

Gregory Corso's Post-vegetarian Ethical Dilemma

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Gregory Corso is often thought of as a comic side-kick to the more important Beat poet Allen Ginsberg. As the leader of the Beat movement, Ginsberg received serious critical attention, and it is no longer doubtful whether he will be included in the mainstream canon. Corso's "zany" work places him as a lightweight Beatnik, remembered outside the movement for his poem "Marriage," and inside the movement largely as a problematic character for whom the other Beats felt the burden of responsibility.¹ Corso's work has been consistently misread. Derek Parker writes, "Gregory Corso first became widely known in the U.S. when, in 1956, his name was linked with those of Ginsberg, Kerouac, Snyder, and others in a group which became known as 'the Beat poets.' Like all such arbitrarily catalogued groups, this one dispersed soon after it was discovered; and it has become clear that Corso's is an

individual voice which has relatively little to do with the voices of the other 'Beats.' It is a quieter, more introvert voice than Ginsberg's; more discipline and intense than Kerouac's" (237). Indeed, Corso is not interested in the politics, or ecology, or other concerns of the other poets in this arbitrary grouping. Corso's humor belies a profound, far-reaching thought which goes to the heart of the madness of living in a food chain. In Corso's poetry, he takes on serious philosophical issues in such a way as to show that he is far in advance of any of the Beat writers, as he destroys the hunky dory assumptions of the ecology movement and reveals the monstrous heart of nature. Throughout his poems, Corso takes on the difficulty to being ethically human within nature, a theme which is touched upon frequently by post-modern philosophers, but Corso seems to outstrip even them in terms of his insights. The basic question, as Corso puts it, is, can we be ethical when we must eat other creatures in order to live? If other creatures have the right to co-exist with us, and to be considered as subjects, and since we must eat other creatures in order to survive, is there a possibility of ethics and morality in our world? The obvious answer is no. Corso's work for several decades was to make this clear. The result is that he has been ignored, because his ecological suspicions do not accord with the contemporary melanoia (opposite of paranoia) regarding the food chain.

At a mid-point in Gregory Corso's career, he began to write poems in which animals appear without humans. Completely overlooked by any of Corso's commentators thus far, and yet retained by Corso in his *Selected Poems* (1989) the short poem "Active Night," from the collection *Long Live Man* (1962), contains many secrets to Corso's vision:

Active Night

A tarsier bewrays the end of an epical rain
Burying beetles ponderously lug a dead rat
A moth, just a few seconds old, tumbles down fern
Bats are drinking flowers
The lonely tapir walks the river bottom
And up comes a manatee with a sea-anemone
On its nose

(Long Live Man 72)

In this poem, set in the Malaysian rain forest, a variety of animals return to their feeding after a long, pensive wait. A tarsier's appearance "bewrays," or prophesies, the end of the rain. The action and diction turns to New York street talk with "lugs a dead rat," as the end of the "epical" rain is reached. This eco-system functions much like a utopian nightlife scene—every individual going about the business of pleasure—hence its title. Since groups mean the death of the individual to Corso, the two groups presented here, "burying beetles" and "bats", are explicitly or implicitly linked to death. The burying beetles, like pall-bearers, lug a dead rat to a softer place, where they will then bury it, and live off the fly larvae that will develop inside its underground carcass. The bats, with images of vampires flitting through our cultural image bank, in this instance "drink" from flowers, a sexy image, in which the bats, simply by following their natural instincts, end up all doing the same sweet thing together. Corso's initial hypothesis seems to be that if everyone just minds their own business by following their own nature, then everyone can be content within nature. But the last few lines debate this conclusion. A tapir, a smaller animal related to the rhinoceros, is walking along the river bottom, feeling lonely, when he sees a manatee surface—with a sea-anemone on its nose. The sea-anemone, which eats small sea-creatures, has apparently mistaken the manatee's nose for something to eat, and the manatee surfaces in this humorous close, an ending akin to a mousetrap on a clown's nose in a tiny circus. The tapir, we may assume, now relishes his loneliness, as his nose at least is not being chewed by someone else, so perhaps, the poem seems to say it is better to be lonely. Corso, in a sense, denies the very possibility of community between species in the poem. Although the poem has a circus feeling, there is a bitterness at the heart of the poem, in that creatures are forced to perceive each other with suspicion.

