

Embodying the Animal:
Questioning Human Identity in Literature and Circus

by

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements.....	3
Introduction.....	4
Chapter One	
Imaginative Embodiment in Literature.....	16
<i>Red Peter</i>	18
<i>Enkidu and Gregor</i>	20
<i>The Churl and Gregor</i>	27
<i>The Prisoner and the Hunger Artist</i>	35
Chapter Two	
Physical Embodiment in Circus.....	44
<i>Roman Circus</i>	46
<i>Traditional Circus</i>	50
<i>Cirque du Soleil</i>	59
Conclusion.....	70
Notes.....	74
Works Cited.....	75
Appendix	81

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INTRODUCTION

A dwarf marches into the ring, decked out in traditional circus attire -- an elaborate conductor's hat, a shimmering blue vest, and a red bow tie. He flourishes his riding crop, and with a precise gesture cues two horses to trot in a wide circle. The uninterested horses stare at the dwarf for a moment. With a sigh they turn and lazily saunter around the ring, paying little attention to the assigned task. While ambling along, the brown horse petulantly snaps at a musician in his path. The dwarf forces a smile and signals the brown horse to come to the center of the ring. However, the horse shakes his head "no," shrugs, and sits down, refusing to move until the red horse impatiently kicks him. The brown horse nonchalantly strides to the center where he drops to the ground and plays dead. As a last resort, the dwarf pulls a cube of sugar from his pocket and holds it out to the brown horse, bribing him to stand up. Infuriated, the red horse demands her ration of sugar by sticking her hand out from under the horse costume.

As the preceding description makes clear, the ornery horses featured in this circus act are each played by two humans—one as the head and one as the rear. This fresh interpretation of a traditional equestrian clown routine is featured in Cirque du Soleil's 2007 production, *Corteo*. The sight of real horses on the Cirque du Soleil stage would be surprising, as Cirque is known for its lack of animals. These "horses," obviously and comically played by human actors, conform to Cirque's norms, providing a satirical routine that illustrates in a blatantly comic fashion the human effort to represent animals¹ on the circus stage.

From the beginning of the routine it is apparent that the equestrian act in *Corteo* is intended to mock the clownish “horse” acts famous in traditional circus.² For comic effect, humans were costumed as horses and performed an equestrian routine which was laughably unimpressive. Like these traditional circus maneuvers, *Corteo* features two obstinate, and inept “horses,” who are unwilling and unable to perform any anticipated tricks.

However, *Corteo* goes beyond the straightforward comedy of this classic clown routine and provokes the audience to analyze the maneuver itself by drawing attention to the humanness of the performers. This performance strategy makes it clear to the spectator that the humans are precisely what make the act so thoroughly unimpressive. The greatest difficulties the “horses” present for the dwarf are their unmistakably human emotions, postures, and garb. The red “horse” wears high heels, restricting her movement. The brown “horse” is too proud, always delaying the routine by refusing to follow his cues. When the “horses” do perform tricks, they are mediocre at best because the human performers are unable to imitate the movement of horses. In the end the horse costumes rip apart, revealing the humans the audience knew were beneath them. Ultimately, the performers give up the effort to embody the horses, bringing attention to the intrinsic silliness of humans dressing up and passing themselves off as animals.

Of course, the silliness is the point—it is a comic routine. It is through the comedy that the audience is able to participate in ridiculing the notion that humans can successfully represent animals. We find it funny that the clowns pointedly display human behavior, parodying their performance as horses and ultimately pulling apart their costumes. Our laughter expresses our sympathetic participation in

the mockery of this clumsy illusion, and, on a broader scale, the notion that humans could ever successfully imitate animals.

Performances of this nature attempt to gain an understanding of the question of the animal. *The question of the animal*, a term commonly referred to by various theorists such as Martin Puchner and Cary Wolfe, encompasses a variety of issues stemming from our complex relationship with animals. We are fascinated by animals, drawn to them, and often get emotionally attached to them; yet at the same time we also fear them, kill them, and consume them. We use animals as a means of defining our human identity with such questions as, “Are animals ‘us’ or ‘other’?” “What differentiates us from animals? Anything? Nothing?” “Why do I perceive animals the way I do?” “What does my perception of animals say about me?”

An example of the complex issues surrounding the human perceptions of animals is illustrated by the following news story: “London housewife Barbara Carter won a ‘grant a wish’ charity contest, and said she wanted to kiss and cuddle a lion. Wednesday night she was in the hospital in shock with throat wounds” (Berger 257-8). Barbara Carter demonstrates the absurd human notion that animals will conform to whatever postures humans want them to adopt. Lions do not become “cuddly” just because silly housewives want to cuddle them. Yet, our conceptions of animals have often been misguided by our own perceptions, circumstances, and needs. The question of the animal directly addresses these human perceptions, asking how they affect our definition of the animal-human distinction and what that definition means for human identity.

Philosophers, biologists, theologians, and scholars in many other disciplines have attempted to define the animal-human relationship. Even the earliest Greek

philosophers demonstrated interest in the question of the animal. In the Pythagorean theory of metempsychosis, or the transmigration of souls, after a human body dies, its human soul is reincarnated in the form of an animal or even a plant (Ovid 367-79).

This theory not only assumes that the soul and body are separable, but more surprisingly, implies that a creature clearly perceptible and identifiable as an animal may have a human soul, and therefore, be in possession of human faculties.

The doctrine of metempsychosis also appears in several of Plato's dialogues.³ In *The Republic*, Plato also developed the idea of the three levels of soul—vegetative, animal, and rational—that are found, respectively, in plants, animals, and human beings. According to this theory, which was later refined by Aristotle in *On the Soul*, all animate beings possessed souls, but humans were unique in the possession of a rational soul. Plato and Aristotle do not appear to have taken up the notion that animals can think. The Aristotelian concept of the soul was later absorbed into medieval Catholic theology.⁴

During the first half of the 17th century, René Descartes perceived animals as machine-like, and his near-contemporary, Thomas Hobbes, went so far as to speak about humans as mechanical assemblies of cogs and pulleys (Descartes 59-62; Hobbes Bk. I). Descartes, in establishing thought as not only superior to sensory phenomena, but the criterion of reality, was a major influence in the development of the animal-human dichotomy that has become dominant in Western thinking since the Early Modern era. Immanuel Kant similarly viewed animals as mechanical beings insofar as he considered them as automatically responsive to instinctive stimuli, and lacking any capacity of restraint. "A dog must eat if he is hungry and has something in front of him; but a man in the same situation can restrain himself" (60).

More recent thinkers have opposed the binary opposition of humans and animals, inclining instead to emphasize that humans are animals. Derrida attempted to reverse the commonly-accepted notion that humans are fundamentally distinct from animals in his book, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*. His questioning of the established boundary that distinguished the human so decidedly from the animal influenced the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben. In *The Open: Man and Animal*, Agamben denounces the animal-human distinction as a fabrication in which “some animals are separated out from all the others and given a special name, ‘human,’ which is then placed in opposition to a second category ... ‘animal’” (Puchner 23).

The rapidly-narrowing gap separating humans from animals has forced us to rethink our own identity since our definition of the human has, for so long, been greatly dependent on our ability to differentiate ourselves from animals. In this study I will be using the terms “human” and “animal” repeatedly. However, because their meanings are under scrutiny, they have no static definitions. For the sake of clarity, I will define the *conventionally-accepted idea of the human* as a being with human capacities. I will define *human capacities* as many early philosophers have, i.e., the ability to speak, think rationally and morally, create and use tools, exercise restraint, and amass a social and cultural history. I will define the *conventionally-accepted idea of the animal* as a being that does not have these human capacities.

The philosopher Gilles Deleuze and psychoanalyst Félix Guattari denounce the notion that static definitions of human and animal exist in *One Thousand Plateaus*. They argue that there can be no definition of either animal or human because identity is only a state of metamorphosis—a result of ever-moving and changing drives, desires, and circumstances. Deleuze and Guattari define this

identity metamorphosis as “becoming-animal” (*devenir-animal*). Becoming-animal is a process that undoes any definition we might have of human or animal identity.

To become-animal is

to participate in movement, to stake out a path of escape in all its positivity, to cross a threshold, to reach a continuum of intensities that are valuable only in themselves, to find a world of pure intensities where all forms come undone, as do all the significations, signifiers, and signified (96).

Becoming-animal does not produce anything—one does not actually become an animal. Instead, it allows humans to escape the strict renderings of animal and human identity as defined by political and social forces (97).

Deleuze and Guattari believe that art has the power to initiate the process of becoming-animal by provoking what they call an affect, “the incredible feeling of an unknown Nature” (89). By rousing an affect that cannot be easily bound or restrained, art sets free identities that are otherwise restricted by political and cultural forces, challenging the definitions that these forces place on identities. Through art, Deleuze and Guattari find a pathway by which one can escape the strict definitions and categories in society, and experience an “otherness” not allowed in everyday life, the process of becoming-animal.

Artists have often experimented with the notion of becoming-animal, attempting to discover whether this idea can be represented. In 2006, the gallery MASS MoCA presented a show entitled *Becoming Animal* meant to “explore the closing gap between human and animal existence” (Becoming-Animal). The show included installation pieces such as Natalie Jeremijenko and Phil Taylor’s *For the*

Birds, which featured a series of bird perches in a courtyard. A bird landing on one of the perches triggered an audio track that invited human interaction to play. In 2005 NYU professor Una Chaudhuri initiated a theatrical collaboration entitled “The Animal Project” for the purpose of exploring this Deleuze and Guattari statement: “there is a reality to becoming-animal, even though one does not in reality become an animal” (qtd. in Chaudhuri 2). It culminated in the play, *Fox Hallow*, about a journalist who travels to a small town to investigate the bizarre case of four teenagers who, rather than attend Ivy League schools, decided to turn into animals (13). Steve Baker has discussed many artists who explore the question of the animal within their work. In his essays *What Does Becoming Animal Look Like?* and *The Salon of Becoming-Animal*, he discusses, among others, Olly and Suzi, artists who paint live wild animals, in one instance being lowered under the ocean in a metal cage to paint a shark.

Art was also a means of understanding and challenging definitions for William Butler Yeats. In his last letter he wrote “man can embody truth but he cannot know it” (922). Perhaps it is through artistic embodiment that we can gain a more truthful and complex understanding of our relationship to animals. Continuing, Yeats wrote, “you can refute Hegel, but not the Saint or the Song of Sixpence,” (922) suggesting that theoretical constructs will inevitably invite and accommodate counter-arguments, but there is no refuting what is solidly grounded in human experience or imaginative aspiration. *Embodiment* is a concrete representation of an otherwise nebulous concept. For Yeats, the poetic arts seem to have constituted a major form of embodiment.

In this study, my aim is to explore how the question of the animal is embodied in literature and circus. I am working with philosophical ideas as explored in art. I am not concerned with a scientific approach to the animal-human relationship, a complex topic that has been extensively investigated, but that is beyond the scope of the present study. Therefore I will not be addressing scientific treatments of the animal estate, experimentation on animals, or various instances of the human abuse of animals. Instead, I will explore the complex animal-human relationship and its effect on our definition of human identity, as it is embodied in literature and circus.

My first chapter focuses on the embodiment of the question of the animal in fiction through “the poetic imagination,” a term proposed by J.M. Coetzee’s character Elizabeth Costello, in his book, *The Lives of the Animals*. Costello, an aging Australian writer defines the *poetic imagination* as a tool with which writers give abstract philosophical ideas specificity of circumstance and context by situating them in literature (Puchner 25). Because literary realism is not comfortable with vague notions, “when it needs to debate ideas ... it is driven to invent situations – walks in the countryside, conversations – in which characters give voice to contending ideas and thereby in a certain sense embody them” (Coetzee 9 qtd. in Puchner 25-6). The poetic imagination thrusts philosophical ideas into the specific realities of a story, grounding them in facts, circumstances, and characters that do not allow them “to exist as bodiless entities” (Puchner 26).

The embodiment of the question of the animal in literature is a vast topic, which I will narrow by centering my discussion on characters that can be viewed as animal-human hybrids. These characters challenge our normal assumptions about animal and human identity, by embodying elements of both animals and humans,

provoking us to question how we categorize someone as human. Is it certain physical features, traits that can be viewed on the exterior? Is it the ability to speak and think rationally? Is it related to behavior? Or is it something altogether different?

