

The Walrus and the Sublime in a Painting by John Webber

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Abstract

This paper explores and provides the context for a painting by John Webber, who accompanied James Cook on his third voyage of discovery to the Pacific: *A Party from His Majesty's Ship Resolution Shooting Sea Horses* (1784). While the painting depicts the slaughter of walrus by Cook's sailors in a cold Arctic environment, a case is made for the employment of tropes of the philosophical concept of the sublime on Webber's part, and an empathetic response to the condition and plight of the animals depicted. This, it is argued, is part of the wider eighteenth-century 'animal turn', where 'new sensibilities' in British culture developed a conception of animals as an appropriate object of human sympathy by observing their capacity to suffer. The paper ends by proposing that Webber's depiction of this scene might today be comprehended as an example of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's notion of *becoming-animal*.

Keywords

Walrus, John Webber, James Cook, Arctic, the sublime, sympathy, 'animal turn', 'becoming-animal'

Among the numberless objects with which the surface of this globe is covered and peopled, animals deservedly hold the first rank...

(Comte de Buffon, *Natural History* 1749)

I try in vain to be persuaded that the pole is the seat of frost and desolation; it ever presents itself to my imagination as the region of beauty and delight.

(Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein* 1818)

Introduction

Recent scholars of eighteenth-century studies have spoken of an ‘animal turn’ and a significant shift in attitudes to human-animal relations (Festa, Keenleyside and Menely). The eighteenth-century interest in sensation meant that more weight was given to animals’ ability to feel pain and pleasure, along with the broad dissemination of a nexus of ideas about human-animal similarity and kinship, and the ethical obligations the former owe to the latter. In part, this ‘turn’ was a post-Cartesian restoration of animality, and a response to what was widely characterised as the Cartesian assault on animal life. This paper explores these issues in relation to a close reading of an animal painting, *A Party from His Majesty’s ship Resolution shooting Sea Horses, Latitude 71 North, 1778* (1784), by John Webber, the artist who accompanied James Cook on his third journey to the Pacific. While it might be easy to see Webber’s painting as a simple confirmation of human superiority and violence – as it has often been seen, in fact – my aim here is to make the contrary case. I argue that the depiction of walrus in Webber’s painting is embedded in the cultural and intellectual debates regarding animals

of the eighteenth century – about the specificity of animal life, the nature of animal suffering, how we might live with the animal – debates that are still with us.

The paper proposes that Webber applied philosophical concepts of the sublime, pictorial devices such as personification, sentimentality, and sensory responses such as the possibility of sound conveyed by the ‘silent’ painting, to the walruses (‘sea horses’) whose slaughter is depicted. In so doing, it is argued that Webber was responding to the new perspectives in human-animal relations that were being introduced and debated in the late eighteenth century. As such, Webber’s painting questions the norms of colonial human-centric endeavour, and it opens up multi-species points of view and experiences. The greater naturalistic representation of animals, including those never encountered before, and the adoption of artistic forms that think both *with* and *about* animals, coincide with an ethical framework for greater humanity towards animal rights. A comparable case in point would be Hogarth’s *Four Stages of Cruelty* (1751), compelling illustrations of the proposition that cruelty to animals led to violence against people. Webber’s painting, too, indicates a heightened awareness on his part of human-animal relations. This is not to suggest that Webber was openly advocating for the interests of animals in any direct or deliberate way, nor was he engaged in animal advocacy as such. Rather, his painting by various means attributes to non-human animals feeling, thought, consciousness, and a point of view. This painting, I suggest, sought to persuade its viewers to attach greater value to animal life.

The voyage to the Arctic

On 11 August 1778, James Cook, on his third voyage of discovery to the Pacific, sailed northeast through Bering Strait into the Arctic Ocean and across the Arctic Circle in search of the Northwest Passage. Working his way along the northern coast of Alaska, in the middle of the day on 17 August both the sun and the moon appeared and Cook records that: ‘Sometime before Noon we perceived a brig[h]tness in the Northern horizon like that reflected from ice, commonly called the blink’ and, subsequently, ‘the sight of a large field of ice left us in no longer doubt about the cause of the brightness of the Horizon’. Cook must have recalled the similar scene when he got as far south towards Antarctica as he could on 31 January 1774, during his second voyage, and experienced his first ice-blink.ⁱ But in

1778, it was here at 70°33' north and 197°41' east that his progress was halted by 'ice which was compact as a Wall and seemed to be ten or twelve feet high at least' (Cook, *Part I*, 417). This marked Cook's farthest north at 70°44' N latitude, just west of present-day Wainwright (Ulgunik) in Alaska. The ice that Cook encountered was most likely ridged sea ice, at the edge of the continuous and dense pack ice, but of a jumbled nature. Retreating southward about 18 miles, Cook encountered 'a point which was much incumbered with ice for which Reason it obtained the name of *Icey Cape*'. He continued:

Our situation was now more and more critical, we were in shoald water upon a lee shore and the main body of the ice in sight to windward driving down upon us. It was evident, if we remained much longer between it and the land it would force us ashore. (Cook, *Part I*, 418)

The artist on board Cook's third voyage, John Webber, provided a pen and ink wash [Figure 1] as well as a pencil drawing of this 'critical' moment, the former possibly completed on site.



