

COLLISION

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Animals and Aesthetics

A new genre of speculative writing created by the Editors of *Evental Aesthetics*, the Collision is a concise but pointed essay that introduces philosophical questions raised by a specific aesthetic experience. A Collision is not an entire, expository journey; not a full-fledged argument but the potential of an argument. A Collision is an encounter that is also a point of departure: the impact of a striking confrontation between experience, thought, and writing may propel later inquiries into being.



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ABSTRACT

This collision explores ecological aesthetics through two encounters with dead whales: one literary and one osseous. The literary animal is the taxidermied whale that drives the narrative of László Krasznahorkai's 1989 novel *The Melancholy of Resistance*, and the osseous encounter involves a bench made of one jawbone and one rib from a baleen whale. Considered together, the immense totality of the taxidermied whale and the metonymic bones provide unsettling aesthetic insights into ecological matters of interconnectedness – of the relationships between parts and wholes and amongst parts within a whole or wholes. Through analyses of the visual, literary, and haptic aspects of these encounters, this paper raises questions about what it means to perceive and think about ecology through aesthetic encounters with non-human animal bones and taxidermied bodies.

KEYWORDS

ecology, László Krasznahorkai, whale, taxidermy, bone

Dead Whale Watching

Andrew Hageman



This collision emerges from two encounters with dead whales: one literary and one osseous.¹ The literary encounter takes place in László Krasznahorkai's 1989 novel *The Melancholy of Resistance*, which is about a rural Hungarian town where revolutionary unrest has been fomenting for some time. When a traveling circus that features a taxidermied whale arrives, the cetaceous spectacle unleashes pent-up local forces in widespread and anarchic violence. The second, osseous encounter entails my direct haptic interaction with a whale-bone bench comprised of a jaw-bone seat and a rib-bone back (Figure 1).

While Krasznahorkai's novel depicts the whale as a visual spectacle, this bench of bones combines the visual with the tactile. In fact, I read the novel over the course of several sittings with my back resting in the curve



Figure 1. Whale-bone bench comprised of a jawbone seat and rib back. Photo by Andrew Hageman.

of the rib, and I would set the book down occasionally to explore the smooth flat surfaces and rough porous tips of each bone with my hands.

Both of these dead whales prompt us to experience, imagine, and theorize the aesthetics of our encounters with non-human animals. This particular collision of a whole whale with two whale parts gives us two different aesthetic experiences that are both tied to ecology – to the relationships between parts and wholes and amongst parts within a whole or wholes. The novel’s protagonist experiences the whole whale as a massive totality, too immense to view and comprehend completely. By contrast, the dual-bone bench functions metonymically as a reference to an absent whole or wholes since we do not know if these remainders come from one whale or two. Both of these postmortem beings-turned-art provoke us to ask what messages we might be sending to ourselves, via their remains, in this Anthropocene era of mass species extinction. I want to suggest that we must examine both dead whales to begin answering this question as their collision invokes a complex response to parts and wholes together (Figure 2).

• Dead Whale Whole •

The taxidermied whale in Krasznahorkai's novel makes two crucial appearances. Each appearance creates an ecologically significant literary aesthetic impact. Initially, the townsfolk see an image of the whale printed on freshly-pasted advertising posters that exclaim: "A SPECTACLE! AN EXTRAORDINARY SPECTACLE! THE BIGGEST WHALE IN THE WORLD AND OTHER SENSATIONAL SECRETS OF NATURE."² The posters frame the animal as an object to look at with fascination and wonder. In particular, the visual image at the center of the poster underscores the whale's position in the visual or scopic realm, as it depicts not only the whale but also two adult people and a child looking and pointing at it. What makes the poster especially significant, though, is the way its inclusion as a full-page image within the novel draws our attention to the highly extraordinary style of the prose that it disrupts. Throughout the entire novel, individual sentences may extend over multiple pages, and Krasznahorkai does not use paragraph breaks to provide readers with predetermined opportunities to pause. This relentless verbal flow presents an account of lives entangled in overlapping narratives without dividing the presentation into units of meaning ready for consumption. Instead, the novel, like a taxidermied whale's body, presents a massive body covered in lines that tell in various ways of lives lived and lived with others. As such, the literary aesthetic experience of reading Krasznahorkai's unremitting prose style formally parallels the experience of looking at the immense and immensely textured body of a taxidermied whale.