I will focus my attention on a few illustrative works drawn from the vast range of literature that explores this philosophical question, including *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, *Beowulf*, Franz Kafka's *In the Penal Colony*, *The Hunger Artist*, and *A Report to the Academy*, and Chrétien de Troyes' *The Knight with the Lion*. These works express a wide range of attitudes, views, and ideas about animals, developed over a long period of time. Simultaneously, they deconstruct our notion of human identity, sometimes integrating it more closely with that of the animal, sometimes reaffirming its distinction from animals, and sometimes leaving it undefined.

However, with the immense scope of literature that contains animal-human hybrids, one might focus on other entirely different works and reach a similar conclusion.

My second chapter broadens the discussion of embodiment to include physical representation through circus performance. Ultimately, as Martin Puchner writes in his article, *Performing the Open: Actors, Animals, Philosophers*, "it is as if the question of embodiment ... like the question of the animal more generally, was yearning to break out of the domain of literature and thus of human language and into the domain of theatre and performance" (28). Performance is an experiential method of embodiment that is based in the physical reality of the world. A performance depends upon the physical bodies of the performers. When the question of the animal is explored in this fashion, one would imagine that the poetic imagination and its fictional embodiments are confronted by the reality of human and/or animal bodies (28). Performance also provides a more active method of exploring philosophical

ideas. As Richard Schechner explains in the preface to his book, *The End of Humanism*, writing is a method of reflection, while performance is a means of doing (10). The experiential and transformational process of doing unique to performance is an appropriate method for exploring the question of the animal. In structure it is more closely linked to the animal, which is commonly considered as a more active, physical creature than a reflective one.

In fact, one of the earliest types of performance is thought to have originated from the imitation of animal movement. In his book, *Animals and the Origins of Dance*, Steven Lonsdale defines dance as a combination of bestial and human movement, stemming from the human desire to embody the powerful, magical, and athletic movement of animals (9).

Animals have unique movements which capture human imagination and inspire imitation. There is something uncanny about the compulsive regularity of animal movement that impresses man. The same fascination with sure, precise, athletic and rhythmic motion that impels the visual artist to capture the animal in action through works of art carries over into dance in choreographic imitations. Animals incorporate certain forces or qualities admired by humans, such as strength, speed, courage, or magical power over evil. These and other animal attributes may be controlled and harnessed through dance (11).

While humans depicted animals in paintings, they also aspired to physically embody their movements for the purpose of accessing powers, knowledge, and understanding that could not be gained without the experience of physical imitation.

The circus offers an exploration of the question of the animal by combining the animalistic movement of dance, the experiential process of theater, and athleticism. Historically, circus can be broadly divided into three categories: Roman circus, Traditional circus, and Modern circus, each of which provides very different spectacles. However, circus as a general art is steeped in the history of animal-human collaborations and combats.

Unlike literature, most circus does not use poetic imagination for the exploration of the question of the animal. Rather, it uses the physical bodies of the performers. Roman circus offered real, mostly unscripted, spectacles that often incurred violence that resulted in death. The traditional circus was more performance-based, including costumes, music, and choreographed routines that involved humans and animals. However, since traditional circus performances were not contextualized within an imagined story they did not use poetic imagination. The circus performers simply exhibit themselves as circus performers without any attempt to justify or contextualize their impressive routines and bizarre movements. These performances were cultural experiences meant to offer entertainment, not provoke thought. They were used as a means to pacify the public by providing an escape from the monotony of their daily lives. As in ancient Rome, “the People who once upon a time handed out military command, high civil office, legions — everything, now restrains itself and anxiously hopes for just two things: bread and circuses” (Juvenal 10.77–81).

However, a modern circus combines the physical reality of traditional circus with the poetic imagination of literature, embodying the question of the animal through contextualized physicality. By adding an element of fictitious storytelling to

their productions, Cirque du Soleil adds an intellectual component to the physical circus bodies. Calling on many methods of performance, including dance and theater, Cirque creates productions that intellectually and imaginatively explore philosophical questions while still emphasizing physicality and physical embodiment. While the productions are entertaining spectacles like any circus, Cirque's performances also purposely explore ideas that provoke its audience to reflect on what it is to be human.

Cirque du Soleil explores the question of the animal most readily in its 2002 production, *Varekai*. *Varekai* embodies the animal in a much different way than the traditional circus in that it does not use animals. Instead the performer becomes animal-human hybrid with his costume, makeup, and movement. The animal-costumed acrobats and contortionists display the potential for the human body to be animalistic in bizarre, beautiful, and impressive ways. Additionally, these animalistic characters are contextualized in a story that is set in a forest where humans and animals interact. The plot, though at times vague, uses the acrobatic acts to explore the story of Icarus, the mythological character who transgressed human boundaries.

I will argue that Cirque du Soleil, particularly with *Varekai*, fits into a long history of human perceptions of animals, representing a new and sophisticated phase that uses the poetic imagination to ground ideas in both imagined circumstances and physical bodies. *Varekai* intimates heightened respect for the human body and its potential to realize the grace and liveness of animals without having to relinquish any of its distinctively human traits, giving its audience and performers a new understanding of the animal-human relationship through the human embodiment of the animal.

CHAPTER ONE:
Imaginative Embodiment in Literature

The last fifty years have unsettled our previous assumptions about human identity. Inventions in medicine, computer science, and genetics have prompted us to consider the possibility of new human categories such as hybrids, chimeras,¹ and clones. In 2005 scientists disturbed many by implanting human brain tissue into mice (e.g., Begley 1; Safire 1). The Wall Street Journal covered the story with an article entitled “Now that Chimeras Exist, What if Some Turn Out Too Human?” Such genetically engineered animal-human hybrids have left us with an unstable definition of what it means to be human.

Yet, humans have imagined figures that combine elements of the human and the animal since the beginning of written history. A vast array of literature and art has explored human identity by approaching its outermost edges, thereby pushing the human into the seemingly non-human territories of the beast, the monster, and the animal. Greek mythology abounded with mermaids, centaurs, and sphinxes. Cave paintings from the Upper Paleolithic in France are famed for their numerous illustrations of animals, which include composite creatures possessing animal and human characteristics (Clottes 7). Ancient Egyptian art heavily featured human bodies with animal heads in sculptures and paintings of deities, as well as hieroglyphic characters (Frankfort 11; Arnold 9). The major source for our knowledge of Ireland’s medieval history, Gerald of Wales’ *The History and Topography of Ireland*, features an account of a man’s transformation into a wolf and a creature that is half man and half ox (68-76).

Literature has incorporated animal-human hybrids since the oldest written work. Writers have used the hybrid to gain or express an understanding of human identity by embodying the question of the animal. Possessing features ascribed to both animals and humans, hybrids extend beyond our ordinary understanding of species classification because they cannot be easily assigned to a distinct category. Their perplexing animal-human quality provokes us to reevaluate our strict definitions of human and animal identities.

In literature, animal-human hybrids are commonly described in three ways: image, essence, and behavior. Is the character human in its *image* – its appearance? In its *essence* – its capacities, abilities, mentality, and instincts? Or in its *behavior* – its posture and mannerisms, often inextricably linked to its essence, but distinct nonetheless because it can be acquired? Ordinarily, a character's essence, behavior, and image are consistent -- it is easy to define as human someone who is essentially and physically human. However, animal-human hybrids thrust these elements into conflict, forcing us to decide which is most significant in our definition of human identity.

The poetic imagination has invented copious animal-human hybrids in literature. I will focus on a limited selection of works that illustrate the varying treatments of the question of the animal. Franz Kafka's *A Report to the Academy* demonstrates the confusion that can arise from a discrepancy of image, essence, and behavior through a character that is human in behavior and essence, but physically remains an ape. Drawing from this example, I will examine Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* and *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, which evince two extreme treatments of the animal/animalistic body, illustrating how it has the potential to appear beautiful

and superhuman, as well as grotesque and frightening. The animal-human hybrid is placed within a moral frame in *The Knight with the Lion* by Chrétien de Troyes and *Beowulf*. These two medieval works demonstrate the potential morality of the animal as opposed to the moral depravity of the monster. This moral frame is reversed in Kafka's *In the Penal Colony* which, along with his *A Hunger Artist*, includes figurative animal-human and human-monster hybrids. Through their use of the poetic imagination, these works embody the question of the animal, forcing us to examine the strict definitions separating human and animal identity.

Red Peter

In his short story, *A Report to the Academy*, Franz Kafka employs a tone of irony in revealing our definition of humanity to be predominantly based on physical appearance.

Your experience as apes, gentlemen – to the extent that you have something of that sort behind you – cannot be more distant from you than mine is. But it tickles at the heels of everyone who walks here on earth, the small chimpanzee as well as the great Achilles (1).

Initially this statement may not provoke much opposition from the reader. It is commonly accepted that humans evolved from apes, therefore all humans have “something of that sort” behind them, albeit far behind them and hardly considered an “experience.” However, the speaker, Red Peter, is not a human, but an ape. In his report, Red Peter recounts the story of his captivity, during which his desire for freedom motivated him to learn to think and speak better than the average human. Since our speaker is an ape, his statement elicits a slew of questions, the most

immediate being how this biological ape can claim to be no more of an ape than the gentlemen he is addressing. If this civilized ape is no nearer to “apehood” than these gentlemen, or any human for that matter, what separates “apehood” from humanity?

Red Peter, may appear to be an ape, yet he has acquired human capacities. He speaks eloquently and thinks rationally, having attained a level of education equivalent to, or perhaps greater than, the average European (11). Human identity is commonly believed to lie in the capacity for consciousness, rational thought, and the use of spoken and written language. If this is the case, the ape, having acquired these, is every bit as human as his audience.

Yet Red Peter is unable to break from his past “apehood” and attain a fully human identity because he remains physically and biologically an ape. Since he appears and is perceived as an ape, who can only mate with other apes, he cannot seamlessly assimilate into human society. His only vocational option is as a showman (or ape), put on display for laymen and scientists. It is impossible for him to acquire any other human occupation—no one will hire an ape, no matter how eloquently he expresses himself. Therefore, it would seem absurd to classify Red Peter as a human.

Yet, denying his humanness requires us to admit that the capacity for intellectual, moral, and rational thought, as well as a social history, the adoption of a cultural context, and the use of complex language are not uniquely human, but under the right circumstances are achievable by any species. This idea is quite unsettling because we rely so heavily on these qualities to distinguish ourselves from animals. Kafka fuses an animal body with human capacities to make the satirical point that

despite our insistence that what defines the human are mental capacities, what we accept as human is what in image appears to be so.

Red Peter's allusion to "the great Achilles" also emphasizes this point. He sees "the great Achilles," the war hero of Homer's *Iliad* and the ultimate human killing machine, as the great paradigm for the essentially human. Red Peter might have used as an example a brilliant thinker, a writer, a theologian, or a philosopher. However, he chose Achilles, who is known for his impressive physicality, strength, and ability to kill, thus illustrating how we evaluate ourselves on the basis of image and appearance.

Enkidu and Gregor

The discrepancy between image, essence, and behavior is approached in *The Epic of Gilgamesh* and Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*. These works act as two opposing extremes that examine human reactions to differing animal forms. Enkidu illustrates the wonderful power and beauty aligned with having an animalistic body. In contrast, Gregor Samsa maintains his human consciousness when he is transformed into a revolting human-sized "insect," demonstrating the terrifying reality of an essentially human character trapped in the body of an animal. These two works illustrate the potential of the animal form to inspire either incredible awe or incredible disgust.

The Epic of Gilgamesh is the oldest known surviving written work, dating back to 2000 B.C. The original manuscript was written in Sumerian under the Third Dynasty of Ur (Mitchell 1; Tigay 15). However the Acadian version, written in Mesopotamia circa 700 BC, is widely considered the standard (Tigay 3). Though

appearing in many different forms over time, the epic always revolves around the adventures of the partially-divine king Gilgamesh, and his dearest friend, Enkidu.

The description of Enkidu's body demonstrates the human respect, and even awe, for the animal form. Enkidu is "a man," but appears to possess both animal and human physical features. The god, Aruru, made Enkidu by "pinching off some clay," shaping it, and casting it into the wilderness. Enkidu is a "man," but does not resemble a civilized human. Hair covers his body, he wears no clothing, and has "muscles like rock" (75). His appearance frightens a trapper who thinks he is a "savage man" (75). Enkidu seems to resemble something of a "primordial man," (78) bridging the evolutionary divide between animals and humans.

Enkidu's behavior is animalistic as well. He lives "like an animal," (80) roaming "naked" in forests and fields "far from the cities of men" (75). He eats with the gazelles and drinks at watering holes with antelope and deer. Enkidu neither speaks nor understands human language, but he has had no need to. He behaves, appears, and is accepted by the animals as one of their own.

