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"Closely united, immensely divided." Reading Virginia Woolf's *Flush* and Sigrid Nunez's *Mitz* as humanimal biofiction

Reading Flush as humanimal biofiction

Virginia Woolf's short novel *Flush: A Biography* (1933) is a strangely doubled fictional biography: it recalls episodes from the life of the Victorian literary foremother, Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1806–1861) from the perspective of her dog, a cocker spaniel called Flush. A sketch of a human past, a private story with public relevance in homage to the famous artist predecessor is intertwined with speculations about an animal past even less frequently commemorated than the "herstory" of a woman's life in an androcentric and anthropocentric (his)storytelling tradition. Hence, the story performs a double resistance to the silencing of the marginalised.

Published only two years after Woolf's majestic experimental novel *The Waves* (1931), *Flush* was originally intended as a joke, a lark, a jeu d'esprit (Briggs 300), a tongue-in-cheek parody of celebrated biographies like Lytton Strachey's *Queen Victoria* (1921), dedicated to Woolf. In a letter to Ottoline Morrell in February 1933, Woolf associates the birth of the text with a spontaneous outburst of joy, a comic relief, a sweet temptation to light-heartedness: "I was so tired after the Waves, that I lay in the garden and read the Browning love letters, and the figure of their dog made me laugh so I couldn't resist making him a Life." (Letters vol. 5, 161–2, qtd. in Novak 107). The endeavor borders on the nonsensical in light of Woolf's claim formulated in her essay "The New Biography:" "Let it be fact, one feels, or let it be fiction; the imagination will not serve under two masters simultaneously." (234) However, *Flush*, mockingly subtitled "A Biography" does precisely the opposite, and performs the paradoxical by aiming to mingle fact and fiction in the semi-imaginary account of poet-owner's and pet-dog's parallel experiences.

While Woolf acknowledged Barrett Browning's "complicity in the making of modern poetry" (104) – she called *Aurora Leigh* "a masterpiece stuck in an embryonic state" (Péter 62) –, she was perhaps even more captivated by the myth surrounding the fragile yet fierce figure of the invalid author, unjustly commemorated by posterity more because of her life than her art, as "an extravagant freak of early Victorian taste" – as Woolf put it in an early review of Lubbock's monograph on Barrett Browning's letters (Snaith 614). True to the modernists' interest in details hidden beneath the grand narrative surface story, and driven by a ludic demythologising agenda, she portrayed Barrett Browning, "England's foremost poetess, the brilliant, the doomed, the adored Elizabeth" (*Flush* 18) through the eyes of the therapy pet who accompanied her from the claustrophobic confinement of Wimpole Street, London's most dignified and impersonal household, to the

romantic escapade with the poet spouse, to the sensorially stimulating and intellectually liberating touristic-artistic exploration of the lush Italian cities.

Nóra Séllei (2012) describes *Flush* as a "deceptively charming" little text that at once takes itself seriously and parodically, reflecting not only on the genre of biography but also on a dense network of Victorian disciplinary discourses: the Austenian novel of manners, the logically structured scientific essay of natural history, spatial semiotics, and the rhetoric of colonisation – each reiterated and subverted on its turn. Beneath its seemingly light-hearted surface, *Flush* engages with the socio-political contexts of both mid-nineteenth-century London and the early 1930s, when the text was composed, interrogating internalised cultural norms of class, gender, race, (dis)ability, and the hegemonic power of the British Empire from the lowly vantage point of a dog, a marginal witness to human history. The irruption of animal alterity – surfacing in narrative gaps, twists, and hybridisations – serves as a key instrument of textual politics.

Flush is a playful stylistic exercise in animal stream of consciousness that offers a peek into the private life of the poetess through reimagining the intimate human-animal bond based on Barrett Browning's letters and poems. This curious companionship, described as a "sharing of shadows," an "aloneness together," a "mutual mirroring," is endowed with the potential of an interspecies solidarity that Donna Haraway's ecofeminist philosophy today would call a "sympoietic becoming with and through one another" (58). The celebration of relationality works both at an inter- and intraspecies level: in her tender description of the companion animal, Woolf echoes Barrett Browning's own lyrical wording. The passages are exciting from a zoopoetic perspective – concerning the intersection of poetic thinking and transverbal animal consciousness, our tendencies to treat animals as humans and humans as animals, as well as the challenges of the artistic discursive representations of such difficult connections.