Long before this poem was written, Corso had already written against a simple Gaia concept of nature in his poem, "A Pastoral Fetish", which appeared in his first collection of poems, *Vestal Lady on Brattle*. This book was the only one to have at least one poem in it written before Corso had met the other members of the so-called Beat generation (he met Ginsberg in 1950, and "Sea Chanty" had been written in 1945), and thus shows that his anti-ecological concerns were not conceived against the other Beats, but were part of his original vision of nature and society. Poems such as "Sea Chanty", "Song", and especially "Pastoral Fetish", are the most obvious examples of his tendency in Corso's early verses, but nearly all of the early poems touch on this same theme. As Gregory

Stephenson writes in his book on Corso, “The central motif of the poems in this collection is that of a predatory devouring or destruction of innocence and beauty. This theme is first treated in the title poem of the collection where an aged woman devours a child; a vampyric, cannibalistic act that is apparently part of her daily regimen. In ‘You Cane Last Season’, a lover consumes his beloved, while the poem ‘Coney Island’ presents a comedian-crab and a fungi-man whose common and consuming interest is eating the feet of the bathers on the beach. The sea itself is seen as a cruel devourer in ‘Sea Chanty’ in which the narrator’s mother is first eaten by the sea and is then unknowingly eaten by the narrator himself. In “Song”, it is the ‘pig’s daughter’ who is to be betrayed, killed, and eaten by her husband. Other predators in these poems include the mouse-eating mandrill in ‘Vision Epizootic’; the ‘drooling desirer’ with his ‘long greasy coat, and the bloodstained fingernails’ who stalks his human prey in “The Early Morning... and the perverse, flower-murdering Old McDonald in ‘A Pastoral Fetish’” (Stephenson 11-12).

A Pastoral Fetish

Old Mac Donald wears clod-hoppers
In his walk through fields of lilac and dandelion
A storm-trooper, like a Klee tittering machine, he stomps:
Crunch one lilac here; crunch another dandelion there,
Here, there, everywhere (he’s got no mercy at all)
Crunch crunch here and a crunch crunch there

Crunch everywhere
There comes a time when he’s got to stop
Take off his shoes; go to bed...
Ah, that’s when Old MacDonald’s in his glory.
Green blood and mud-caked leather he digs the most.
He makes it a habit to sleep his nose by his toes
so that all night long he could snore in the sticky smell
Of murdered lilac and dandelion.
It’s the old bastard’s greatest kick

(Mindfield 13)

Comparing the nursery rhyme figure of Old Mac Donald to a storm-trooper, and calling him an old bastard, subverts the innocence of the children’s genre, and gives the poem an adult realism. In a sense Corso is stomping on the innocence of childish rhymes, and showing the bitter truth of life in a food chain, in which flowers can be murdered, and nobody can say anything about it, because even today plants do not have subjectivity, and they are unlikely to get it before a court of law, even if animals are well on their way. The fun of destroying nature is something that almost everyone has felt—stomping on beauty, pulling the wings off insects, skinning frogs and shooting guns at birds. It is something wired into people, who are, after all, predators, with teeth, and hard nails, and stomachs they are forced to fill.

A long philosophical tradition from Plato through Martin Heidegger denies animals the power of rationality and speech in order to rationalize our dominance over nature. Critic John Lewellyn writes of Heidegger that, "...his problem here is very much Kant's problem: how to understand the classical definition of man as a rational animal without implying that Dasein and the animal are species of a shared genus. The same problem surfaces in [Emmanuel] Levinas' remark 'We understand the animal, the face of an animal, in accordance with Dasein.' Levinas, Heidegger and Kant are all preoccupied, like the Stoics, with the problem of safeguarding the dignity of man." (Lewellyn 83).

Corso's humor consists largely of continually unmasking the foundational truth that we live in a food chain and must eat other creatures in order to live. The food chain, though never named as such, emerges in his earliest poetry, such as the poems "Song", "A Pastoral Fetish", and "The Sausages", from *Vestal Lady on Brattle* (1955), inscribing the unassimilable and disturbing content of the food chain within the absurd feel-good rhymes of childhood. Within the self-cannibalizing convoy of subjects known as a "food chain", Corso relentlessly questions the possibility of a logical ethics, and the most he can achieve is an absurdist aesthetics. In the later poem "This Was My Meal", from the collection *Gasoline* (1958), Corso writes:

In the peas in the upside down letters of MONK
And beside it, in the Eyestares of Wine
I saw Olive and Blackhair
I decided sunset to dine

I cut through the cowbrain and saw Christmas
And my birthday run hand in hand through the snow
I cut deeper
and Christmas bled to the edge of the plate

I turned to my father
and he ate my birthday
I drank my milk and saw trees outrun themselves
valleys outdo themselves
and no mountain stood a chance of not walking
Desert came in the spindly hands of stepmother
I wanted to drop fire-engines from my mouth!
But in ran the moonlight and grabbed the prunes.

(*Mindfield* 39)

In the upside down letters of MONK, the poem begins. If we turn MONK upside down we get the word KNOW. What is it that monks would know if their world were righted? It is that we eat. When the narrator cuts through the cowbrain he sees Christmas—not only a critique of Christianity, but of the traditional foods we eat at Christmas. Everything is busy eating in the poem, pleased with the taste of other things, and there is real fear as

the father eats the child's birthday. Trees take off running, even mountains run to escape the general mayhem, and finally, even something as insubstantial and traditionally poetic as "moonlight" runs in and grabs the prunes.

Corso does not accept the ethical face of humanity. He would never accept the project of Heidegger and Levinas of "safeguarding the dignity of man" (Lewellyn 83). Cannibalizing other beings, something which we must do by our very nature in that there is nothing we can eat which didn't first have a life of its own, seemingly undoes any morality we might claim to possess, as soon as we grant being to other creatures. Morality is, Corso avers, merely a series of conventions, or masks. Eating is a public secret which we must repress in order to continue the fiction of living in an ethical world.

