According to scholars of the nonhuman turn, the scandal of theory lies in its failure to decenter the human.

The real scandal, however, is that we keep trying. We can no longer presume our privileged and exceptional status above all other beings, animate or inanimate, sentient or insentient. Nevertheless, our phantasmatic humanness engenders an aporetic relation between us and nonhumans. Theorists who focus on nonhuman entities and agencies are surely not entirely unaware of this aporia. In Vibrant Matter, for instance, Jane Bennett worries that her theory of object agency risks “the charge of performative self-contradiction” because it emerges from a human subject. This allegation, she observes, “is not so easy to resist, deflect, or redirect.” Yet are resistance, deflection, and redirection our only options? Why should we impatiently “bracket the question of the human,” as if it were merely an obstacle on the path toward an ever-greater nonhumanist world? If the elision of the human disavows the fundamental aporia that conditions our “access” to the nonhuman, then should we not abide this scandal rather than attempt to step around it?
That the human is a scandal for the nonhuman humanities must be understood in precise etymological terms. The term *scandal* stems from the Greek *skándalon*: a stumbling block or a trap laid for an enemy. In *The Beast and the Sovereign*, volume 2, Derrida offers a fable of sorts that turns on such an obstacle. Focused on the relation between solitude and world in Robinson Crusoe and Martin Heidegger, Derrida begins by pondering what it means to hear the statement “I am alone” all on its own: that is, in absolute terms, as an expression of an “I” who is “absolved, detached or delivered from all bond, *absolutus*, safe from any bond, exceptional, even sovereign.” He observes that “I am alone” always implies alterity “because we’re always talking about the world, when we talk about solitude.” We are always “alone” together, together alone. From these preliminary reflections, Derrida then invites the reader to imagine strolling along the shore of an island, perhaps similar to the one on which Robinson Crusoe becomes shipwrecked. Suddenly we happen upon a stone, “abandoned or placed deliberately,” a rock that we have “tripped over . . . as though it were a stumbling block.” Inscribed on this *skándalon* is the following sentence: “The beasts are not alone.” From “among ten thousand” possible interpretations of this inscription, which Derrida also asks us to read *alone*, as an aphorism ensiled from any larger context, he offers two. The first: “I am a friend of the beasts, there are all over the world friends of the beasts, the beasts are not alone. The beasts must not be alone, long live the struggle for the beasts, the struggle goes on.” This initial reading is consonant with the nonhuman turn, posthumanism, animal rights, or any other of the myriad contemporary discourses that declare their concern for nonhuman animals. Yet this affirmation of animal affinity and amity is immediately stymied by an alterative reading that blocks our passage from human to beast: “The beasts are not alone, they do not need us, or else they do not need friends.” These textual islands offer entirely divergent conceptions of the abyss between human and nonhuman: one bridgeable, the other unbridgeable. What might it mean to declare that animals do not need our friendship? One can imagine the cynical conclusions to which such a statement might lead. To wit: animals are doing just fine by themselves! Their abandonment to abuse and extermination does not call for human intervention and protection, as if to pervert for the purposes of justifying animal abuse Coetzee’s claim discussed in the introduction that they are not aware of our benevolence, that they do not understand the wrongness of our misdeeds committed against them. Of course, Coetzee explicitly rebukes animal slaughter, remarking that the treatment of “any living being like a unit in an industrial process” is “a crime against nature.” Clearly what
interests him is the claim of proximity and affinity that empathy for non-humans implies: “However close the well-meaning benefactor may feel to animals, the animal rights campaign remains a human project from beginning to end.”

Something frustrates the claim of empathic identification with animals. That “beasts are not alone” thus means that what humans and animals share with one another is precisely the impossibility of sharing the same world. We turn toward this isolated, “worldless” stone (as Heidegger famously put it) only to see reflected back to us our own worldlessness.

The nonhuman turn has advanced largely by eschewing this skándalon in favor of affirming a shared world. Asserting that “we have never been human,” for instance, Donna Haraway stresses the “multispecies crowd” through which humans and nonhumans are co-constituted: “Partners do not preexist their relating; the partners are precisely what come out of the inter- and intra-relating of fleshly, significant, semiotic-material being.”

This conception of “worldliness and touch across difference,” of “species coshaping one another in layers of reciprocating complexity,” explicitly acknowledges human/animal power asymmetries—especially in the context of the dog agility training in which she and her Australian Shepherd dog participate. Yet to claim that “we have never been human” is to downplay the seductive power of human exceptionalism, which cannot be exorcised simply by asserting an immersive companionship with animals.

Husserl’s notion of “analogical appresentation” is particularly salient to the oblique relationship between human and nonhuman. In the Cartesian Meditations, Husserl asserts that “neither the other Ego himself, nor his subjective processes or his appearances themselves, nor anything else belonging to his own essence, becomes given in our experience originally. If it were, if what belongs to the other’s own essence were directly accessible, it would be merely a moment of my own essence and ultimately he himself and I myself would be the same.”