A "civilized" person might be repulsed by Enkidu's animalistic behavior and appearance, but the human characters in *Gilgamesh* are impressed by his stunning form. A trapper declares that Enkidu "must be the strongest man in the world" and is intimidated by his ability to outrun "the swiftest animals" (75 – 6). When the priestess Shamash first sees Enkidu, she is both amazed by and sexually attracted to him, finding him "huge/ and beautiful" (78). The citizens of Uruk gossip about Enkidu's incredible strength and stature, remarking that, having grown up in the wilderness with gazelles, antelope, and deer, "this wild man can rival the mightiest of

kings” (88). The entire city is taken with Enkidu’s physical prowess, which can only be matched by the partially-divine king Gilgamesh himself.

More than simply inspiring awe, Enkidu’s hybrid body allows him to transcend humanity. Combining his human body with the physical strength and aggressive mentality of certain animals makes him seem superhuman. The gods created Enkidu as a force who was equal to and could oppose Gilgamesh—Gilgamesh’s “double, [his] second self” (83). To make Enkidu equal to a king with divine strength and power, the gods endow him with the physical prowess of animals. His gigantic hybrid body makes him the only man strong and brave enough to match Gilgamesh. “‘What an enormous man!’ [the townspeople] whispered./ ‘How much like Gilgamesh’” (88). Enkidu’s hybrid body and aggressive animal behavior, which he displays in the forest by digging up all the animal traps set by humans, are what allow him to fearlessly challenge Gilgamesh to a fight. He is not civilized, and therefore is unrestricted by certain social norms. In challenging Gilgamesh, he does what the civilized humans of Uruk were unable to do.

In some ancient religions, particularly in Ancient Egypt, animal-human hybrids were commonly seen as divine. For example, the god Anubis, associated with jackals, is portrayed in a papyrus relief with a jackal’s head and a man’s body. The god Hathor is depicted in drawings as a cow with a woman’s face (Pavlik 163). The divine depiction of animal-human hybrids might have been because, as French historian John Berger emphasizes, animals first entered the human imagination as mystical creatures. Berger cites as an example the domestication of cattle, which “did not begin as a simple prospect of milk and meat. Cattle had magical functions, sometimes oracular, sometimes sacrificial” (252). Many cultures considered animals

to have magical, even divine, powers. In ancient Egypt, animals were venerated as manifestations of gods. In his book, *Ancient Egyptian Religion*, Henri Frankfort describes the painstaking mummification of numerous cats and dogs who were thought to be godly messengers (10). Latin American tribes venerated jaguars for their strength, believing that the jaguar's spirit gave power to their hunters (Pavlik 161). Like Enkidu, these religious deities blended human and animal elements in a way that suggests that this combination is superhuman.

Although there were no known animal-human hybrid gods in Mesopotamia, Sumerian religion revolved around the natural elements. The Sumerians believed that they were the impotent servants of Nature, vulnerable and powerless to her whims. The mountains, trees, and rivers, all had lives of their own. (Hollister and Rogers 20, Vico). Animals, as a part of this fearful, alien, and yet magnificent, natural world, were closely connected to the divine, suggesting that Enkidu's animalistic faculties allowed him to harness the power of the natural elements. Enkidu, having been made from clay and thrown into the natural, uncivilized world, received divine power from his natural creation.

Enkidu does not remain in the natural world, but rather is eventually civilized. It becomes evident that while he first appeared animalistic in image and behavior, he is essentially human and his physical form lends itself to the civilizing process. When he first encounters a human female, his body proves quite adept at submitting to attraction, and draws him to his own species. What follows is a weeklong spate of sexual intercourse. When he meets "his own kind" he innately realizes what he must do and who he was meant to be, instinctively behaving human by participating in sexual intercourse with a member of the human species.

When he behaves like a human, Enkidu immediately realizes the full human capacity of his body. Suddenly he thinks and speaks, spontaneously acquiring an understanding of human language. His mind “had somehow grown larger,/ he knew things now that an animal can’t know” (79), suggesting the dawning of consciousness. From that point on he moves to the city and rapidly learns to eat, act, and dress as a civilized human. This is only possible because Enkidu’s physical form is suitable to human habits and predispositions. It is already attractive to many humans, and the only change required is a “hair cut” (86). Unlike Red Peter, Enkidu is physically able to appear human by superficial changes such as shaving and wearing clothes. Therefore, he is much more readily accepted into human society than Red Peter, whose physical “apeness” will always be an obstacle in maintaining a human identity.

In becoming “fully human” Enkidu gains knowledge, but he loses agility and spirit. His “life-force” is spent. Enkidu “could no longer run/ like an animal, as he had before,” (79) unable to keep up with them when they become “bewildered, and [leave] him forever” (77). The loss of “life-force” suggests that animals possess a physical ability and spirit for which humans do not have the capacity. As humans have a greater mind, animals have a life-force and a physical agility that humans do not. Through Enkidu’s civilization, it is clear that humans are considered to have capacities that animals do not. Yet, animal bodies, in Enkidu’s case, appear to have the potential for civilization and rational thought, as well as a life-force and physical strength not found in humans.

The fact that the animals recognize the change in Enkidu, and leave him, suggests an animal-human binary. Once Enkidu is introduced to his human identity

he is automatically stripped of his animal identity. This establishes the idea that one cannot fully be accepted as both an animal and a human. Rather, these categories are distinct and separate. At the beginning, Enkidu was a “primordial man,” between animal and human. When he follows his human instincts, he fully acknowledges, whether consciously or not, his humanness and therefore can no longer remain partially animal. Yet, despite the species binary, there exists in *Gilgamesh* an appreciation of uniquely human and uniquely animal capabilities, and the animal form is recognized as beautiful and divine.

However, this positive portrayal of the animal-human hybrid is far from universal. In stark contrast, Kafka’s *The Metamorphosis* illustrates an instance in which the animal form is entirely unattractive. The depiction of Gregor’s life as an insect and the reactions his transformation elicits highlight the human aversion to the insect form.

The Metamorphosis begins as Gregor finds himself transformed into a “gigantic insect” (67). Although the word for insect in the original German text (*ungeziefer*) suggests a word closer to vermin,² Kafka’s description of Gregor vividly illustrates, to our horror, a human-sized insect. His back is “hard” and “armor-plated” (67). His “dome-like brown belly” is divided into thorax-like segments, to which are attached “numerous legs, which [are] pitifully thin compared to the rest of his bulk” (67). His voice is accompanied by “a persistent horrible twittering squeak” (70), making his words incomprehensible to the human ear.

Though one may pity Gregor, his body incites nothing but revulsion. Unlike Enkidu, Gregor’s animal body is neither beautiful nor impressive, which is not surprising—he is a giant bug. His own family is repulsed and afraid, ensuring that he

remains locked securely in his room with one person standing guard at all times. However, because no one wants to be left alone with an abnormally large insect, two people often stay behind. Gregor's mother refuses to approach his room, while his father employs force whenever Gregor advances an inch beyond his bedroom door. The most contact Gregor has is from his sister, Grete, who cares for him, but is nevertheless afraid to look at him. The family's reaction to Gregor is more than justified. Unlike Enkidu's venerable stature, Gregor's enormous insect body is deeply disturbing. The idea of a human-sized insect, complete with stick-like legs, beady eyes, and sticky mucus oozing from its body is enough to ensure a continuous stream of nightmares.

Gregor's metamorphosis is all the more troubling because it is a change in his appearance only, not in his essence or behavior. Enkidu is meant to be a human and his instinctual actions lead to a better understanding of the capabilities of his body and mind. However, Gregor simply wakes up with an insect body—he is not rising to nature's calling but forced to assume a form that renders human behavior impossible. Gregor has difficulty sleeping because his insect body makes him unable to lie in his preferred position. He spends fifteen minutes trying to launch himself out of bed because he is stuck rocking back and forth on his dome-shaped back, and he is unable to communicate because of the "twittering" that masks every word he speaks. Unlike Enkidu's form, Gregor's insect body is far from well suited to functioning as human.

In contrast to Gregor, Kafka metaphorically compares Gregor's parents to animals. His father had "grown rather fat and became sluggish" (97) and his mother "had asthma, which troubled her even when she walked through the flat and kept her lying on a sofa every other day panting for breath beside an open window" (97). We

can imagine the father as an enormous slug, and his mother as a dog panting for air. Yet, though we can imagine this, it is not the reality. These figures in behavior and personality may be described as animalistic, but because they retain their human form and mentality, they are ultimately more human, as well as less grotesque and frightening, than Gregor. Kafka ironically inserts these metaphors to contrast Gregor's insect form, illustrating how feeling oneself to be an animal is utterly different than actually being one.

With Gregor, we see a human physically become a loathsome, exterminable bug, who is taken out with the garbage when he dies. His insect body makes him repulsive and horrific, while making it impossible for him to perform his job, support his family, and maintain a social life. This is in complete opposition to Enkidu, whose animal qualities make him appear attractive, superhuman, and even god-like. These two stories demonstrate how the animal form has the potential in one extreme to inspire great awe and allow human transcendence, and yet in the other to be incredibly frightening and poorly suited to human instincts, habits, and capacities.

The Churl and Grendel

Two medieval works that place the animal-human hybrid in a moral frame will be considered here: *The Knight with the Lion* by Chrétien de Troyes and *Beowulf*. The churl in *The Knight with the Lion* and Grendel in *Beowulf* represent two contrary treatments of species distinction and its connection to morality. Although the churl is hideous and deformed—his body an amalgamation of animal and disfigured human features—he is able to think and speak rationally, exhibiting moral intuition. Grendel is also a deformed, misshapen human. However, his body

combines humanoid elements with features of fantastical monsters, such as dragons. Although it is unclear if Grendel can speak, he evinces human thoughts and emotions, although these are wholly negative: rage, vengeance, envy, and so on. However, his moral intuition is not on par with that of the churl. With the churl in *The Knight with the Lion*, Chrétien de Troyes demonstrates the potential for a human mind and sensibility to reside in a creature of exceedingly deformed “animalesque” appearance, whereas *Beowulf*'s Grendel descended from one who possessed the same moral intuition as every other human, but who perverted his morality by disregarding it and allowing it to be overruled by evil will.

In the Arthurian Romance, *The Knight with the Lion*, a knight named Calogrenant happens upon the churl while in search of an adventure.

A peasant who resembled a Moor, ugly and hideous in the extreme—such such an ugly creature that he cannot be described in words—was seated on a stump, with a great club in his hand. I approached the peasant and saw that his head was larger than a nag's or other beast's. His hair was unkempt and his bare forehead was more than two spans wide; his ears were as hairy and as huge as an elephant's; his eyebrows heavy and his face flat. He had the eyes of an owl and the nose of a cat, jowls split like a wolf's, with the sharp reddish teeth of a boar; he had a russet beard, tangled moustache, a chin down to his breast and a long, twisted spine with a hump. He was leaning on his club and wore a most unusual cloak, made neither of wool nor linen; instead, at his neck he had attached two pelts freshly skinned from two bulls or two oxen (298-9).

Calogrenant describes a creature whose body is composed of segments of various animals combined with mangled human features. The description of the animalistic components in the churl's physique depicts a creature whose bizarre appearance is not merely unattractive, but downright alarming. "His ears were as hairy and as huge as an elephant's ... He had the eyes of an owl and the nose of a cat, jowls split like a wolf's ... sharp reddish teeth of a boar." On the one hand, his large, floppy ears and beady eyes sound almost amusing, yet on the other, his sharp teeth and enormous stature terrify Calogrenant. His size echoes Enkidu's, but his oversized build incites fear and disgust in the onlooker. Before meeting the churl, Calogrenant is frightened by a pack of wild bulls, explaining that "no beast is as fierce as or more bellicose than a bull" (298). However, by Calogrenant's description, the churl, in his bull-skin cloak, seems at least as fierce and as aggressive as the animals that Calogrenant had seen.

Calogrenant assumes from the churl's appearance that he speaks "no more than a beast would" (299). Yet, it is made clear in the case of the churl that physical deformity and a resemblance to animals do not constitute a bar to rationality, speech, and moral agency; despite his physical appearance, the churl retains human mental capacities. Mustering up the courage to approach the churl, Calogrenant says, "tell me if you are a good creature or not" (299). The churl evidently understands the question and replies simply, "I am a man." Though he may appear animalistic and deformed, the churl speaks and thinks as a human. This highlights the radical discrepancy between the churl's beastly appearance and his perfectly functioning mentality. When Calogrenant probes the churl further, demanding what sort of man he is, the churl ironically responds, "just as you see; and I'm never anything else"

(299). However, when Calogrenant looks at the churl, he sees some sort of beast, not at all the “man” the churl thinks he is. It is only the churl who finds no discrepancy between his assertion that he is a man and his physical form.