To examine the ecological element of this literary form paralleling an encounter with a whale, I turn to a specific point of comparison with Herman Melville's 1851 novel, *Moby Dick*. Many readers have remarked how *Moby Dick* is an aptly bulky novel for the bulky eponymous animal driving its narrative.³ While we could go into the specific limits of that claim, I want to emphasize the construction of *Moby Dick* as a series of 130 quite short chapters.⁴ Melville's highly individuated form approaches the totality of the whale through a combination of analytical frameworks that each break the animal down into units for study and comprehension — anatomy, taxonomy, its placements within human economies — in direct contrast to Krasznahorkai's unbroken approach that, as an example illustrates below, revels in the overwhelming impossibility of total views or comprehension.



Figure 2. The whales collide. Photo by Andrew Hageman.

Here I am referring to the unbroken prose that is brought into sharp relief by the circus's promotional poster. The poster, after all, promises the revelation of secrets of nature to those who come and see the whale. Yet, Krasznahorkai depicts revelation only through the eyes of Valuska, and the secret he sees is one of impossible comprehension. Thus, even as both novels depict people driven by whale encounters to extreme thoughts and bodily actions, *Moby Dick* formally contains the whale as an animal object approached via dissection and empirical study, while *The Melancholy of Resistance* depicts the whale as an animal object that fascinates us even as it remains beyond our full comprehension.

In the following passage, Krasznahorkai's whale encounter forces humans to acknowledge that, regardless of what we can make an animal other mean to us, it is also a totality that remains ultimately unknown and unknowable to us. The protagonist, Valuska, walks to the circus, pays the admission fee, and encounters the animal:

Seeing the whale did not mean he could grasp the full meaning of the sight, since to comprehend the enormous tail fin, the dried, cracked, steel-grey carapace and, halfway down the strangely bloated hulk, the top fin, which alone measured several metres, appeared a singularly hopeless task. It was just too big and too long; Valuska simply couldn't see it all at once, and failed even to get a proper look at its dead eyes.⁵

Valuska connects with multiple lines, fissures, opaque parts, and the ungraspable entirety of the whale but not with its eyes. This provocative exclusion diverges from a common literary convention whereby human beings make powerful, meaningful eye contact with non-human animals. One of the most well-known example of this convention is the passage in Aldo Leopold's *A Sand County Almanac*, where he recounts recklessly shooting a wolf and being deeply moved when he approaches the dying animal and sees "a fierce green fire dying in her eyes."⁶ Leopold's passage has exerted a powerful environmental aesthetic influence on the literary convention in which human beings experience epiphanies by connecting with non-human animals eye-to-eye. Such eye-contact scenes typically deliver an epiphanic recognition of the animal's individual subjectivity and/or the impression that the animal studies the human observer just as much as she presumed to study the animal other.

But the power of Valuska's aesthetic experience of the whale has precisely nothing to do with its eyes as he does not even respond to the unblinking glass eyes installed by the taxidermist.⁷ I will claim here that this failure to make eye contact is a liberating precondition for the aesthetic response we experience through Valuska. The eye-contact convention almost always leads to a recognition of the non-human animal's equality relative to humans. While assertions of equality may help to critique anthropocentric hierarchies, they permit fundamental assumptions on which the assertion of equality is based (for instance the presumed superiority of forms of consciousness that manifest in a creature's gaze) to remain in place; and these assumptions have proven all too effective as foundations for the exploitation of human and non-human

beings alike. If we neglect to examine what equality entails, we cannot reach truly radical insights into what it means to live together in the overlapping meshes of ecosystems.