Echoing Husserl, Derrida remarks that, “if the other were not recognized as a transcendental alter ego, it would be entirely in the world and not, as ego, the origin of the world.” That the ego originates the world does not mean that alterity is simply a product of consciousness in any literal sense; rather, it means that every other with whom I come into contact constitutes another point of origin whose perspective I can never fully inhabit. As Derrida asks, “is not intentionality respect itself?” That intentionality never fully grasps the other means that analogical appresentation names the condition of any ethics of alterity. While Husserl developed his theory to account for intersubjectivity between humans, it is perhaps even more
relevant to interspecies relations. Our relation to nonhumans is intentional in the phenomenological sense: a directedness toward alterity that emerges from the human’s “sphere of ownness.” This sphere is not an absolutely self-enclosed, solipsistic space; rather, self and other inhabit a chiasmic space of intersubjective, “immanent transcendency.” Intersubjectivity requires at least a minimal exceptionality by virtue of which my sphere of ownness is never fully accessible to others, and vice versa. Being-with presupposes a quasi-transcendence whereby every subject, human or animal, is “taken outside,” as the etymology of exception (excipere) implies. We belong to the world by not belonging to it. Haraway’s conception of “becoming with” nonhuman others thus ironically risks erasing this alterity precisely by refusing the phantasmatic exceptionality that conditions human/animal becoming.

This asymmetry comes into focus if we follow the logic of Husserl’s famous transcendental reduction, which asks us to imagine the possibility of a worldless subject in order to inaugurate a phenomenological attitude toward the world (as opposed to the “natural” attitude that views the world as entirely independent of us). Husserl is not encouraging solipsistic doubt, but is interested rather in how the attempt to doubt alters our attitude toward the world. We suspend the world, we put it in parentheses, yet it nevertheless remains. The transcendental reduction thus requires a provisional rather than permanent suspension of the world. Only by imagining the possibility of a worldless subject can we come to have an intentional relation to the world. If we merely belonged to the world, if we were entirely in the world, then we would have absolutely no relation to it.

Derrida extrapolates from this world-forming characteristic of subjectivity to account for how the world is irredeemably altered by the loss of the other, a deprivation that he links to a line from a poem by Paul Celan: “The world is gone, I must carry you” (“Die Welt ist fort”). Crucially, however, Derrida insists that this loss of the world does not commence with the other’s death. As he asks later in this same essay,

Isn’t this retreat of the world, this distancing by which the world retreats to the point of the possibility of its annihilation, the most necessary, the most logical, but also the most insane experience of a transcendental phenomenology? In the famous paragraph 49 of Ideas I, doesn’t Husserl explain to us . . . that access to the absolute egological consciousness, in its purest phenomenological sense, requires that the existence of the transcendent world be suspended in a radical epoke? . . . In this absolute solitude of the pure ego, when the world has
retreated, when “Die Welt ist fort,” the alter ego that is constituted in the ego is no longer accessible in an originary and purely phenomenological intuition. . . . The alter ego is constituted only by analogy, by appresentation, indirectly, inside of me, who then carries it there where there is no longer a transcendent world.26

Far from lapsing into an unqualified solipsism, the Husserlian transcendental reduction suspends the external world precisely in order to give the ego over to an alterity that it can no longer know in an immediate way. I can access the other only “indirectly, inside of me.” Counter-intuitively, the “annihilation” of the world facilitates a nonoriginary relation to the world, which is to say a relation to an otherness that escapes my grasp. Hence, I transcend the world, but the world also transcends me.

Rather than parenthesize the human, should posthumanism not instead take the “insane” yet necessary step of parenthesizing the nonhuman? Nothing perhaps would seem more politically and ethically indecent in the context of the alleged nonhuman turn than to call for the “annihilation” of nonhumans. Dominic Pettman, for instance, has argued that immanent transcendency amounts to a “double gesture” that cultivates human narcissism.27 Yet if intentionality as such requires the suspension of alterity, if relating to the world compels us to “doubt” its existence, and thus to carry others in the wake of the world’s disappearance, then the “exclusion” of alterity is precisely what the nonhuman turn already performs in its own inchoate fashion. To grasp what it means to say that we should stop trying to decenter the human requires that we hear “try” less as “to attempt” than as “to sort” or “to cull,” latent meanings derived from the French root trier. To try is also to discriminate. We should not try to decenter the human as if its full and final accomplishment were attainable, but we should try to decenter the human from the viewpoint of countless trials to come. Their verdicts will always remain subject to appeal because they will always be vulnerable to the accusation of having overlooked someone or something. Hence, the phantasm of anthropocentrism cannot simply be replaced with the truth of its excentricity. We will have never been posthuman. The nonhuman turn turns out to have been revolutionary in a way that its advocates likely never intended. As with Husserl’s transcendental reduction, we can turn toward the nonhuman world only by first having turned back toward ourselves. The nonhuman turn would thereby name a movement of transformation and return according to the double meaning of “revolution” as both change and restoration (as in the premodern definition of revolution as astronomical orbit).
That every turn is always revolutionary in this dual sense is precisely why we should remain skeptical of the rhetoric of “the turn” as such. Despite admitting that academia suffers from “turn fatigue,” Richard Grusin attempts to “defend and reclaim” the turn for the nonhumanities. As he sees it, the nonhuman turn is more auspicious than previous shifts in “academic fashion” because it bears the potential to “provoke a fundamental change of circumstances in the humanities in the twenty-first century. . . . A turn is invariably oriented toward the future. Even a turn back is an attempt to turn the future around, to prevent a future that lies ahead.” Every academic turn promises change, so what makes the nonhuman turn any more propitious? The answer seems to lie in the twofold temporal and spatial sense of the turn. For Grusin, the spatial shift from verticality to horizontality pledges:

“to lose the traditional way of the human, to move aside so that other nonhumans—animate and less animate—can make their way, turn toward movement themselves. I hope that . . . the nonhuman turn . . . might in some small way mark the occasion for a turn of fortune, an intensified concern for the nonhuman that might catalyze a change in our circumstances, a turn for the better not for the worse, in which everyone who wants to participate, human and nonhuman alike, will get their turn.”

