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“Non dovevo ucciderlo nemmeno?”: Interspecific Killing and Kinship in Giovanni Verga’s *Jeli il pastore*

Bristin Scalzo Jones

in latere exiles digiti pro cruribus haerent,
cetera venter habet: de quo tamen illa remittit
stamen et antiquas exercet aranea telas.
—Ovid, *Metamorphōseōn*

Di molte fila esser bisogno parme
A condur la gran tela ch’io lavoro.
—Ludovico Ariosto, *Orlando Furioso*

In *Thinking Italian Animals*, the foundational text for Anglophone Italian Animal Studies, co-editors Deborah Amberson and Elena Past cite Giovanni Verga as one of the prominent writers missing from their collection. “There are countless creatures throughout Italian literature who have not made appearances in essays in this volume,” they write, continuing, “We might also invoke the beasts of burden—human and non—of Giovanni Verga’s Sicily.”¹ I take this line as scholarly bait, and what follows can be considered a direct response to this omission. In this article, I suggest Verga’s novella *Jeli il pastore* (*Jeli the Shepherd*),² when put into conversation with modern biology’s theorization of animal communication, can help us see that domestication has less to do with human exceptionalism and more to do with communication. It is for this particular contribution to the current state of animal studies—that is, the recognition of the importance of interspecific communication—that I find the recovery of Verga’s work within this field so pertinent. Through my research into how present-day biologists theorize animal communication, I have come to think that we in the humanities have, in our conceptualizations of domestication, been pursuing a misguided line of thinking by focusing on its hierarchical and anthropocentric valences. Perhaps surprisingly, contemporary biology and the eponymous protagonist of *Jeli il pastore* converge in their realizations that both individuals’ and species’ survival depend on the ability to enter into complex networks of interspecific relations. Southern, poor, orphaned, *cornuto*, animal: Jeli epitomizes the marginalized subject in late nineteenth century Italy. Jeli’s liminal position between the dying remnants of an agropastoral way of life and a modernizing capitalistic society can help us imagine a “way out”³ of our own contemporary and post-industrial disengagement from other animal lives by anticipating the importance of interspecific communication and alternative kinship networks.

¹ Deborah Amberson and Elena Past, eds., *Thinking Italian Animals: Human and Posthuman in Modern Italian Literature and Film* (New York: Palgrave, 2014), 13. In Italy, there is burgeoning interest in how Verga’s work can contribute to the field of animal studies, best evidenced by Gianni Oliva, ed., *Animali e metafore zoomorfe in Verga* (Rome: Bulzoni, 1999).

² Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own. The only published English translation of this novella is “Jeli,” trans. Giovanni Cecchetti, *The She-Wolf and Other Stories* (Berkeley: University of Berkeley Press, 1973), 19-64).

³ Here I echo the “way out” prominently featured in Franz Kafka, “A Report to an Academy,” trans. Willa and Edwin Muir, *The Complete Stories*, ed. Nahum N. Glatzer (New York: Schocken Books, 1983), 250–69.

Weaving Uexküll with Clever Hans: Rethinking Interspecific Communication

Before turning, in the latter part of this article, to discussing Verga's writing in general and *Jeli* in particular, I must weave together various strands:⁴ Jakob von Uexküll's spider and fly, the curious case of Clever Hans, Jacques Derrida's discussion of the commandment "Thou shall not kill," animal studies' discussion of domestication, and contemporary biology. My discussion in the following sections will center on the problem of communication and the ways it is manifested and negotiated via domestication in animal studies today. This theoretical discussion lays the groundwork for the latter sections of the article in which I explore *Jeli* philologically through my analysis of textual variants made possible by archival research conducted at the Fondazione Verga in Catania.

In *The Open*, Giorgio Agamben introduces zoologist Jakob von Uexküll's concept of *Umwelt* (environment-world) through the problematic example of the spider and the fly. "The spider knows nothing about the fly," Agamben explains,

nor can it measure its client as a tailor does before sewing his suit. And yet it determines the length of the stitches in its web according to the dimensions of the fly's body, and it adjusts the resistance of the threads in exact proportion to the force of impact of the fly's body in flight.⁵

Uexküll is perhaps better known for his interpretation of the obstinate tick, whose life supposedly revolves around only butyric acid, a temperature of 37C, and mammalian skin. However, I argue Uexküll's triumvirate of the spider, the fly, and the web that binds them is more conducive to the questions we ask in animal studies for its focus not on an individual species' experience of the world but rather on the relationships—or lack thereof—among different species. "Indeed," Agamben continues, "the most surprising fact is that the threads of the web are exactly proportioned to the visual capacity of the eye of the fly, who cannot see them and therefore flies toward death unawares."⁶ The passage presents two species living in complete isolation, each simultaneously dependent on and ignorant of the other. Due to the two species' different sensory capacities, there is no communication between them; each operates within and only within in its own private *Umwelt*:

The two perceptual worlds of the fly and the spider are absolutely uncommunicating [...]. Though the spider can in no way see the *Umwelt* of the fly (Uexküll affirms—and thus formulates a principle that would have some success—that "no animal can enter into relation with an object as such," but only with its own carriers of significance), the web expresses the paradoxical coincidence of this reciprocal blindness.⁷

⁴ My process of weaving echoes the purposefully abrupt transitions of Ariosto mentioned in the epigraph. This process reinforces the spider and fly example I discuss from Uexküll, which, I argue, becomes metonymic for the (in)capacity of interspecific communication.