In his novel *American Express*, Corso presents a scene in which a seal-trainer's seal is stolen from him at a party and cooked. The seal meat is then passed around. Very quickly, the seal disappears. The seal-trainer remains in the room, and after the orgy of consumption is accomplished, he is accused of having partaken:

"You ate it all!" Vatic accused Sgarlotto.

"Would I eat but a morsel? I could not. I too am hungry, but ate nothing. A sacrifice of the stronger need—disposed in ethics—the animal was my pet, sir" (128).

A few pages later Corso pushes the cannibalistic theme even further. A statue of Christ is smashed, cut into small pieces and cooked in oil. "'Carroll', I said, 'have you ever thought of frying bits of Christ?' I had chopped off an entire foot and he watched it fry with horror in his eyes" (139).

Corso's character Mr. Plow argues that, "Man can live without food. There are ways. But these ways are held back. There are certain forces, the restaurant industry in particular, that put all their effort into keeping these ways out of man's consciousness. Farmers, cattlemen, the entire scheme of eating would crumple were the ways exposed—" (*American Express* 133). These lines are some of the few that Corso marshals against the general slaughter of everything by everything, a wall to wall bloodbath of eating and carnage which is spread from one end of Corso's art to the other, over a period of more than forty years, from the first poem, "Sea Chanty", written at the age of 15 (Stephenson 11), to the drawing of knights slaughtering each other at the end of Corso's *Selected Poems* on page 265, with the title "Life is a Battlefield." Unrelentingly, this is Corso's theme, which is mitigated, as Stephenson writes, by "...love, humor, compassion...and the imagination" (19). But which is predominant in Corso's vision—the slaughter or the love? It seems to me that slaughter wins, just as it does in life, eventually.

In "A Dreamed Realization," from *The Happy Birthday of Death*, Corso writes that, "Black there in God creatures sat like stone/...—no light in their various eyes." "It was Life jabbed a spoon in their mouths./ Crow Jackal hyena vulture worm woke to necessity" (49). The price of life, which is death, is also distressingly recounted in "Food", in the same collection, even if in this short section Corso abstains from eating, this abstention can only be momentary, an ethical pose permitted by a full stomach. Corso writes, "The

farmer will never love me/ nor I, he/I'd rather go hungry / Than assist his chicken slaughter / Attend his Sate Fair/Or screw his famous daughter" (33-34).

Corso writes often of zoos in poems such as "Berlin Zoo", "Puma in Chapultepec Zoo", and "A Difference of Zoos", because they accentuate the captivity of animals, but Corso always implies that the metaphor is easily reversible, to show the captivity of the animal-like instincts in man. Because they help to erase the humanist line that reserves a special place for humanity, Corso shows a special affinity for those creatures that lie somewhere between man and animal, in that zone which Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari call in *Thousand Plateaus* "Becoming-Intense, Becoming-Animal".

A Difference of Zoos

I went to the Hotel Broog;
And it was there I imagined myself singing Ave Maria
to a bunch of hoary igneous Brownies.

.....
.....
I sang Ave Maria
for the Heap, for Groot,
for the Mugwump, for Thoth,
the Centtaur, Pan;

I summoned them all to my room in the Broog,
the werewolf, the vampire, Frankenstein,
every monster imaginable
And sang and sang Ave Maria—
The room got to be unbearable!
I went to the zoo
and oh thank God the simple elephant.

(*Long Live Man* 62)

In the final line, Corso thanks God for the comparatively simple elephant. Corso's Italian-Catholic upbringing, which upheld the dignity of man but, at least in the lives of certain saints such as St. Francis, also upheld the dignity of animals, and is a major source of lyric tension in Corso's work, as it contrasts so painfully with the actual nature of the world, in which one eats creatures in order to live. In the poem "Saint Francis," Corso writes:

I praise you your love,
Your benediction of animals and men...

.....
.....
I see you with eagle,

Penguin, vulture, seagull;
Nor be it a bird
But an elephant, a herd!
All on your goodly compassionate shoulders.

(*Long Live Man* 36)

If we are all fragile beings placed in an immanent world, rather than immortal beings in a transcendent one, questions of morality arise with the problem of mortality. If we must treat this world with respect, since there is no possibility of an afterlife, we are yet simultaneously prevented from doing so by having to eat our neighbors: the animals and vegetables. In the poem above, St. Francis does very well with birds on his shoulders, but then Corso piles on the heavier facts of the food chain: not just one elephant, but a whole herd, and one can imagine the saint being crushed into a blood pancake.

