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“The Level of the Beasts That Perish”: Animalized Text
in Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna’s *Helen Fleetwood*

by

Christie Peterson

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

“The Level of the Beasts That Perish”: Animalized Text

in Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna’s *Helen Fleetwood*

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Master of Arts

Although Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna’s 1839 social reform novel *Helen Fleetwood* has long been understood as a commentary on the dehumanizing effects of factory work, her use of animals to represent factory workers has not been considered in analyses of her depictions of dehumanization. Considering both the growing interest in the animal/human divide during the early nineteenth century and Tonna’s own direct contributions to discussions about animals, in this essay I examine the role that animals play in negotiating definitions of humanity and nature in the novel. I argue that idealized, “Edenic” animals and corrupted, “industrial” animals are integral to Tonna’s juxtaposition of the pre-industrialized countryside and the industrial city; I also explore how “animality” transcends the content of the novel and becomes an element of the novel’s methodology and conventions. Using the animality of *Helen Fleetwood* as a case study, I conclude that Victorian social reform writers not only idealized nature to serve their arguments but were also constrained and somewhat undermined by a kind of “nature” that lay beyond their narrative control.

Keywords: Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna, Helen Fleetwood, animals, nature, social reform fiction

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Introduction

In May of 1833, the *London Times* reported that “an animal of a strange and unnatural appearance” had “taken abode in the neighboring woods” of the little village of Coulsden in Surrey:

It has been seen by a great many persons, but the several descriptions are much at variance with each other. All declare that it is something of the dog or wolf species, but all agree that they never saw the like before. It is thought by the more rational part, who are willing to assign a natural cause for the visit of this animal, that it has escaped from some menagery; but the superstitious are inclined to the belief that it is a supernatural being, come to terrify the wicked for their sins.

The article highlights the bafflement of the people in the village, who in their confusion turn to what is apparently the only logical place available to identify this “strange and unnatural” creature: inward, toward some fragment of themselves. Whether the animal originated in a menagery, which is a human configuration of animals that have been displaced from their natural environment, or is a supernatural being that represents the guilt of wicked people, the creature is a kind of human projection. Mute, separated from the human population, and taken out of its own context, the animal is an outward copy of an inner portion of the humans who are observing it.

Defining “the animal” and its relationship with humans was a preoccupation for many writers who helped to mobilize awareness of animal treatment during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, when there developed a new awareness of animals’ physiological and emotional similarity to humans (Perkins 22-24).¹ Deborah Denenholz Morse and Martin A. Danahay note that animals—especially an animal seen as “‘out of place’ and thus to have

escaped conventional categories,” like the animal in Coulsden, Surrey—become “the canvas on which a culture can sketch the range of its many, and often contradictory, attitudes toward both the ‘animal’ and the concept of ‘nature’ as a zone purportedly separate from the human that needs either to be exploited or protected” (4-5). *Purportedly* is a significant term here, for as Morse and Danahay clarify, “the status of the ‘animal’ also brings into question the status of the ‘human’ as the two cannot be seen in isolation” (5). As the animal rights movement progressed into the 1830s and 1840s, these connections were underscored by the industrial revolution; social reform writers often used animals to explore technology’s effect on man and his changing relationship with nature, projecting their fears about technology’s dehumanizing influence onto animals much as the people of Coulsden, Surrey projected their sins onto the “strange and unnatural” creature in their neighborhood.²

Fears about the dehumanizing effects of technology surface in the 1839 didactic reform novel *Helen Fleetwood*, in which Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna laments that factory owners will not make the necessary reforms “to raise [workers] somewhat above the level of the beasts that perish—somewhat above the insensible machinery against which their feeble limbs must toil in an agonizing race” (176). Tonna, born in England in 1790, was a staunch Evangelical who espoused a number of social causes and was a prolific writer, publishing novels, poetry, short stories, religious tracts, political pamphlets, and an autobiography as well as serving as editor for the *Christian Lady’s Magazine* during the 1830s and 1840s. Her fiction and non-fiction about factory reform was influential during the early years of the industrial reform movement, although her work soon fell out of favor and was largely unread until scholars in the 1970s rediscovered her pivotal role in the reform movement. Basing *Helen Fleetwood*, her best novel, on her research in the Parliamentary blue books, Tonna strove to inform her readers of the atrocities of

factory work.³ In writing the novel, Tonna particularly wished to gain women's sympathy for two major causes, the repeal of the New Poor Law of 1834 and the passing of the Ten Hours Bill, to teach women how to respond to the break-up of the national family and the now-jeopardized nuclear family (Lenard 68-70; Gallagher 127).⁴ Her overall objective was to invigorate her readers with a sense of the injustice of a system that suppressed or ignored the individuality and humanity of the working poor.

Scholars studying didactic social reform fiction like Tonna's have shown how nature was used as a way to counter both the mechanization of factory workers and the metaphorical mechanization of the entire society. Yet this scholarship has largely overlooked the complex role animals play in negotiating the relationship between humans and technology. In this essay, I will argue that to fully understand how nature informs didactic social reform fiction, more attention must be paid to the "animality" of the texts in their conventions and content. Doing so places these texts in their wider ecological context and reveals new nuances in "nature" in these novels.

I will demonstrate the importance of animals in social reform arguments by looking particularly at *Helen Fleetwood*, a novel well suited to a mode of inquiry that brings animal studies and social reform scholarship together. Tonna wrote specifically about animals and technology as one strand of her social reform project; she also repeatedly declares in her autobiography that her natural surroundings in the countryside as a youth inspired her imagination and writing (*Personal Recollections* 7). And although her didactic depictions of dehumanizing factory abuse are typically read as commentary on the need for a more humane relationship between factory owners and factory workers, none of these studies has gotten to the heart of what *dehumanization* really means in Tonna's terms.⁵

This essay first examines the relationship between machines, animals, and humans in context of both Victorian paradigms of social structure and social reform writers' methods of narrating social structure. I will then analyze how Tonna depicts animals differently in rural scenes and industrial scenes in her novel as she illuminates the problems in society's way of conceptualizing labor and proffers her own, nature-based solution. Finally, I will argue that this nature-based solution is complicated by the traces of technology in the methodology of Tonna's argument and will examine some of the implications of that contamination. My analysis will demonstrate how Tonna's social reform argument, written during a time when animals took on new significance for humans' understanding of labor, both shapes and is shaped by animality.