⁵ Agamben, *The Open*, trans. Kevin Attell (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 41–42.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 42.

⁷ *Ibid.*

In a case of pure dramatic irony, we, the human audience, anticipate the literally interwoven fates of the two non-human actors that they themselves cannot see. Each is, in Agamben's astute turn of phrase, reciprocally blind, and, in this reciprocal blindness, destined either to life (for the spider) or death (for the fly). The web and its weaving, then, become metonymic figures of not only the incapacity for communication between the spider and the fly but also the incapacity for communication across any species divide.

While Uexküll's claims, which, in turn inspired Martin Heidegger's assertion that all non-human animals are poor in world,⁸ are no longer considered sound or even relevant to contemporary biologists—to the point that his name is entirely absent from most modern day biology and ecology textbooks—in animal studies we continue to weave Uexküll's terms and concepts into our discourse. While I sympathize with Heidegger's impulse to turn to the biology of his time to enrich his philosophy, I disagree with his conclusions for two reasons: first, Uexküll's science is now extremely outdated and second, Heidegger's and Uexküll's frameworks are humanistic and anthropocentric, which necessarily lead them to humanistic and anthropocentric conclusions. In opening up animal studies to science, we must be careful to not fall back into a humanist framework—as rampant in science as in philosophy—that proclaims a subject-centered semantics based on the concept of “the human.” Following Heidegger's impulse to turn to what was, during his time, contemporary biological research, this article asks: what would it look like for animal studies to turn to contemporary biology to enrich our understanding of other animals, while being careful to maintain a posthumanist framework?⁹

I need many threads to weave the conceptual web I am working on. I need to transport us back in time to witness the feats of Clever Hans, the horse paraded around Europe at the turn of the twentieth century advertised as being able to solve mathematic equations and correctly answer various questions posed to him by humans. A 1904 *New York Times* article proclaims,

The versatility of Hans [...] is astonishing. He can distinguish between straw and felt hats, between canes and umbrellas. He knows the different colors. [...] Hans can tell the time on a watch and can indicate the exact hour. He knows the names of the months and indicates the day of the week by putting down his foot, Sunday once, Monday twice, etc.¹⁰

And yet, while holding this thread in my hands, I need to pick up Jacques Derrida's discussion in “Eating Well” of the commandment “Thou shalt not kill,” which he contends has never been

⁸ “Indeed, not only are Uexküll's studies explicitly described [by Heidegger] as ‘the most fruitful thing that philosophy can adopt from the biology dominant today,’ but the influence on the concepts and terminologies of [his] lectures is even greater than Heidegger himself recognizes when he writes that the words that he uses to define the animal's poverty in world express nothing other than what Uexküll means with the terms *Umwelt* and *Innenwelt*” (Agamben, 51).

⁹ Only by embracing posthumanist content and posthumanist disciplinary practices can we recognize what Cary Wolfe defines as “the material, embodied, and evolutionary nature of intelligence and cognition, in which language, for example, is no longer seen (as it is in philosophical humanism) as a well-nigh-magical property that ontologically separates *Homo sapiens* from every other living creature.” Cary Wolfe, *What is Posthumanism?* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 120.

¹⁰ Edward T. Heyn, “Berlin's Wonderful Horse; He Can Do Almost Everything but Talk--How He Was Taught,” *The New York Times*, September 4, 1904.

taken to mean “Thou shalt not put to death the living in general.”¹¹ Questioning who can possess subject status and the sacrificial structure underlying Western cultures, religions, and philosophies, Derrida writes,

I don’t know, at this point, who is “who,” no more than I know what “sacrifice” means; to determine what this last word means, I would retain this clue: need, desire, authorization, the justification of putting to death, putting to death as denegation of murder. The putting to death of the animal, says this denegation, is not a murder.¹²

Humans, or at least those permitted subject status by the biopolitical apparatus, are “murdered.” Other animals are simply “put to death.”

I begin my weaving here with these seemingly separate threads as together they embody the point of departure for this article: humans’ belittling of non-human animal communication is part of a larger hierarchical and anthropocentric (humanist) worldview that justifies killing non-human animals. The conundrum of Clever Hans is, similarly, the point of departure for Vicky Hearne in *Adam’s Task*. As someone who simultaneously inhabits the two traditionally incompatible subject positions of animal trainer and academic, Hearne is suspicious of the supercilious rejection of Clever Hans’s intelligence given by most linguists and animal psychologists. “There is an unhealthy air of triumph in the rhythms of the prose of the people who do this discrediting,” she writes, “and I have found myself moved to wonder why, if the trainers and thinkers who believe that Hans illustrates something more important are so discountable, they must be so often attacked.”¹³ Is this not, she ponders, a case of academics who doth protest too much? Within the academy’s halls, she was taught to vilify the so-called anthropomorphism of non-humans and cites numerous examples of fellow students being chastised and corrected for doing so. However, as a horse and dog trainer, she knew “the trainers’ habit of talking in highly anthropomorphic, morally loaded language” was “part of what enabled the good trainers to do so much more than the academic psychologists could in eliciting interesting behavior from animals.”¹⁴