The way out of this horrible realization that “life is a battlefield” recently has been to grant animals subjectivity and to argue for vegetarianism. Soon, there will probably be laws passed against eating meat, just as there are laws against eating people, if this alarming trend continues. It all began innocently enough. For two millennia male European philosophers held that women possessed limited moral understanding. Aristotle wrote in *Politics* “For the slave has no deliberative faculty at all; the woman has, but it is without authority... The courage of a man is shown in commanding, of a woman in obeying...” (270-271), and he cites Sophocles to the effect that “Silence is a woman’s glory” (271). In *the Summa Theologica* St. Thomas argues along with Aristotle that women have “a defect in the active power,” perhaps coming from some “external influence, such as that of a south wind, which is moist” which preclude them from the clearer, drier reasoning necessary for moral judgment (Aquinas 880). Today such chauvinistic thinking is considered more and more antiquated, as western democracies have accepted for at least fifty years the right of women to vote, to be educated, and to hold increasingly complex professional positions, including the presidency. Now to grant men souls, and not women, is ridiculous. But must we then grant all of nature a soul? A paradoxical double-movement is taking place in eco-feminist discourse, Ferry says, in which women are held to be more “natural” than men, and thus this would undermine women’s right to “rationality” and “humanity”: consigning women to the precise roles that Aristotle laid out for them two thousand five hundred years ago—irrational, emotional beings whose “irrationalism” consigns them to certain positions outside the logos. Luc Ferry is a contemporary Enlightenment thinker concerned with the destruction of human subjectivity among postmodernist philosophers and argues for rights among the human genus which he would deny to animal species. He argues that “To assert that women are more ‘natural’ than men is to deny their freedom, thus their full and whole place within humanity” (Ferry 126). Without full human subjectivity, women will have the same status as animals, which Ferry argues must not be accorded the same privileges as humanity. Rights and the idea of women’s subjectivity were launched by the early feminist movement, properly, Ferry believes, only to be challenged unwittingly by more recent eco-feminists who would place women back amongst

the animals. At the same time, these same women would like animals to have rights. Ferry sees this second movement as preposterous. The animal rights movement is now trying to extend the notion of subjectivity and rights to other mammals, and even trees, which, Ferry thinks, makes the entire idea of rights ridiculous. Which way is it going to be? Is humanity going to extend rights to women and animals, thus granting everything subjectivity, or will men be stripped of rationalism as well, and stripped of rights? To grant everything the right to vote would be fun, but would it mean anything to grant a worm the right to vote and hold office? For without the notion of subjectivity, of a precious autonomy outside the food chain, there can be no vote granted. A worm would have to speak, as would a tree, in order to take its place in the legislature. The decisions we make over rights, Ferry asserts, are not whimsical philosophical debate but will affect the legal realm, and the way every category of life is treated in the future. What counts as food, and what is exempt from being eaten, and treated as object without subjectivity?

Christopher D. Stone's landmark article, "Should Trees Have Standing? Towards Legal Rights for Natural Objects," appeared in 1972 in the *Southern California Law Review*, and was later reprinted as an influential short book (cited in Ferry xvi). While the notion of radical democracy for all beings continues to spread, Corso is working in the other direction, a direction of many postmodern scholars, in arguing that humankind does not possess rationality, and in fact is merely animal. Corso has gone further than any of the postmodern philosophers in asserting the animality of people, and thus seems to implicitly accept cannibalism, as he does from his earliest poetry on forward. Therefore, not only do animals not have subjectivity, but neither does man. Meanwhile, animal rights activists assert that "...all animals are born equal and have equal rights to exist" (quoted in Luc Ferry 3). The philosopher Luc Ferry sees this spreading of rights as a continuation of the French Revolution of 1789 (Ferry 3), a spreading of a radical democracy which he thinks must be curtailed, if it is not to end in nonsense. "Law is always for men, and it is for men that trees or whales can become objects of a form of respect tied to legislation – not the reverse... the most common response among [ecological] fundamentalists is that it is the 'biosphere' as a whole, because it gives life to all beings, or at the very least allows them to sustain their existence. But the biosphere gives life both to the AIDS virus and to the baby seal, to the plague and to cholera, to the forest and to the river. Can one seriously claim that HIV is a subject of law, equal to man" (Ferry 139-140)? Ferry asserts that man has greater freedom than animals. and this makes us separate and special, above the general slaughter. Animal cultures, he says, persist over thousands of years without any change. Human cultures are constantly changing, constantly evolving, and thus we have a freedom which distinguishes us from animals. "...for unlike an animal, which is subject to the natural code of instinct particular to its species more than to its individuality. human beings have the possibility of emancipating themselves, even of revolting against their own nature. It is by so doing, that is, by breaking away from the order of things, that one gives proof of an authentic humanity and simultaneously accesses the realm of ethics and culture" (Ferry 115). Is Ferry's fury over the furry ferrets gaining rights in a fun and fair fearless world

more than simple conservatism, a hope to keep things as they are? If nobody has rights, then the world is a free for all, in which murder is as legitimate as negotiation. If everything has rights, then to step on a flower inadvertently would mean that one could be charged with murder. Is there a balance that we could strike between these two extremes? Ferry wants us to see that human beings have the gift of being able to think over a certain period of time, outside of instinct, outside of natural needs, which allows us to create a culture, a legal realm, thanks to the length of our memories (a fish, by comparison, has a memory of approximately eight seconds). This, and speech, allow us to think, and communicate, important moral concepts which animals cannot access.