Figure 1: John Webber, *The Resolution Beating through the Ice with the Discovery in danger in the distance*, [August 1778], pen and wash on sepia-washed paper, 442 x 630 mm, signed 'J. Webber del.'. Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Cook steered southward to extricate his ships from danger, then turned westward, and for the next eleven days sailed close to the edge of the ice, trying to find an opening to the north. Soon they encountered what Cook called sea-horses, walruses, huddled together in large numbers on the broken ice floes. Cook described the encounter as follows:

They lay in herds of many hundred upon the ice, huddling over one another like swine, and roar or bray very loud, so that in the night or foggy weather they gave us notice of the ice long before we could see it. We never found the Whole herd asleep, some were always upon the watch, these, on the approach of the boat, would wake those next to them and these the others, so that the whole herd would be awake presently. But they were seldom in a hurry to get away till after they had been once fire[d] at, then they would tumble one over the other into the sea in the utmost

confusion... They did not appear to be that dangerous animal some Authors have described, not even when attacked, they are rather more so to appearance than reality. (Cook, *Part I*, 420)

John Ledyard, a corporal of the marines on board, gave a fuller and more scientific description of the animals in his journal:

These loose fields of ice are covered with numerous herds of seahorses who repose themselves upon them, after they have completed their excursions in the water in pursuit of their food, which is fish and such marine productions as they find at the bottom of the water. They are a large unwieldy sluggish animal weighing some of them nine hundred and some eleven hundred weight. Their legs are very short and terminate in a webbed membrane, with which they swim very swift and are very active in the water though exceedingly clumsy out of that element. They are amphibious and between a quadrupede and a fish, their heads are somewhat like those of a dog, without ears, except two large white tusks that project downward from the upper jaw about eighteen inches or two feet; they have a thick skin like that of a horse, and the hair is of a chestnut colour. (Zug 57-8)

The first shootings of the walrus occurred on August 19 and a second and a third on August 27 and 28. On 19 August Cook reported: 'On the ice lay a prodigious number of Sea horses and as we were in want of fresh provisions the boats from each ship were sent to get some. By 7 oclock we had got on board the Resolution Nine of these Animals' (Cook, *Part I*, 419). The animals were consumed for food – although there was considerable debate on board as to whether the walruses were edible at allⁱⁱⁱ – and provided much oil, and the sailors made use of their thick hides 'about our rigging'.

Upon his return to Britain, in 1784 Webber completed a painting of this event, titled *A Party from His Majesty's ship Resolution shooting Sea Horses, Latitude 71 North, 1778* [Figure 2], which was then exhibited at the Royal Academy in the same year.ⁱⁱⁱ Webber also appears to have made a quick pencil and charcoal drawing on location of the killing of the

walruses, and two more refined drawings possibly completed at the time. The pencil field sketch [Figure 3] and the charcoal and grey wash derived from it [Figure 4] suggests that Webber went out in the *Resolution*'s launch to witness the slaughter. Could the figure with his back turned towards the viewer in the painting he completed back in England in 1784 be a later memory of his inclusion in that moment?^{2iv}



Figure 2: John Webber, *A Party from His Majesty's ship Resolution shooting Sea Horses, Latitude 71 North, 1778, [1784]*, oil on canvas, 1245 x 1575 mm. National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, London.



Figure 3: John Webber, *Shooting Sea Horses on an Ice flow*, [August 1778], pen, pencil, charcoal and wash, 162 x 300 mm, unsigned. The Public Archives of Canada, Ottawa.



Figure 4: John Webber, *Shooting Sea Horses on an Ice flow*, [August 1778], charcoal and grey wash, 137 x 258mm, unsigned. The Public Archives of Canada, Ottawa.

Webber and the walruses

This is a large painting, over a metre and a half wide, of walruses (*Odobenus rosmarus divergens*) being shot for food by two parties of sailors sent out from the ships, the *Resolution* and the *Discovery*, which are depicted in the rear of the painting at the right. The dark chestnut-brown walruses, many in profile with their tusks displayed, are arranged huddled in a line that disappears into the left background along the edge of the thick-ribbed and uneven ice shelf. Apart from one walrus roiling face down into the sea in the left-hand foreground corner, their capacity to hold an unmoving gaze in the face of the threat of fire seems uncannily compelling. Walruses have an air sac under their throats that act like a flotation bubble and allow them to bob vertically in the water and Webber depicts several other walruses bobbing around the longboats in the sea, their faces, whiskers and tusks protruding above the waterline in an almost-human fashion that may at first sight appear comic, but may equally evoke an impression of bewilderment. Two thirds of Webber's composition consist of an evocative sky. At the top left it is ominously dark, a sign of disturbed air, but then it lightens modulated by superimposed diaphanous milk-white scarves of clouds with the faintest sense of yellow sunlight at the lower horizon line in the centre. The failing low light, suggesting a moment late in the day, at once emphasises the sparkling reflective hard silver gleam of the ice and silhouettes the dark and massive walruses. The dirtiness of the ice becomes apparent through a covering of grisaille greys and broken whites on the ice shelf, as well as smears of dark on the white snow. The composition is also perfectly balanced with a centrally placed boat between the foregrounded walruses on one side and the backgrounded ships on the other. The longboats full of sailors are low in the water, something heightened by the red edge trim on the nearest boat. This hint of colour is also picked up in the central raised oar highlighted against the distant ice shelf, as well as the tinge of the unfurled red ensign at the stern of the nearest ship. The central longboat contains nine heavily-clothed sailors, three with muskets raised and blasting away, two re-loading them in the stern of the boat, another three managing the boat with oars and at the tiller, and one seated enigmatic figure in the centre with his back to us. There are eight men on the rear longboat which has