Hearne argues that the dominant interpretation of the Clever Hans case as a cautionary tale warning of the risks associated with assuming intelligence, consciousness, and communicative capacities in other species—so dominant, in fact, that the term “Clever Hans fallacy” is used in animal psychology to refer to similar situations—completely misses the point. This (mis)interpretation frames Clever Hans’s abilities in terms of a lack—he *lacks* the ability to “actually” do math and “know” the answers to human questions. However, the more critical approach to take vis-à-vis Clever Hans is modeled for us by Hearne and proposed by Derrida when he suggests we think “the absence of the name and of the word otherwise, as something other than a privation.”¹⁵ Clever Hans, and domesticated horses in general, Hearne explains,

¹¹ Jacques Derrida, “‘Eating Well,’ Or the Calculation of the Subject: An Interview with Jacques Derrida,” in *Who Comes After the Subject?*, eds. Eduardo Cadava, Peter Connor and Jean-Luc Nancy (New York: Routledge, 1991), 113.

¹² Derrida, “Eating Well,” 115.

¹³ Hearne, *Adam’s Task: Calling Animals by Name* (New York: Skyhorse Publishing, 2016), 5.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹⁵ “It would not be a matter of ‘giving speech back’ to animals but perhaps of acceding to a thinking, however fabulous and chimerical it might be, that thinks the absence of the name and of the word otherwise, as something

understand us in a way we will never be able to understand them. They have, she says, quoting from a personal letter she received from Stanley Cavell, a “capacity to feel our presence incomparably beyond our ability to feel theirs.”¹⁶ Hans was not doing the math himself, but he was doing something more poignant and powerful: he “read” the questioner’s mind, or rather his mind through his body’s involuntary clues, without the latter saying a word:

It turned out that Hans could not answer questions if he could not see the person asking him. It turned out further that if the questioner was in sight, Hans could always find out what the questioner thought was the correct answer, no matter how hard the questioner worked at remaining still and impassive. Hans apparently read minute changes in breathing, angles of the eyebrows, etc., with an accuracy we have trouble imagining.¹⁷

Of course this mind reading is not magic, but rather what contemporary biologists refer to as interspecific communication. Such communication is common in the animal kingdom, evolving whenever it is mutually beneficial for the species involved.

Weaving Animal Studies with Modern Biology: Rethinking Domestication

Much now-canonical animal studies scholarship has focused on the question of domestication and its ethical ramifications. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, on the one hand, claim domesticated animals are not “real” animals at all, but are instead “sentimental, Oedipal animals each with its own petty history, ‘my’ cat, ‘my’ dog [...] that invite us to regress, draw us into a narcissistic contemplation.”¹⁸ Donna Haraway ferociously disagrees, responding to their claims, “I am not sure I can find in philosophy a clearer display of misogyny, fear of aging, incuriosity about animals, and horror at the ordinariness of flesh, here covered by the alibi of an anti-Oedipal and anticapitalist project.”¹⁹ Instead, she argues, “Dogs are not surrogates for theory; they are not just here to think with. They are here to live with. Partners in the crime of human evolution, they are in the garden from the get-go.”²⁰ Though dogs certainly have a historical, cultural, and evolutionary specificity, a similar statement could be made for all domesticated species. Horses, chickens, cats: they have each coevolved with us, and our human lives, histories, and cultures are intertwined with theirs in ways that are always already more than theoretical.

Carla Freccero interprets our relationships with domesticated species as a sort of alternative kinship network, allowing us to think beyond the teleological “parental model of history” critiqued by Paul de Man.²¹ By following the figure of the “devouring dog” across time and space, Freccero argues we are implicated with the histories and subjectivities of species not our own. “Tracking dog-human figurations in this manner,” she writes, “suggests an approach that

other than a privation.” Jacques Derrida, “The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow),” *Critical Inquiry* 28, no.2 (winter 2002): 416.

¹⁶ Hearne, 115.

¹⁷ Hearne, 4.

¹⁸ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 240.

¹⁹ Donna Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 30.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 5.

²¹ Carla Freccero, “Figural Historiography: Dogs, Humans, and Cynanthropic Becomings,” in *Comparatively Queer*, eds. Jarrod Hayes, Margaret Higonnet and William J. Spurlin (London: Palgrave, 2010), 46.

does not privilege only the human or the nonhuman as the site of subjectivity and agency but implicates both in a consequential becoming.”²² It is through this mutual “becoming” that we are tied to and tied up with other domestic species.²³ Although she does not state it outright, Freccero seems to suggest that rethinking our bonds with other animals (and domesticated animals in particular) as bonds of kinship could help us queer our conceptualization of kinship itself, allowing us to think beyond relationships based on blood, species, and heteronormative reproductivity. While Freccero concentrates her attention on the communication of figures across diverse temporal and geographic landscapes—how our (human) use of the (non-human) “figure” entangles us in kinship relationships with other species—Haraway and Hearne are perhaps more interested in the communication between domesticator and domesticate. For both Haraway and Hearne, Kari Weil writes in *Thinking Animals*, “training is what allows a pet to escape the status of victim by offering a means of *communication between species*. Training sets up a relation between unequals—animals of unequal lexicons and unequal capacities for scent, touch, and hearing—but each of whom must be acknowledged as ‘having a world’ and having something to say.”²⁴