The churl’s response to Calogrenant does not merely display his intelligence, but also his moral intuition and judgment. In reply to the question of whether he is good or not, the churl explains that he is a man. This answer suggests that the churl understands that the category “man” encompasses a spectrum of good and evil. Perhaps the churl does not know if he is good or evil, but he knows that he is a man. The churl, a creature who appears to be more animal than human, and seriously deformed, seems more knowledgeable in the realm of morality than Calogrenant, a knight of presumably perfect physical form. By the end of their conversation, the knight has even asked this churl to give him advice in “seeking what [he] cannot find”—an adventure (299). The churl, despite his appearance, seems wiser in rational and moral thought than the knight who receives his advice. This bizarre disfigured creature, more animal than human, is rationally and morally on par with a physically normal human, suggesting that having deformed or animalistic physical features is not a bar to moral and rational thought.

The lion mentioned in the title reinforces the notion that man and animal are on the same moral plane. When the hero Yvain happens upon a lion fighting a dragon, he chooses to help the lion, the “noble and honourable” animal, instead of the dragon, “a venomous and wicked creature [who] deserves only harm” (337). Yvain’s choice implies that the lion, the animal, is the creature worthy of his help, unlike the dragon, a monster. The lion and Yvain become partners, the lion in effect becoming Yvain’s vassal, entering into a mutual pact with Yvain to serve and protect him. In

entering into what amounts to a feudal compact of mutual protection and loyalty, the lion behaves exactly like a human being who possesses a sure sense of obligation and commitment. The close bond cultivated between Yvain and the lion is possible because of the lion's morality. It has faith "that God and Righteousness" (349) will aid them in their battles. The lion takes his service to and his love for Yvain so seriously that he interposes himself before Yvain and his sword when the knight seeks to take his own life. The lion is Yvain's true "companion" who helps him as no human could. Not only does the lion belong to Yvain, but Yvain belongs to the lion (376), implying that the lion is equal to Yvain, with regard to fighting and moral intuition. The lion exemplifies the portrayal of animals, not only as noble creatures who are worthy companions for men, but as creatures on the same plane as men, not in rationality, but with respect to their moral qualities and their capacity to experience and act upon lofty moral imperatives. This is in stark contrast with such monsters as dragons. Yvain's lion, though not endowed with speech, performs the act of fealty that a human vassal would make, and his perfect loyalty to Yvain proves him to be as exemplary a vassal as any human.

By presenting the lion and the churl as he does, Chrétien de Troyes suggests that the condition of being human is not a function of physical form, but of rationality and moral intuition. Unlike *A Report to the Academy*, Chrétien's story proposes that a being of any physical form, no matter how different from the conventionally human or conventionally beautiful, can still possess mature, rational, and moral faculties. Chrétien may well have designed this creature with ironic intent, especially in light of medieval theories on the correlation between physical beauty and good character, and

the reverse. Nonetheless, he speaks to the idea that what is quintessentially human is independent of physical form.

The unknown poet of *Beowulf* approaches this idea from the opposite direction through Grendel, a monster-human hybrid. Monsters are quite different from animals and are defined in various ways, including “mythical hybrid animals,” “gross exceptions to species,” or “any deformed and frightening creatures” (Webster Dictionary 1465). However, they most clearly differ from animals by their “negative moral connotation,” (1465). This is the case with Grendel, who is a morally depraved monster-human hybrid.

Grendel is physically monstrous. His body is covered in spikes, horns, and tough scales. “Every nail, /claw-scale and spur, every spike/ and welt on the hand of that heathen brute/was like barbed steel” (65). Tough as iron, his skin is impenetrable, and his fearsome appearance is only furthered by his behemoth size – it takes four men to hoist his colossal head.

Grendel’s monstrous side may seem to take the fore physically, but his human features and emotions are evident. Described as the “warped shape of a man” (95), Grendel’s body is disfigured and monstrous, but perceptibly human. Hair hangs from his head, his body retains a human bone structure, and although he has “claws” the narrator also describes fingers. “Every bone in [Grendel’s] body/ quailed and recoiled ... latching power/ in his fingers weakened” (51). Grendel also displays uniquely human emotions. As “the Lord’s outcast” (13), exiled from the community cultivated in Herot Hall, Grendel is resentful and bitter, “nursing a hard grievance” (13). Only humans and strongly humanoid monsters – such as dragons – can nurse

grievances, and this is clearly a human sentiment. Insofar as Grendel harbors such feelings, he evinces a clearly human side.

Grendel also aspires to be included in the human warrior society from which he is exiled. Grendel wages “his lonely war, / inflicting constant cruelties on the people, / atrocious hurt. He took over Heorot, / haunted the glittering hall after dark, / but the throne itself, the treasure seat, /he was kept from approaching” (13). The notion that Grendel “was kept from approaching” the throne implies that he had tried at some earlier point to reach it, but failed. The reader is left with a sense that Grendel desires to take possession of the throne from which the decree banning him from Herot has issued. However, strictly speaking, Grendel has not been “exiled”—rather, he never belonged there. Grendel stalks about the mead hall and consumes the warriors’ flesh and blood, ingesting the people whose association he desires. Through ingestion Grendel metaphorically consumes and assimilates the humanness he needs to be accepted.

Grendel even has a soul, and at the moment of his death, his soul is compared to that of all humans’.

Only the roof remained unscathed/ by the time the guilt-fouled fiend
turned tail/ in despair of his life. But death is not easily/ escaped from
by anyone: / all of us with souls, earth-dwellers/ and children of men,
must make our way/ to a destination already ordained/ where the body,
after banqueting, / sleeps on its deathbed” (67).

Associating Grendel’s death with the death that all humans will experience, suggests that Grendel is more human than he might originally appear. Like “all of us with souls,” even the seemingly invulnerable Grendel meets his death.

As a descendent of the biblical human Cain, Grendel's humanness is unsurprising. His lineage stems from one of the first humans, inextricably linking him to the human race. Yet, attributing his birth to the story of Cain, the first murderer, suggests moral degeneracy as the source of his deformity. Although the narration suggests that Grendel is "malignant by nature," he is also considered morally degenerate, which would entail the moral agency to choose between right and wrong. Because Grendel has the capacities of thought and feeling and appears to be able to recognize good and evil, he has moral agency like humans, and therefore can perform acts that are legitimately regarded by others as evil. Although Grendel is partially monster, he has a soul, he is an "alien spirit," he is an "earth dweller," and he is one of the "children of men," suggesting an equally human nature. Grendel's inclusion in the human race suggests that he has the uniquely human capacity for moral depravity, unlike animals, who are commonly considered amoral.

Beowulf implies that there can be a direct line from morally degenerate human to monster, that bypasses the purely animal. The lion in *The Knight with the Lion* appears to be an exception to animals, displaying moral intuition that separates him from ordinary animals. The churl, though monstrous in size and perhaps ugliness, and described as a grotesque assemblage of familiar animal parts, is morally on a par with an upright man. These two medieval works differentiate the animal, the human, and the monster. Grendel has moral agency and a soul—to that extent, he is human. However, his monstrous physical features are connected to his lineage, which establishes him as a morally depraved creature. The churl, unlike Grendel, has moral intuition. All his animal qualities are on the surface. His beastly aspects are all externalized, and he thinks and speaks like a rationally and morally capable human.

Like the churl, animals, such as the lion, can be placed on the same moral plane as the human. The imputation is that man and animal can potentially be on the same moral plane, but man and monster cannot.

The Prisoner and the Hunger Artist

The previous works incorporated characters that were literal animal-human and monster-human hybrids. However, many writers, including Homer and Shakespeare, have figuratively compared their characters to animals. In the twentieth century, Kafka is particularly notable for his extensive use of the animal metaphor. As author Reiner Stach explains in *Kafka: The Decisive Years*, “The image of a person degraded into an animal had been familiar to [Kafka] for some time, probably since his childhood. His father, who liked to pepper his speech with profanities, employed this device on a regular basis. Their clumsy cook was a ‘beast,’ the consumptive shop-boy a ‘sick dog’” (192-3). These animal slurs, of course, are incorporated into all languages, as illustrated by the English words bitch, cur, cat, viper, vulture, vixen, chick, and pig. However, during Kafka’s time in particular, viewing animals in this lowly manner was particularly common. “In the 1890s, overworked horses were a regular part of the metropolitan scene. No adult gave a second thought to the creatures living in captivity in the zoo and the circus, or to the inferno of the slaughterhouses” (193). It is therefore not surprising that Kafka metaphorically incorporated animal-human hybrids into his short stories *In the Penal Colony* and *The Hunger Artist*.

In the Penal Colony draws the animal, the monster, and the human together in a story about a display of utter human cruelty, illustrating how humans are capable of

a brutality that animals could never achieve. A torturous killing machine is at the center of the penal colony's punishment procedures, although it has begun to go out-of-style. The prisoner is punished by an apparatus that uses a needle, called the Harrow, to carve a sentence describing the criminal's crime into his body. This would serve the purpose of enlightening him to his crime through the pain of this torturous punishment.

This appliance is so shockingly barbarous that it verges on the "inhuman," and it is through the "inhumane" actions of the human characters that Kafka makes use of the animal and the monster. The brutal execution machine is a product of human ingenuity, created by scientists and the Old Commandant. The people who created, as well as those who now employ, such a brutal instrument no longer seem human, but so cruel that they must be monstrosities. In Kafka's story, humans invent and use cruelty to such extremes, even if it is under the façade of justice, that they appear as morally depraved.

Kafka contrasts the monstrous human with the prisoner who, in physicality, behavior, and mentality is compared to an animal. He is "a stupid-looking wide-mouthed creature with bewildered hair and face," and as a prisoner he "looked so like a submissive dog that one might have thought he could be left to run free on the surrounding hills and would only need to be whistled for when the execution was due to begin" (191). The prisoner is kept on a chain, like a dog, held by the soldier, and in his curiosity, he "had pulled forward the sleepy soldier with the chain and was bending over the glass" (201). The curious prisoner dragging the guard behind him recalls the image of a dog chasing down a squirrel and pulling his owner along behind him. In another instance the prisoner sticks out his tongue, reaching for rice

that the soldier has poured into a basin. The soldier pushes him away from the rice, reminding the reader of a dog attempting to steal food off the kitchen table and being “shooed” away.

Similarly like an animal, the prisoner is unable to comprehend what the other characters say. This is, of course, because they speak French and the prisoner is presumably fluent in another language. However, the emphasis is not on the language in question—French is only mentioned once—but rather the prisoner’s inability to understand it. In one instance, the prisoner watches the Harrow, not realizing that he has been condemned to its treacherous punishment. “One could see that [the prisoner’s] uncertain eyes were trying to perceive what the two gentlemen had been looking at, but since he had not understood the explanation he could not make head or tail of it” (201). The officer points to him, but he does not “understand a word” (197) of what the officer says. Throughout almost the entire action of the story, the prisoner watches “uncomprehendingly” (204). Although this is a failure to understand a specific human language, it recalls the inability of an animal to understand and communicate with humans.

However, there is a deep and unsettling irony in the issue of “not understanding.” Understanding something that is a product of human ingenuity is ordinarily a positive and revered achievement. However, if a human understands the mechanism of a diabolically cruel instrument of torture like the machine in question, what is he? *In the Penal Colony* inverts the treatment of moral agency that *The Knight with the Lion* and *Beowulf* treat as essentially human. The churl is shown to be human, at least in essence, through his ability to understand Calogrenant, his reply demonstrating that he possessed moral intuition. However, an ability to understand

the Harrow, a technically human capability, seems inhuman, in this case lacking humanity because of its cruelty. The ingenuity that created this machine and the rationale necessary for understanding it transgresses the border of humanity and steps into cruel and monstrous territories. The prisoner may be negatively portrayed as animalistic—he cannot understand, he is incredibly submissive, and so on—but the scientists and the officers are akin to “monsters” because of their cruel inventions. These scientists have transgressed in ways impossible for an animal. An animal could never create a machine as terrible as the one created by Kafka’s monstrous humans—animals are amoral, not cruel.

As a figurative animal, the prisoner can never fully understand the man-made machine through explanation alone. He must experience the process of his punishment by “learn[ing] it on his body” (197). Through this corporal punishment, the prisoner will supposedly reach an understanding of his unlawful behavior. Like an animal, his lesson will be enforced with physical pain. The prisoner “deciphers [the inscription] with his wounds” meaning that in becoming enlightened to his crime, the unfortunate victim is no different from an animal, with whom he shares sensation and the capacity for feeling. It is the cruel punishment, a punishment conceived by humans, that makes an “animal” of its victims.