the addition of a sail. All are managing the boat except for two loading muskets and two seated facing us. This boat's billowing sail indicates the intruding wind towards the walruses, as do the choppy, steely, glass-green waves in the immediate foreground champing at the ice shelf. On the right, and in the close foreground, are large pieces of snow-covered ice which have broken away from the shelf and have been corroded and eaten away by the sea to create strange, distorted, almost anthropomorphic shapes. Knobbed and hollow like rotten teeth, these ice scraps provide ghostly counterpoints to the tragi-comic bobbing walruses' dazed faces confronting their imminent death.

Sound and the sublime

What does this close description tell us? First of all, in *A Party from His Majesty's Ship Resolution*, Webber perhaps shows himself to be aware of the paradigms of the philosophical aesthetics of his time. I do not expect this suggestion to inspire general consent since this, I realise, amounts to a claim for which I cannot provide concrete written biographical evidence. Yet there is enough in common between the fundamental structures of Webber's composition and the theoretical outlines of early and current theories of the sublime to justify the connection. In his *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* (1783), published one year before Webber completed *A Party from His Majesty's Ship Resolution*, Scottish minister and University of Edinburgh professor Hugh Blair identifies 'vastness' as a defining feature of the sublime:

THE simplest form of external Grandeur appears in the vast and boundless prospects presented to us by nature; such as wide extended plains, to which the eye can see no limits; the firmament of Heaven; or the boundless expanse of the Ocean. All vastness produces the impression of Sublimity ... Wherever space is concerned, it is clear, that amplitude or greatness of extent, in one dimension or other, is necessary to Grandeur. Remove all bounds from any object, and you presently

render it sublime. Hence infinite space, endless numbers, and eternal duration, fill the mind with great ideas. (Blair 56)

In *A Party*, as I have noted, two-thirds of Webber's composition is of the sky and such an extensive sky helps provide a sense of vast distance with the coast of the ice shelf stretching to the far right in front of the stationary ships; reaching in fact to the point from which Cook might have come: Icy Cape. The sense of vastness is reinforced by the disappearing line of walruses that extends along the ice shelf. The physical and cultural emptiness of the frozen seas and icy wastes of the Arctic both challenged and defied representation and interpretation. Webber captures visually what Cian Duffy has described as the subgenre of 'the polar sublime', a category that is developed in the writings of Cook and others in the mid-eighteenth century, and his painting contributes to the way 'the indescribable emptiness of frozen seas and icy wastes' quickly became embedded in the popular imagination as a history of responses to landscape, and aesthetic attraction to cold regions. As Duffy notes, the paradox is that: 'The reality of the polar sublime was hostile not only to human life, but even to the imagination itself' (103).^v

Coupled with the vastness and the dominance of the sky is the presence of what might seem, at first sight, an antithetical characteristic which I want to designate by the term 'blockage'.^{vi} At this point, Cook's journey north was literally blocked, and in his journal he acknowledged this: 'I did not think it consistent with prudence to make any further attempts to find a passage this year in any direction so little was the prospect of succeeding' (Cook, *Part I*, 427). On 29 August, having reached the coast of Siberia, Cape Shmidt at 69°N without finding any break in the ice, and indeed observing that the ice was advancing southward 'and extended farther to the South than where we first fell in with it', Cook abandoned his search for the Northwest Passage, since 'The season was now so very far advanced and the time when the frost was expected to set in so near at hand'. Nevertheless, he resolved 'to return to the North in further search of a Passage the ensuing summer' (Cook, *Part I*, 422-3; 427).^{vii} He now sailed south, working his way back along the north

coast of the Chukotskiy Peninsula and through Bering Strait on 2 September, having spent a total of three weeks in the Arctic.

Here I will simply point to one aspect of this symbolic blockage that bears on my general argument: there is, according to the standard account of the Kantian notion of mathematical sublime, a sense of the sublime that arises out of cognitive exhaustion. It is a sense of the sublime that arises by being blocked, not by the threat of being overwhelmed, although that is certainly here in Cook's fear of becoming entrapped in the ice floes, but by what Kant describes as 'a momentary checking of vital powers (*Lebenskräfte*)' which is then released into another order of experience (Kant 129). Samuel Monk, in his pioneering study of the sublime, attributes the first elaboration of this 'aspiration to grasp the object, the preordained failure, and the consequent feeling of bafflement, and the sense of awe and wonder' to Joseph Addison (58). The sublimity of this moment of 'blockage', for Cook, and therefore for Webber, becomes clearer if we consider it in the light of the general history of exploration; in terms, that is, of 'a tradition whereby defeats and setbacks in the field can be almost as triumphant as victories' (Thompson 182).^{viii} More might be said about this complex topic, but it is a tradition that Cook fits into and a feature of his personality that is remarked upon by both his collaborators and his biographers. Take, for example, the *Resolution*'s Midshipman James Trevenen, who observes:

This indefatigability was a leading feature of his Character. If he failed in, or could no longer pursue, his first great object, he immediately began to consider how he might be most useful in prosecuting some inferior one, procrastination & irresolution he was a stranger to. (Cook, *Part I*, fn 427)

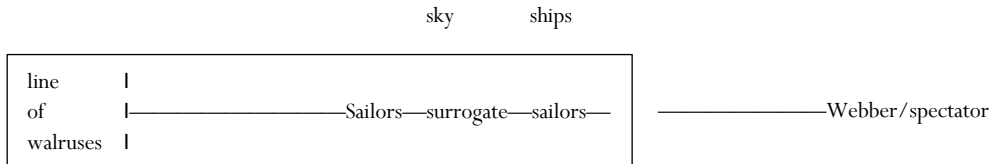
As has already emerged, there is a further, seemingly incidental detail of structural and thematic blockage. It is the figure in the centre of the composition with his back to us, right arm slightly upraised: either that of a surrogate painter, if one chooses to read the figure as an oblique self-representation; or that of a surrogate viewer, if one takes the man with his back to us as a 'spectator figure' in the Albertian sense of:

someone in the ‘historia’ [painting] who tells the spectators what is going on, and either beckons them with his hand to look, or with ferocious expression and forbidding glance challenges them not to come near, as if he wished their business to be secret, or points to some danger or some remarkable secret, or by his gestures invites you to laugh or to weep with them. (Alberti 78)

The former choice is assisted by the uplifted right hand, suggesting a brush poised above the canvas at the centre of the drama; that is, the *painted* arm mimics the *painting* arm. It remains an open question to what extent a given spectator understands him or herself to be responding to the painting’s subtle and complex invitation to empathetic projection. But there can be no doubt, or so I claim, that an impulse to ‘embed’ oneself in the representation is contained in the painting’s structure of address, and there are, of course, several other visible observers in the scene. These are the bobbing heads of the walruses, the possible significance of which I want to come back to in a moment.

Moreover, as by now scarcely requires emphasis, at stake in one way or another in this painting is the overarching sense of impasse. It is the very impasse that shadows Cook’s expedition at this point. Significant and explicit is the line of blockage to the left; the line of walruses along the ice shelf which blocks the forward passage of Cook’s expedition. The bows of all the boats are pointed at them. This, too, is the side of the ominous upper sky. On the first longboat it is the diagonals of oars and guns on the boat that echo the diagonal lines of the erect walruses. In the second longboat the lines are more vertical, perhaps reinforcing the verticality of the bobbing walruses and the white lines of walrus tusks that visibly stand out. The eye is drawn to the huddled walruses, following the line of fire and the direction of the arms, and so involved in a play of differences between human and animal. The structure of the painting can thus be thought of as an extended horizontal shaft directed towards our left along which the play of subject (Cook’s hunting party) and object (the walruses) develops. This will become a play of identification and distancing, joining the viewer and/or the painter to the representation of the landscape on canvas (and between

human and animal, I want to suggest, in another twist of my argument in a moment). The line of the walruses adds to the horizontal shaft a crossbar, making it look like a sort of capital T lying on its side.



The lure of this structure, and its strong axis, is the suggestion that the two modes of difference (human/animal; hunter/hunted) are not unrelated, and, given the line of axis, they are also an emblem of the tensions that join *and* separate the spectator (and the painter) outside the frame from the surrogates inside the frame, as well as from the ‘scene itself’.

What makes this structure more palpable is that it is a prominent feature of much of Webber’s art. I refer here to the almost invariable reliance in his paintings on a centralised mode of composition, a structure that imposes an obvious sort of bilateral symmetry on the representational field as a whole, while at the same time setting the stage for the spectator’s mediation of opposites.^{ix}

The roaring of walruses

I want to suggest further that this structure of ‘embedding’ works in a reverse fashion to introduce something from inside the scene to the outside perception of it, and that it finds a correlate in the allusion to background noise: the cracking of the ice, the firing of the rifles and the roar and sound of the walruses themselves. It may seem at first glance perverse, *prima facie* implausible, to discuss the importance of sound and noise in Webber’s *A Party from His Majesty’s Ship Resolution*.^x What does it mean to think about the depiction of noise in a painting? But I want to insist that in the painting Webber asks – compels – us to listen to

the noise of the scene and what it might mean. Certainly, his image is anything but quiet and peaceful, it is full of the cacophony of a hunt; filled with clamour and disharmony. Three further incidental details worth commenting on are the unsettled sky, the choppy surface of the sea and the unfurled sail all of which indicate a potential howling gale. Cook's journal attests to the incessant roaring of the walruses: 'huddling over one another like swine, and roar or bray very loud, so that in the night or foggy weather they gave us notice of the ice long before we could see it' (Cook, *Part I*, 420); this is coupled with the visible evidence of the cracking and fragmenting ice shelf. In raising the issue of noise, I want to think about the ways Webber's painting addresses itself to multiple senses, inviting us to hear as well as see. The word 'noise' in Webber's time could refer to both pleasant and unpleasant sounds; in Samuel Johnson's 1755 *Dictionary*, it means 'any kind of sound' (85). As if to underscore the implications for aspects of Webber's painting we have already discussed, noise, too, is a recognised feature of the sublime. For Burke, who includes a section on 'The Cries of Animals' in his 1757 reflection on the sublime, the 'excessive loudness' of cataracts, storms, thunder, but also cries of humans and other animals in pain or danger, and the 'angry tones of wild beasts' are all signs of its presence. He adds:

The eye is not the only organ of sensation, by which a sublime passion may be produced. Sounds have a great power in these as in most other passions... Excessive loudness alone is sufficient to overpower the soul, to suspend its action, and to fill it with terror. The noise of vast cataracts, raging storms, thunder, or artillery, awakes a great and awful sensation in the mind... The angry tones of wild beasts are equally capable of causing a great and awful sensation... The modifications of sound, which may be productive of the sublime, are almost infinite. (Burke 82, 84, 75, 77-78)

It is in this context that we can begin to appreciate the force and boldness of the reference to sound. To think about noise in Webber's painting is to recognise the degree to which his paintings challenge the established order – of empire, of human-animal relations (I shall have more to say about this in a moment) – by compelling us to hear and listen to sounds that are normally silenced. In all of these examples of the sublime at work in *A Party*

from His Majesty's Ship Resolution (blockage, embedded spectatorship, projection of sound) what one is drawn to is not a clearly oriented reflection, but an engagement with the act and with the medium of painting condensed almost to the point of its limits. That is, the canvas itself figuratively serves to indicate whatever resists representation. It remains an open question to what extent a given spectator understands her or himself to be responding to the painting's subtle and complex invitation to empathetic projection. It is to the question of empathy or sentiment that I now turn.

Empathetic projection and human-animal relations

I have already foregrounded this section of my argument by suggesting that Webber's depiction of the walruses, and his intimation of their sounds, indicate a heightened awareness on his part of human-animal relations. Indeed, I would go even further by speculating on what I take to be Webber's conflicted feelings about finding himself at the centre of a hunt. I describe this ambivalence to his painting subject as *specular*, by which I mean to invoke a certain kind of separating or distancing coupled with an *immersion*, a being at one with the work in progress. Not that I think this is a progressive process – immersion followed by specularity – rather, I have something in mind like the continual ambivalence of oscillation. For another basic structural polarity exists between *absorption* – the depiction of figures absorbed or engrossed in what they are doing (loading or shooting firearms) – and *address*, the depiction of figures, who by looking *out* or *in* direct the attention of the spectator (the enigmatic figure with his back to us that I mentioned earlier, the seated figures in the rear longboat, even the walrus 'faces' that stare back). Much less has it been recognised that Webber's paintings are shot through with a recurrent oscillation or tension between effects of identification and those of counter-identification.^{xi} It is this that gives Webber's painting, indeed his art, much of its profoundly unsettling allure.

Coming to the issue of human-animal relations, at the outset I noted an eighteenth-century 'animal turn', where 'new sensibilities' in British culture developed a conception of

the animal as an appropriate object of human sympathy by observing their capacity to suffer.^{xii} Historians like Keith Thomas have also proposed a connection between campaigns for the abolition of slavery and the prevention of cruelty to animals. In the seventeenth century, the dominant paradigm of human-animal relations was that of Descartes, who maintained that animals cannot reason and do not feel pain; animals are living organic creatures, but they are automata, like mechanical robots. But even before the end of the century English, naturalist John Ray, in his *The Wisdom of God Manifested in the Works of the Creation* (1691), had already denounced the Cartesian *bête-machine* evacuation of animal mind and sentiment:

Should this be true, that Beasts were Automata or Machines, they could have no sense or perception of Pleasure and Pain, and consequently no cruelty could be exercised against them; which is contrary to the commonsense of Mankind, all men naturally pitying them as apprehending them to have such a sense and feeling of Pain and Misery as themselves have. (Ray 39)^{xiii}

Thus, the eighteenth century saw a new moral understanding of animals among philosophers and writers, and the problem of human and animal relations is intimately intertwined with wider discussions of inequality and distress. We can observe a new tenderness towards animals, coupled with a conception of the animal as an appropriate object of human sympathy following observations of their capacity to suffer. Animals enjoyed a new status as sentient beings and objects of sensible affections; for example, the moral philosopher Lord Shaftesbury included animals within the moral debate and wrote of our ability to understand ‘signs of joy and contentment ... in the countenances, gestures, voices and sounds, even of creatures foreign to our kind’ (Cooper 204). In 1763, Philip Doddridge in his ‘Lectures on Pneumatology’ suggested that ‘virtue obliges us to avoid whatever would be grievous to any of our fellow-creatures’, proposing a ‘law of universal benevolence’ that ‘extends itself even to the brutes, supposing them capable of sensation, and consequently of pleasure and pain’. Given this law, Doddridge concludes, ‘a virtuous man would be cautious how he abuses them, (especially since they are generally supposed to have sensation)’ (129-30). In his 1776