Nature and the Machine in Early Victorian England

As Morse and Danahay's collection of essays demonstrates, Victorian novelists regularly relied on animals to explore gender ideology, sexuality, attitudes toward science and evolution, parenting, criminality, and a host of other subjects. Frequently, animals served these novelists as a site at which to explore the nature of humanity itself. From the madwoman Bertha, the "clothed hyena" lurking in the attic of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (Brontë 381), to the frightfully animalistic Mr. Hyde in Robert Louis Stevenson's story, animals and animal language represent the extreme limits of human sanity. In short, animals are what people like Bertha and Dr. Jekyll become when they are not *thinking* like humans. Taking up this concern, industrial novels such as Elizabeth Gaskell's *Mary Barton* or the novel in question here, Tonna's *Helen Fleetwood*, often express fears about the effect of machinery on humans' ability to think by projecting those fears onto animals. Animals as markers of dehumanized workers in reform novels represent widespread anxieties about the "nature" of humans and animals during the industrial revolution,

when animals were rather suddenly replaced with machinery and the humans who worked the machines risked becoming machine-like.

For example, Sarah Stickney Ellis invokes the animal figure to dramatize the danger of becoming an automaton in the busy materiality of Victorian life. She argues that if women were able to “invest material things with the attributes of mind”—in other words, to *think* about the great “machine” of society rather than be a passive part of it—then they “may assist in redeeming the character of English *men* from the mere animal, or rather, the mere mechanical state, into which, from the nature and urgency of their occupations, they are in danger of falling” (461). Ellis’s word choice equates an animalistic state of mind with a mechanical state of mind, suggesting a core connection between the technology of machines and something “technological” in nature.

A significant strand of animal studies revolves around connections between humans, animals, and machines. A century after Ellis wrote, Martin Heidegger would identify modern technology as a “challenging of nature” that is destructive to humanity because it emphasizes product over process, utility over ontology (“Question”). In this he distinguishes dangerous, or negative, technology from poetic technology, which David Krell notes is “a way of revealing the totality of beings” (309). As Jacques Derrida argues in his commentary on Heidegger in *Of Spirit*, it is its dangerous “technological” nature that makes Heidegger’s animal “poor in world,” or unopen to its own ontology (10). Ellis’s fear that man will become animal through contamination by technology reflects not only a Heideggerian paranoia about man’s precarious grasp of his own ontology, but also a Derridean testament to the shifting ontology of these societal constructs and the role of the machine in creating that shift; as the machine draws attention to animality within man, animals must become part of man’s self-definition.

My reading of humans, animals, and machines in *Helen Fleetwood* brings scholarship on social reform narrative techniques and studies of animals together into conversation. Though scholars studying Tonna's novels have given a great deal of attention to her narrative techniques, none have yet examined animals as one of those techniques. To explain why animal studies needs to be brought to bear on *Helen Fleetwood's* narrative, I will describe several theories about the narrative techniques in reform fiction that draw on Heidegger's concept of "animalistic" technology as a social paradigm. I will then look at scholarship that analyzes nature as a counter to these paradigms in reform fiction and will argue that the more nuanced view of nature that animal studies offers, as well as the proliferation of animals in social problem novels, are reasons to re-examine "nature" in the novels in context of animal studies.

Scholarship on social reform fiction has analyzed how Heidegger's version of negative technology was embodied in the very way society saw the poor, working classes. James Richard Simmons notes that even by the 1830s, after many acts had been passed to improve factory conditions, it appeared that "factory children were victims of the popularity of the principles of Malthusian economics," "an insignificant part of the surplus population" (338). Mary Poovey identifies two overarching metaphors that governed how British leaders dealt with the problem of the poor: the social machine and the social body.⁶ Both models were based on what Poovey calls "abstractions," or "symbolic representations of a system that was too large and complex to comprehend" (42); both supported laissez-faire politics to some extent; and although the social body metaphor "produced a more dynamic picture of the relationship between organisms and their physical environment," both models were essentially machine-like in that they viewed the relationship between poor workers and masters to be naturally self-regulating (40). As Patricia Ingham notes, "By the 1830s, . . . to a large extent the language of political economy and the

picture of society as an economic machine became inescapable, as what had at first been taken metaphorically came to be regarded as literal” (12). It was in part to combat a technological outlook on society that social reform fiction arose.

Joseph Kestner asserts that the social fiction of the 1830s is particularly significant because it “confronted the transformation” to industrialization at its onset and laid the foundation for later, more canonical reform writers like Charlotte Brontë and Elizabeth Gaskell (*Protest and Reform* 66). These novels mark a point at which fiction began to shape the future of industrialization and industrialization began to shape the future of narrative (6). Rosemarie Bodenheimer suggests that the idealistic didacticism that was typically employed in 1830s novels like *Helen Fleetwood* was not, as has often been argued, a failure because of its unrealistic depictions of the working poor. Instead, “it is in the shape and movement of narrative rather than in its proclaimed social ideology that we may find the ‘politics’ of a novel in its deepest . . . most problematical expression” (3). The narratives of these novels embody the very real conflicts and circumstances of social problems themselves because their conventions “define and delimit imagined possibilities for social thought, action, and change” (3). Didacticism was wedded to social fiction in Tonna’s era to restore social cohesion and concern for the individual during a time of industrial upheaval and neglect of the poor. What modernists and later twentieth-century scholars have sometimes perceived as unsophisticated writing, full of preaching and naiveté, was, in Mary Lenard’s terms, an eventually successful attempt to teach “nineteenth-century audiences how to ‘read’ and respond to social problems,” a way to read technological situations non-technologically (68).