It is Gregory Corso's cynical laughter over this separation of man and animals that led him to write during the first hours after President John F. Kennedy's assassination, a poem in praise of the animalistic aspects of man. Corso, in this poem, sees murder as legitimate, as a part of a long tradition going back to Rome, back through the animal species, back to the very beginning of life. Corso doesn't see anything "emancipating" in man which is essentially worth preserving. No ethics because there is no such thing as an "authentic humanity" and no culture, either. The radiant moments of mankind are dimmed by its blacker moments, which are part of our legacy in a natural world. This doesn't mean he's happy about it: it's just the way it is.

Come you illiterate creepy dumbbells harken the cry of
the true Assassin
I damn! I hail!

I summon the Blessed Lord of the Ice Cold Nanook Country
and eat raw seal meat with Him!

I curse the earth in Space and in Time!

I pee upon the evolution of the Rocks!

I weep upon the first living things!

Bang my fists on the unknown age of the world!

I vomit up Natural Selection and the change of the Species!

I laugh like a sick dinosaur o'er
the invasion of the dry lands by Life!

I smirk at the butterfly like a pimply-faced stumble-bum!

By the wings I yank by the wings the wings the lovely wings

By the throat I smote the Age of the Reptile!

So too the Age of the Mammal!

So too O very much so the Ancestry of Man!

Man descended from a walking ape!

I awake the lazy greasy Neanderthal and spit in his big sad
Stupid eye!

I pummel my Colt. 38 into the iron skin of the Paleolithic
muralist!

I look contemptuously down upon the screwed-up Neolithic
creep!

(from "Lines Written Nov. 22, 23-1963-in Discord," *Mindfield* 141)

Corso sees the good in man, the democratic, freedom loving part, as being hopelessly eclipsed by a demonic animalistic agency which has made its way into every living thing. "I have made goats of every King every Pope every puny club-footed Elect" (*Mindfield* 141). Corso sees even God Himself as being merely an animal, or as having animal faculties, in the poem "God is a Masturbator," (*Elegiac Feelings American* 112). There is nothing that is not immanent, and nothing which is not demned, and fatally flawed, and utterly animalistic to the core.

Corso is not willing to accept the human dignity of the "face;" and he has been willing to dispense with all spiritual traditions and regard man as a vicious and unredeemable animal. Corso anticipates and raises the ante on one of the most important questions posed by postmodernism: how can we have an ethics in a food chain, if everything is beyond good and evil? Corso defies simple popular solutions mandated by unitary aesthetics and humanistic good taste; instead, Corso offers us a fragmentary, hard look at the natural world in all of its paradoxical hilarity. While Levinas, Heidegger and Kant are preoccupied with "safeguarding the dignity of man" (Lewellyn 83), Corso increasingly questions the "face" of this civilized, alienated man and posits a lurking rapist who rapes and murders innocent schoolgirls. "The kind man behind the kind man / Is the kind of man who could and can" (*Elegiac Feelings American* 77). As Corso distances himself from his early Catholicism,² his writing grows darker, he turns to heroin and drink, and his output diminishes. From 1958 to 1962, Corso produced three ebullient volumes in four years. Corso says in his interview in *The Beat Vision* that he began to take drugs at the age of 33, which would have been in 1963 (179). After that, there have been only two complete volumes, and these poems (when they are successful, such as "On One Month's Reading of English Newspapers" on rape quoted just above) are even more bitter, as the qualifying aspect of humor is often muted or even extinguished in these poems. Corso cannot find a transcendent truth, but he cannot find the actual world to his taste either, as long as there remains the "drudgery and insult of food" (*American Express* 104). Unlike the more popular American eco-poets such as the Luddite Wendell Berry or Zen naturalist Gary Snyder, who are busy finding delicious truths that we can live with and then pointing the Way, Corso finds despicable truths that he cannot live with, and reveals his fruitless attempts at ethical reconciliation. He is treated with contempt by Gary Snyder in the collection *The Beat Vision*, where Snyder suggests a confrontation with Corso because Corso doesn't share the consensus vision that the Beats, Snyder says, were coming towards in the 1970s. "It's very interesting that we find ourselves so much on the same ground again, after having explored divergent paths; and find ourselves united on this position of powerful environmental concern, critique of the future of the industrial state, and essentially shared poetics, and only half-stated but in the background very powerfully there, a basic agreement on some Buddhist type psychological views of human nature and human possibilities" (*The Beat Vision* 3-4). Corso doesn't fit into any of this—denying religion, denying a critique of anything—he writes down what he sees, and is not a social reformer at all. " . .