animal-rights manifesto, *A Dissertation on the Duty of Mercy and the Sin of Cruelty to Brute Animals*, published one year before the departure of Cook's third voyage, and eight before Webber's rendering of the encounter with the walruses in oil, the clergyman Humphrey Primatt extends the vague imperatives of Shaftesburian sociability into straightforward moral obligations. Primatt makes a radical call for a legal recognition of animal rights premised on animal articulateness: the 'cries and groans', which 'are as strong an indication to us of' an animal's 'sensibility of pain, as the cries and groans of a human being, whose language we do not understand' (13-14). Sensibility privileged the capacity to see the symptoms of suffering through a form of critical reading in which an inner state is accessed by a proper reading of the exterior body. The cry of the distressed animal needed no translation and demanded urgent response. For several thinkers of the eighteenth century, it was never questioned that animals had the ability to express states of agitation and suffering, nor that humans had the intrinsic capacity to understand creaturely feelings.^{xiv}

Here again we might make the connection between the discussion of the sublime in the previous section and the concern for animal rights. The sublime that induces sentiment helps develop what we might call a moral attitude towards nature and, as a form of aesthetic appreciation, our perceptual attention is directed towards natural qualities. Such a connection was theorised by Blair, who in 1783 wrote:

THERE still remains to be mentioned one class of Sublime objects; what may be called the moral, or sentimental Sublime; arising from certain exertions of the human mind; from certain affections, and actions, of our fellow-creatures. These will be found to be all, or chiefly, of that class, which comes under the name of Magnanimity or Heroism; and they produce an effect extremely similar to what is produced by the view of grand objects in nature; filling the mind with admiration, and elevating it above itself. (63)

Secondly, the natural sublime, through such attributes as size, has the capacity to humble the spectator. Experiences of sublimity involve phenomena greater than ourselves thereby involving humility. Thirdly, the metaphysical dimension of the sublime creates important

shifts in perspective and the sublime offers the suggestion of agitation, excitement and unpredictability within the stable framework of detached observation. Many eighteenth-century definitions of the sublime emphasise the high degree of destabilisation.

While Webber records the violent impulses of hunting and food gathering on the part of Cook and his sailors, he also depicts the hunted animals as experiencing beings, whose dazed expressions and cries (we seemingly hear) demonstrate their suffering. His walruses stare back implacably, but they are also humanised, as already noted, in an endearingly comic fashion that enlists viewer empathy. The ethical and conceptual stakes of Webber's use of personification, and the nature of species relationships that it evokes, do not necessarily mean that Webber was advocating for the interests of animals in any direct or deliberate way. Nor does he provide any clear prescriptions for resolving the conflicts that come with interspecies human-animal association. But he does show through a stylised rhetoric of personification that figuring animals is crucial for exploring species sociality. He does ask us as spectators to read the animal *in* and *for* itself, not just as a displaced metaphor. In *A Party from His Majesty's Ship Resolution* there exists a deliberate contrast between precise natural description and rhetorical description with its rich semiotics of signs of animal affect. Critics like Bernard Smith and Nicholas Thomas have tended to celebrate Webber's achievement in natural description and dismiss the seriousness of his rhetorical strategies such as personification. In a reference to another painting by Webber, Thomas, commenting on the penguins depicted in Christmas Harbour, Kerguelen Island, finds 'something faintly ironic in the penguins, posed as though engaged in polite conversation at an afternoon garden party' (289). This understanding of the sentimental as superficial and whimsical, in the context of its eighteenth-century elaboration, does not reflect the complexity of its use during the period, nor, I believe, in Webber's *A Party from His Majesty's Ship Resolution*, or, indeed, his painting in general. Thomas writing on the artist's encounter with the walruses proposes that Webber simply reads their deaths as a visual analogy for the failure of the

expedition's search for the Northwest Passage: 'Webber perhaps saw, in the business of blasting away at these huge, helpless beasts, huddled on the breaking ice, a visual anecdote of the extremity that the voyage had reached' (Nicholas Thomas 289, 373).^{xv}

The sentimental

However, Webber's personification of the walrus bears a deeper relation to eighteenth century discussions of sentimentality or sentimentalism which, I contend, is also crucial to making historical sense of his painting. This discussion of sentimentality is a large topic for eighteenth-century painting and aesthetics, but a portion of its complexities may be glimpsed in our affective response to the depicted animal, especially the animal under siege. The paradox is that sentimentality at once guards the border of human community and, at the same time, disrupts it through cross-species sympathy. My contention with Webber, however, is that this is not a case of either/or; of destructive human agency contrasted to the visible helplessness of its quarry. Instead, Webber uses personification to do serious natural- and socio-political work. Personification confers agency and connects this agency to sentiment: to mental actions or affections – like being amusing or even tragi-comic. Personification also shifts the understanding of collectivity since it is an operation that involves the transformation of animals into exclusive and irreplaceable personalities (a shift, that is, from simply being considered as an alternative food supply). The display of walrus bodies, therefore, is not just descriptive, nor even just scientific, as Bernard Smith and others claim; it is *affective*. Webber's spectator is meant to sympathise with the inner states of the animals as pathetic images capable of moving spectators. The viewer of *A Party from His Majesty's Ship Resolution* is left in a position of affective and moral uncertainty, where sympathy for an animal is placed in conflict with traditional assumptions about human dominion and the need for sustenance in a challenging environment. Alongside Webber's rhetoric of personification, it may be useful to invoke another stylistic technique that I want to call 'proximity'. It is simply this, the firing sailors are too close to their prey, the bobbing walruses in the water float behind the firing line and alongside the longboat's stern, and, in

some way because of this ‘impossible proximity’ the accentuated sound of the walruses’ roar pierces the silent tableau. Proximity exalts human agency, the performance of human dominion in the sport of hunting, but it also highlights the animals’ resistance to their fate by imploring sympathetic identification through the closeness to the viewer of *their* body language and their cries.