In addition to the various religious, domestic, political, and economic environments that influenced the didactic form of 1830s industrial novels, Bodenheimer notes that the natural

environment powerfully shaped didactic fiction.⁷ She writes that “fictional appeals to nature or to a value-laden past are particularly open to dismissal as escapist or nostalgic fantasy. But in the dialectic of narrative argument, they can function as genuine alternatives: not as better worlds elsewhere but as challenges to the assumptions of a dominant social theory” (9). In other words, nature in an idyllic sense—nature that exemplifies harmony and emphasizes ontology—provides a model for seeing society’s members in a manner diametrically opposed to the machine model of society that Poovey and Ingham trace.

Yet, with the rise of ecocriticism as a vital mode of literary critique, and under its umbrella the growing popularity of animal studies, “nature” must be reexamined. Animal studies has shown that attempting to understand human nature without examining humans’ ecological context is myopic because such studies assume that “human” is a self-contained category of being. At least from Descartes onward, animal theory has demonstrated that animals are inextricably linked with Heidegger’s “dangerous” technology, and from the late twentieth century onward, the animal-technology connection has been expanded to include human nature as well. If nature *is* technological, then by implication when nature is invoked as a formal device—as a “genuine alternative . . . to the assumptions of a dominant social theory,” in Bodenheimer’s words—the *conventions* of the fiction are also contaminated with traces of technology, which suggests a tension between the methodology of social reform fiction and the kind of environment it tried to write into industrial Britain.

Tonna and the Technological Animal

Helen Fleetwood tells the story of the Green family, which consists of the widow Green, her four grandchildren, and the orphan Helen Fleetwood, who has been adopted into the family. After their country cottage becomes unaffordable, officials in the parish persuade the Greens to

move from their idyllic home to a factory town to seek work, insisting that their lives there will be more pleasant. Everyone in the family moves to town, except for Richard Green, who remains in the country as an agricultural laborer for a squire. For over a year, Helen and the Green children toil away in the factories and suffer not only the unbearable physical conditions of the work but also—what the extremely religious widow Green considers far worse—exposure to moral depredation, from which only Helen remains immune. The end of the novel, in which Helen Fleetwood dies and the widow Green goes to the workhouse, demonstrates the extreme effects of the mechanization of their world.

For Tonna, animals are a locus for exploring the degree to which industrial society has become mechanized in its outlook on humanity. Central to her discussion is her argument that “dangerous” technology originates in humans, such that animals who behave like machines—and factory workers who appear to behave like these animals—are copies of a human-made technological system. In this she prefigures, in a religiously inflected way, the arguments of several late-twentieth-century philosophers who have responded to Heidegger’s claim that humanity and animality can and should be separated.

Though he does not write from a religious viewpoint, Heidegger argues for a distinction between man and animal in his “Letter on Humanism,” suggesting that the humanity of man “lies in his essence,” but that we cannot get to that human essence by setting man off as one living creature among many (224, 227). Basing the human on animals in any way is too metaphysical and contaminates the human with what is metaphysical: “Metaphysics thinks of man on the basis of *animalitas* and does not think in the direction of his *humanitas*” (227). Heidegger’s distinction between human and animal rests on his assumption that humans can free themselves from

negative technology while animals cannot engage in any activity that is not fundamentally technological, governed by utility rather than a quest for the essence.

Derrida, in his critique of Heidegger, explains the connection between technology and animality rather obliquely through his mention of “the hand” in Heidegger: the hand is a manner of Dasein that allows him to think (*Geschlecht* 171). Heidegger believed that speech/thought represented through *handwriting* could be subsumed by “the imperatives of technical productivity” by the proliferation of typewriters; similarly, he thought that animals, lacking a hand that could do more than grasp and manipulate things, cannot “let the thing be what it is in its essence” (*Geschlecht* 172-75). Thus, one infers, animals can engage with things in only a utilitarian, or technological, way. But if, as Derrida argues, humans are already thoroughly saturated by technology in their everyday lives, and if its technological approach to the world is what makes an animal an animal, then, as Morse and Danahay note in their discussion of posthuman perspectives like Derrida’s, “the distinction between human and animal has been eradicated” (Derrida, *Of Spirit* 11-12; Morse and Danahay 3).

Giorgio Agamben claims that Heidegger overlooks the connection between animals and humans in his eagerness to establish the otherness of animals. As Agamben explains, “Dasein is simply an animal that has learned to become bored; it has awakened *from* its own captivity *to* its own captivity”—the animal is encapsulated in the human and is in fact the basis of the human, for “if humanity has been obtained only through a suspension of animality . . . in what sense does Heidegger’s attempt to grasp the ‘existing essence of man’ escape the metaphysical primacy of *animalitas*?” (70-73). Agamben poses some original animality at the core of humanity, suggesting that humans may merely be more sophisticated copies of animals.

Cary Wolfe identifies the original/copy concept as an underlying foundation of the animal/human relationship, one that humans return to compulsively: “Who or what is miming, and who or what is mimed? Who is ‘like’ and who is ‘same,’ who the original and who the copy, who the human and who the animal?” (*Animal Rites* 180). To develop this idea Wolfe quotes Walter Benjamin, who states in “On the Mimetic Faculty” that “the highest capacity for producing similarities . . . is man’s,” as well as Michael Taussig, who points out that “the mimetic faculty is ‘the nature that culture uses to create second nature’” and that for humans, “‘the ability to mime, and mime well, in other words, is the capacity to Other’” (qtd. in Wolfe 180). As Taussig puts it, humans understand themselves and animals by pursuing—or generating—likenesses between human and animal, identifying with an “other” until an original human self becomes a copy of an animal, or until an animal appears to be a copy of a human self.