Weil is onto something when she privileges the importance of communication to our relationship with domesticated animals. Indeed, in contemporary biology, domestication is seen as an interspecific relationship that is neither necessarily hierarchical nor unique to humans. Melinda A. Zeder, zooarchaeological researcher and leading expert on the origins of plant and animal domestication, explains that even within biological and anthropological discourses, there is little consensus on the definition of the term. “Beyond agreeing that it involves a relationship between a domesticator and a domesticate,” she writes, “there is little agreement on what this relationship entails or how and when it results in the creation of a domesticated plant or animal.”²⁵ Although domestication has traditionally been defined from “the perspective of the domesticator, emphasizing the role of humans in separating a target domesticate from free-living populations and assuming mastery over all aspects of its life cycle,”²⁶ Zeder disagrees with the anthropocentrism of such a conceptualization, in part because humans hold no monopoly on such a role. In fact, domestication is “well documented in nonhuman species, especially among a number of social insect domesticators and their plant and animal domesticates.”²⁷ Arguing the most accurate definition would focus not on genetic, cultural, or managerial outcomes, Zeder redefines domestication as

a sustained multigenerational, mutualistic relationship in which one organism assumes a significant degree of influence over the reproduction and care of another organism in order to secure a more predictable supply of a resource of

²² Ibid., 48–9.

²³ Here Freccero subverts Deleuze and Guattari’s phrase “becoming animal” while also playing upon Haraway’s “partners in the crime of human evolution.” Additionally, she builds upon Eduardo Kohn’s “becoming animal.” See Eduardo Kohn, “How Dogs Dream: Amazonian Natures and the Politics of Transspecies Engagement,” *American Ethnologist* 34, no. 1 (2007): 3–24.

²⁴ Kari Weil, *Thinking Animals* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 59, emphasis mine.

²⁵ Melinda A. Zeder, “Core Questions in Domestication Research,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* 112, no. 11 (Mar 17, 2015): 3191.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid. See, for example, Aniek B. F. Ivens et al., “Ants Farm Subterranean Aphids mostly in Single Clone Groups - an Example of Prudent Husbandry for Carbohydrates and Proteins?” *BMC Evolutionary Biology* 12, no. 1 (2012): 106. This article, which studies ants’ domestication of aphids, suggests that humans are not the only domesticator species.

interest, and through which the partner organism gains advantage over individuals that remain outside this relationship, thereby benefitting and often increasing the fitness of both the domesticator and the target domesticate.²⁸

Domestication, then, is no longer about establishing unequal relationships between a “domesticator” qua dominator and a “domesticate” qua dominated. Although we treat the human-non-human bond performed in domestication as a unique and privileged case, domestication is just one note in the vast and diverse gamut of interspecific relationships accessible to animal species, relationships predicated on the sharing of information. In the “wild,” predators communicate with prey, prey with predators, prey with other prey, and so on. For communication to occur across species lines, there need not be a hierarchical relationship between interlocutors, only a mutual need to send or receive information. A veritable (and decidedly intermodal) cacophony of interspecific conversations broadcast all around us, if we but tuned in to listen.

Perhaps this is why I find so absurd²⁹ Heidegger’s assertion that all non-human animals are poor in world (*weltarm*) and Uexküll’s affirmation, cited and expanded upon by Agamben, that “‘no animal can enter into relation with an object as such’ but only with its own carriers of significance.”³⁰ In addition to their assumptions of human exceptionalism, these statements declare non-human individuals live in isolation of one another, each existing in their own private instinct-driven *Umwelt* with no serious engagement with or relation to other individuals. This could not be further from the truth. To restate the point with which I began, both individuals’ and species’ survival depend on the ability to enter into complex networks of relations, to the extent that to speak of animal cultures, while still taboo in some academic circles, is now widely accepted in behavioral ecology.³¹

Domestication, then, has less to do with human exceptionalism and more to do with communication: a domesticated animal is one that we can communicate with, or at least one that has come to understand our communicative signals—visual, auditory, vibrational, chemical, tactile—even those we do not realize we produce. It makes sense that the animals with whom we share our homes and lives have evolved to better communicate with us. In the home as in the “wild,” interspecific communication is born when and only when it becomes beneficial for both species. Animal domestication is, first, intertwined with interspecific communication from the very beginning, and, second, represents only one branch of the diverse communicative relationships that exist across species divides. These ideas are supported by a curious fact: animal researchers who, a few decades ago, held high hopes for learning about animal communicative abilities through our closest genetic relatives—primates—are now turning their attention and research to domesticated species. Brian Hare, professor of evolutionary anthropology at Duke University, previously studied the evolution of cognition in bonobos but now researches dogs instead. In a 2011 episode of *Nova ScienceNow* titled “How Smart Are Animals?,” the camera toggles between Dr. Hare, sitting on the grass and trying (unsuccessfully) to tempt a bonobo into a game of find-the-treat, and researchers in an indoor lab playing the same game (successfully)

²⁸ Zeder, 3191.