in some ways I'm a good Maoist" Snyder says (15), while Corso isn't with the program at all, and Snyder considers him to be a problem. "... I haven't really tried to deal with where Gregory's at; but he's had a lot of self-created hard times ... But we're all responsible collectively in some sense for Gregory, so what I would like to do is all of us (Lawrence, myself, and Allen and so forth) sit down and have a collective meeting with Gregory. That's I'm going to suggest, too. I've learned how to do that where I live. Collective meetings of mutual and personal self-criticism" (24-25). Snyder's Maoist-inspired program of "mutual and personal self-criticism" would indicate that unless Corso was willing to get with the program, he would get stomped. Snyder actually suggests this to one of the interviewers who is having a hard time understanding one of his friends who has adopted an Eastern viewpoint. "I'd kick the fuck out of him, that's all", Snyder says (27). And then he says, blandly, "Say, 'Make sense, you son of a bitch.' That's what I do with people" (27). When one remembers that eco-saint Gary Snyder broke his first wife Joanne Kyger's jaw in a fight, Snyder's bullying banter takes on a less than jocular character.

Corso's thinking undoes the Buddhist ecologist's insistence that nature makes sense. But does the food chain make sense? Can it be understood? Should Corso be stomped for this? Can Corso be forced to make sense on Snyder's Buddhist ecological grounds, in which Snyder wants to write about nature, without including any of nature's terror, its nightmarish aspect, in which creatures die without dignity, in the maws of others? In which predators race through the jungles, killing things for nutrition? May be Snyder should be asked (very gently) to make more sense on Corso's terms.

Like many postmodern philosophers and like Gary Snyder, Corso questions the special place accorded man in western philosophy's arrogant relationship to the natural world, but Corso came from a world of gangs, prisons, and hard beatings as he grew up in the Italian American section of New York City. He doesn't have the kind of privileged background Gary Snyder, or Allen Ginsberg, or most other members of the cultural elite took for granted in their childhood, and thus they can perhaps more easily idealize the world. Jacques Derrida in his interview "Eating Well", says, "... one must begin to identify with the other, who is to be assimilated, interiorized, understood ideally... The sublime refinement involved in this respect for the other is also a way of 'Eating Well', in the sense of good eating but also doing well to eat" (115). This project of "respect for the other" whom we must eat has been left out of western civilization since Plato said that animals were outside of the realm of Being, unworthy of respect, because they could not speak. Derrida asserts that we ought to at least have respect for the animals we devour, and say as much, as if that would somehow matter to them. Corso distrusts all speech and points out "Everything that is said is said by man—I say it is stupid, disgusting, to listen!" (*American Express* 143).

In an interview with Jean-Luc Nancy, Jacques Derrida questions the artificial boundary between man and animal. He extends subjectivity as far as the vegetable realm, but my question is: does this matter. since we are still eating them? Should a vegetable say, "Thanks for the rights, Jacques?" as it is being spread over his steak tartar in thin slices. to

make a tasty accompaniment?

J-LN: when you decide not to limit a potential “subjectivity” to man, why do you then limit yourself simply to the animal?

JD: Nothing should be excluded.... The difference between ‘animal’ and ‘vegetal’ also remains problematic (106).

Corso sometimes looks half-heartedly to the American Indian for a philosophical answer to the dilemma, but only for laughs. The American Indians considered humans to be members of the same family as animals, making no crucial distinction between man and animal, even though they ate their brothers willingly. Does it matter if we treat animals and vegetables as brothers and sisters as long as we are still eating them, or does that just augment the horror? Can we return to that early table the Pilgrims were offered by the Indians and not laugh? Gregory Corso describes the collision of cultures in the Massachusetts Bay colony in his “Spontaneous Requiem for the American Indian”: “Pilgrim blunderbuss, buckles, high hat, Dutch, English, pat-/ent leather shoes, Bible, pray... o but feast, turkey, corn, pumpkin, sweet confused happy hosty guests, Iriquois, Mohawk, Oneida, Onandaga, Thanks giving!” (*Elegiac Feelings American* 16). Can we make friends with the beings that we eat? After all, their brothers and sisters (termites, worms, etc.) in turn will eat us when we die. Corso opened this question and was aware of its difficulty some years before the major postmodern thinkers began dodging the question. In contrast to the easy righteousness of the ecological movement which shares the apparently common American Indian belief that animals willingly gave up their lives to be food for humans, it is obvious that humans are the narrators in this picture. (At an ecology and literature conference at the University of Wales, Swansea, in 1996, I was offered his interpretation of eating by a member of the conference after I had read an early version of this paper. Berries, one Australian woman said, happily give up their flesh so that the seeds could be deposited in fruitful feces. I recognized this line of thought from a previous encounter I’d had with Gary Snyder’s poetry at a reading he’d given in Seattle. Other members of the conference leaped into the utopian vision, arguing that animals, too, like to offer themselves to hunters, happily giving their lives to feed the charming humans. All I can say is that I haven’t seen this. In every case I have seen, the fleetest animals run like hell when humans chase them or else they hide in the bushes. I have hunted, and I have yet to see a deer walk up to me and roll over and smile. Perhaps they don’t consider me worthy of this, which is fortunate because if they did, I couldn’t consider killing such an animal using such an intelligent Gandhian tactic. Perhaps other hunters have this experience, but I have yet to see it, is all, and I haven’t heard other hunters talk about it. The day animals come up with this tactic is the day even I would be forced to grant them full human rights. And if vegetables would say thank you for eating me, I couldn’t do that, either. I don’t know how ecological fundamentalists can eat things they consider to be nearly human. I would rather starve. Fortunately, from what I’ve been able to make out in safari films, however, the larger prey such as rhinos or crocodiles have thick armor, and big teeth, and counterattack if they are able. I have never seen an animal willingly give up its life to help humans, not even in the