The nonhuman turn corresponds to a temporal and spatial shift that marks the moment when the human steps away from itself in the hopes of affirming an immanent, nonhierarchical relation to nonhuman others. Yet the conventional, humanist pluralism of this hope could not be more patent. Do we know that nonhumans want to participate? What form might this participation assume? Grusin claims that “affectivity belongs to nonhuman animals as well as to nonhuman plants or inanimate objects, technical or natural,” but how exactly will extending our concern to plants and things be “politically liberatory” in the same way that previous “turns toward a concern for gender, race, ethnicity, or class were politically liberatory for groups of humans”? In whose political interest do we extend our concern to rocks? Perhaps if we were to turn over the stone that Derrida “discovers” on Crusoe’s island we might find inscribed another message: rocks are not alone. As with the writing on its obverse, this engraving would comprise both a claim of affinity, even affection, and a claim of solitude, perhaps even a rebuke to all those object-oriented theorists who believe rocks need us to speak on their behalf (can the sub-basaltic speak, anyone?). Perhaps
the rock “speaks” only to say “I have no desire to speak, thank you very much. Leave me to my solitary, petrified life.”

While it may be in the interest of animals not to be tortured and killed, the same cannot be said of this stone for which political liberation would seem entirely indirect and vicarious: a rebranded version of Kant’s claim that “all duties relating to animals, other beings and things have an indirect reference to our duties towards mankind.” The Kantian view on animals is notorious, but less often discussed is the place of “inanimate objects” in his conception of indirect duties: “The human impulse to destroy things that can still be used is very immoral. No man ought to damage the beauty of nature; even though he cannot use it, other people may yet be able to do so, and though he has no need to observe such a duty in regard to the thing itself, he does in regard to others. Thus all duties relating to animals, other beings and things have an indirect reference to our duties towards mankind.”

Theorists of vital materialities, however, often imply that we do bear direct responsibilities toward nonliving agencies. Bennett suggests that the conception of politics as exclusively human amounts to “a prejudice against a (nonhuman) multitude.” She is no doubt correct that things bear a capacity “not only to impede or block the will and designs of humans but also to act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own.” Yet how precisely does this force of things bear on the problem of political discrimination? Discussing Darwin’s treatise on worms, she asks, “can worms be considered members of a public...? Are there nonhuman members of a public? What, in sum, are the implications of a (meta)physics of vibrant materiality for political theory?” Bennett draws upon Dewey’s conception of a public as an alliance formed in response to “a shared experience of harm.” That this formation is not necessarily voluntary or intentional leads her to conceive it as a virtually boundless network of actants, including “dead rats, bottle caps, gadgets, fire, electricity, berries, [and] metal.” No doubt a myriad of nonhuman entities bear a capacity to “catalyze a public,” but does it follow that they all experience the harm around which this public coalesces, in which case we could justifiably call their exclusion prejudicial? Is it “wrong to deny vitality to nonhuman bodies, forces, and forms” because they have a “face” in the Levinasian sense, in which case we have a direct responsibility not to harm them? Bennett does not directly address this question. Instead, the political exclusion of worms, dead rats, and bottle caps remains a prejudice in search of a harm. Indeed, she seems to backpedal on the suggestion that these things ought to count as members of a public, conceding that she
does not wish to “horizontalize’ the world completely,” but rather “to inspire a greater sense of the extent to which all bodies are kin in the sense of inextricably enmeshed in a dense network of relations. And in a knotted world of vibrant matter, to harm one section of the web may very well be to harm oneself.” 39 For all the talk of expanding the sphere of politics to include innumerable nonhuman entities, it seems that their “inclusion” ultimately answers to a set of ethical duties that return to the human, as if by doing “harm” to anything other one harms oneself. The ethical and political responsiveness that Bennett champions is therefore no less oblique than Kant’s insofar as her alleged concern for the vitality of everything is performed on behalf of the human.

Grusin likewise reinscribes the centrality of the human when he suggests that the nonhuman turn must also turn toward “the nonhumanness that is in all of us,” by which he means the animal embodiment that humanism has historically disavowed. This turn away from the human thus also turns back to it precisely at the place of the nonhuman within the human. While the turn as historical shift may be “invariably oriented” toward the future, the turn as spatial metaphor invariably bears within itself an intrinsic variability whereby the project of radical immanence turns on itself precisely by turning back to the self. The turn as hope—which Emily Dickinson calls “the thing with feathers,” swoops down toward immanence from the human’s “transcendent” perch above the nonhuman. 40 The point is not to catch Grusin in a posthumanist “gotcha moment,” but rather to ask why theorists remain invested in the rhetoric of “the turn” despite its manifest theoretical inadequacy. If we are unable to abandon the fiction of transcendence, then the nonhuman turn amounts to a teleological circle whose goal of absolute inclusivity always pivots around the human, no matter how other-oriented it wants to be. In the final analysis, Grusin’s concern for the nonhuman answers to an all-too-human ethico-political imperative. Is it not time to turn away from the turn, to concede that responsiveness to others conceived as a turn always seeks to mask an originary turn toward the self that is the condition of possibility for any ethics of alterity?