²⁹ Here I echo Derrida’s “aussi rigoureuse qu’absurde” (“as rigorous as it is absurd”) from Jacques Derrida, *The Death Penalty, Volume I*, eds. Geoffrey Bennington, Marc Crépon and Thomas Dutoit, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 127.

³⁰ Agamben, *The Open*, 42.

³¹ See, for example, Étienne Danchin and Richard H. Wagner, “Cultural Evolution,” in *Behavioural Ecology*, eds. Étienne Danchin, Luc-Alain Giraldeau and Frank Cézilly (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 693–726.

with dogs. It is not a question of intelligence or IQ but one of interest and need. “When I see my dog,” Dr. Hare explains,

my dog wants me to be around. He wants me to be his social partner. He actually needs me. Whereas a bonobo and chimpanzee, they don’t need me. They’re basically like, “Hey, you got any food? Can I get any food off of you? Is there something I can do to trick you to ...? No, okay. Well, I’m going to go stay with my fellow bonobos and chimpanzees.” They’re not interested in making me happy.³²

We could say, à la Deleuze and Guattari, that dogs, strategically bred to be subservient to and dependent on us, are engaged in a sick narcissistic, Oedipal, or even master/slave relationship with us. And yet this reductive interpretation would overlook the biological fact that this kind of communication across species happens in the “wild,” even where, presumably, no such psychoanalytic disorders exist. The dog, who has coevolved with us, wants to figure out the game. The bonobo, to put it simply, could not care less. As Dr. Hare indicates, why would he want to interact with me instead of his bonobo friends? The game, and communicating with humans more generally, does not hold his interest.

Weaving Philological and Animal Studies: Close Reading *Jeli il pastore*

Verga’s most studied and written about work is *I Malavoglia* (*The House by the Medlar Tree*³³), his *capolavoro di verismo* first published in 1881. Comparatively little has been written on *Vita dei campi* (*Life in the Fields*), Verga’s collection of *novelle* first published one year earlier in 1880, and even less on *Jeli* specifically.³⁴ Understanding *Jeli* is crucial to understanding *Vita dei campi* as a whole: coming after the *proemio* story *Fantasticheria* (*Daydream*), *Jeli* is the first true novella in the collection.³⁵ Furthermore, the collection closes with *Pentolaccia* (*Stinkpot*³⁶), which some critics consider to be a satirical rewriting of *Jeli*’s husband-wife-lover plot.³⁷ While most of the *novelle* in *Vita dei campi* underwent various iterations,³⁸ *Jeli* underwent more

³² Bloom, Alexis, Irene Pepperberg, Julia Cort, Rushmore DeNooyer, Joshua Seftel, Dana Rae Warren, dir., *Nova ScienceNow*, Season 5, Episode 4, “How Smart are Animals?,” aired February 9, 2011.

³³ *The House by the Medlar Tree* is the title used for all published English translations of the novel.

³⁴ On the publishing and editorial history of *Vita dei campi*, see Carla Riccardi’s introduction in Giovanni Verga, *Vita dei campi. Edizione nazionale delle opere di Giovanni Verga. Volume XIV*, ed. Carla Riccardi (Florence: Le Monnier, 1987), XXXI-LXVIII. On the critical reception of Verga’s *novelle*, see Andrea Manganaro, “Le novelle verghiane nella critica,” *Annali della Fondazione Verga (nuova serie)*, 2 (2009): 85–108.

³⁵ The ordering of the collection varies with respect to the publication year; this interpretation assumes the ordering of the first published edition in 1880. For a more in-depth analysis of *Jeli*’s position within the structure of the collection, see Roberto Mercuri, “Lettura di *Jeli il Pastore*,” *Annali della Fondazione Verga*, 17 (2000): 127–160. Additionally, *Jeli* is one of five *novelle* in *Vita dei campi* with a plot revolving around a love triangle.

³⁶ This is Cecchetti’s translation of the title in the aforementioned collection, *The She-Wolf*.

³⁷ Mercuri interprets *Pentolaccia* as both the collection’s epilogue and “una sorta di variazione parodica di *Jeli*” (“a sort of parodic variation of *Jeli*”). See Mercuri, 136. In the latter story, however, the rival is killed not “proprio come un capretto” but instead like an ox: “l’ammazzò come un bue” (“he murdered him like an ox”). Verga, *Vita dei campi*, 121.

³⁸ “Quasi tutte presentano una doppia o una triplice stesura, con abbozzi e riscritture che documentano l’impegno dell’autore sulla via del realismo” (“Almost all of them show a second or third version, with drafts and rewritings that document the author’s commitment on the path to realism”). See Gabriella Alfieri, *Verga* (Rome: Salerno, 2016), 134.

numerous and more significant re-writings than any other novella in the collection. Through archival research conducted at the Fondazione Verga in Catania, I was able to study *Jeli*'s three main manuscript drafts, and the analysis that follows provides insights gained from studying and comparing them.³⁹ The most important modifications in these manuscripts, each dated November 15, 1879 and ranging from 213 to 820 lines in length, are changes in narrator, changes in overall length and in the story's ending, and omissions and additions with respect to zoomorphic language. In looking to these early drafts, I do not treat the canonical 1880 published version of the text as definitive or teleological.⁴⁰ Instead, my analysis hopes to highlight the interior dynamism of the novella through its various pre-publication iterations.