most sentimental nature documentary. This happens in the minds of ecological fundamentalists, but nowhere else. Even berry bushes have spikes all over them to protect their fruit, so I don't think that even the bushes think of themselves as willingly giving up their fruit to the next shitter who stomps past).

Corso depicts man as a member of an obscene and comical animal world, and presents another aspect of Indians in "Spontaneous Requiem for the American Indian." At the end of the poem an Indian on a motorcycle screams into New York to sit at Horn & Hardart's with white women, and Corso writes, "O, he's an angle there/though sinister in shape of Steel Discipline smoking/ a cigarette in a fishy corner in the night..." (*Mindfield* 139). Corso doesn't buy the idea of Indians as angels of perfect ecological insight. After all, they too slaughtered the buffalo, as well as each other, before whites came, and when they came, they burned the white settlers, scalped them, and torched their houses. "Dust, hordes, tribes, death, blonde girls to die, gowns/ of ladies to burn, men of redcoats and bluecoats to/ die, boys to drum and fife and curse and cry and die,/ horses... to die, babies... to die", (139) in the miserable "battlefield of life" (265). The Indians lost, and in our general love for victims in the Maoist period in which we are living, all victims have taken on a saintly glow, and we are supposed to collectively wail over them, but they too had their sinister side. They were beaten by superior technology, and Corso is not at all sentimental about it, but simply realistic, just as Indian tribes before whites came slaughtered one another, and held each other as slaves and aren't exactly sorry about it. Corso in fact dismisses the Indian way of life as something worthy of study in his interview with Michael André.

André: In many ways there is as much left to study in the American Indian civilization as in Greek civilization.

Corso: Oh, not in architecture, anyway, except the pueblo. I would think the Indians had a better way of life, but... The Greeks could have had technology. The Renaissance picked up on that, through the Byzantine; Giotto learned the two dimensional Christ from the Byzantine (154).

Corso's bitter dismissal of the Turtle Island ecological world view does not offer any easy ethical answers, and is therefore difficult to digest, as he opens a public secret which everybody knows, but which it is taboo to mention. The western world was superior to the Indian world—in architecture, in art, in terms of its general level of comfort. The western viewpoint saw the world as composed of things, whereas the Indians were trapped in a world where everything, even trees and animals and tools, had subjectivity, and thus could not be used without some sense of respect. But how does one eat something respectfully? If someone were to eat me, I wouldn't care if they did it respectfully. What would it matter? Thanks to the ecology movement, western civilization is going back to this notion of everything as being imbued with a spirit. But for what good reason? We invite each other out to dinner, celebrate good times over food, and go happily to the grocery store, but we are rarely conscious that we are eating other beings. Would it be a better thing if we were to realize it? We can recognize and empathize with animals'

sufferings, and we can even find some signs of sentience in plants, but our lives are based on their exploitation. As the animal rights movement declares that all living beings are created equal, Corso's poetry will be increasingly relevant to describing and understanding the ethical dilemma that we face. The spiritual diaspora accepted in the western tradition beginning in Plato and continuing with the gnostic theologians, in which man is trapped here in an alien body, and on an alien planet, was an initial answer to the question of evil. They concluded there is evil on this earth because this is *not paradise*. Paradise was in Heaven. Early theologians sought to remove the animal aspects of man in order to recreate heaven on earth, and prepare us to go to heaven. Gregory Corso's poetry, by bringing the violent animal nature of man back into the center of the *polis*, opens up an ontological conduit which goes both ways. It challenges the dignity of man. Not only does "humanity" flow into animals; but "animality" flows into humanity.