Drawing on the concept on copies and originals in a surprisingly radical move, Tonna aligns herself with the ideas of Derrida and Agamben and suggests that, in an industrial world at least, humans must take responsibility for dangerous technology in themselves and in the plant and animal world they have transformed. In an 1845 Sunday School tract entitled “Kindness to Animals; or, The Sin of Cruelty Exposed and Rebuked,” Tonna argues that beginning with Adam and Eve’s sin, all living creatures were made to work for their subsistence, and at this point humans began to value animals for their functionality rather than for what they reveal about God and His relationship with His creatures.

In other words, at the moment when humans created what Heidegger might call a product-oriented rather than a process-oriented attitude toward technology—when technology ceased to be ontologically-revealing—the technological animal as we know it was born. In Taussig’s terms, then, animals’ technological nature, the “otherness” for which they have been

exploited since their expulsion from Eden, is a mimicry of the original technology of humans. By presenting the industrial world of *Helen Fleetwood* as a fallen state, in which workers moving in from the countryside are like the animals who were transformed into machinery after original sin, Tonna demonstrates that nature in its original, Edenic form has been subsumed by dangerous technology.

It is this very Edenic nature that Tonna proposes as a kind of new “original” for industrial society. In the rural scenes of the novel, Tonna creates a world in which both humans and animals are considered to be individuals whose work is not dangerously technological but is in harmony with their surroundings and valued for more than the products they produce. Tonna goes so far as to extract the “technological animal” altogether, even from the actual animal itself, and crafts animals instead as original, Edenic beings free from the contamination of technology that was generated by humans’ need to labor. Tonna’s rural scenes, in which she positions animals as originals for humans to copy, are an integral part of her challenge to return to Eden and to reevaluate the technological “assumptions of [the] dominant social theory” that Bodenheimer identifies as a goal of idealized fictional accounts of nature (9).

Seeing “Naturally”: Edenic Animals as Poetic Technology

Nature in *Helen Fleetwood* is presented both nostalgically and as a model for the future. Raymond Williams notes that the ever-present longing in literature for a perhaps nonexistent rural past, a literary longing prevalent during the shift from agrarianism to industrialism, is less a matter of “historical error” than a matter of “historical perspective” (10). He explains that as identity and community became more problematic, as a matter of perception and as a matter of valuation, as the scale and complexity of the characteristic social organization increased [and] a whole community, wholly knowable . . . became

harder and harder to sustain, [what was knowable about a community became not] a function of objects [but] a function of subjects, of observers. . . . And what we have then to see, as throughout, in the country writing, is not only the reality of the rural community; it is the observer's position in and towards it; a position which is part of the community being known. (165)

Scholars studying nature scenes in Tonna's novel have traditionally seen them as evidence of Tonna making nature a model for industrial labor. In her analysis of Tonna's use of the countryside in *Helen Fleetwood*, Dorice Elliott asserts that Tonna's didactic portrayal of agrarian paternalism is "a carefully articulated call for a kind of social relations that could be transferred to the urban environment of the factories—as well as needing to be preserved in the country" (103). Bodenheimer contends that Tonna's call is so extreme that the novel "says stubbornly that the whole course of industrialization has been a mistake" and "that preindustrial patriarchal society is equivalent to the timeless and always reproducible course of nature" (134). As a result, Bodenheimer argues, "the effect of her rural scenes is to renaturalize an old vision of a social order rather than to provide an interior pastoral from which the workings of the social order may be observed" (134). However, looking carefully at nature and especially animals in Tonna's argument reveals that Bodenheimer's analysis of this particular novel is overly simplistic. While it is true that *Helen Fleetwood* overtly expresses a yearning for a former time, and while Tonna's apparent hope that society can somehow return to that time is clearly futile, the novel does more than wax nostalgic. As is evident in Tonna's treatment of Heidegger's dangerous technology in her descriptions of the countryside, and particularly in her descriptions of animals in Edenic nature, Tonna's nature scenes do attempt to offer a de-technologized "interior pastoral"—in Bodenheimer's words, an inner "continuity between the human spirit and the natural universe

that is distinct from social [constructions]”—from which human relationships in labor settings can be re-envisioned (115).

The novel begins with a lengthy encomium on the nature that surrounds Helen Fleetwood as she goes about her morning chore of milking the cows:

Who that has seen the sun’s uprising, when his first bright gleam comes sparkling over the billows on a clear autumnal morning, but has felt a thrill of gladness at his heart—an involuntary, perhaps an unconscious ascription of praise to the Creator, who has so framed him that all his innate perverseness cannot bar the entrance of that thrill? (7)

From the outset, Tonna indicates that agricultural work is ennobling not just because it is physically easier than factory work or provides visual pleasure through association with nature; rather, the full advantage of working in a rural setting comes from one’s ability to glean from nature’s mere existence an awareness of the self as a living being and an awareness that one’s “innate perverseness” is overshadowed by “creation.”

Both a context for their labor and an integral part of it, nature provides for Helen Fleetwood a way of approaching work that is only technological in the best sense, a Heideggerian “way of revealing the totality of beings,” a “bringing-forth” of a natural process rather than a “challenging-forth” that requires everything “ordered to stand by, to be immediately on hand, indeed to stand there just so that it may be on call for a further ordering” (Krell 309; Heidegger, “Question” 322).⁸ As she works, Helen “somehow” feels “so hearty and alive,” her Being, in Heidegger’s terms, thrown into relief through her connections with her natural surroundings (9). It is significant that although like Heidegger’s peasant woman Helen’s “thoughts had never learned to clothe themselves in language worthy of the occasion that called

them into existence,” the reader is privy to Tonna’s articulation of those feelings (Heidegger, “Origin” 158-59; Tonna 7-8). By privileging the *narration* of a nature experience as the reader’s ultimate means of understanding an individual laborer’s Being, Tonna’s text conditions the reader not only to see nature as the ideal alternative to industry, as Bodenheimer suggests, but also to consider nature as the best setting in which work should be conceptualized. In nature, Helen and especially the reader develop an interior pastoral, an ability to view work as an experience motivated by natural rather than social factors.