But they also posit the book as an exercise in the genre's subversive "metabiographical" exploration (Herman 547, Nünning 195). Flush uses nonhuman subjectivity to explore the limits of language. Its primordial dilemma is the knowability and the speakability of self and other, the insufficiency of any solid narrative to frame the turbulence of a life, those ephemeral moments of being Woolf was so interested in. Moreover, the mock-sentimental, intimate tone of Barrett Browning and Flush's double fictional biography is an elaborate case of self-masking that hides and reveals Woolf's own confession about her feelings for dogs, in particular, her beloved cocker spaniel Pinka. Woolf's playful identification with the canine perspective pays an affectionate homage to the animal world, a radical otherness both frightening and fascinating, assimilated or marginalised to the brink of human society in an illusorily tamed or violently bestialised form. Even if Woolf is ironically aware of her authorial ownership over (dog and human) lives, yet hers is a dialogic attempt to self-reflectively engage with the literary foremother – an avid letter writer like herself excelling in the dialogic form –, past and present animal companions, and the biographical genre itself.

Received ambiguously by critics and marginalised for some time by canonisation, Flush has been rediscovered by feminist scholars who drew a parallel between the unleashed dog's wild life-energies and the woman-artist's fight to reject the yokes of paternal tyranny and patriarchal custom, to denounce systemic oppression involved in sexist, classist, colonialist, fascist, or speciesist marginalisation – an ethical agenda shared by Woolf and Barrett Browning. Politicised readings (eg. Squier, Flint, Snaith, Séllei, "Kutyaszimat") explored how the generic hybrid of human/canine biofiction provides a critical commentary on the ideological othering and the subversive counter-narrative potentialities, the somato-sensory explorations involved in becoming-woman and becoming-animal.

It is an exciting question to explore how the personal yet politically charged experimentation with the biographical mode in Woolf's case relates to the hybrid genre of "biofiction" defined by David Lodge as a narrative that "takes a real person and their real history as the subject matter for imaginative exploration, using the novel's techniques for representing subjectivity rather than the objective, evidence-based discourse of biography" (2007, 8). In the following, I wish to interpret Flush as a humanimal biofiction (a double portmanteau of "human-animal fictional biography") focusing on novelistic techniques of representing non-human subjectivities. In my understanding, humanimal biofiction fictionalises actual historical figures and factual events with a focus on interspecies connections, mutually formative bonds between humans and animals, like pets and owners, exploring animal perspectives as alternatives for self-centred anthropocentric viewpoints. Meanwhile, on a meta-level it also addresses limitations concerning the insatiable hunger for truth implied in Philippe Lejeune's autobiographical pact and the inevitability of defacement problematised by Paul de Man, as well as the difficulties of detachment from the human/ist gaze. As Louisa Treger puts it, according to the illusory premise and the legerdemain logic of the genre, biofiction "presents a lie through which truth can emerge" (Treger qtd. in Layne 9). Some of these truths, in Flush's case, concern the status of animals in the human lifeworld.

The dog as engine of (life)narrative and agent of liberation/(de)mythologisation

Even if *Flush* is a playful hybrid of novel and biography (or, more precisely, an anti-novel and mock-biography suffused with fable, in which anthropomorphic animals reflect on frailties of human lives), readers are inclined to assume that our speculative familiarisation with (or even fantasising about) Barrett Browning as a dog-owner will shed a new light on her art and life. Yet, surprisingly, Woolf's narrative reveals little about Barrett Browning's artistic efforts or creative genius; the writerly self is witnessed only in the context of her letter-writing, which the canine gaze ironically admires only because of the physical feat of her manual dexterity. Nevertheless, Woolf's humanimal biofiction exerts a subtle but palpable impact on Barrett Browning's critical reception and the reconstruction of her authorial persona by posterity. By mockingly filling biographical lacunae, *Flush* retrospectively rationalises unjustifiable, seemingly inexplicable life choices by foregrounding animal agency.