Corso's western orientation is irreligious. He only accepts facts, the factual nature of the world, and sees it like a machine, engineered for comfort. He has much in common with postmodernist Gilles Deleuze who writes, "What is required is humor, as opposed to the Socratic irony or to the technique of the ascent" (*Logic* 135). "Deeper than any other ground is the surface and the skin... the tragic and the ironic give way to a new value, that of humor. For if irony is the co-extensiveness of being with the individual, or of the I with representation, humor is the co-extensiveness of sense with nonsense" (*Logic* 141). Deleuze concludes: "The values of humor are distinguished from those of [Socratic] irony: humor is the art of surfaces and the complex relations between the two surfaces" (*Logic* 248). Corso's writing is ahead of its time in America because it takes up the Nietzschean problem of a world without transcendent values. Without some standard which stands outside the whole system, there is no objective way to judge good and evil, and thus no reason to feel guilt, which Nietzsche saw as a leftover of the priestly mentality. From a biological viewpoint, ethics make no sense. Nietzsche writes against morality throughout his work as a tool of the priestly caste who "... concentrated their effort on arousing moral and religious responses, and the moral norm was vicariously invoked where by rights a powerful aesthetic magic should have transported the listeners" (*The Birth of Tragedy* 134-135). Nietzsche laughs explicitly at the "vegetarian absurdity" which had already swept Europe in his day, as a ramification of the growing guilt over the subjectivity of formerly objectified animals (267). The "face" of man, in Levinas' and Heidegger's sense, is for Corso merely a mask whose sole function is to hide his animal nature from himself. In his deconstruction of human subjectivity Corso closely parallels recent trends in French postmodern thought, but he goes further. I am arguing for reevaluation of Corso's poetry within the light of his anticipation and taking of these developments in French postmodernism to their furthest extreme. Aside from a few in-group appreciations from the likes of fellow Beats Ginsberg, Kerouac, and Burroughs,³ Corso's writing has received scant critical attention, and much of this has been negative, and almost all of it has misunderstood or skimmed over Corso's intentions. Until recently, Corso has not fit into any of the reigning critical paradigms. His impiety has gotten him rejected from serious consideration. And yet, at least a decade

before Derrida and Deleuze, Corso interrogated all the transcendent economies of being, and found the exits blocked. The important puzzle of the ethics of eating has yet to be satisfactorily addressed by either the ecological movement or postmodern philosophy. If we are neighbors and not ontologically superior to the creatures we eat, the idea of ethics goes out the window when we're eating; and we must eat several times a day, or die. Corso's paradoxical poetry deals with this notion in a manner more profound and more vivid than anything yet written by Deleuze or Derrida. Corso knocked out the absurdity of an eternal God, and universal judgement, and impartial ethics years before postmodernism, but what are we left with? Mere cannibalism, without justification! For Corso it has meant that all of his early hopes for an ethical aesthetic reaction to the natural world were broken; his hopes as a utopian philosopher were dashed at the same time he was reborn as a no longer ebullient poet, but a tougher and a more realistic poet just the same. Corso's thinking led him to poetry, which is where he remained. Friedrich Nietzsche, the godfather of postmodernism, shows that art takes over where logic and science can go no further. Nietzsche writes, "Every noble and gifted man has, before reaching the mid-point of his career, come up against some part of the [scientific] periphery that defied his understanding, quite apart from the fact that we have no way of knowing how the area of the circle is over to be fully charted. When the inquirer, having pushed to the circumference, realizes how logic in that place curls about itself and bites its own tail, he is struck with a new kind of perception, which requires, to make it tolerable, the remedy of art" (*Birth of Tragedy* 95).

I would suggest the Buddhist ecological movement take a long hard look at the work of Gregory Corso, and forget Gary Snyder for a moment in their rush to love all creatures. Corso's poetry still has something to offer: which is the problematic of the subject. The question of subjectivity: who has it, and who doesn't, is not a simple matter of waving our hand and declaring rights for trees. It's a more serious mess than that, and Corso's work is the best illustration of this mess. In the aporia between the need for eating and respect for the other "logic curls about itself and bites its own tail." It is right here that Corso's art is centered. In the heart of immanence lies Corso's crowning curse: if humanity is animal, and has no transcendent soul, are ethics, then, just for laughs? Corso would say no. Because animals do not have imagination, they thus cannot change things, they do not have agency, in Luc Ferry's sense. In one of Corso's final poems in his *Selected Poems* he writes:

Fire Report – No Alarm

And that I did not adhere
to any man's God
neither a comprehensible
Absolute
nor the inexplicable
unseen breath
of Omnipotent power
— that I did indeed feel

back quite strong, is that we can still have faith in ourselves and in our imaginations. If we can imagine a decent thing, then we can do it. Against nature, and nature's darkest inclinations, Corso posits the spirit of humor and imagination and hope. It isn't a program, but a matter of inspiration, of poetry.

Notes

¹During a gathering of the Beats in Grand Forks, South Dakota, Corso is described by Allen Ginsberg rather insultingly as "the last Beatnik", (7), and Gary Snyder describes Corso as a "casualty" (23), along with Lew Welch and Jack Kerouac, as if Corso, too, had died, even though he was there at the conference! Corso is still living twenty five years after this comment by Snyder, but Snyder's remark shows that Corso's life and poetics were quite different from that of other members of the Beats. Snyder says, "We weren't high school dropouts. We were graduate school drop-outs – all of us" (9). Again this would exclude Corso, who audited some undergraduate classes at Harvard, but never received a high school diploma. He spent much of his teenage years in prisons and homes for wayward youth.

²Corso does still offer optimistic lyric efforts into the seventies, but the poems seem uninhabited and saccharine, as if even he himself does not believe in them. See "Sunrise" (*Mindfield* 166) or "Alchemy" (*Mindfield* 202).

³A short and largely complete summary of Corso criticism is offered in Gregory Stephenson's *Exiled Angle: A Study of the Work of Gregory Corso* (97).

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