Tonna’s argument that nature provides an alternative way of viewing work is most strikingly demonstrated through animals in the Edenic countryside. Although the country is not actually Eden—labor exists here, where it did not before the Fall—it is Edenic, and Tonna’s representations of animals recreate as much as possible a world before technology. Positioned somewhere between the idyllic nature described in the passage above—the sun, the ocean, etc.—and the humans who inhabit that nature, animals present a possible point of intersection between poetic technology uncontaminated by human constructs and the dangerous technology that in Tonna’s eyes originated with humans. As living, breathing, acting beings more closely connected with nature than their human counterparts, animals in the novel have the potential to demonstrate how “natural” living entities can work and produce without becoming negatively technologized.

The Green family—whose very name marks them as a symbol of pure nature—treats their pet ducks, rabbits, and fowls as individual beings with human characteristics (Tonna 13). All of the animals—Helen’s fowls, James Green’s rabbits, and Willy Green’s ducks—are taken care of as family members (13-15). The animals are also a source of pride: Young Willy Green “[gazes] with admiration at the exploits of his young ducks in their narrow pond,” keeping a careful eye on the creatures he has tended since his infancy (15). Although some of these animals

are destined to be sold or eaten, during their lifetimes they are clearly valued for more than what they produce.

In some cases the animals are, in fact, set up as models for leaders of families and of society. Describing to Helen his hopes for the future, Richard draws out a comparison between his imaginary future family and a family of fowls that used to belong to the Greens:

“Look,” said he, “at Strut, what a good fellow he is. . . . Now you see, Helen, how he goes about peeping, and scratching and hunting, and when he finds a nice thing, instead of gobbling it up all alone, he calls them, and looks on better pleased to see them enjoy it than to eat it himself. And then if anybody meddles with the hens or chickens, what a fuss he gets into! . . . He follows me about, and pecks from my hand; but if I catch a fowl, and frighten it, bounce he flies at me, tries to strike with his spurs, and tells me as plain as he can speak he is going to tear my eyes out.”

. . . “I will be like Strut when I am a man.” (185)

Strut is apparently uncontaminated by product-oriented technology and is instead selfless, aware of his relationship with other beings, and willing to sacrifice the material objects he labors for to preserve others’ happiness. A thinking being that can experience pleasure in abstract thought, as a laborer Strut is more than a machine that forays for food. This animal is presented as Edenic, uncontaminated by negative technology and therefore a model of original “nature” for Richard to copy as he prepares to labor for his family.

Just as Tonna articulates how Helen’s connection with nature defines her Being, in this passage Richard interprets Strut’s motivations from his actions, giving voice to a process of thought that Strut himself does not describe. Seeing an animal’s natural approach to labor,

Richard, and through him the reader, learns to read human labor systems in a re-naturalized, poetically technological way. Through the form in which these nature scenes are presented, Tonna champions an ontological methodology over a mechanical one, a methodology that analytically probes the individual's approach to work in order to ascertain what work is and, presumably, how labor systems should function. Though it is developed out of nature, as a methodology it is a kind of "internal pastoral" that Bodenheimer refers to. In other words, through Edenic animals Tonna offers a more sophisticated version of reform than merely an escape to an eighteenth-century past—she offers a redefinition of work itself as a nature-based process.

This redefinition takes form through Richard's story in the later parts of the novel. Richard, who remains in the country to work in the fields, experiences the "value" of being able to say, "My employer knows me; I am not in his sight a mere piece of machinery, regarded only while it works in his service" (179). Richard's strong belief in the humanizing power of a rural setting and masters who are able to view their workers non-technologically is contrasted sharply with Tonna's use of the "technologized animal" workers in her factory scenes.

"Baiting the Trap": Animals and Animalistic Mindsets in Industry

When the story moves to industrial settings, nature becomes dominated by a human construct of industry. The idyllic peace of the novel's first chapter is interrupted by a transition to a focus on "a higher grade of society" than the Greens', and with the class move enters strife (16). The widow Green is deceived into removing Helen and the other children from their cottage to a nearby industrial town when a Mr. Stratton, a parish leader, gives her a pamphlet that "[sets] forth in glowing colors the comfort, the abundance, the independence of those who engaged in [industrial] work" and she finds the proposal to move to town "too delightful a

prospect to be relinquished” (31-34). The deceit loosely mirrors that of Adam and Eve, for by falling for this metaphorical fruit the widow puts her children at risk of losing their clear and uncontested relationship with the plant, animal, and human life around them. They are exchanging Edenic labor that “brings forth” for industrial labor that “challenges forth.”

At this point, the “animal” in the text shifts into something negative, representing not a source of ontological revelation about creation but the machination of creatures that epitomizes Heideggerian poorness in world. Rather than representing an original purity for humans to copy, animals in industrial settings are used symbolically to show that industrialization has warped nature into a copy of human technological-mindedness.

Tonna describes Mr. Stratton’s lie as a baited trap “that was to enclose the victims within its iron fence” (53). By comparing the factory with an “iron” trap, the parish workers with hunters, and the factory workers with animals fooled by bait, Tonna draws on rhetoric that permeated discussions about animal rights in her time. Hunting and its associated practices, including trapping, were a controversial subject in the nineteenth century both because of the pain they inflicted on animals and the perceived negative effects on the characters of those who hunted (Perkins 70). Tonna herself reprimanded young boys who trapped animals for anything but food, declaring that “though the Lord has given you the bodies of his creatures for food, he has never given you their natural liberty, either for your amusement or profit” (“Kindness”). In disparaging hunting, a rural practice, Tonna emphasizes that human activities based on social values corrupt the natural order. Because the act of trapping an animal without real need is a literal and figurative way of framing it as something merely for “amusement or profit,” it reflects the trappers’ disregard for the animals’ ontology. The trappers’ position of power above animals has seemingly disobliged them from considering the animals’ liberty, which was in fact the case

for hunters at the time—since only the upper classes were allowed to hunt, the institution of hunting was protected by the wealth and influence of the gentry (Perkins 74). The injustice of leveraging one’s social position to take control of and use a helpless animal is the underpinning of Tonna’s critique of the parish leaders’ “trapping” in *Helen Fleetwood*, who manipulate the poor in order to use them as technology for their own convenience.