Now I want to enlarge this by suggesting that it is this ‘getting close’ and sentimentality, as a rhetorical practice more than anything else, that enabled or drove Webber to convert a scene of violence and exploitation into an occasion for benevolence and pity. Lynn Festa has argued how sentimentalism and its turning *inward* became the dominant mode for representing a turning *out*, that is imperial expansion, and she concludes: ‘In exposing the discrepancy between Enlightenment ideals and the realities of human suffering and exploitation, empire begets sentimentality’ (7). This conclusion raises an interesting question: Why did an artistic form, notable for its preoccupation with the self, become the form of choice for the depiction of colonised populations during the piecing together of colonial empires? According to Festa, ‘[t]he sentimental feeling self is thus the Janus face of the Enlightenment rational subject, the possessive individual...’ and ‘[i]n an era in which imperial reach increasingly outstripped imaginative grasp’ sentimentality ‘created the tropes that reel the world home in their minds’ (4, 2).

Becoming-animal and a polar bear

Cook, of course, was not to return to the Arctic the following year, as he had promised, as he met his death in Hawai’i on 14 February 1779. After Cook’s death in Hawai’i, his fellow captain, Charles Clerke, faithfully returned in the summer of 1779. Clerke sailed from Petropavlosk on the Kamchatka Peninsula, and he himself was very ill with consumption when the ships sailed north through Bering Strait on July 6, more than a month earlier than in the previous year. The next day they encountered an ‘immense body of Ice to which we could see no bounds from our Mast’s Head’ at 68°12’ N (Cook, *Part I*, 789), a repeat of the

experience of the previous year – the waters narrowing upon sailing east and the pack ice joined to the American continent – was confirmed, so they turned westward following the ice edge in search of any opening to the north. July, of course, was less favourable in terms of ice conditions than August. A description is given in Clerke's journal, noting the sailors had again encountered 'vast quantities of morses (walruses)'^{xvi} and on the 20th while traversing 'a great deal of loose Ice... we saw two white bears to which we immediately gave chase in the Jolly Boat & were fortunate enough soon to have them onboard'. The larger bear when hauled from the water 'was found to be 7 feet 2 inches long with a circumference of 4^f13^b' (Cook, *Part I*, 695).^{xvii} Clerke also notes that three or four more bears were seen upon the ice at night and that his crew generally agreed that, although tasting fishy, the meat of the polar bear was preferable to that of sea horse (walrus).

Webber was to produce an unsigned pencil, pen and wash sketch and then a dated and signed pencil and wash drawing of this encounter with the polar bear (Figure 5).



Figure 5: John Webber, *A White Bear*, 1779, pencil and wash, 310 x 450mm. National Library of Australia. Rex Nan Kivell Collection.

If Clerke's adult bear that is shot is in fact Webber's bear depicted, and the dimensions seem to suggest it is, then, like the earlier walruses, Webber may also have witnessed its death. And these deaths may have marked the end of the mission of the third voyage, for on the 21st Clerke notes, in the last entry in his journal, that any attempt to proceed 'farther North' is doomed 'for this Sea is now so Choak'd with Ice that a passage I fear is totally out of the question'.^{xviii}

Webber's polar bear is perched in profile at the edge of the continuous and contentious ice shelf, feet firm, on solid ice, his mouth half open, staring directly back at the unseen (for us) sailors and their ships. His girth and strength are almost palpable, and his command of the landscape is fully visible. Webber's sketch and drawing are scientifically accurate but they are also something more. As with Webber's depictions of walruses, this 'something more' is, I would suggest, the result of proximity. Here Deleuze and Guattari's concept of becoming-animal (*devenir-animal*) holds a special place in tying any creative reimagining of the human so closely to that of the animal. Lori Brown describes the process Deleuze and Guattari invoke as follows:

Through becoming, we join with the other animal in a zone of proximity that dissolves our identities and the boundaries that we set up between us. This process disturbs and disrupts our usual ontological categories. The resultant zone is a field where novelty and creativity can occur. New ways of relating to one another proliferate here. ... We are significantly altered by this exchange with the other animal. In the process, the human being moves out of a position of dominance.
(261-2)

'Becoming' enables us to see another animal as an active, responsive participant in the exchange. In the process of becoming, we develop an awareness of the way other animals slip out of the grasp of our classificatory structures, and our delineations of their attributes and abilities. In their book, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, Deleuze and Guattari write:

To become animal is to participate in movement, to stake out a path of escape in all its positivity, to cross a threshold, to reach a continuum of intensities that are valuable only in themselves, to find a world of pure intensities *where all forms come undone, as do all the significations, signifiers, and signifieds*, to the benefit of an unformed matter of deterritorialized flux, of nonsignifying signs. (13)

The real radicalism of the concept lies not in its reframing of the question of living subjects and their identities, but rather in its charting the possibilities for experiencing an uncompromising sweeping-away of identities, whether human or animal. Webber in his encounter with the animal in the extreme Arctic, as I hope to have shown, enabled his walruses and polar bear to surprise him, and us, and to make us curious about what those surprises reveal to us about the animal, ourselves as human-animals, and the plane on which we exist together.