Flush comes to be celebrated as an agent of liberation and a pivotal figure in his owner's personality development, courtesy of an anecdote appropriated by multiple biographers and recycled in Woolf's text. According to the anecdote, when Elizabeth, despite parental prohibition, rescued Flush from criminals – it was common practice to abduct gentlefolks' pets who were only returned to their noble owners in exchange for a ransom (Howell 35) –, she realised that she was stronger than she believed herself to be, and that there was life for her beyond her sickbed, so the elopement with future husband, Robert Browning, soon followed. Obeying a novelistic dramaturgy, Woolf fictionalises the episode. Barrett Browning's letters and diaries attest to three separate dog-nappings, which became condensed into a single incident in the novel, and although it remains uncertain whether Elizabeth or her brother executed Flush's rescue from the animal traffickers, Woolf attributes the courageous act to the poetess herself. By a romanesque logic, a cause-and-effect relation is imposed on potentially unrelated events: the dog's rescue precipitates the elopement with Robert, underscoring the significance of animal intervention within the course of human lives. Interspecies entanglement thus emerges as an identity-theme, in Norman Holland's sense, celebrated by Woolf's biofiction.

In her notes on *Flush*, Woolf highlights "the question of dogs' relation to the spirit of the age, whether it is possible to call one dog Elizabethan, another Augustan, another Victorian, together," mockingly adding that "the influence upon dogs of the poetry and philosophy of their masters, deserves a fuller discussion" (*Flush* 162). In this manner, she enacts a simultaneous demythologisation and remythologisation, carving out a space for the untold stories of animals and their human companions and entwining literary, historical, and biographical narrative.

The dog as eyewitness

In *Flush*, the depiction of the dog's life functions primarily as a pretext to get a glimpse of the secretive life of the famous woman writer from a curious yet ostensibly authentic perspective. Intimate details of the private sphere – the sick bed, Oedipal anxieties, inhibited passions – are disclosed, but there is no moral censure attached to this voyeurism. We lack the doubts related to paparazzi's questionable peeping, since the animal acts as an unbiased eyewitness. The non-human animal perspective thereby becomes a guarantor of credibility, mediated through a pseudo-realistic mockumentarism that substitutes for the Lejeuneian autobiographical pact, the conventional promise of truth-telling as the prerequisite of any life- or self-writing's mimetic genre.

As Nóra Séllei observes, the dog's acute sensory perceptions minutely detect and defamiliarise the social customs, taboos, and discourse systems foundational to Victorian culture: Flush's microscopic observations of knee-high objects decorating a bourgeois household simultaneously map a refined lady's taste and material traces of colonial ideology. With an ironic reiteration of socialist feminist critique, Woolf juxtaposes the prestige of the pedigreed purebred dogs with that of human aristocratic ancestral lineage, while celebrating a pack of Mediterranean stray dogs as emblematic embodiments of a utopian

ethos of democracy, free love, and unrestrained mobility. The dog's distanced vantage point underwrites Woolf's attempt to reconstruct an authentic image of the artist and her milieu – so much so that, because of this authenticity, Lackey reads *Flush* as a historical novel ("Usages" 13). However, it also remains a partial perspective, constrained by the limitations of its location and by its self-conscious acknowledgment of the difficulty inherent in human conceptualisations of a non-human gaze. What Lackey designates as biofiction's "truth proposal" (Biofiction passim) manifests here as a fidelity not to literal fact, but to the 'spirit' of Barrett Browning.

The dog as a mirror

In Barrett Browning's poetry – most notably in "Flush or Faunus" and "To Flush, My Dog" –, Flush emerges as a Faun-like figure, a sprite of Nature, whose vitality animates the poetess's world with his life energies: "a lowly creature with the most sublime love, a loving friend and gentle fellow creature." The dog, a gift from an old friend, Mary Russell Mitford, was intended to console Elizabeth, who was overwhelmed by grief following the death of her two brothers. The mischievous spaniel soon evolved from a comfort object to a therapeutic companion animal and, ultimately, a soulmate. Barrett Browning interprets canine fidelity through affective anthropomorphisation, framing Flush's devotion in terms of sacrificial heterosexual romance: she believes the dog renounces his own needs and desires to remain by her sickbed because of his unselfish devotion, thereby mimicking her emotional states to articulate rudimentary forms of empathy. The companion animal grants a pleasure derived from narcissistic self-recognition, a satisfying similarity that Barrett Browning describes through the metaphor of mutual mirroring.