Because Valuska bypasses the whale's eyes and responds instead to the cracks in its fins and desiccated carapace, his aesthetic experience of the whale includes the stories of its lived experience and its perpetuation in taxidermy after death: stories that, in lines and fissures, are written into the whale's body. Crucially, Valuska does not respond to the enormous corpus covered in myriad marks by trying to organize them into a comprehensive order – a totality. On the contrary, Valuska seems to perceive the whale as, paradoxically, a whole in itself and as a discrete part of multiple grander wholes. The narrator informs us that "it wasn't so much the mouth, nor the sheer incomprehensible size of the creature that most astonished him, but the full and certain general knowledge purveyed by the publicity that it had witnessed the wonders of an infinitely strange and infinitely distant world," and after Valuska leaves the whale he continues to imagine it before him,

unfocused yet somehow in its entirety, that innocent carcass vaster than imagination which even now filled up his mind, and left him thinking, "How enormous! ... How extraordinary a creation! What a deeply mysterious person the Creator must be to amuse himself with such extraordinary creatures!"⁸

He imagines the existence of structures and systems, from ecosystems to planet to universe, in which he and the whale are parts, yet he does not imagine that he could fully see or know them.

This is significant because the whale, suspended as it is between its unified organismic life and its post-*rigor mortis* transformation into a de-organized mass teeming with life and emerging ecosystems, could be considered an object rendered fully available for human observation, comprehension, and control. Taxidermy is commonly disparaged along these lines as a blunt and brutal exertion of human domination over once-living animals. But in Valuska's eyes, the whale remains out of control and utterly uncanny as a thing both dead and alive, such that in its state of decelerated and modified decomposition, this animal has become an object of startling aesthetic power.

• Dead Whale Parts • ---

Valuska traces the textures of the dead whale with his eyes, but my own experience of sitting on a whale-bone bench entailed haptic explorations of the surface textures and structural curvatures of whale parts. Although the origin of this particular bench is lost, it is a doubly rare artifact.

Nicholas Redman, the foremost whale-bone art expert, has found only ten bone seats in all of the British Isles during more than thirty years of research.⁹ These are predominantly stools made from individual vertebrae, and most are quite intricate and ornate. Unlike its typical companion seats, the whale-bone bench discussed here exhibits a clean, simple design, without complex architecture or scrimshandered carvings. In the absence of complex patterns to attract our attention or suggest some kind of narrative whole, the metonymic functions of these bones are laid bare. Unlike Krasznahorkai's taxidermied whale, these unadorned bench bones are presented as fragments, parts of a disassembled whole repurposed into a new whole that overtly refers to the earlier and one might say fuller whole.

Thus, one metonymic function of the bones is their allusion to a particular once-living whale – this individual that had a family, ate, swam, communicated, and was perhaps working on projects. Conjuring images and thoughts of this particular whale with the weight of one's body supported by its disjointed jaw-bone, I recalled the "Observing Reason" section in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* where Hegel discusses bone and Spirit.¹⁰ In the process of dismissing phrenology, Hegel claims that haptic contact with bone – feeling its weight, contours, and textures with one's hands – provides a necessary material aesthetic catalyst for theorizing what it means to be and to become. In the case of the bench, with the soft brain tissues and eyeball jellies long gone, these bones remain, rigid matter taken from a dead body and assembled into apparatuses of rest and contemplation. Jaw and rib have been joined together to invite us to think upon them, even to read about dead whales upon them.

While sitting, reading, and thinking upon them, I was struck, like Valuska, by cracks and crevices. In my own experience, I felt and followed the lines written into each bone with my fingers, but they also stippled



Figure 3. Contours and textures of the jawbone at its joint. Photo by Andrew Hageman.

temporary patterns into my living flesh as it pressed into them. And yet, in this highly intimate moment of contact, I felt like Valuska as I encountered not communication or communion with the dead whale, but the untraversable chasm between myself and the whale. In place of epistemological totalization of the whale, the bench offers a synthesis of

opaque surfaces and mysterious black holes at the bones' ends where the animal's very marrow formerly pulsed and oozed (Figure 3).