Throughout the various versions of *Jeli*, the text overtly characterizes Jeli zoomorphically, both through the use of zoomorphic figurative language and through Jeli's ability to communicate and empathize with other species. While Jeli's bestial kinship initially permits him success in his line of work as an animal caretaker, it eventually makes him an outcast in the rural Sicilian community in which he lives. In the novella's conclusion, Jeli slits the throat of his rival don Alfonso in a manner that directly invokes the killing of a non-human animal: "gli tagliò la gola di un sol colpo, proprio come un capretto" ("he slit the throat with a single stroke, just like a goatling").⁴¹ This human murder parallels animal killings that Jeli witnessed in the past, encouraging us to question not only the humanity of the zoomorphic protagonist but also the humanity of killing non-human animals in the first place. In the following sections, I read across the differences between manuscript versions of *Jeli* and the 1880 published version to elucidate the significance of Jeli's seemingly unexpected final act.

At first glance, Jeli's murder of his human rival, constructed as a zoomorphic simile, seems decidedly out of character for the protagonist and perhaps, even, a flaw in the verisimilitude of the text. How can Jeli, characterized up to this point as naively kind, giving, and unfazed by his wife's adultery, suddenly murder his childhood friend? Throughout the text, Jeli has been described as usually being moved and perhaps even scarred by the putting to death of non-humans deemed necessary by other less empathetic characters, so the description of Jeli's murderous act through the use of zoomorphic simile seems particularly surprising and incongruous. Jeli, we assume, would never slit a goat's throat, and yet he does precisely that to his human rival, as if don Alfonso himself were a goat (a goat that, again, Jeli would presumably *not* kill). Though in many ways the novella's dramatic conclusion echoes the other love-triangle-inspired murders that populate the *Vita dei campi* collection, *Jeli*'s ending somehow rings less true in terms of its verisimilitude until we consider two earlier essential aspects of the text: Jeli's ability to communicate and thereby empathize with other species, as epitomized by his kinship with horses, and the proliferation of zoomorphic figurative language in the text, specifically in the *fiesta* scene.

³⁹ While not widely available, transcriptions of these manuscript drafts can be found in the now out-of-print critical edition published by Le Monnier and cited throughout this chapter. See footnote 34.

⁴⁰ I agree with Riccardi that out of the various *published* versions of the collection, the "original" 1880 version is the most important. In the introduction to the critical edition of *Vita dei campi*, she writes, "appare innegabile che l'*editio princeps* sia storicamente il testo più importante e che, come tale, debba essere considerato testo base cui rapportare sia la genesi sia l'evoluzione della raccolta" ("it appears undeniable that the *editio princeps* is historically the most important text and that, as such, it should be considered the base text against which both the genesis and the evolution of the collection should be measured"). See Verga, *Vita dei campi*, LXVIII. For this reason, in this article I jump freely between the 1880 published version and the earlier drafts.

⁴¹ 1880 version, Verga, 47.

“Tale e quale come noi altri”: Jeli’s Kinship and Communication with Horses

In all versions of the text, horses are central to Jeli’s characterization for two interconnected reasons: kinship and communication. Jeli’s kinship with horses is initially established through his role as horse guardian and caretaker. In fact, the novella’s very first line introduces us to the protagonist through this very epithet: “Jeli, il guardiano di cavalli, aveva tredici anni quando conobbe don Alfonso, il signorino; ma era così piccolo che non arrivava alla pancia della *bianca*, la vecchia giumenta che portava il campanaccio della mandra” (“Jeli, the horse guardian, was thirteen years old when he met Don Alfonso, the little gentleman; but he was so small that he did not reach the stomach of Bianca, the old mare that carried the herd’s bell”).⁴² This initial apposite, “il guardiano di cavalli” (“the horse guardian”), suggests it is Jeli’s role as horse caretaker, and, therefore, his intimate connection with horses, that defines him. The importance of positioning Jeli with respect to horses is reinforced by the text’s description of his size (“così piccolo che non arrivava alla pancia della *bianca*” [“so small that he did not reach the stomach of Bianca”]), given not in a standard numerical measurement but rather with respect to the *bianca*, a mare he tends.⁴³ Jeli’s physical “position” in society—as defined both by his job and his height—is intimately tied to horses from the very start.