The officer vividly describes the moment of enlightenment as a sacred instant in which the prisoner, through the exquisite and precisely administered torture, understands his crime without the need for verbal explanation. “Enlightenment comes to the most dull-witted. It begins around the eyes. From there it radiates. A moment that might tempt one to get under the Harrow oneself” (204). The beauty of

the moment of enlightenment is so moving for the Officer that he almost yearns to experience it himself.

Yet, the form of enlightenment the officer provides is established by Kafka as both out-dated and cruel. While the Officer's misguided perception leads him to view the machine as flawless, it is literally falling apart and it is a method of execution that has become less prevalent in the colony. The notion that this cruel machine provides enlightenment is absurd and backwards. When the officer realizes that his magnificent machine will no longer be used, he submits himself to its torturous techniques. Ironically, the machine does not provide the exquisite enlightenment and precision of which the officer had dreamed, but instead breaks down and slices into the officers body as it falls apart, killing him within the first five minutes and providing no enlightenment. The barbarous method of punishment is proven incapable of enlightening even the officer who so powerfully believed in it.

In the Penal Colony demonstrates that there is a way that humans can become more brutish and "inhuman" than any animal. Although there is a hierarchy in which humans are placed on a more elevated level than animals because of the human mind, Kafka implies that the power to think when it is reflected in ingenuity devoted to the infliction of pain and suffering takes the human into the realm of "bestiality" far beyond that of any animal. We like to ascribe the worst characteristics we can fathom to animals, however, with *In the Penal Colony* Kafka suggests that human ingenuity is what ultimately procures and realizes cruelty.

Kafka invokes a similar irony in *The Hunger Artist* and applies it to art. Art, as a cultural achievement, is widely recognized as a refined product of the human mind. There is a romantic aura surrounding the idea of art. The most illustrious

works reside in museums, worth millions of dollars and guarded by top security. Artists slave over their art, passionately perfecting each detail even if their artistic career yields no monetary benefits. However, Kafka uses irony to depict a thoroughly unromantic form of art in *The Hunger Artist*, a short story centered on the art of fasting.

Fasting is the repression of arguably the most fundamental and universal animal instinct: the need to eat when hungry. The hunger artist refuses to give into the instinctual need to eat, illustrating his ability to repress it through each fasting “performance,” which often lasts for forty days. The hunger artist takes his craft very seriously—he never eats during a fast, “the honor of his profession forbade it” (244). The hunger artist’s repression of animalistic needs is further illustrated by his disgust with the animals he encounters. He hates their stench and the way they tear apart the meat they eat. As a refined artist, he is able to refrain from this sort of behavior.

Ironically, this “artistic” fasting causes the hunger artist to be treated in a way comparable to the treatment of animals. During his fasts, he is locked up in a “small barred cage” (244) and visitors watch him from outside of it. Butchers are employed to watch the artist during his fasts to ensure that he does not eat anything, giving the impression that the hunger artist is a caged animal on a farm about to be slaughtered.

The hunger artist also behaves “like an animal” at times. During certain fasts, the public must retreat as the hunger artist shakes “the bars of the cage like a wild animal” (249). The impresario tells them not to fear, explaining that this is just the result of “irritability caused by fasting” (249), suggesting that the hunger artist is responding in a sensory way, unable to think rationally because of the hunger he

feels. This equates him with the sensory instincts and responses of an animal.

Although his art requires “the great self-denial” (249) of animal needs, he is treated, and sometimes behaves, as if he were an animal.

It seems only natural after the art of fasting has gone out of fashion that the hunger artist is employed by a circus, a type of performance in need of both men and animals. During the sections of the story that take place at the circus, Kafka demonstrates the charm of lively animals in contrast to the unpleasant image of a rail-thin artist repressing the need to eat. In the circus, the hunger artist’s cage was not stationed with the other circus artists, but outside by the animal menagerie. When the audience saw both the animals and the hunger artist, they always chose to go up to the animal cages. “The public came thronging ... to see the animals” (252). They wanted to see “the excitements of the menagerie” (252). Without the animals, the hunger artist would not have any spectators for he “had the animals to thank for the troops of people who passed his cage” (253). This is a demonstration of people choosing the joyous, lively, natural quality of the animals over the unnatural suppression of the desire to eat that the hunger artist forces upon himself.

The choice seems understandable—although art is usually considered refined and beautiful, the hunger artist’s fasting seems ridiculous if not at times sickening. The description of the artist’s frail skin-and-bones body exiting the cage after a fast is repulsive. The girls who ceremoniously help him out of the cage are disgusted by his feeble figure. In the end, no one wants to watch the hunger artist fast. The hunger artist even admits, right before his death, that no one should admire his fasting. Ironically, his fasting was not out of self-denial, but simply because he “couldn’t find the food [he] liked. If [he] had found it ... [he] should have made no fuss and stuffed

[himself] like” everyone else (255). This portrays fasting, and other forms of such repression, as not only absurd, but misguided and unimpressive.

After the hunger artist dies, his cage is occupied by a young panther.

Even the most insensitive felt it refreshing to see this wild creature leaping around the cage that had so long been dreary. The panther was all right. The food he liked was brought him without hesitation by the attendants; he seemed not even to miss his freedom; his noble body, furnished almost to the bursting point with all that it needed, seemed to carry freedom around with it too; somewhere in his jaws it seemed to lurk; and the joy of life streamed with such ardent passion from his throat that for the onlookers it was not easy to stand the shock of it.

But they braced themselves, crowded round the cage, and did not want ever to move away (255- 256).

The natural animal is much more beautiful than the dying artist. Once again, human ingenuity has created something truly bizarre, unnecessary, and even harmful, leading to the artists' death. Animals would never do something so absurd and thus are portrayed in Kafka's story as much more appealing and lively to watch. In the circus, the animals and the circus artists attract the attention, while the hunger artist, suppressing his instincts, is pushed to the side, forgotten, and left to die. *The Hunger Artist* embodies the ridiculous notion of repressing an instinctual desire that all humans share with animals.

Through the embodiment of animal-human hybrids, the poetic imagination grounds philosophical ideas in ways that allow them to be analyzed on a case by case basis. In philosophical debates, ideas are always tied to the speaker “by whom they

are enounced, and generated from the matrix of individual interests out of which [they] act in the world” (Coetzee 9 qtd. in Puchner 26). Therefore the philosopher might have a perception or analysis based on something specific to his own experience, such as his concern “not to seem an old-fashioned absolutist” (Coetzee 9 qtd in Puchner 26). However, when philosophy is crossed with literature, and these ideas are embodied in the text, the fact that an idea is tied to its speaker is made evident. We know not to trust the officer’s description of the perfect enlightenment provided by his cruel machine. We are able to see the image-essence discrepancy in Gregor and Grendel because we are able to peek into their minds. The poetic imagination focuses the ideas of philosophy into the specific world of the story, allowing the reader to view the perspective of the author grounded in characters, places, emotions, actions, and a narrative.

CHAPTER TWO: Physical Embodiment in Circus

Circus is a particularly apt mode of performance for embodying the question of the animal. Since its early development, circus has mediated physical encounters between man and animal. In this chapter I will examine three circus traditions: ancient Roman circus, traditional circus that began in England and expanded to North America, and the modern Québécois Cirque du Soleil. As a performance, circus explores the question of the animal in an experiential way through the physical bodies on stage. Ancient Roman circus was based on real-life competitions that could and did result in death. Traditional circus was more performance-based, featuring costumes, music, and scripted animal-human interactions. Cirque du Soleil is a theatrical circus, combining the physical techniques found in traditional circus with poetic imagination.

While circus in general might be categorized as a theatrical event, it is necessary to recognize the athletic component not usually present in other types of performance. This component makes circus a particularly “real” performance. Because circus is both a performance and an athletic event, I argue that the performing body in the arena can be perceived in three ways. The first is as a “phenomenal body,” defined by performance theorist Erika Fischer-Lichte as the real body of the performer, “the vital, organic, energetic body whose sensuousness works directly on the phenomenal body of the spectators” (5). This is not a body that *performs*, but a body that *does*. Unlike in most theatrical performances, the movement of the circus performer’s body is not an act – it does exactly what it appears to be doing. As Dan Handelman explains in his essay, *Symbolic Types, the Body, and Circus*, circus bodies in performance “are exactly what they show

themselves to be – they are reality and neither fantasy or ideology (213). The circus body uses “‘pure actions’ that are the total ‘implementation of plans’” (214). While Oedipus may appear to have gouged out his eyes, the actual eyes of the performer remain intact. However, the trapezist actually throws herself from one trapeze to another. The actions of circus artists can result in the injury, and perhaps even death, of the performer because they have the potential to harm her real body. For the purposes of this study, I will apply to circus Erika Fischer-Lichte’s term *phenomenal body* to designate the circus performer’s actual physical body that uses ‘pure actions’ and does what it claims to be doing.

Circus bodies are also perceived as iconic and symbolic. Based on ideas formulated by circus theorists Yoram Carmeli and Paul Bouissac, I propose the term *iconic body* (or simply *iconic*) to describe a body that symbolizes, without necessarily meaning to, all human bodies or all of a certain type of human body. As circus Carmeli explains in reference to traditional circus, “the public does not identify with the performer as a particular human being. Rather, it identifies the performer as a specimen of the human race mirroring itself” (*Semiotica* 80 213). A lion in the ring in this sense represents all lions, or Lion, and the man taming him represents Man.

However, in types of circus with a narrative, the performer can also be perceived as having a “semiotic body.” Fischer-Lichte describes the semiotic body in performance as the meaning-producing symbolic body that creates “illusion in the mind and imagination of the spectator” (5). When applied to circus in this paper, the *semiotic body* is purposefully designed to symbolically represent a character in the narrative of the performance, and expresses his or her imagined emotions. In the ensuing discussion of Roman circus, traditional circus, and Cirque du Soleil, I will

draw upon all three of these ideas of the body in performance—the phenomenal, the iconic, and the semiotic body—as one or another of them proves appropriate to the particular topic under consideration.

Roman Circus

Circus originated as an exhibition of heightened animal-human interactions. The first circus, the Circus Maximus, was built in Ancient Rome in 329 B.C. (Brown 5). The building was a giant arena called the hippodrome, as opposed to the tent we recognize today. The Circus Maximus, and other Roman circuses, exhibited human encounters with animals in either cooperation (e.g., chariot races) or opposition (e.g., gladiator-animal fights). The Roman circus was a combination of athletic competitions and performance, weaving rehearsed acrobatic and equestrian routines into competitive events. The realness of the competition in Roman circus brought the phenomenal body of the performers to the fore. While performances are “real” too, to the extent that they actually occur, but the Roman circus performances were not representational or aimed to express a “text.” With their “pure actions,” the performers tested their physical abilities alongside and against those of animals, capturing and heightening particular instances of animal-human interaction in such “real-life” situations as the hunt.

The embodied animal-human interactions in the circus were primarily a means of entertaining the public. The turbulent economic times in Rome made circuses—and the free wheat distributions that accompanied them—a primary means of keeping uprisings at bay (Croft-Cooke 12). The audience usually consisted of the entire populace, a crowd of about 150,000, making it the only event that men and

women were allowed to attend together (15). On the day of a circus, the spectators packed into the stadium to watch exotic animals, exciting races, and bloody battles to the death. They cheered loudly for successful and brave fighters, booed those who were timid, and debated the outcome of the chariot races (May 13). The circus was a popular social event that offered an escape from the struggles of daily life.

The hippodrome was established as a meeting place between animals, humans, and gods through its iconography and the ceremonies that preceded the events. The civic center was decorated with illustrations of the gods and animals. The circus opened with a religious ceremony dedicated to the gods, which included the sacrificing of animals. The opening and closing processions paraded exotic animals, as well as statues and paintings of gods and priests (Croft-Cooke 23). The central feature of the bare arena was an obelisk that represented the axis separating the heavens from the earth (Feldherr 249), suggesting the arena as a point of contact between them.