Yet Woolf also invites us to consider the insurmountable differences, the irreducible asymmetries inherent in the hierarchically organised relation of master and pet. Elizabeth's voluntary confinement is medically mandated, whereas Flush's limited mobility is externally imposed on him by his owner. The passage describing the first encounter between Elizabeth and Flush emphasises their interlocking gazes, dramatising the separation involved in the proximity:

> There was a likeness between them. As they gazed at each other each felt: Here am I– and then each felt: But how different! Hers was the pale worn face of an invalid, cut off from air, light, freedom. His was the warm ruddy face of a young animal; instinct with health and energy. Broken asunder, yet made in the same mould, could it be that each completed what was dormant in the other? She might have been–all that; and he–But no. Between them lay the widest gulf that can separate one being from another. She spoke. He was dumb. She was woman; he was dog. Thus, closely united, thus immensely divided, they gazed at each other. (*Flush* 27)

The scene resonates with Jacques Derrida's philosophical reflections in *L'animal donc que je suis* ("The Animal that therefore I am more to follow"), particularly the famous

anecdote in which he notices his cat staring at his naked body, prompting him to meditatively reflect on his own reactions to animal otherness, and to realise humans' inability to fully conceptualise the animal perspective. Like Derrida, Woolf invites the reader to see the animal seeing us.

To further illuminate the ambiguous dynamics of interspecies bonds, ocular intimacy is counterpointed by insurmountable differences, most notably the question of language: Elizabeth excels in the mastery of words, whereas Flush is incapable of verbalisation. This melancholic acknowledgment of a "togetherness of worlds-apart" imbues the narrative with a metanarrative quality, problematising the speakability of the self, the knowability of the other, and the cultural myth of interspecies friendship's redemptive quality.

The dog as muse

Flush toys with the possibility of reconstructing a canine stream of consciousness, attempting to capture the essence of dogly being with the inherently limited apparatus of human language. As Vanessa Berry observes, the book is not so much about how much Woolf loves dogs, but how much she wants to be a dog herself. The book abounds in lengthy descriptions about the inadequacy of human language to convey the intricate olfactory and sensory experiences of a dog roaming freely through the streets, emphasising the fundamental gap between species-specific modes of perception.

> […] there are no more than two words and perhaps one-half for what we smell. The human nose is practically non-existent. The greatest poets in the world have smelt nothing but roses on the one hand, and dung on the other. The infinite gradations that lie between are unrecorded. Yet it was in the world of smell that Flush mostly lived. Love was chiefly smell; form and colour were smell; music and architecture, law, politics and science were smell. To him religion itself was smell.… But Flush wandered off into the streets of Florence to enjoy the rapture of smell. He threaded his path through main streets and back streets, through squares and alleys, by smell. He nosed his way from smell to smell; the rough, the smooth, the dark, the golden. …He slept in this hot patch of sun–how sun made the stone reek! he sought that tunnel of shade–how acid shade made the stone smell! He devoured whole bunches of ripe grapes largely because of their purple smell; …He followed the swooning sweetness of incense into the violet intricacies of dark cathedrals; and, sniffing, tried to lap the gold on the window-stained tomb…Not a single one of his myriad sensations ever submitted itself to the deformity of words. (125)

This verbosity about unspeakability invites us to read the text as a fictional metabiography, a genre defined by Ansgar Nünning (2005) as one that transgresses the boundaries between fact and fiction, blurs generic distinctions, employs self-reflexivity, and ultimately reveals more about the biographer than the elusive subject (195–6). Woolf's stylistic experiment in "becoming a dog" deploys the same imaginative literary techniques

characteristic of her experimental fiction: stream of consciousness, free indirect discourse, and narrative subjectivity. Applying Woolf's own critical categories, as articulated in her "The Art of Biography" (1939), *Flush* aligns more closely with the novel, insofar as it is committed to the aesthetic imperative of projecting "the truth of [its] own vision" (124) rather than the epistemic obligation to accurately represent established, verifiable facts, as conventional biographies do.