Amongst the parts of the whale that remain inaccessible to human observers is its embodied experience of being in the world. It lived as a part of numerous interpenetrating ecosystems. But while human beings intersect with animals in many of these ecosystems, the contacts made consist of forces exerted within structures rather than intimate empathetic access to non-human animal others. As Hegel implied, the bony metonym of the bench points past the individual towards grander wholes, which, having to do with being, include ecology. Krasznahorkai's whale did that too. Perhaps counter-intuitively, it was as a taxidermied object in a circus tent far from the ocean that this whale de-naturalized Valuska's ideas of whales and opened the way for a revolutionary aesthetic encounter. The whole whale body and the bony parts each offer human beings aesthetic contact with whales, but even as they provide certain kinds of access, a critical mind will perceive these artifacts as the ultimate inaccessibility, or withdrawnness, of the whales, leaving us to work with the territory we do find in common.

To pursue the osseous ecological aesthetic still further, the notion that people might pass through a whale's jaw *en route* to epiphanies about grander wholes and one's role within them is quite familiar. Recall the Jewish prophet Jonah finding confirmation of his belief in God deep inside the stomach of the whale. Or, less theologically inclined, it was inside the whale that the woodcarver Geppetto recognized the structure of familial love so deeply that Pinocchio was ultimately granted human status by the Fairy with Turquoise Hair. Yet Jonah's and Geppetto's revelations arrived after they had passed through the jaws into the warmth of living tissues, and the womb-like effect re-contains their epiphanies within a canny human framework. But anyone who sits on this bench lingers on the bare jaw-bone, feeling the palpable yet ultimately intangible structure of human reality. Just as the taxidermied whale applies a handbrake to the momentum and dynamics of individual and systemic flows, the aestheticized bones disrupt material ebbs and flows, creating a temporary eddy where people can sit and begin to glimpse the compelling but ultimately elusive structures of ecology.

• Dead Whales Meet •

To conclude without closing this dead whale collision, I leave you with the following sets of questions in which the whales' impact reverberates.

(1) Do aesthetic encounters with dead animals transmit distorted messages, like dreams, that we keep sending ourselves because we have not yet fully received them? Whether or not these aesthetic encounters emanate from a kind of ecological unconscious, can they help us to avoid ecological catastrophes? (2) Besides whales, which other non-human animals circulate as ecological symbols in the social imaginary? How can we exfoliate the symbolism we have attached to them in order to respect these beings anew, in the true meaning of *re-spect*: to see them again? (3) What does it mean to identify preserved dead animals as powerful ecological aesthetic objects? And, what are the ethical stakes, ecological and otherwise, of dead animal art and aesthetics?

• Notes •

¹ Thanks to Judit Fabian for inspiring an interest in Hungarian literature, to Amanda Hamp for responding to an early draft, and to the *Evental Aesthetics* reviewers for insightful feedback.

² László Krasznahorkai, *The Melancholy of Resistance*, trans. George Szirtes (New York: New Directions Publishing, 2002), 26.

³ Two common phrases that appear in writing about Melville's *Moby Dick* are "Whale of a Tale" and "Big Book about the Big Whale," the former also referring to a musical adaptation of the novel, and both expressions positing equations of the novel's bulk and its eponymous sperm whale. Nathaniel Philbrick's *Why Read Moby-Dick?* (New York: Viking, 2011) makes its own whale-novel juxtapositions while using Melville's own words from Chapter 104 "The Fossil Whale."

⁴ Herman Melville, *Moby Dick; or The Whale* (New York: Bantam Classics, 1981).

⁵ Krasznahorkai, *The Melancholy of Resistance*, 88.

⁶ Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac and Sketches Here and There* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 130.

⁷ Bela Tarr's brilliant 2000 film adaptation, *Werckmeister Harmonies*, does include two shots of people looking into the whale's glass eyes. The scenes of greatest moment, however, use medium and long shots of people next to the enormous body set against the town square in post-uprising ruins.

⁸ Krasznahorkai, *The Melancholy of Resistance*, 89-91.

⁹ Nicholas Redman, *Whales' Bones of the British Isles* (Wiltshire: Nicholas Redman, 2004), 129-130. Redman tells also of a bench made from a whale's skull and its first vertebrae in St. Nicholas's Cathedral in Great Yarmouth nicknamed "Devil's Seat." For centuries, people perpetuated the story that ill fortune would befall anyone who sat on the bone bench, and they kept it just outside the church.

¹⁰ G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 185-210.

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