When the spectators entered the hippodrome, they separated themselves from their everyday lives and entered a contact zone. A *contact zone*, a term defined by Mary Louise Pratt, is a social space in which “cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today” (Pratt 6-7). A contact zone, as noted in the passage just quoted, was a locale for the encounter, or clash, of cultures that were not only qualitatively different, but were also sharply different by relations of power. However, the Roman circus went beyond this definition in serving as a contact zone not for human cultures, but rather, for the encounter of animal, human, and divine. It was an

unequal zone of contact because the established hierarchy placed animals below humans, and humans below the gods. The circus was a meeting-ground designed by humans, who controlled the roles played by animals, which could be forced to perform in certain events. At times, after being starved, the animals were turned loose upon slaves or Christians that they might tear to pieces and eat for the delectation of the mob. In other instances, the animals might simply be slaughtered. Although some of the grappling between the human and the animal that took place in the arena might appear to have partially erased their nominal hierarchical relations, these would always ultimately be reaffirmed.

When a performer stepped into the hippodrome, both the phenomenal and iconic bodies were present. Both the animal and the human became “exemplifications of their own kind” (Carmeli *Lion on Display* 65). While Yoram Carmeli is referring to traditional circus, the iconic body of the performer was also present in Roman circus. However, at the same time, the man was recognized as an individual human being, and the lion, as an individual lion (*Performing the ‘Real’ and ‘Impossible’* 211). The performer’s phenomenal body is emphasized in some instances by injury or death. In this respect, the awe and fear inspired by powerful wild beasts, as well as the human aspiration to conquer and subdue them, might be felt by the spectators, who, depending on the course and outcome of the struggle, might also feel the thrill of the hunt or the dread of becoming the lion’s victim.

When animals and humans met in the hippodrome, at times they collaborated, and at others they fought. Humans and animals joined forces in Roman circuses during chariot races and acrobatic acts. Chariot racers drove four horses around the track in competition (Dunbabin 86), and acrobats trained horses to participate in

tricks, in which the acrobats would leap from horse to horse and stood erect as they sped along the track (May 13). These equestrian performances represented a collaborative effort between man and animal. The horses were trained to respond to human cues, allowing man and animal to work towards a common goal. Exhibiting this cooperation in heightened focus echoed instances in real life in which communication was required between man and horse, particularly on the battlefield. In the arena, as on the battlefield, the human and the animal were deeply dependent on one another, cooperating for the purpose of achieving a human goal. The chariot races embodied events like ancient wars that necessitated interspecies collaboration in which the men would ride horses into battle.

The Roman circus also embodied instances of species opposition through segments of the performance that featured the slaughter of animals and violent gladiator battles. Animals, in addition to being offered in sacrifice, were killed for sheer entertainment. One announcement promised the slaughter of “500 Fierce Numidian Lions” (12). Boars, stags, and wolf-cubs were pushed into flames for the audience’s entertainment, while other animals were made to fight to the death (Croft-Cooke 14-5). Gladiator contests physically pitted humans against animals, by throwing the combatant (usually slaves, criminals, or prisoners of war) into an inescapable arena with a ruthlessly aggressive animal. Occasionally there were battles between groups of animals and humans, that left piles of dead and wounded scattered in the arena (26). These fights physically echoed instances of hostile animal-human interaction, particularly hunting. However, the battle in the arena was an inverse of the hunt; the human combatant became the hunted instead of the hunter,

needing to defend himself against the lion. This animal-human battle embodied the human need and desire to kill the animal, whether for food, glory, or protection.

Through the performances in the ring, the athletes and artists both subverted and ultimately accepted the universal order that placed humans above animals. Although animals appeared superior when they hunted humans, the accepted universal hierarchy was ultimately reaffirmed because the animals entered an arena controlled by humans and when the performance was over, the animals left harnessed to human carriages. The entire performance was designed by humans for entertainment, and although there were instances in which the animal seemed to have more power, such as the gladiator fights, these instances were fleeting. When the animals and humans stepped into the ring, perceived as both phenomenal and iconic bodies, they symbolically represented every Animal and Human, highlighting a struggle between the two for power, and ultimately reaffirming the universal order that places man above animal.

Traditional Circus

More than a thousand years later, traditional circus emerged. The first performance recognized as traditional circus took place in England in the 1770s. It was a culmination of various art forms that had developed separately, including farce, equestrian performance, *commedia dell'arte*, nomadic fairs, theater, and traveling menageries (Babinski 61; Carmeli 71–72). Equestrian performer Sergeant Philip Astley brought these separate activities together into one performance, creating the first traditional circus (Speaight 31).

The circus rapidly spread, passing to other countries and growing in popularity and variety. Aerial acts were added in 1859 when French gymnast, Jules Léotard, introduced an early form of the trapeze (Babinski 61). In 1871, P. T. Barnum created the world's first three-ring circus (61). Circus proprietors constantly outdid one another, seeking to have the biggest and the best. Barnum acquired exotic animals and acrobatic performers were constantly developing fresh routines with new equipment, attempting at every performance to show the audience something "never-before-seen."

Traditional circus was more performance-based than its Roman predecessor. The show was not a competition, with races and fights to the death, but a collaborative performance with a string of different acts featured one after another. The performances were still real, emphasizing the phenomenal body of the circus performer, and the performance could still result in death or injury if an accident occurred. However, performances in traditional circus were more scripted, especially those using animals. They never purposely involved violence to or the death of the phenomenal body of the human or the animal. In these staged encounters the lion, if all went well, would always be tamed, and neither the human nor the lion would be hurt.

However, at this point the semiotic body began to phase into circus, being present alongside of the iconic body. Although there was no story, the performers to a certain extent played characters when they were onstage. The lion tamer, the clown, the strongest woman in the world, were characters, meant to illustrate a certain human type. The illustration of these types was partially purposeful and therefore not simply iconic, but also semiotic. Costumes were used to exhibit the circus artist's

body in a particular way, whether as a clumsy, oafish clown with baggy trousers, or as a strong, athletic man, wearing only tight pants to highlight his inordinately large muscles. These costumes, as well as the scripted actions within routines, the set pieces, and the music, brought a semiotic component to the circus, beginning to phase out the presence of the iconic body.

At its height in the second half of the nineteenth century, the circus developed an aura of magic. The circus provided its audience with the thrill and pleasure of access to an otherwise inaccessible world of romance. In a single performance it brought together exotic and frightening animals and humans of exaggerated proportions - featuring the exceptionally tall, short, thin, fat, strong, or deformed. It wedded the strange and impossible with the comic. It claimed to bring before the ordinary bourgeois exciting phenomena from the far corners of the world that they could never hope to visit. It offered in a safe, locally-accessible place, the excitement of travel and adventure, and with it, intimations of extraordinary freedom. For the duration of the performance, the audience was allowed access to this “ancient closed society” with its exotic animals and bizarrely-talented humans (Freedman 5). When the circus was in town the spectator was given a chance to step out of his humdrum daily life and be swept up in the spectacle.

Like the Roman hippodrome, the circus tent not only acted as an escape from quotidian life, but also served as a contact zone between humans and animals. The traditional circus is, however, a choreographed version of the Roman contact zone. Man and lion met and fought in the traditional circus, but the lion responds to cues that the human gives during the performance. The lion learns to follow a prescribed routine and the tamer puts on a show, acting as if a struggle were involved in getting

the lion to obey. There is always the possibility that the lion will not follow the routine, or that an accident might occur, but normally the lions respond to the cues as set. Unlike the gladiator act, lion-taming requires a performance from both the tamer and the lion to make the audience forget the hours of training that went into the act. Lion-taming is one of the most popular circus events, featuring an enactment of the classic struggle between a human and a lion.

In lion-taming acts, the animals featured were established as dangerous and wild. Circus posters highlight the exotic and threatening qualities of their animals by placing them in what is suggested to be their natural habitat. In Figures 1 and 2, the animals that will presumably appear in the circus are shown in forests, fields, and in the case of the polar bear, on a block of ice. Placing them in a natural environment highlights how far from human civilization, and thus how far from being tamed, they are. Additionally, they are illustrated with mouths open and teeth bared, so that the viewer can almost hear their implied roars. These animals are purposefully depicted as the iconic wild and untamable Animal. The lion in Figure 2 even stares directly at the viewer, daring him to approach, making him to realize that if the lion were real, he would most certainly not approach. The wild and aggressive character of the animal is heightened in the ring by the fact that lions are often trained to play at resisting the trainer's authority. Lions and tigers are made to roar and refuse the human's orders, making their nature appear more difficult to tame than it actually is. Before the spectators enter the circus ring, they are expecting the wildest lions, ones that no human in their right mind would dare approach. In this way, lions become representative of iconic aggressive behavior.

Thus, taming this lion becomes taming all lions, and perhaps even taming all aggressive natures. Carmeli notes, “the animals’ appearance (their size, teeth, color) and behavior (their bearing, agility, their occasional roaring, and their fierceness) become a display of their innate nature, familiar to and expected by the audience. As such, the animals are representations of the spectators’ prevailing notions of ‘Nature.’” (*Lions on Display* 74). When animal meets man in the circus tent, Nature meets Culture. Tools created by man’s ingenuity, chairs, whips, revolvers, cages, grills, hoops, are all employed to contain the wild animal. The animal is contained within the context of human culture; the tamer, aided by the cultural products that surround him, tames the animal’s nature into submission. They battle one another and at the end of the act their opposition is, as Carmeli puts it, “shattered.” While other circus acts blend the distinction between man and animal, the lion-taming act reestablishes the illusion of an order that places Culture above Nature, Man above Animal.

However, despite their iconic status, the “realness” of the lion and the lion tamer cannot be erased, as Carmeli claims. The audience identifies with the trainer as one of his own kind and, at times, as himself, unable to forget that his phenomenal body is coexisting with the lion. This is what makes the lion-taming act so fascinating and scary. It is a real human risking his life in the cage with a real lion. The lack of “poetic imagination” makes this circus act frightening because the possibility always exists that the lion tamer might fail and be hurt, something that has of course occurred. Although the lion tamer and lion are both seen as icons, the corporeality of their phenomenal bodies is ever-present and the audience responds to both. The traditional circus performance is real too, but in a different way than the

Roman circus. It is not imaginary, it actually occurs, but the phenomenal body's materiality is what cannot be ignored and makes the performance frightening.

In the traditional circus, animals and humans act in collaboration as well as in opposition. One particularly interesting form of animal training features performances that exhibit trained animals eating with utensils, playing instruments, walking upright, and wearing clothes. These performances physically embody the animal-human hybrid, confusing and questioning the definitions of animal and human. A Ringling Bros and Barnum and Bailey poster (Figure 3) illustrates a pig, a monkey, and an elephant, who presumably work at the circus, welcoming a crowd of circus-goers, who are monkeys, dressed and behaving like humans. Most walk upright, and one of them even carries a purse and wears earrings. They pay for tickets, with acorns, rather than money, and walk into the tent. This brightly colored cartoon poster features the animal playing the human roles of spectator and ticket seller. Whether purposely or not, the poster compares the spectators to monkeys. Dressing animals in human clothing during circus acts such as these and having them "act human," flirts with the notion that if an animal can be trained to ride a bicycle, stand upright, and eat with utensils, perhaps there is little that differentiates us from animals other than clothes. While these animals do not speak eloquently or think rationally like Red Peter in *A Report to the Academy*, their performances of uniquely human actions in human clothing suggests the idea that humans are simply clothed and trained animals.

Animal and human identity are even more confused because the circus performer at times seems animalistic and of a different species. The circus performer is established as an outsider: a foreigner whose bizarre capabilities allow him to

perform tricks that ordinary people cannot. He is “the exotic Other” (Davis 232). These performers seem to be an exception to humanity, and while the spectator knows that they are humans, the performers are so eccentric and specialized in their skills that they appear, at times, to be of a different breed or “species”. As circus admirer, Dame Laura Knight said, “It is the feeling of defiance for the laws of nature that makes the circus people a race apart” (Croft-Cooke 173). They are not like other humans; they are dwarves, bizarrely skilled contortionists, men of extraordinary strength, and people capable of taming wild beasts. The emphasis placed on family tradition in the circus further underlines the circus performer as a different “species.” The poster proclaiming the performance of “The Cristiani Family in thrilling feats of acrobatic skill” (Smith and Fletcher 49) implies that the members of this family are markedly different from other humans, and that this difference accounts for their extraordinary skills and abilities. Circus performers, who come into a town for one day only, do not participate in the daily life of its audience’s community. However, they are advertised for their out of the ordinary existence. Their exoticness and their descent from a lineage of circus artists, have a mythic quality that make them seem different than other humans.