Notes

ⁱ For an account of this ‘ice-blink’ and the painting done of it, see Simmons (163-84).

ⁱⁱ Citing the enforced consumption of walrus meat as an example of Cook’s increasing irascibility on the third voyage, Beaglehole, in his biography of Cook, writes as follows: ‘There was, for example, the matter of walrus meat in the arctic. Fresh food it was, certainly; invaluable food; and unfamiliar. Cook could eat anything. His taste, thought one of his midshipmen, “was, surely, the coarsest that ever mortal was endued with”. Walrus, however, made some men vomit: very well, then, they could live on their scanty allowance of bread, and “complaints and murmurings” had to rise to a very considerable pitch before he would give them back their familiar salt beef.’ (Beaglehole 8)

ⁱⁱⁱ A critic reviewing Webber’s painting in the *Morning Chronicle*, and *London Advertiser* described it as an ‘unpleasing picture’, not out of keeping, of course, with the aesthetic attributes required for the sublime. He continues: ‘Webber’s large picture of a party on board Capt. Cook’s ship shooting sea horses, is what we must profess ourselves unable to understand – either the subject or the manner of treating it.’

^{iv} Interestingly, the figure does not appear in any of the drawings or engravings completed of the incident of shooting the walruses.

^v However, this conclusion contradicts Mary Shelley’s assertion in my epigraph.

^{vi} For a discussion of the notion of blockage and the sublime in Wordsworth see Hertz (40-60).

^{vii} Of course, Cook was not to make this return journey, meeting his death in Hawai’i on 14 February 1779.

^{viii} Cian Duffy also writes of the British re-imaging of the Arctic as ‘a theatre of tragic-heroic defeat of hubristic aspiration’ (105).

^{ix} Notice, for instance, how the figure of Cook is placed at the centre of Webber’s painting, watercolour and engraving of *The Death of Captain Cook* (c. 1781-3). William Hauptmann

suggests that the ‘awkwardly posed nature of the composition’ results from ‘the mythic, almost messianic role Webber ascribed to Cook’ (161).

^x I am grateful to Ben Pollitt for the suggestion to pay attention to the ‘sounds’ of this painting. Pollitt presented a paper on this aspect of Webber’s painting – “‘The Other Side of Silence’: The Rhetoric of the Sublime in John Webber’s *Shooting Sea-Horses* (1784)’ – at the forum *Gendered Voices as Noises*, University College London, 29 June 2018.

^{xi} Bernard Smith and Rüdiger Joppien comment as follows on the depiction of Cook’s ships potentially caught in the ice: ‘In spite of the dangerous situation Webber’s treatment of the scene is surprisingly calm.’ It is, they maintain, ‘a history piece documenting an event of significance, rather than an illustration seeking to arouse emotions’ (115). However, in *A Party* they believe ‘he attempts a more dramatic note. Walrus and man now confront one another, as protagonists must; the walrus awaiting its fate stoically. It enabled them to be drawn both frontally and in profile, for no doubt Webber now had a didactic purpose in mind’ (118). Although, of course, they have missed the oscillation and ambivalence.

^{xii} See, for example, Fudge 2002; Fudge et al.; Nash; Perkins; Steinrager; Wolloch; Blackwell editor; ‘Human-Animal Studies and the Eighteenth Century’; Menely; and Keenleyside.

^{xiii} The reference to the ‘animal-machine’ in Descartes is vol I (140).

^{xiv} See Menely. In the late 1600s theologian Henry More described the sounds of oppressed animals as ‘those efficacious sorts of Eloquence, [Nature] has bestowed on so many of the Creatures when they are oppressed for the drawing of Compassion towards them’ (59).

^{xv} Geoff Quilley suggests that Webber treats the subject ‘in the manner of a contest between humanity and savage nature’ (19) and he does not acknowledge the comic nature of the walruses. Bernard Smith and Rüdiger Joppien insist: ‘Walrus and man now confront one another, as protagonists must; the walrus awaiting its fate stoically. It enabled them to be drawn both frontally and in profile, for no doubt Webber now had a didactic purpose in mind.’ They suggest that Webber was really motivated by an attempt to catch individual features of the animal, ‘an illustration of a little-known animal’ (118).

^{xvi} The archaic English word ‘morse’ (used by Cook and his sailors in in their journals) contains a coincidental similarity with the Latin word *morsus* (bite) and this supposedly contributed to the walruses’ reputation as a monster.

^{xvii} See also the account in the journal of William Ellis vol. 2 (266-7).

^{xviii} Beaglehole adds a footnote: ‘The exhausted Clerke here lays down his pen, with but a month more to live’.

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