The animalizing of the children worsens after the Greens’ move. Before they can be employed, the children must be inspected by a surgeon to determine their eligibility for work. The Greens’ agent, Mr. M., presses the surgeon to ignore the certificates that prove the children’s ages, insisting that “the ordinary strength and appearance . . . is the rule,” because he knows that some of the children are underage (54). After examining the limbs of each child and evaluating their features, the surgeon “rates” the children and pronounces which of them he can approve for work (52). His treatment of them demonstrates that he views them as brute creatures to be sold based on their utility, rather than seeing their humanity—he sees “substance and muscle” only (52). (Tonna displays the animalization of the children so boldly in this scene that next to this passage in the *Google Books* copy of *Helen Fleetwood*, someone has written in the margin simply “animals.”) Tonna makes similar references to the animalization of workers, some overt and some subtle, throughout the novel. Mrs. Wright, the widow’s daughter, describes Mary Green and Helen as “two more lambs for the shambles” (70). Sarah Wright, a cousin of the Greens’, has been so maimed by the factory machinery and the overlooker’s beatings that she can only crawl on all fours like an animal (60; 84). When Richard comes to visit the Greens and sees the children working at the mill, he remarks that “they are working babes as [he] would not work a plough-horse” (241).

Helen tells the widow that she is “greatly mistaken” to think that the overlookers care for the moral well-being of factory children, noting that they care only “to see everybody feeding the engines, or drawing out the cotton, winding, piecening, and all the rest of the business” (115). She bitterly comments that she knows Mr. Z., the factory owner, would never subject his own daughters to the animalization the children in the mill undergo: “He knows too well that their health would be destroyed by staying even so long in the heat, the steam, the stench and the dust of rooms . . . and he knows that they would [be ruined by] the vile, filthy talk that his poor laborers use” (120). As Tom South, a friend of the Greens, tells Richard, factory workers “may lie, they may steal, they may drink, they may make themselves no better than the beasts of the earth, so long as they work out their hours of labor, keeping time with the machinery” (220).

Industry encourages even lower-class people to animalize each other. South tells the widow Green that families who depend on their young children’s factory wages live “a cannibal sort of life to be eating, as one may say, the flesh off our children’s bones, and sucking the young blood out of their veins” (67). His uneasiness about his “cannibalism” is derived from his sense that he, too, is made of flesh and bone like his children—it is wrong to “eat” them because of his similarity to them, which is masked but not eradicated when they are divided by their positions as workers and owner. In its reference to meat-eating, the language here conjures up animals: as Perkins notes, since “vegetables were the diet of Paradise,” many in the nineteenth century felt guilt over eating animal flesh because it implicated them in the base aspects of human nature—aggression, cruelty, and exploitation toward beings in whom they saw aspects of themselves (124).

These brief but recurring passages refer to animals as the epitome of dangerous technology. No longer are animals a means of re-generating an Edenic approach to life; they are

instead a symbol of everything that is wrong about working relationships in industry. Here the argument Tonna makes in “Kindness to Animals” comes into full force as a critique of industry. The industrial labor structure is preserved through animals—outside of the Edenic countryside, factory owners create distance between themselves and their workers by animalizing them in their work with machines. Drawing on a Derridean concept of the relationship between animals, humans, and technology, Tonna demonstrates that in a fallen world animality is integral to the masters and is in fact the means of their animalizing of others. Just as the post-Edenic man overlooks the paradox of his relationship to animals, the manufacturer ignores the paradox of his relationship with his employees—he forgets that what is animal and technological within him has been internalized by the human worker. Implicitly, Tonna accuses both the parents of industrial workers and especially the masters of the factories for crafting these “beasts of the earth” through their own materialistic “challenging-forth” of technology, as Derrida critiques Heidegger for disregarding the technological connections between humans and animals. The workers’ “beastliness” is merely a copy of the technological human.

The degree to which dangerous technology permeates the mind marks the true distinction between spheres of people in industrial settings. Those who fall victim to “the system, the vile, the cruel, the body-and-soul murdering system of factory labor,” and especially those who enforce the system, lose their souls in their slavery to productivity and are marked as inferior to those of all economic classes who manage to maintain morality, which for Tonna is defined in part as purity from technology (127). The fact that Mr. Z. conceives of his workers as animals who create profit for him indicates that the “internal pastoral” of a nature-based way of understanding labor has given way in industry to the machine-based paradigm that Poovey contends is so prevalent in the Victorian era. He “sees” like Heidegger’s technological animal.

By drawing out the fictions that Mr. Z. indulges in about his workers' lives—that their sufferings, both physical and spiritual, are beyond his responsibility and don't require his thought—Tonna demonstrates to the reader his inability to learn about labor from nature the way Richard learns from Strut.

The Animalized Helen Fleetwood

Yet, in a closer reading, this same dangerous technology is subtly present in both Tonna's Edenic animals in nature and in her manner of "knowing" nature. Strut the rooster, for example, is generally motivated by love and decency, but if threatened his behavior resembles that of Mr. Z. Richard describes Strut's behavior under stress: Strut will fly at him, strike him, and tear his eyes out, reducing Richard to a material threat that must be managed (185). This survival instinct is similar to that which motivates the factory owners to elevate their own families while suppressing others, to take extreme and violent measures to preserve the financial and social stability of those they love. Both Strut and Mr. Z. behave like Heidegger's technological animal, which grasps and manipulates with its hand to secure something immediately but does not reflect about the wider, long-term consequences or consider the ontology of its labor.

From Richard's comparison of Strut with himself, it is clear that Richard, too, embodies that same animal core and is even proud of it. While Tonna portrays Strut as an original model, a nostalgically Edenic character that Richard wishes to copy, the end of this passage reveals that Strut is also a copy of the technological man that has existed since Adam and Eve first invented economic competition. The technological nature of Strut complicates the Edenic relationship between humans and animals in rural scenes.