However, what associates performers most with animals is the movement during the performance of their act. While human performances appear superhuman in the risks taken and the ability required, the movement is physically animalistic. A trip to the circus pays homage to the incredible physical potential of the human body. Circus artists seem superhuman with their acrobatic performances that defy the commonly understood notion of what a human is physically capable of. Taking such incredible risks, with such seeming ease, makes the circus artists appear more than

human. When the performers transgress the boundary between the human and the superhuman they simultaneously advance into animal territory -- it is through animalistic movement that the bodies appear so physically extraordinary. Spectators often metaphorically describe acrobatic actions by pulling terms from the animal kingdom (Bouissac *Circus and Culture* 45 – 46). This is evident with the aerialist and the contortionist, who represent two contrasting examples of animal embodiment in circus. The incredibly athletic movement of the acrobat, aerialist, and contortionist, combined with their silence, make them appear to be animals during the moment of the performance.

In the aerialist, the audience sees not only a superhuman, but birds, butterflies, and other flying animals. La Trobe University professor, Peta Tait, discusses the aerialist's potential to resemble animal bodies in her book *Circus Bodies: Cultural Identity in Aerial Performance*. Trapeze acts recall the image of flying birds; one spectator described the first trapezist as “swaying through the air backwards and forwards alighting each time on the iron frame as lightly as a bird” (14). A trapezist floats, flips, turns upside down, extends his body horizontally in midair, arches his back up towards the sky, and for the short-lived moment of the acrobatic trick, the movement of the performer creates the illusion that his body is animalistic.

While aerialists appear to be birds or butterflies, contortionists resemble insects, snakes, and other crawling, low-to-the-ground creatures. If the aerial performer explores the animal through reaching up to the heavens and outside himself, the contortionist explores the inner animalistic qualities of her body through turning, molding, and shaping it within a confined space. The contortionist has no need to go outside herself to look for the animal: “as the body turns through its own

axes, its hidden secrets and potentials are made explicit” (Handelman 216). By arching her feet over her head or folding herself in a way never before seen, the contortionist explores the animalistic potential of her body. When the performer is standing upright before and after the performance, she appears to be what the audience knows her to be: a human. Yet, in the midst of her contortion, her “body begins to transform ... into an alien image” (218). This foreign image appears “monstrous ... and for all the coherence of the body parts, the embodiment verges on the inhuman, and indeed on the insectile” (218).

Contortionists’ postures are indeed monstrous and insect-like. The contortionist's movements do have their analogues within the animal kingdom, but not within the range of animals with whom humans commonly interact or are compared -- rather, with insects or vermin. Exhibiting the ability of the human to seem insect-like and monstrous, the contortionist act places the human on a par with animals that are often seen as bizarre, disturbing, and repulsive. The contortionist refuses the human body its upright stance, instead making it crawl, twist, and roll on the ground. A contortionist embodies not the human ability to be beautiful and free like a bird or a butterfly, but rather the human ability to be a physical oddity, at times repulsive and disturbing.

The world offered by the traditional circus allows for binaries to be broken apart. Circus subverted gender norms by featuring muscular women and men in drag. It displayed bizarre talents and exhibited deformities, claiming they deserved applause. Humans became superhuman in the ring. Animals and humans met and “became” one another. The Circus inverted normal social and cultural systems. In part, this was the reason the circus was so popular in bourgeois societies--it gave the

bourgeois the thrill of seeing minor conventions defied, and in so doing, at the same time reinforced those conventions. In the end, the inverted order of the circus reaffirms the accepted cultural norms and the universal hierarchy through lion-taming acts. Lion-taming acts claim to vanquish the aggressive animal instincts that it advertises are intrinsic to the nature of wild lions, tigers, and other animals. The animals are trained to perform and submit to humans, and more than in Roman circuses, the circus performers control their encounter with the animal. When successfully performed, the lion-taming act reaffirms the notion that humans can convert the animal natures, whether wild, aggressive, similar to humans or not, into an impressive and playful performance that is entertaining and which ultimately affirms the human ability to control and conquer beasts.

Cirque du Soleil

More recently, particularly over the last forty years, traditional circus has become less popular, a wane that is influenced by the circus' use and treatment of animals. Recent circuses have begun to avoid the use of animals due to activist protests. The traditional circus animal acts that once incited fascination and amusement are now often seen as cruel. Cirque du Soleil is one example of a modern circus that refrains from the use of animals. Founded and based in Québec, Cirque du Soleil merges theatricality with traditional circus acts to redefine circus tradition. Three young Québécois artists, Gilles St. Croix, Guy Caron, and Guy Laliberté, created Cirque du Soleil in the early eighties out of a desire to pursue the circus arts in Québec. The three had collaborated through various projects, St. Croix and Laliberté eventually organizing a street performance festival called La Fête Foraine

(Babinski 30). Laliberté drew from the pool of artistic talent at the festival and in 1984 launched what would soon be Cirque du Soleil (44). From its big top debut, Cirque became hugely successful, ultimately setting up tours of 13 shows over a period of 20 years and in 130 different cities (Kaufman).

What drew so many people to this fresh circus? Perhaps it was the way Cirque merged physical embodiment and poetic imagination. Cirque du Soleil does not take place in a contact zone—there are no battles for power. Instead the animal-human relationship is explored through a story, by grounding the acrobatic routines in a central theme, weaving the performances together with an abstract narrative. The acrobats portray characters in the unique world imagined by Cirque, allowing them to be perceived as semiotic bodies. Because the performances are grounded in a story imagined by Cirque, the circus performer does not have an iconic body that can be vaguely associated as representing Man. Instead he has a semiotic body that signifies a specific character and its emotions.

Introducing poetic imagination to circus gives Cirque du Soleil an intellectual component that was not present in Roman and traditional circus. These circuses had elements of theatricality—the acrobats were often costumed, the performers saluted and performed for the audience. However, there was no scripted story that could be analyzed, rather the separate performances combined in the circus could be analyzed from a cultural perspective. The circumstances and characters of the poetic imagination spill onto Cirque's stage and purposefully provoke questions about human and animal identity. As Ernst Albrecht explains in his book *Contemporary Circus*, Cirque du Soleil brought an “intellectual component” (x). Of course, one can (and many do) take Cirque du Soleil at a superficial level, as simply an entertaining

circus spectacle. However, the performances bring the spectator into a magical, fantastical world far from quotidian life, in order to mirror aspects of our own culture, community, and values, while at the same time subjecting them to a reexamination.

Cirque du Soleil's 2002 production, *Varekai*, is its most lucid treatment of the animal-human relationship. Director/writer Dominic Champagne conceived the most developed and intelligible plot of any Cirque show. The unfolding story follows the interactions between humans and eccentric animals in the titular forest, centering on the mythological figure Icarus.

Icarus falls into the alien world of *Varekai*, where creatures appearing to be lizards, insects, snakes, and other bizarre animals live together with humans. Among these many odd creatures is the Betrothed, who resembles an insect or a lizard, with her light green costume and her low-to-the-ground movement. Despite being different species, the two are immediately attracted to one another, staring curiously. However, they are parted continuously throughout the performance as each new circus act takes the stage. After their third reunion, a group of trapezists who appear to be serpents descend on their trapeze and capture the Betrothed, placing her in a cage at the top of the tent. The cage serves as a cocoon, revealing the Betrothed transformed—now confidently standing erect in a shimmering white bodysuit. The show ends as the Betrothed and Icarus are married in a celebratory finale, leaving one with the question: what can we make of a love story between an insect and a mythological human?

Varekai is set in an eccentric forest, opening on a bare one-ring stage with a cluster of 20-foot golden metallic sticks at the back shooting up from the ground towards the sky. There is a faint buzzing of flies and chirping of birds. The

performers enter one by one, some crawling on all fours, others climbing through the metallic sticks, still others jumping over and walking along seats in the audience. Each performer wears a brightly colored costume (see Figures 4), often a skin-tight body suit with embellishments projecting from it, such as flower petals, long tails, or feathers. The makeup is equally bright and colorful. The cluster of metallic rods in the back recall trees or bamboo shoots, and the performers hanging are in a position that resembles that of koala bears perched in trees.

The opening act emphasizes the forest's natural atmosphere. A character called the Skywatcher hears the unnatural sounds of human creation—the jet engines, jack hammers, cell phones which might go off during this performance—and disposes of them in a machine that converts their sounds into the chirping of birds. He keeps those noises, associated with human society, from disturbing his habitat by turning them into the natural sound of a bird. It is as if the audience was being told to leave human inventions and technological preoccupations of the modern world behind them as they enter the environment of this circus tent. Those things do not belong in the world of *Varekai*.

The characters living in the forest appear to be animal-human hybrids. The performers' human faces remain clearly visible beneath their makeup, and their bodies remain human. However, their costumes have tails, spikes down the spine, scales, and headdresses with antennae. Their acrobatic movement, which is highly stylized, is used to create a way of moving for each character. Andre Simard, the choreographer of the aerial acts in *Varekai*, explains that the movement becomes “a vehicle for the artists to express their inner language” (Cirque du Soleil Website). In *Varekai*, the performers use their acrobatic movements, which often resembled the

movements of animals even in traditional circus, as starting points for creating a movement for their characters. Acrobats perch themselves on all fours, performers crawl out of stage traps, creating the illusion that these acrobats are creatures who have burrowed holes under the earth. At one point, the Skywatcher casts a fishing rod about the stage, attempting to catch the performers about him, as if they were fish.

While the ensemble of acrobats plays animals, there are also five human characters in *Varekai*: the two clowns, the Sky Watcher and the Inventor, and Icarus. Each set of characters represents a different type of human. The two clowns are the cultured, technologically savvy, modern humans. They are the only characters to dress in completely recognizable, albeit gaudy, human clothing. They use microphones and other technological devices. In the beginning of the show, they walk around the stage as if they were zoo-goers, observing the movements of the animalistic characters while simultaneously stuffing themselves with popcorn. These clowns comment upon the human's claim to superiority over the animal. While the clowns eat popcorn and lazily traverse the stage, the acrobatic creatures perform impressive tricks with energy and purpose. The animals are the characters we take seriously, while these human clowns are the ones at which we laugh. The two clowns are physically less capable and impressive than the animals. They are clumsy, unable to control their movements, and overweight or have awkward patches of hair on their bodies. These clowns play the role that Paul Bouissac views as the traditional role of the clown, which is to represent "a biologically inferior being, one who would not survive in many animal species because of his peers or his predators" (*Circus and Culture* 46). They are hilariously ugly and maladroit in comparison to the graceful

acrobats. It is clear that if natural selection were to immediately weed out two characters in *Varekai* it would be these two clowns. One cannot help but laugh at these characters, and when we laugh at them, we are laughing at the characters who are outwardly most like ourselves.

Although these clowns seem to be “biologically inferior beings” or sub-human, they are the most technically advanced human characters in the *Varekai* world. The technology that the clowns use always seems to thwart them and make their lives more difficult and complicated than the simple equipment the other performers use. For example, while he is attempting to sing a song, the male clown’s spotlight keeps evading him. This act suggests that these clowns, and thus the human who is completely out of touch with nature and other animals, are inferior to other humans who are more in touch with nature, and even animals. The clowns are amusing and the audience falls in love with them because they fulfill their purpose: provoking laughter. Nonetheless, the animals and the other human characters that are more in touch with the natural world are much less ridiculous and therefore higher on any sort of evolutionary scale.

The Skywatcher and the Inventor are two humans who are much more in touch with nature because they live in the forest of *Varekai*. They invent tools and machines, a uniquely human ability, but their machines do not disturb the serene forest atmosphere, and in the case of the Skywatcher’s sound machine, they even protect it. They live with the animals and are able to communicate with them to a certain extent. The Skywatcher talks to the Betrothed in a gibberish language that they both seem to understand. At the same time, however, they are clearly distinct from the animals. The Skywatcher and the Inventor walk upright, even if in a

stylized manner. They also do not perform any impressive acrobatic tricks to the extent that the animalistic characters do. Additionally, their costumes act as clothing, whereas the animal characters' costumes appear to be skin. However, these clothes seem to be made out of tree bark and are much simpler than those of the clowns.

The Skywatcher and the Inventor are humans that are much more in tune with nature than the clowns. They fill the world with human tools and inventions, but these objects in no way harm the natural world in which they live. They are comic characters at times, particularly in a section that involves the Skywatcher and the Inventor attempting to replace the light bulb that sits atop the Inventor's head which has gone out. It makes one think of the joke "how many monkeys does it take to screw in a light bulb?" They make clumsy errors, get angry and frustrated with each other, but finally succeed. There seems to be something animalistic, natural, and primal about their nature. They deal with problems, such as screwing in the light bulb, in very simple, step-by-step ways. However, they also fish for animals and create objects that are not truly part of the animal world. The Skywatcher and the Inventor live on the cusp between the animal and human world.