On the one hand, attributing the complex cognitive agency of mindwandering to a dog challenges our ingrained automatic anthropocentrism: anticipating posthumanist philosophy, canine psycho-narration vindicates agency through subjectivation for non-human beings. As exemplified by the olfactorily rich and sensorially intricate experiences of the canine flâneur described above, Woolf treats the dog's animal perceptions as more immediate, more authentic, and closer to reality than those of humans. Dogs can experience things in themselves, apprehend pure phenomena stripped of cultural connotations, unmediated by symbolic frameworks. Flush, infested with fleas, and subsequently shaved bare naked, stripped of the purebred elegant beauty of its fur coat, undergoes an existential catharsis of "being nobody and becoming nothing," dissolving into the totality of the world's things, experiencing absolute independence, and thereby enacting the modernist aspiration of a "world seen without a self." (Macadré 27)

The dog as an autobiographical animal

On the other hand, *Flush* performs a double exercise in empathy: adopting a canine perspective enables Woolf to reach back to her literary foremother, Barrett Browning. Canine biofiction celebrates relational identity by foregrounding entanglement in interspecies bonds and within the woman-writerly tradition. Neither fiction nor documentary biography can fully express who one is: the self can be grasped only through its connection with the other – whether a pet or a fellow female artist –, fading, dissolving into the collective fantasy of community. Yet behind the conjoint biofiction of Elizabeth and Flush lies the shadow story of another writer and another dog: an autofictional stratum inspired by Woolf's relationship with her dog, a black cocker spaniel called Pinka, a gift from Vita Sackville-West, who functioned as an affectively charged transitional object of queer desire, and who, in Woolf's words, "represents the private side of life, the play side" (Woolf 5). Pinka embodies those "unwitnessed inscrutable moments of being which are foundational of the value of every life," moments that constitute the very subject of biofiction (Boldrini et al 8). As Woolf confesses in a letter to Vita Sackville-West, the human–animal bond is both an impossible and an irresistible form of love:

> Your puppy has destroyed, by eating holes, my skirt, tore it to shreds. He ate Leonard's proofs. He did all the damage that could be done to the carpet. But he is an angel of light […]. Leonard says seriously that Pinka makes him believe in the existence of God… and this after he peed on the floor eight times in a single day. (Woolf qtd. in Adams 227)

Woolf thus uses the life of her subject to articulate her vision of the world (Lackey, "Introduction" 10), offering a nuanced meditation on the human–animal bond, but also on empathy, freedom, and the ethics of writing – the responsibility to engage imaginatively with the world.

A dog… and a marmoset of Bloomsbury

The afterlife of Flush is compelling not only in terms of literary-critical reevaluations but also through contemporary fictional reimaginings of its central concerns. Sigrid Nunez's *Mitz: The Marmoset of Bloomsbury* (1998) plays with the infinite regress of mise en abyme by staging a metafictional layering: Woolf, who imagines Barrett Browning through her dog, is herself reimagined by Nunez through her own pets. In this way, Nunez's novel doubles Woolf's mock-biographical experiment, creating a chain of interspecies portraits.

Although Woolf's spaniels, Pinka and Sally, figure prominently in Nunez's novel – which also references Flush as both a modernist exercise in imaginary life-writing and a literary homage to dog-loving –, Nunez's humanimal biofiction primarily seeks to rescue from oblivion a very different companion animal; the eponymous marmoset, a pet monkey, Mitz, adopted by the Woolfs from the Rothschild family. Much like Woolf's reconstruction of Barrett Browning's life through Flush, Nunez draws on real historical documents – letters, diaries, and anecdotal records – to reimagine the writer Woolf's domestic life and the cultural and affective dynamics of the wider Bloomsbury circle, refracted through their entanglement with, and occasionally narrated from the perspective of this largely forgotten pet.

As if to mock speciesist hierarchisation that arbitrarily discriminates between beings based on species membership, dog is contrasted with monkey: one considered to be man's most loyal, best friend, the other a biblical emblem of foolishness, vanity, and distorted imitation, one is domesticated, tamed, subservient, the other a rebellious wild creature, one familiar, the other radical otherness incarnate. Yet Woolf attests the same curiosity about both, even if eyeing the two reveals different affective relationalities.