The technology of rural life is pressed on Richard in the end. He hopes to earn enough money to support the members of his family that remain alive and to enable them to move back

to the country. He declares that he is a “free-born man” who can work hard for what he wants without “any law to hinder” him (304). But his hopes are dashed when he is told that the squire, whom he hoped would continue to increase his wages, is already overpaying him, did not plan ever to pay him enough to support his family, and discourages any plan Richard may have to do so (305). As with Strut, who ultimately became an animal to protect what he cares most about, the squire must keep his self-interest at heart when he determines Richard’s wages, even if it means sending Richard’s family to the workhouse.

That the country life often technologized laborers is born out in other, perhaps more realistic, literature of the time, suggesting that Tonna’s idealization of rural animals was quickly being broken apart by other writers on the same subject. For example, in Elizabeth Gaskell’s *North and South*, with which *Helen Fleetwood* has often been paired, Margaret Hale tells factory worker Nicholas Higgins that she does not think he would find better wages nor better working conditions in the southern countryside. She argues that both industrial and rural work animalizes workers: “Both must find it hard to realize a future of any kind; the one because the present is so living and hurrying and close around him; the other because his life tempts him to revel in the mere sense of animal existence, not knowing of, and consequently not caring for any pungency of pleasure, for the attainment of which he can plan, and deny himself and look forward” (275). Margaret identifies ludicrously low wages as a problem in the rural labor system, but what most makes her caution Higgins against the move is her conviction that he will be oppressed by the kind of labor required, which strips humans of their humanity and makes them “brutishly tired, poor creatures” whose brains have been robbed (279). Mr. Hale seconds Margaret’s opinion, telling Higgins that country workers develop “stagnant habits of mind” (275).

Their word choice is strikingly similar to that which Richard uses to describe workers in the factory: “Their minds seemed to stagnate, their spirits to have wholly evaporated, and a sort of indifference, the furthest possibly removed from all feeling of enjoyment, reigned supreme” (269). Gaskell’s more rounded, less biased comparison of country labor and industrial labor reveals what Tonna conceals, or at least suppresses: that the animal mentality toward workers dwells in employers of all situations and all settings. As George Crabbe remarks in *The Parish Register*, “Since vice the world subdued and waters drowned, / Auburn and Eden can no more be found” (3001). The relationship between masters and workers has less to do with location than with technology itself, whatever its form. In the post-Eden world the technological animal is an innate, complicated part of nature itself, and an element of labor systems that industrialization made more visible but did not invent.

Because “nature” is finally oversimplified in the novel, its technological qualities hidden under seemingly ontological qualities, Tonna’s nature-based methodology for re-conceiving society is compromised. While literal and figurative animals allow Tonna to create the characters of masters and workers in her cautionary tale, the animals themselves lack complex character—they are narrative devices that take the form of partial pieces, original or copied, of human beings to serve a purpose for the writer. Even Strut, whom Richard describes as an agent protecting his family, finally serves solely as an analogy that is intended to idealize human relationships; like the “beasts” that Tonna refers to generally throughout her argument that industrial workers are animalized, he is symbolic rather than actual.

Cary Wolfe argues that animal studies is both most accurate and most useful when it sees animals not as a “theme, trope, metaphor, analogy, representation, or sociological datum,” but rather as actual entities that mark how humans view ethical dilemmas (“Human” 567). Looking

at animals as symbolic copies of humans can highlight important connections between them, such as the foundational technological connection between humans and animals that Tonna draws in her Sunday School tract. But when what is copied in animals from humans or by humans *becomes* an animal's identity, animals are then the general "the animal" Derrida decries. As he explains, whenever one "says 'The Animal' in the singular and without further ado, claiming thus to designate every living thing that is held not to be human . . . this 'one,' this 'I,' . . . utters an *asinanity* [bêtise]" (*Animal* 31).⁹ Because master/worker relationships in *Helen Fleetwood* are so often predicated on animals that lack individual identity, there is no possibility of making a realistic argument for nature-based, ethical reform.

The lack of real animals in *Helen Fleetwood* is part of a larger conflict at work in the novel between fictional and realistic constructs of nature. Tonna's self-reflections on this conflict demonstrate the difficulty of revealing the ontology of human working relationships through nature in didactic fiction:

Let no one suppose we are going to write fiction, or to conjure up phantoms of a heated imagination, to aid the cause which we avowedly embrace. . . . We will exhibit the tree, we will analyze the soil where it grows, the elements that nourish, the hands that culture it, and the fruit which it ultimately produces; but the secret circulation of its poisonous sap we will not so bare as to contaminate the mind of a youthful reader, or to harrow up the soul of any one. (43)

Despite her declaration that she will not write "fiction," Tonna adamantly declares no interest in presenting the ontological origins of what drives the abuses in the factory; she is interested in only surface, representational copies of that abuse. Her use of biological terms—the tree, the soil, the fruit—as a metaphor for her novel indicates that, as with animals, the discussion of human

systems is both inextricably linked with their biological environment and simultaneously insistent on dominating that environment when the “poisonous sap” proves too “contaminating” to explore. Because Tonna treats animals as beings that can copy and be copied, the narrative itself becomes a being that can be copied, a how-to manual that represses complications to make an argument and lacks what Walter Benjamin calls “the whole sphere of authenticity” in its “technical reproducibility.” In Benjamin’s terms, the novel “substitutes a plurality of copies for a unique existence”; the pluralities of “the animal” in the novel are as mass-produced as the workers and products of the factories Tonna condemns (324-25).

Conclusion

As a genre that developed because of the transition from agricultural to industrial labor, and subsequently out of the changing paradigms of labor structures that Mary Poovey outlines, industrial reform novels like *Helen Fleetwood* reveal as much about the ontology of social thought as they do about factory conditions in mid-century England. Scholars like Joseph Kestner, Mary Lenard, and Rosemarie Bodenheimer have shown that the narrative conventions of social reform novels mark the ways in which their writers coped with or contested “mechanical” views of society; in particular, Bodenheimer’s analysis of nature in these novels establishes that the didacticism of this period is a nuanced response to industrialization that cannot be fully understood by examining only the novels’ political, social, and religious environments.