Jeli lives on the outskirts of a small Sicilian village, usually sleeping in the fields with his horses. An orphan (he has already lost his mother and loses his father within the text’s narrative arc), Jeli develops a kinship network defined not in terms of his blood (human) relatives or his (nearby) human neighbors but rather in terms of the horses in his care. In fact, a character in the text goes so far as to say Jeli is “figliato [dalle] sue cavalle” (“birthed [by] his horses”),⁴⁴ born to horses not humans, a striking description I will explore in more detail in the coming pages. It is crucial to the plot’s unfolding that this description of Jeli’s filiality is provided *not* by Jeli himself but rather a member of the local (human) community. This community constructs Jeli as an outsider: someone who not only lives outside the geographical bounds of the village but also outside its networks of social (and species) kinship. Through its characterization of Jeli as less than human, the human community excludes Jeli from *bios*, which Agamben defines as “the form or way of living proper to an individual or group” or political life, relegating him instead to perpetual *zoe* status.⁴⁵

Directly connected to Jeli’s kinship with horses is his ability to communicate with them and, in turn, to feel their pain as his own. This empathetic capacity is most vividly demonstrated by the scene in which an injured colt is killed by the *fattore*, which I will discuss later in detail. We can construct Jeli’s communicative abilities in one of two ways: as a privation, i.e. Jeli’s *inability* to “properly” communicate with humans in the nearby community, or as something other than a privation, i.e. Jeli’s *ability* to communicate with horses. His “privation”—as epitomized by Jeli’s

⁴² Ibid., 13.

⁴³ Roberto Mercuri makes a similar point, focusing however more on Jeli’s relationship to nature more generally rather than to animals more specifically: “La descrizione fisica di Jeli è essenziale: vengono indicati soltanto l’età (tredici anni) e la sua statura, il cui termine di apprezzamento è il mondo della natura, in questo caso la pancia della giumenta Bianca” (“The physical description of Jeli is essential: all that are indicated are his age (thirteen years) and his height, which is measured in terms of the natural world, in this case the stomach of the mare Bianca”). See Roberto Mercuri, “Lettura,” 137.

⁴⁴ 1880 version, Verga, *Vita dei campi*, 15.

⁴⁵ Agamben defines *zoe* as “the simple fact of living common to all living beings (animals, men, or gods).” Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), 1.

illiteracy and his refusal to accept Mara's infidelity when it is, time and again, revealed to him by the local townspeople—is crucial to Jeli's characterization as decidedly *zoe* and not *bios*. As Agamben explains, “human politics is distinguished from that of other living beings in that it is founded, through a supplement of politicity [*policità*] tied to language.”⁴⁶ Jeli can only enter the world of *bios* if and when he shares a language with his (human) peers. By sharing a “language” with horses and not his fellow humans, Jeli is necessarily ostracized from his sociopolitical community. Jeli's marginal (human) status, in turn, will lead to numerous misunderstandings on Jeli's part, most significantly his confusion regarding what is “right” and “wrong” in terms of “putting to death” (non-humans) and “murdering” (humans).

In Verga's second draft, *Abbozzo II*, I found an intriguing passage omitted from later versions. In a dramatic departure from the 1880 published version, the story in *Abbozzo I* and *II* is recounted by a first-person narrator modeled after Verga himself.⁴⁷ The passage, which I will refer to as *Passage A*, is a snippet of discourse between Jeli and the narrator which focuses on the intelligence and communicative abilities of horses:

— *Le bestie sono tale e quale come noi altri, e sebbene non possano parlarsi s'intendono fra di loro. Vedi la mora non sa staccarsi mai dalla giumenta balzana, e se l'una si sdraja sul pascolo, l'altra lascia di brucare l'erba e sta ad aspettarla.*

Io gli raccontavo tutte le cose meravigliose che avevo visto fare a certi cavalli ammaestrati che indicavano le ore, leggevano dei nomi proprii, e andavano a trovare gli oggetti nascosti, egli sorrideva in aria incredula, colla selvaggia diffidenza del contadino, e poi se ne andava ad accarezzare la mora, *la quale pure era una bestia intelligente* che avrebbe capito dal movimento delle labbra quello che ei avesse voluto dirle, ma non avrebbe mai imparato a fare una sola di quelle cose sorprendenti.

(“*Beasts are just like us others, and although they cannot speak they understand one another. See how Mora never leaves Balzana's side, and if one lies down on the pasture, the other stops nibbling the grass and waits for her.*”)

I would tell him all the marvelous things I had seen certain trained horses do: tell time, read their own names, and go find hidden objects, he would smile incredulously, with the wild distrust of a peasant, and then would go caress Mora, *who also was an intelligent beast* who would have understood from the movement of his lips what he wanted to tell her, but never would have learned to do even one of those surprising things.)⁴⁸

Given the importance of Jeli's relationship to horses in all versions of the text, this passage, which comes 113 lines into *Abbozzo II*, is a remarkable philological find, providing additional insight into his kinship with them. In the previous lines, Jeli had been explaining to the narrator the story of a colt who had lost his mother. This colt, Jeli says, mourned the loss just like Jeli had after his own mother's death:

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 2–3.

⁴⁷ On the autobiographical impetus behind this first-person narration, see Mercuri, “Lettura,” 139 and Verga, *Vita dei campi*, XII.

⁴⁸ *Abbozzo II*, Verga, 140, emphasis mine.

