a child trapped within the polite structures of a very “proper” upper-class Portuguese household, itself trapped within a police state. Playing with the structures provides a sort of escape without the necessity of leaving. I would propose that Stay!’s conversation between Elizabeth Taylor’s film roles and Rego’s dog-women (as well as dog-nurturing girls) brings us new and more varied models for relationship. Stay! moves toward a doggy aesthetic, beyond the butch-femme aesthetic exemplified for Sue-Ellen Case by the work of these performers’ mentors, Peggy Shaw and Lois Weaver.

The question remains, what does any of this have to do with animals? Rego’s dogs function metaphorically, although I note for her at least one Lassie-type experience (in 1963, their dog ran home to alert Paula that her husband had suffered a heart attack), and her early collage Stray Dogs (The Dogs of Barcelona) (1965) makes reference to actual cruelty to actual dogs while also commenting on the authoritarian governments in Portugal and Spain. Chaudhuri notes that by “refusing the animal its radical otherness by ceaselessly troping it and rendering it a metaphor for humanity, modernity erases the animal even as it makes it discursively ubiquitous.” The dogs of Stay! are not dogs, although they have likely learned some parts of being human from dogs.

So: whatever happened to the black dog? After nursing my own black dog, Oso, through liver failure in a month of 2008, I had to make the decision to end his life. As I was writing this essay, my niece Lisa called to talk through the same situation with her black dog, Ruby. These decisions bring into sharp relief our absolute responsibility for our companion animals, our unbearable power to make such choices. We rehearse love and loss, and each relationship is a rehearsal for the next—whether that relationship is with another human or another species of creature. The first time that I watched the video of Stay!, my nonblack dog Hercules was roused by the sound of
barking. Usually he pays no attention to those sounds when I’m watching a movie. But he came running to investigate. When his nose overruled his ears and informed him that there was nothing doing, he resorted to his usual way of enjoying video entertainment with me: he brought me his big nylon bone, and I held one end while he chewed the other. For the first thirty minutes, that is. Then he lay down in a patch of sunlight on the floor near my computer, and I wiped the dog drool off my chair.

NOTES

Stay! was inspired by the films *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* and *Lassie Come Home*, and the paintings of Paula Rego. Thanks to Peggy Shaw, Lois Weaver, Joshua Sofaer, Angie Bual, Nikki Tomlinson, and Sue Baynton.

2. Stacy Makishi, Lisa Asagi, and Vick Ryder developed *Stay!* collaboratively at the Lyric Hammersmith, London. “Jack Russell” is the name by which the performer wishes to be credited. In addition to the script, this essay refers to the performance video available on Vimeo at http://vimeo.com/39421351 (accessed Apr. 30, 2012).
5. Ibid., 145.
8. Ibid., 61.
10. Rego, quoted in Brown, “Paula Rego Interview.”