But Bodenheimer’s description of pastoral arguments as “a separate ground for social judgment” provides only half the story (118). Studying Tonna’s treatment of animals shows that Tonna is complicit in the social judgment she purports to counteract. In *Helen Fleetwood*, Tonna creates new biological constructs in fiction—reinventing what an animal is, or perhaps

suppressing what an animal is—to craft an argument about what should be the “natural” relationships between human workers. But in its failure to treat animals as more than symbols, the novel ironically becomes as “poor in world” as the animals Martin Heidegger disparages, repressing a thorough analysis of the ontology of Raymond Williams’s “knowable community” and instead becoming capable only of functionality (Heidegger, “Origin”). As much as the workers it defends, the novel’s conventions are shaped by the “technologizing” of labor in the transition to the industrial revolution, a parallel to the factory system that the novel seeks to challenge. At least in Tonna’s case the pastoral argument is not a separate ground of assumptions at all—it is an *attempt* to establish a separate ground that is complicated by her inability to escape the technology that permeates both the content and conventions of her novel.

Tonna’s complicity in furthering an animalistic approach to the industrial labor structure makes it clear that industrialization highlighted the instability of literary conventions as much as the instability of social formations. Studying the animality of Tonna’s text indicates that narrated nature in social reform fiction doesn’t entirely dictate social constructions, as scholars have often supposed, but is instead largely dictated by a “nature” that is beyond the novelists’ control—the technological nature that pervades the earth, animals, and humans alike. Social reform novelists’ efforts to restore “humanity” to the industrial world may therefore be read less as a quest to reintroduce nature into paradigms of society than as a strained effort to escape nature in its most fundamental sense.

Notes

¹ Perkins also explains that during this time period people became aware that animals could feel pain, began to consider the possibility that animals have souls, and began to fear that animal

cruelty was not in keeping with a civilized, enlightened society. Additionally, there was a pervading religious belief that God had commanded men to be kind to all creatures (22-32).

² On the connection between working animals and machinery, Elsie B. Michie quotes from the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge's words in *The Horse; With a Treatise on Draught* from London, 1831: "An animal is but a beautiful piece of machinery, and although perfect in its construction, and wonderfully accommodating in its movements, it still, like the engine, has a limited power, and has its peculiar modes of action, its strong and its feeble parts" (150).

³ Although Tonna was a popular writer in her day, her novel received at best scattered attention from scholars over the first half of the twentieth century, and it wasn't until the 1970s that her significant role as an industrial novelist was acknowledged. After Barbara Kanner and Ivanka Kovacevic pointed out the unique methodology of Tonna's writing—her research of and fidelity to the Parliamentary blue book investigations of the factories—Tonna's position as a bridge between the working class and the middle and upper classes sparked scholarly interest (152-53, 156).

⁴ The New Poor Law made it more difficult for the parish to assist the poor and pressured parish officials into disposing of them by sending them off to work in industrial towns, which is what happens to the Greens in Tonna's novel (Simmons 336). The Ten Hours campaign sought to restrict the amount of time women could work in the factories to ten hours a day, which would protect them from abuse and allow them to spend more time at home taking care of their families (Dzelzainis 181).

⁵ See Kanner and Kovacevic 168; Kestner, *Wrongs of Woman* 199; Dzelzainis 181; Gallagher 127.

⁶The first metaphor compared society to a factory, in which “the efficient machine . . . could serve as a paradigm for an efficient, productive society” (38). When the social machine was left to run on its own, the relationship between the working classes and their employers would work itself out in the most beneficial way possible; the goal of this model was not to dehumanize workers, but to bind them together with their masters in a unified effort to keep the machine functional, although this idea worked better in theory than in fact (39). The second metaphor, the social body, posited the population as a body of people that was “naturally healthy” but occasionally needed “some form of government-sponsored medical intervention” (40). Further, Poovey points out that mass culture became possible in the mid-nineteenth century because “the technologies capable of materializing an aggregate known as the ‘population’ had been institutionalized” (4). By “technologies” Poovey refers to the census and population statistics, as well as “cheap publications” and “national museums” that functioned as “technologies of representation” (4).

⁷These scholars have teased out the relationship that Kestner identifies between social issues and didacticism, which represents one stage in the developing form of those novels. Christine Krueger argues that Tonna’s Evangelicalism led her to assume the preacher-like voice and the stark adherence to realism that dominates her narration; by contrast, Mary Lenard highlights the sentimentality that seeps into Tonna’s writing, arguing that Tonna was part of a new aesthetic movement that emphasized emotion as a rhetorical tool. Catherine Gallagher concludes that Tonna’s didacticism is in part a result of religious and economic forces, which create a tension in her work between free will and determinism that she attempts to suppress by carefully controlling the readers’ responses to her story. Ella Dzelzainis points out that Tonna’s reform

rhetoric is both framed by the domestic ideology she upheld and shaped as a challenge to that ideology, making women prominent in the political sphere (189).

⁸ In “The Origin of the Work of Art,” Heidegger suggests that because the shoes of a peasant woman working in a field are used as equipment, they reveal to an observer the Being of the shoes and the peasant woman, although this is not revealed to the peasant woman herself because she is immersed in the work itself. Yet, because this work is a bringing-forth type of work, the peasant woman is immersed in an ontologically revealing setting, despite the fact that she is not technically conscious of it (158-59).

⁹ Commenting on the objectification of animals that Derrida identifies here, Donna Haraway adds that Derrida is “[tracking] the old philosophical scandal of judging ‘the animal’ to be capable only of reaction as an animal-machine” (19). Her words are particularly fitting in relation to Tonna’s novel, which generalizes animals to make them a machine for her own labor of argumentation.

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