The As If As Such

We may genuinely believe that we desire to do without the humanist fictions of exceptionalism and transcendence. Haraway is no doubt sincere in this regard when she declares that “human exceptionalism is what companion species cannot abide.” 41 Yet what happens to the exceptionalist phan-
tasm once its intolerability is proclaimed? As Michael Naas argues, all phantasms involve an as if that attempts to pass as an as such: a “speculative fiction” that poses as an “inflexible law.” Discussing the centrality of the phantasm in Derrida, Naas writes that “the phenomenon of the phantasm cannot fail to be sustained by the desire, by the temptation, to believe.” We must therefore come to terms with:

the force and tenacity of a phantasm that, metaphysically speaking, does not exist but that we believe exists, a phantasm that would be nothing other than our belief in a phenomenon that transcends itself, that spontaneously gives rise to itself—like an Immaculate Conception. For in any consideration of the phantasm one must emphasize less the ontological status of the phantasm than its staying power, its returning power, I would be tempted to say its regenerative power. In a word, one must emphasize the fact that the phantasm lives on, the fact that, to cite an English idiom, it seems always to have “legs.”

The specific phantasm to which Naas is referring in this passage is the fiction of auto-affection that Derrida put into question in *Voice and Phenomenon*. Whereas Husserl maintains that the closed space of interior monologue constitutes a realm of pure expression in which sign and meaning are aligned insofar as “speaker” and “listener” are identical, Derrida argues that this ostensibly interior world is always exposed to the exterior world of representation, iterability, and difference. The phantasm of auto-affection permits me to believe that my language and meaning is absolutely tied to myself. This phantasm thus denies the “truth” of hetero-affection. Yet Derrida also stresses that auto-affection names “what our desire cannot not be tempted to believe.” The French expression *vouloir dire*, “wanting to say,” links this desire to meaning. To mean is always to desire an impossible coincidence between sign and meaning, a desire to remain unexposed and inured against all threats to one’s integrity and self-presence. The irreducibility of this auto-affective phantasm is precisely what Naas captures by suggesting that it “has legs.”

The scandal of human exceptionalism similarly has legs insofar as its staying power belies any simple curative. Absolved of its relation to the human as center, the nonhuman turn wants to reveal decenteredness as the human’s “truth.” If historically the human has presented itself as if it were the center, then the posthumanities aim to show us (humans) that we are not truly the center as such. Anthropocentrism is no doubt a speculative fiction, but it is also what our desire cannot fail to be tempted into believing. While Derrida does not discuss auto-affection in terms of the
human /animal relation in Voice and Phenomenon, anthropocentrism depends precisely on the auto-affective fantasy of pure self-coincidence, of an absolutely porous self-relation that nourishes human narcissism: *nosce te ipsum*. Yet this narcissism cannot simply be evaded. As Pleshette DeArmitt argues, “one cannot simply dispense with narcissism, and to attempt to occupy such a position would even be perilous.” Indeed, Derrida maintains that absolute non-narcissism extinguishes alterity and thus equates with the worst narcissism possible:

There is not narcissism and non-narcissism; there are narcissisms that are more or less comprehensive, generous, open, extended. What is called non-narcissism is in general but the economy of a much more welcoming, hospitable narcissism, one that is much more open to the experience of the other. I believe that without a movement of narcissistic reappropriation, the relation to the other would be absolutely destroyed, it would be destroyed in advance. The relation to the other—even if it remains asymmetrical, open, without possible reappropriation—must trace a movement of reappropriation in the image of oneself for love to be possible, for example. Love is narcissistic.

Narcissism is both necessary and impossible. It corresponds to a desire for oneness and sameness whose seductive power is both illusory and unrealizable.

This power underscores a crucial ethical implication of Husserlian analogical appresentation. Husserl employs the term empathy (*Einfühlung*) only sparingly, preferring instead to talk about “the experience of the other” (*Fremderfahrung*). However directly inaccessible and foreign, the other is experienced as other rather than merely logically inferred or imaginarily projected. If this experience is always incomplete and indirect, then it follows that ethical duties as such are always mediated as well. For Kant, one should not harm nonhumans because “a person who already displays such cruelty to animals is also no less hardened towards men.” The prototype for other humans, however, is oneself. I should be concerned with animal cruelty because it engenders cruelty toward humans, and by extension (or contraction), toward myself. Aside from my ethical concern for animals, my allegedly direct duties to other humans satisfy a narcissistic, self-protective desire to escape harm. That the ethical relation to others—whether human or nonhuman—is always mediated through the self means that the elision of the human commits oneself to an unsustainable, “self-less” ethics of alterity.
What Naas says of phantasms in general is therefore also true of human narcissism. It is not merely an error in need of correction. The “truth” of the human is not only its decenteredness and horizontality in relation to the nonhuman. Its centeredness and verticality do not evaporate simply by wishing it so. These phantasms are also its “truth.” If anthropocentrism lives under the illusion that it represents the way things truly are, then the posthumanist desire to efface anthropocentrism altogether, to erase any and all of its last vestiges, betrays its own phantasmatic logic, its own as if masquerading as an as such.\textsuperscript{52} Massumi’s point discussed in the introduction that both human and animal perspectives are arbitrary starting points because in “actual fact [my emphasis] there has never been anything other than mixtures in nature” invokes the as such of immanence as if its factuality trumped the as if as such.\textsuperscript{53} Yet the speculative fiction of the as if and the inflexible law of the as such are not balanced between mutually exclusive, dueling imperatives. The law of the as if, as it were, insinuates itself into the as such, and vice versa.