As a mythological symbol for transgressing boundaries, Icarus is an appropriate figure to explore human identity and its relation to animals. When Icarus' father built him wings, he warned him to fly at a middling height, not too low or he would fall into the sea, not too high or the sun would melt the wings. Icarus does not remain within the limitations his father sets, flying too high, melting his wings, and plummeting to the ground. Icarus is a high flyer, like a trapeze artist, transgressing both physical and species limitations by attempting the flight that only birds are naturally capable of. When Icarus' falls at the beginning of *Varekai*, the

high flyer is brought down to earth, the trapeze artist is dethroned, and the transgressor of boundaries is catapulted back within his limits.

This is reflected in Icarus's solo aerial act, performed using a net in which he is trapped. The act shows Icarus contorting himself in the net, exploring ways to get out. As his aerial act begins, Icarus curls himself in the net in a variety of ways, moving from fetal position, to splits, to back arches, to hand stands, all within the net. Halfway through the routine, he moves outside of the net and begins using it as a strap or a swing. Throughout the routine, the net rises to the height of the tent, and then falls to the ground, mirroring Icarus' original fall. As the net drops, Icarus climbs up it, as if it were a ladder. Then, at the top, he wraps it around him, and rolls down the entirety of its length as it unravels. The entire routine exhibits Icarus' desire to test boundaries. The sad music that accompanies it and the fatigue and injury Icarus displays when he is finally brought back to the ground illustrate how difficult it is to continue testing these boundaries. This brings the circus artist, the artist who attempts to transgress human physical limits, down to earth.

However, landing in *Varekai*, Icarus transgresses the border between the human and the animal by falling in love with The Betrothed, a female that is clearly not a human. While Icarus falls from above, the Betrothed enters from below, crawling out of a trap on the stage floor. The Betrothed moves close to the ground as if she was a bizarre slightly injured insect and never stands upright. Her costume, shown in Figures 5 and 6, is green and with projections. In Figure 6 she flashes her outer covering, and in Figure 5, she is in a position with her feet curled over her head, suggesting that this is her method for locomotion. For the first three-fourths of the

performance, the Betrothed is insectile. During her insect phase, Icarus and the Betrothed are kept from one another by the successive circus acts.

However, like Icarus, the high flyer, who has been brought down to earth, the Betrothed is raised up in a cocoon that transforms her into a human. She emerges without wings and animalistic projections; only a skin-tight suit, as white as Icarus' costume. While she performs her hand-balancing act, she contorts her body in ways that appear animalistic. However, she is much more human than before. The four trapezists who had captured and caged her now bow down to her. The Betrothed is transformed: she is powerful, confident, and beautiful. Icarus and the Betrothed, two extremes, one flying too high, one insectile and underground, must unite somewhere in the middle, on a human level. This illustrates the human ability to harness the physical extremes of animals. *Varekai* is centered upon the threshold between animals and humans. The story illustrates the extremely "human" and the extremely "animalistic." However, the main characters, the characters around which the plot revolves, are those characters that are able to bridge the gap between the animal and the human worlds.

The history of circus involves a spectrum in which the iconic body fades to the back and the semiotic moves to the fore, while the phenomenal body always remains, although in later periods it is more protected (with scripted routines, as well as in some instances, ropes and harnesses). Roman circus was the most 'real,' located in a contact zone, with unscripted actions, and the phenomenal and the iconic bodies were the only bodies present. Traditional circus added a performative element to its Roman predecessor, with choreographed routines. Costumes, music, and lights purposefully characterized circus performers as specific human types, fading the

iconic body out and fading the semiotic body in. While still highly featuring the phenomenal body, Cirque du Soleil focused the iconic body by applying poetic imagination and theatrical elements to circus more clearly and purposefully than any of its predecessors. By focusing the audience's attention the director chooses which characters the audience will find most beautiful, repulsive, or empathetic.

Some of the features of *Varekai* already remarked seem to reflect symbolically Cirque du Soleil's revisionist strategy with respect to the traditional circus. Icarus the "high-flyer" brought down to earth, is like a trapeze artist hauled down from his trapeze, and the Betrothed, crawling on ground like an insect or reptile, is raised to the human level where she and Icarus meet and are united. In this way, *Varekai* realizes a new unity between the extremes of the animal kingdom through the human.

Cirque du Soleil provides an experiential, physically real, and imaginative embodiment of the question of the animal. In *Varekai*, the embodiment of the animal-human hybrid in literature is now placed in the context of the human body. As Martin Puchner notes in reference to theater performance,

It is as if the question of embodiment and sympathy, like the question of the animal more generally, was yearning to break out of the domain of literature and thus of human language and into the domain of theatre and performance. Does not the theatre seem capable of crossing the dividing line between the human and the animal by virtue of its dependence on nonverbal, physical communication, on an expressive language of gestures? And furthermore, in theatre and performance, illusions about a fictional embodiment and imaginative sympathy are confronted, one would think, with the actual reality of human and animal bodies and the direct expressions of their respective subjectivity (28).

Is not circus, with its history steeped in animal-human encounters, one of the most appropriate modes for exploring the question of the animal?

CONCLUSION

Plato famously decreed the exclusion of art and artists from his ideal republic, on the grounds that art falsifies the truth and therefore has no place in the education of children being trained to govern. It is therefore an inevitable conclusion that art could have nothing useful to say in the discussion and resolution of philosophical questions. Art is a mimetic reproduction of "real" objects, but since the reality it mimics is itself the object of sensory perception, it is already at one remove from the true reality, which is in the ideal Forms of things. Art therefore is at two removes from truth. Plato compares the artist to a man carrying a mirror with him wherever he goes (595b). With his mirror the man "creates" many things, in that he can use the mirror to reflect the images of the things around him, mountains, pavement, and so on. Like this man, the artist simply reflects or imitates the images that he sees. But no matter how superb his reproductions, they are no substitute for the real.

However, even Plato himself suggests moments of opposition to his exclusion of poets from the Republic, and aesthetic philosophy since his time, starting with Aristotle, has substantially reversed his position, developing the idea that art does communicate truth, although not by simply and straightforwardly revealing or presenting it. Once the idea of interpretation (and the various forms of indirection that belong to it) had been introduced into Aesthetics, it became not only possible, but inevitable, for every form of fiction, representation, allusion, and even illusion, to become a vessel of truth. It is well beyond the scope or intention of the present study to trace this evolution, but it will suffice to note that it occurred, and that it accounts for the fact that, almost from the earliest times of its formulation, the "question of the animal" is bound up in human perception.

As humans, our view of the animal is shrouded by own experience. What we consider the study of the history of animals is a history that is seen entirely through the human lens. As Erica Fudge, professor at Middlesex University, explains, “a dog can bark, and that bark can be recorded, documented, but it cannot be understood. The only documents available to the historian in any field are documents written, or spoken, by humans” (5). We can never truly grasp an unbiased, absolute, history of animals. What we call a history of animals is instead “a history of human attitudes toward animals” (6). When philosophers and artists have discussed the question of the animal it has always been encased in the human perspective. Art, necessarily a medium created by humans, is therefore highly appropriate for an exploration of the question of the animal.

The question of the animal has been growing in importance and immediacy recently. While it was once automatically assumed that the human was a distinct species, different from other animals because of its unique capacity for speech and rational thought, many writers have questioned this human distinction and, in some cases, superiority. In the 18th century, Charles Linnaeus classified human beings as primates, placing them in the same genus as apes and Chimpanzees. In the 19th century, Charles Darwin published his famous work, *The Origin of Species*, arousing “passionate debates and embarrassed snickers” (Sax 276). Following the publication of Darwin’s text, many philosophers have grown to see the animal-human distinction as a continuum instead of a binary. As the gap that separates the human and the animal is closing, human identity is being questioned and redefined. What would happen if a human brain could be implanted in a dog or other comparable animal? Would that animal have a human consciousness, as well as the human capacity for

thought? And if so, what would that say about the categories of "human" and "animal"?

As a growing topic of debate, the question of the animal has had an increased presence in the art world. As we have seen, art through the ages has prominently featured the animal in literature, painting and performance. However, there has recently been a marked resurgence of the animal in the arts. As explained in the description of the gallery show, *Becoming Animal*,

in an age when scientists say they can no longer specify the exact difference between human and animal ... many contemporary artists have chosen to use animals in their work – as the ultimate “other,” as metaphor, as reflection. The attempt to discover what is animal, not surprisingly, leads to a greater understanding of what it means to be human (Becoming Animal MASS MoCA).

With a long history steeped in animal-human interactions and an art that combines primarily physical techniques with the poetic imagination, Cirque du Soleil’s new take on circus tradition appears to be a new and unprecedented method for understanding the question of the animal. Without the actual use of animals, this process is intimated through the acrobatic movements of the performers. These silent performers subsume the lack of speech in animals, speaking only with their movement.

Performance has always proved a rigorous testing-ground for ideas, in theatre, in dance, in music, and Cirque du Soleil has now extended such relation of performance to idea to the circus. Performance is necessarily haunted by the real,

since it invariably involves real bodies moving through real spaces in real time. An accident could occur, a trapeze artist could fall, or a lion could hurt his trainer:

When the circus proprietor and animal trainer Wayne Frazen was mauled to death by one of his tigers during a performance in front of two hundred school children at Broad Top City, Pennsylvania, on May 7, 1997, all the national television networks covered the story, and all marveled at the circus's dangers. The circus makes us take pause: to acknowledge the powerful and occasionally perilous relationship between people and animals (Davis 237).

While Cirque du Soleil does not incorporate real animals, it uses real bodies that are grounded in imagined circumstances to explore the question of the animal in a new way. The embodiment of the question of the animal in Cirque provides an understanding of a philosophical idea that is both experiential and intellectual. Throughout this project, I have found no writing that has set out to analyze or interpret a Cirque production. The predominant writing about Cirque du Soleil has been in the form of reviews. However, I hope that Cirque can be realized as a particularly exciting and fresh embodiment of the question of the animal that could and should be analyzed.

NOTES

Introduction

- ¹ I will use the term “animal” to mean all non-human animals.
- ² Traditional circus is the period of circus in England and America that began in the 1790s and ended in the 1950s.
- ³ Most notably in *Gorgias* and *Phaedrus*.
- ⁴ For example, in the thought of St. Augustine, St. Thomas Aquinas, and Boethius.

Chapter One

- ¹ A chimera, named after the Greek mythological creature made up of different animal parts, is produced by mixing cells from two different organisms.
- ² The translation of *ungeziefer* has been given a lot of attention for its possible meanings. It literally translates to “an unclean animal unfit for sacrifice,” but many question whether what Gregor became was actually an animal, notably Deleuze and Guattari.

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APPENDIX

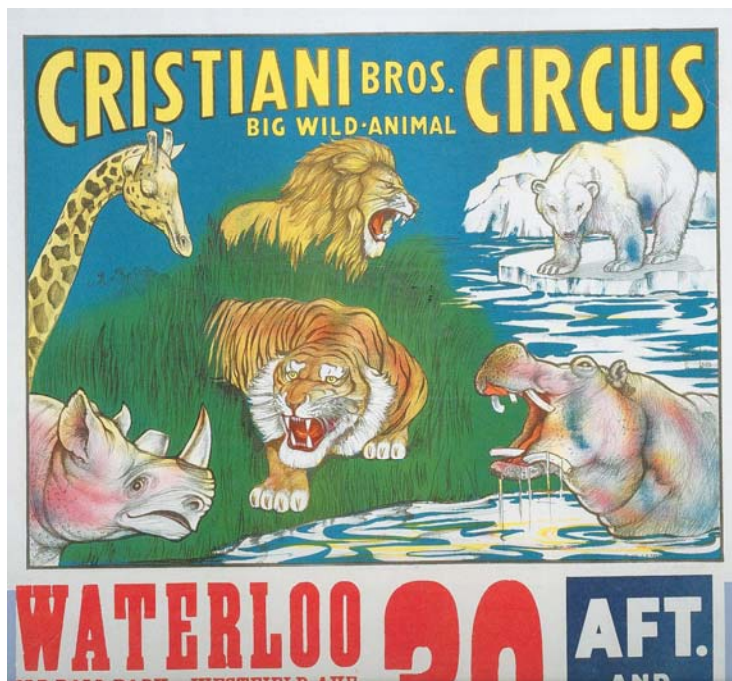


Figure 1: (Smith 39).



Figure 2: (Smith 62)



Figure 3: (Smith 29).



Figure 4: (Butler 1).



Figure 5: (The Tribune 1)



Figure 6: (Hewitson 1)