> She liked to stare into Pinka's eyes too, but you cannot lock gazes with a dog the way you can lock gazes with a cat or, as she now discovered, with a marmoset. […] When Virginia stared hard and unblinking into Mitz's eyes, Mitz stared hard and unblinking back. […] Pinka's eyes were the very image of trust–never so much as when she tipped them up at you. But Virginia had never seen such an expression in Mitz's eyes; always a glint of suspicion, a cast of doubt. (45)

The animal gaze functions as a mirror for Wolf, as Flush's did for Barrett Browning. Yet while locking eyes with a dog provides a narcissistic self-contemplation in the eyes of a sacrificial lover, the unblinking marmoset stare remains an incomprehensible enigma, allowing a melancholic masochistic self-identification with the other. Nunez's Woolf jokes about how much she and Mitz have in common: "two nervous, delicate, wary females,

one as relentlessly curious as the other," both in love with Leonard, both unbelonging. Mitz, a sickly, fragile creature, mirrors both Virginia's vulnerable psyche and the precarity of life amidst turbulent times.

The rare animal alien to the British context – a symbol of artistic decadent taste, like the Rossettis' wombat or Byron's bear, and an exotic merchandise of colonial conquest – offers a grotesque defamiliarisation of actual historical events. Tragedy turns farcical when Mitz "saves the Woolfs from Hitler" (as they put it with ironic exaggeration) when the cuteness of the monkey distracts the attention of Nazi officers during the couple's visit to Germany. The tiny creature offers emotional consolation in times troubled by the impending war and Virginia's worsening mental illness.

Much like Flush, Mitz explores animal consciousness with a novelistic sensibility. In some passages, Nunez directly echoes Woolf: when describing the pet's atavistic memories of the sensual experience of its untamed past wilderness, the locking of the human-animal gaze, or the beast's wondering about humans' limited perceptions. However, Mitz, as a late 20th-century novella, is even more prominently enriched by a meta-modernist self-reflectivity that comments on how the animal thought-processes are conceptualised by the human thought-processes of Woolf, who seeks to verbalise her experience in her creative writing:

> Virginia looked long upon Mitz very often. She wondered about Mitz as she had wondered about the cats and dogs she had known all her life. What was it like to be an animal? How did the world look through a dog's eyes? What did cats think of us? Without such wonder it is doubtful Virginia ever would have written Flush. Now it was Mitz's walnut of a head she wished to crack. Did marmosets dream? Did they remember? Did they regret? What did marmosets want? (44–5)

This psychologising interest curiously echoes Freud's famous unanswerable question: "What does a woman want?" According to Nunez, Woolf's speculations about animal minds' enigmatic otherness are assumed to be the very engine of her fiction: were it not for her fascination with dogs, she would not have written Flush; her curiosity and compassion for companion species' dreams and desires lurk in subtle ways beneath all her self-contemplative writings. As Wendy B. Faris suggests, animals in the art and lives of the Bloomsbury circle served three main functions: they embodied repressed emotions, helped to articulate unresolved social issues, and represented those "reverent feelings" of relatedness with the cosmos that helped construct "the delicate web of communal feeling and mysterious connections that comprise Woolf's 'luminous envelope' of life itself" (107–8).

Mitz also illuminates the complex temporal structuring of lives: while interfacing Bergsonian inner and outer time, it measures the passing of time in terms of Virginia's book publications, the manic and depressive episodes of her illness, global historical events

(the progress of the Second World War), and the brief animal lives reminding humans, like memento mori, of the finite nature of our existence. Both *Flush* and *Mitz* end their narrative abruptly with the pet protagonist's death, remarking bitterly how the world goes on, disinterested, implying that all stories are just fragments of a bigger picture. Yet Nunez also considers posterity, reflecting on authorial afterlives. She ponders what Woolf would think about her current critical receptions, hence implicitly welcomes today's readers into the text. These beastly biographies reveal how the past "is re-enacted, reused, repurposed and reimagined by the present" (Bronstein 1), how "textual beasts are written into history [while they remain] ready to pounce on readers of the future" (Ryan 27)

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