The “Effeineffable” Name of Language

We can further trace this co-insinuation of the as if and the as such in relation to what is perhaps anthropocentrism’s most jealously guarded territory: language. A number of language studies have been conducted with parrots and apes since the 1960s (the latter involving the acquisition of American Sign Language [ASL]). The question of whether or not apes possess language has often been reduced to a psycholinguistic problem that measures their communicative capacities against a human definition of what counts as language. Hence, the stabilization of the meaning of language is presumed and the phantasm of language’s exemplary humanness persists. As Derrida observes in “Eating Well”:

The idea according to which man is the only speaking being, in its traditional form, or in its Heideggerian form, seems to me at once undisplaceable and highly problematic. Of course, if one defines language in such a way that it is reserved for what we call man, then what is there to say? But if one re-inscribes language in a network of possibilities that do not merely encompass it but mark it irreducibly from the inside, everything changes. I am thinking in particular of the mark in general, of the trace, of iterability, of \textit{différance}. These possibilities or necessities, without which there would be no language, are themselves not only human.\textsuperscript{54}
The exclusion of nonhuman language is “at once undisplaceable and highly problematic” insofar as its displacement would require a movement beyond the dialectic of “having” and “not-having” language. As soon as humans fix the meaning of language, however, the exclusion of the animal is assured.

Philosopher and ethologist Dominique Lestel has observed that the anthropological dimension of ape language experiments is often treated as if it were merely a form of contamination that interferes with the experimental results. Rather than “subtract” the human element in order to arrive at some kind of “truth” of nonhuman linguistic capacities, Lestel reconceives nonhuman language as precisely what emerges from a process of mutual domestication: a hybrid community that produces the talking apes it purports to recognize. Lestel’s research marks an important advance insofar as it refuses to bracket the human in hopes of retrieving an inaccessible pure animal language. Yet it remains indebted to a conventional humanist logic that presumes the absence of language among animals prior to what he calls its human accréditation.

Lestel writes that “it is true that these animals are without language. . . . If they do not talk like human beings do, ‘one’ speaks for them. The ‘talking ape’ is acculturated in a special way, because it is integrated into a human community.” Lestel does not comment on nonhuman languages outside the context of hybrid, human/animal communities. Primatologists such as Amy S. Pollick and Frans B. M. de Waal have theorized that apes are especially disposed to the acquisition of ASL because gestural communication occurs naturally among them. That humans share with bonobos and chimpanzees (our closest primate relatives) a proclivity for gestures has led scientists to identify this communicative style as the likely foundation of human language evolution. Apes who learn ASL are effectively engaged in an act of second language acquisition, in which case it is dubious to claim that they are formerly “without language.”

The logic of accréditation is also problematic insofar as it reinscribes the human’s possessive investment in language. Lestel suggests that the language of apes belongs to “the order of the gift.” He continues: “Monkeys do not speak, but researchers can design specific mechanisms through which some great apes can manipulate a kind of symbolic language in their interactions with humans. No chimpanzee has ever spoken like man, but some of them can appropriate segments of symbolic communication with indisputable efficacy. What can one give and to whom? Who can give what to whom? Who can give what to what? And above all: who can give who what?” This law of accreditation not only retains language as what is proper to man, but in so doing ascribes to animals a linguistic poverty that
disavows our own inherent linguistic dispossession. As Derrida puts it in The Monolingualism of the Other, “I have only one language, yet it is not mine.” One inhabits a language that one never fully owns. It comes from the other in the form of an originary “colonial” gesture. Language constitutes a “structure of alienation without alienation,” an “inalienable alienation” because its loss does not befall an original possession. Rather, every speech act cites a language that precedes us and therefore attests to an originary linguistic dispersion.

That humans remain divided when it comes to the question of whether animals have language is altogether dependent on an arbitrary decision that fuses the signifier “language” to an identifiable and stable signified. Lacan, for instance, contested Karl von Frisch’s discovery of the language of honey bees (for which von Frisch won the Nobel in 1973), claiming that bees rely on a fixed code rather than fully developed signifiers. Apparently lost on Lacan was the irony of fixing the signifier “signifier” to a meaning that distinguishes it from the fixity of animal codes. Indeed, he sought to draw a border around language in the hopes of escaping what Paul de Man once described as the vertigo of undecidability: “As anyone who has ever been caught in a revolving door or on a revolving wheel can testify, it is certainly most uncomfortable.” The dismissal of undecidability always betrays an effort to extricate oneself from the uncomfortable feeling of remaining within a revolving wheel, of continuously turning around on oneself. We can attempt to exit this revolving door at any time, yet our “decision” regarding the definition of language will not really have decided anything once and for all.

This disavowal of undecidability explains why even the most apparently radical ethological explorations into nonhuman communication prefer to exchange this vertigo for a false stability. In the Alex Studies, for instance, ethologist Irene Pepperberg gives an account of her investigations into the linguistic capabilities of an eponymous grey parrot. Pepperberg conducted several experiments with Alex in which he demonstrated an ability to recognize difference and sameness, presence and absence, as well as a capacity to communicate intentionally rather than engage in mere mimicry. For instance, he learned to apply the word key to keys of varying color, thus demonstrating an advanced cognitive ability to transfer skills from familiar to novel situations. He also learned to say “I’m sorry” in appropriate contexts: once after he chewed up a grant proposal, another in response to Pepperberg’s visible frustration when he refused to cooperate with a routine skills test, and yet another after he knocked a plastic cup onto the floor. Pepperberg acknowledges that she cannot prove that “I’m sorry”
constitutes an expression of true remorse (of course, the presence of genuine contrition is equally immeasurable in humans!), but she nevertheless interprets his words as an effective means to defuse a tense situation. Pepperberg designates such communication “peri-referentiality,” which she distinguishes from “fully referential” language. An ability that parrots share with the great apes, peri-referentiality employs a symbol as a “mental representation of an item,” but it stops short of “full abstract use of a symbol” in which one is able “to talk about qualities of the item, to talk about how you think about the item—the referent—in its absence, to talk about it in future and past tense—but not simply in the sense of a request for something not yet present.”

In her memoir, *Alex and Me*, which Pepperberg wrote in the wake of the parrot’s death in 2007, she reveals that the name Alex was originally intended as an acronym for Avian Language Experiment, but due to resistance within the scientific community, she revised the acronym to denote Avian Learning Experiment. Pepperberg began her research in the late 1970s at a time when ape language studies were under attack. In 1979, Herbert Terrace, who had previously been a staunch advocate of such studies, published a paper called “Can an Ape Create a Sentence?” in which he claimed that his experiments with an ape named Nim Chimpsky (after the famous linguist) had failed to demonstrate linguistic capabilities in apes. According to Terrace, “the function of the symbols of an ape’s vocabulary appears to be not so much to identify things or to convey information . . . as it is to satisfy a demand that it use that symbol in order to obtain some reward.” Nim may have signed “banana” when he wanted one, but he did not demonstrate any conception of grammar. Of course, Terrace begs the question as to why grammatical ability ought to mark the gateway to language. If Nim could sign “banana,” then he no doubt demonstrated a basic grasp of referentiality. Terrace’s article helped fuel an openly hostile attitude toward studies of nonhuman communication, and thus Pepperberg felt compelled to cease claiming that parrots employ language or words, and stated instead that they use “labels” and “vocalizations.” As Pepperberg remarked in an interview in 1999: “I avoid the language issue. . . . What little syntax he [Alex] has is very simplistic. Language is what you and I are doing, an incredibly complex form of communication.” We should certainly sympathize with the plight of a young scholar trying to gain a foothold in academic research and publishing—which, for all its professed obsession with innovation, is often ironically unreceptive to work that refuses to parrot the status quo—yet we must nevertheless ask how far ethological research into nonhuman languages has actually progressed if a
well-established scholar still feels induced to such caginess some thirty years later.

Rather than avoid the question of language altogether, should we not insist instead that the question of where we draw the line between human language and nonhuman “vocalizations” is among the most pressing questions, a question that calls on us with considerable urgency, but that can only remain unanswerable, a question that must be posed and reposed precisely so that it remain open, so that no final definition of language can be imposed? It seems commonsensical for Pepperberg to believe that scientific investigations into the question of nonhuman communication must first come to a decision about what constitutes language itself: how can we determine if animals have “it” if we do not first define what “it” is? Yet any language that seeks to limit the meaning of language can do so only by posing as a metalanguage, which is to say a language that masquerades as not language, a language that has much to say about what language is and how animals do not have it but has nothing to say about the language that authorizes itself to assert this lack. The human thus presumes that it can stand above and beyond language, that it bears the power to delimit the meaning of “language.” As loquacious as it is when it denies animals a capacity for speech, the language of science suddenly becomes dumbstruck when it comes to justifying the human’s exceptional claim to language. When Pepperberg claims that “language is what you and I are doing,” the circularity of her assertion is unmistakable: she gives herself the sovereign power to decide what does and does not count as language, a power that depends on nothing more than what Derrida calls (drawing from La Fontaine) “the reason of the strongest,” a power that exempts one from the duty to provide rationales. Parrots thus always fall short of some imaginary threshold. Animals that connect a particular sign with a particular object may display a capacity for association, she suggests, but this is “merely the first step toward referential labeling [my emphasis],” which requires “communicative intent.” Likewise, the conceptual understandings inherent in peri-referential labeling are “defining characteristics leading up to referential communication [my emphasis].” Animal “vocalization” is in the vicinity or neighborhood of language, but is not quite there yet; it is always on the way toward language, but never fully arrives there. Although she suggests that “lack of evidence for truly referential communication in animals is most likely a consequence of our own incompetence,” implying that “true” referentiality in nonhuman animals may yet be discovered, this statement is difficult to square with her equation of language with what she deems “truly” complex forms of communication.
Pepperberg may openly reject the view espoused by some ethologists that language “will continue to be redefined by linguists as whatever animals cannot be shown to do,” but by employing a “human standard for the term ‘referential’” has she not already imposed an untraversable boundary between human language and animal vocalization? Lestel remarks that the criterion employed by ape researchers closely resembles that of the Turing test, which the latter proposed to determine whether a computer can be regarded as intelligent. Just as a computer passes the test if it can deceive humans into mistaking it for another human, “the ape will be recognized as speaking when it makes impossible, for a human being, the distinction between a human being and a chimpanzee, with regard to language.” According to such standards, animals would be forever excluded from language. Only if we reduce human language to a code of natural or naturalized signs can it be understood as fully referential. Yet even were we to concede that animal symbolization is less developed than that of humans, this concession would still not justify restricting the term language to human forms of communication. That the peri-referentiality of parrots is prescriptive rather than descriptive means that they are effectively barred from language by an infinitely receding horizon that they have no hope of transcending.

It would be all too easy and expedient to brand as “humanist” any argument that reserves language exclusively for humans. If antihumanism is irreducible, however, then any inquiry into animal languages presupposes at least a provisional definition of language that limits our capacity to grasp nonhuman language “on its own terms.” Is it even meaningful to suggest that the as such of nonhuman language is accessible to us beyond the as if of our imaginary projections? On the one hand, we can and should challenge human exceptionalism by showing that language is not the sole province of the human. On the other hand, what we name language presupposes what Derrida characterized as early as his Introduction to Husserl’s “Origin of Geometry” as a “minimal linguistic transparency.” We can expand our conception of language to embrace innumerable forms of nonhuman communication, to include the general structure of the trace, and so on, but this expansion requires that we proceed as if language qua signifier is minimally univocal. Derrida illustrates the interdependency of the univocal and the equivocal in a well-known passage from the Introduction that discusses Joyce. Although Joyce sought to unearth “the greatest potential for buried, accumulated, and interwoven intentions within each linguistic atom,” this excavation “could only succeed by allotting its share to univocity, whether it might draw from a given univocity or try to produce another. Otherwise,
the very text of its repetition would have been unintelligible; at least it would have remained so forever and for everyone.” For all its equivocation, Joyce’s *Ulysses* is no less exempt from a sort of transitory interruption of the sign’s intrinsic heterogeneity.

Even if we accept that signification is subject to an enduring undecidability, this absence of determinable meaning is no more tolerable than finding oneself trapped in a revolving door. We thus “decide” meaning in a number of interpretative contexts in order to mitigate temporarily this vertigo. The signified of “language” may never present itself; it is always to come, but we proceed here and now as if its meaning has already arrived. And this as if is no less evident than when we reject the humanist exclusion of the animal from the domain of language. As soon as we say “language cannot be defined,” or “language is not exclusively human,” we have already taken a step toward defining language; the intelligibility of these assertions posits some degree of reference, some provisional definition of language, no matter how fallible and precarious, no matter how open to revision and contestation.

The rejection of exceptionalism cannot extricate itself from this tension between univocity and equivocity, between absolute translatability and absolute untranslatability. Language is equivocal as such but we cannot avoid believing as if it were minimally univocal. The human who wields the Adamic power to name what the nonhuman can no longer be said to lack—in a word, language—thus reinscribes exceptionalism precisely through the inclusive gesture that “gives” language to nonhumans. The “gift” of language to animals imposes a univocity that recalls Derrida’s *animot*: a homonym with *animaux* that stresses how the catchall “animal” captures the plurality of animals in its linguistic cage. Are we not reinscribing the general singular “animal” despite all the different languages that may exist among nonhuman animals, languages that nonhumans would certainly not call language, but which might go by other names? Does language not constitute a *humanimot* that bespeaks the human’s monolingualism? Perhaps my cat has a secret name for her purrs and meows, an “Effanineffable/Deep and inscrutable singular Name.” Hence, the most generous, posthumanist gesture that would lend the name language to her voice must reckon with the antehumanist phantasm that this gesture evokes.

This *humanimot* of language is precisely what Massumi disavows when he claims that “human language is essentially animal.” Massumi reads animal play as a prototypical form of “metacommunication,” a “simple code” that “produces the conditions of human language.” Focused on the ludic gestures of wolf cubs whose play fighting communicates “this is not a
bite”—thus marking a distinction between real and figurative combat that is inherently communicative—he asks why, if animal play is protolinguis-
tic, then do we “not consider human language a reprise of animal play, 
raised to a higher power? Or say that it is actually in language that the 
human reaches its highest degree of animality?” While he is critical of the 
“monopoly” that humans claim over language, bis own language maintains 
a hierarchical distinction between human and nonhuman by describing 
animal play as “metacommunicative” and the human capacity for figura-
tion as “metalinguistic.” Similar to Pepperberg, Massumi describes ani-
mal communication as “language-like,” “language avant la lettre.” Rather 
than “give” animals language, he takes language away from the human, or 
rather, “demotes” language to the level of the animal. Yet this demotion is 
only apparent insofar as human language sublates its essential animality 
and raises it up to another level. Indeed, this approach seems even more 
conventionally humanist than that of Pepperberg because it remains silent 
on the sovereign decision that distinguishes animal communication from 
human language. As I will show in chapter 2, sovereignty in its purest 
(impossible) form requires silence, lest sovereignty undermine itself by 
speaking, by providing reasons—in this case, by supplying a rationale for 
deciding on the distinction between animal communication and human 
language, as if this decision were not dependent precisely on the fiction of 
transcendence whose perpendicular distance abstracts the subject from the 
scene. Massumi wants to claim that human and animal difference can be 
affirmed only in “absolute survey,” that is, “without attributing any foun-
dational status” to such distinctions. Absolute survey, which Massumi 
also calls “immanent survey,” describes a perspective that claims not to 
stand apart from or above what it perceives, as if from a bird’s-eye view. 
Such a transcendent perspective is no doubt a phantasm, but Massumi 
proceeds as if its error can simply be opposed to the truth of immanence. 
Absolute survey wants to absolve itself from complicity with the phantasm 
of transcendence. Seeking to distance itself from this phantasm, however, 
it maintains its own bird’s-eye view “above” the knotty aporia of immanent 
transcendence.

The march toward immanence that claims to relinquish “our inveterate 
vanity,” to renounce and thereby move beyond our auto-affective, narcis-
sistic fantasies, can only disavow what Derrida calls “the law of the island 
and the law of the wheel” by virtue of which “my last footstep always might 
coincide with my first.” Discussing the anxiety that Robinson Crusoe 
experiences when he cannot determine if a footprint he discovers in the 
sand belongs to a “cannibal,” another castaway, or to himself, Derrida sug-
gests that the uncanniness engendered by the footprint’s uncertain origin resonates with the unease that Robinson also experiences when he hears his parrot, Poll, say “Robin, Robin, Robin Crusoe, poor Robin Crusoe, where are you, Robin Crusoe? Where are you? Where have you been?” Having found himself temporarily stranded at sea when he explores the opposite side of the island, Crusoe finds Poll’s words uncanny because they seem to be an expression of longing and mourning, as if Poll has flown in search of his lost human companion. Robinson believes that Poll has merely learned these words by rote when the former apparently uttered them in an expression of profound isolation and disorientation. Yet the question of who owns Poll’s linguistic traces is no more answerable than the question of who left the footprint in the sand. Who’s to say that Poll has not reappropriated his master’s words for his own purposes? Robinson’s linguistic disorientation thus mimes his geographical disorientation: “These are always the two risks of a proceeding [démarche]: wander and get lost, or get closed in by retracing one’s steps. And that is the Robinsonian trouble with the island. Not get lost and not get closed into the aporia, not get paralyzed.”

As with de Man’s revolving door of undecidability or the uncertainty that Robinson faces when he is unable to determine if the footprint he discovers belongs to him or to another, the apparently straightforward path that would lead us to nonhuman language always poses the risk of going in circles and retracing our steps. In this sense, Lestel is both absolutely correct and absolutely incorrect to say that apes do not have language. Ethologists such as de Waal do not teach apes to learn ASL, but they nevertheless “give” them language precisely by certifying their gestures as language. Accréditation therefore takes place as soon as one asserts that nonhumans possess language, even if the language that one “gives” them is already “their” own.

Whence the following paradox emerges: language is only and always human; language is never solely human. Humans have only one language, yet it is not our own.

The full and final displacement of the humanist orientation in and of language does not fall within the scope of human potentiality, within the horizon of what the human can achieve or accomplish. This failure attests to a certain nonpower, a not-being-able, a vulnerability and subjection to language that undermines any effort to secure and delineate the scope of its signification. The most obstinate humanists among us will no doubt continue to insist that language is the inalienable property of the human, notwithstanding scientific and ethological efforts to demonstrate the contrary. Yet only those who would thereby assert with equal confidence that
they know what language is could claim to know that animals possess it. One would never be able to prove that animals have language, except by summoning forth the same metalanguage that will have authorized their silencing.

Lestel relates an anecdote about an exasperated linguist who asserted at a colloquium on the topic of language among bonobo apes that “there will always be a fundamental difference between bonobos and humans; it will always be humans who organize symposiums on bonobos and not the reverse.” The unlikelihood of an ape presenting a scholarly paper to his or her peers on the question of human language does not demonstrate that apes lack symbolic language, but it does underscore a fundamental asymmetry between human and nonhuman animals. Openness to animal alterity cannot neutralize the quasi-solipsism by virtue of which access to the other must be given indirectly precisely in order that the other remain other. That the “gift” of animal language cannot escape the monological sovereignty that it opposes means that we cannot finally distinguish the return of language from its imposition, the gift of language from its theft. If animal language always betrays the stain of the human, then we can vainly attempt to escape this trace (as Crusoe flees the footprint) or endure its uncertain origins. This monolanguage that is not of the human, this singular print that does not belong to us, nevertheless leaves its mark on those animals whom we summon forth to speak from the margins of an enforced mutism.