Quando curatolo Stano si menò via la giumenta bianca che avea comprato a S. Giovanni, col patto che gliela tenessero coll'armento sino alla vendemmia, Jele⁴⁹ ebbe un gran da fare per più di otto giorni a correr dietro al puledro della bianca che scorazzava per la china del monte [e] a ricondurlo nel branco. Il puledro s'arrestava sulle quattro zampe col collo teso e l'occhio inquieto, battendosi i fianchi colla coda e [...] sul bel trifoglio folto che pestava sotto i piedi. — È perchè [sic] gli hanno portato via la mamma, diceva Jele, e non sa cosa fare.

Il puledro *rispondeva alle chiamate di Jele con un nitrito lungo e lamentevole*, e gli veniva a fregare il capo contro il petto, o si voltava di qua e di là col naso al vento e si lasciava grattare il ciuffo fra le orecchie. — *Anch'io* quando m'è morta la mamma scorazzavo di qua e di là, diceva Jele.

Poi quando il puledro ricominciò a brucare il trifoglio: — Così, a poco a poco, l'ha dimenticata *anche* lui. Le bestie sono tale e quale come noi altri...

(When the farmhand Stano took away the white mare he had bought at San Giovanni, with the agreement that he would keep her with the herd until vintage time, Jeli had his hands full for eight days chasing the white mare's calf that ran around the mountain slopes and bringing him back to the group. The calf would stop on his four hooves with his neck tense and his eyes restless, batting his flanks with his tail and [...] on the nice dense clover that he stomped under his feet.

"It's because they took away his mother," Jeli would say, "and he doesn't know what to do."

The calf would respond to Jeli's calls with a long and lamenting neigh, and he would come to rub his head against Jeli's chest, or he would turn here and there with his nose to the wind and let himself be scratched in the tuft between his ears.

"When my mother died, *I also* ran around here and there," Jeli would say.

Then when the calf began again to nibble the clover: "See, little by little, he's forgotten her, *too*. Beasts are just like us others..."⁵⁰

While the description of the colt's rowdy behavior may at first seem belabored, Jeli's single line of dialogue that closes the second paragraph reveals the reason for this extended description: "Anch'io quando m'è morta la mamma scorazzavo di qua e di là" ("When my mother died, I also ran around here and there"). Here, the text sets up a direct parallel between the lived experience of the colt and that of Jeli himself. Although the colt seems uncontrollable and lost, the sharing of a similar experience allows Jeli to connect with the colt in the latter's time of grief. The two communicate to one another through both auditory and tactile signals: the colt responds ("rispondeva") to Jeli's calls with an emotion-filled whinny ("nitrito lungo e lamentevole"), and Jeli calms him by scratching the colt's head ("si lasciava grattare il ciuffo fra le orecchie"). Though the text does not specify it here, it is implied that Jeli—and Jeli alone—is able to relate to and communicate with the colt during this tumultuous time. Perhaps Jeli even relays to the colt his understanding of the latter's pain and loss through this auditory and tactile communication.

⁴⁹ In some early manuscript drafts, the protagonist's name is spelled as "Jele" instead of the later "Jeli."

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 139–40, emphasis mine.

The text dramatically expands this parallel between the colt and Jeli in the lines that follow: “Poi quando il puledro ricominciò a brucare il trifoglio: — Così, a poco a poco, l’ha dimenticata *anche* lui. Le bestie sono tale e quale come noi altri...” (“Then when the calf began again to nibble the clover: ‘See, little by little, he’s forgotten her, too. Beasts are just like us others...’”).⁵¹ The “anche” here suggests a continuation of the passage above: the colt little by little must forget his mother, just like Jeli did, in order to move on with his life. However, the line that ensues makes a leap from the colt/Jeli connection to a broader non-human/human one: “Le bestie sono tale e quale come noi altri” (“Beasts are just like us others”).⁵² Up to this point in the text, we have understood that Jeli, due to his shared lived experiences and his seemingly intuitive connection with the animals he cares for, is like a non-human animal. This line, however, encourages us to rethink Jeli’s likeness to and connection with other species: what if it is not only Jeli who is like non-human animals but rather all non-human animals who are, as a whole, like us? Far from a simple comparison that points out likeness alone, a simile’s “like”—or, in Italian, “come”—always signals both identity and difference. In a nod to Judith Butler’s reading of Aretha Franklin’s “You make me feel like a natural woman,”⁵³ we can interpret Jeli’s comparison as a simile based upon a recognition of difference: “beasts” are *like* us only insofar as they are also *different* from us. This essential line, omitted from all later draft and published versions, allows us to see Jeli’s zoomorphic characterization in an entirely new way: it is not only that Jeli is non-human-like, but instead that all non-human animals (in Jeli’s mind) are human-like. Paradoxically, Jeli’s observation suggests he recognizes his similarity to (and in that similarity, his difference from) “beasts”—something later versions do not necessarily do—by positioning Jeli *with* his human community (“noi altri”) and *against* animal “others.” The elimination of this line in later versions allows the text to privilege Jeli’s alienation from his fellow humans and his preference for an alternative kinship network.

Passage A continues by exploring similarities between humans and other animals, namely, their ability to communicate with one another: “*Le bestie sono tale e quale come noi altri, e sebbene non possano parlarsi s’intendono fra di loro. Vedi la mora non sa staccarsi mai dalla giumenta balzana, e se l’una si sdraja sul pascolo, l’altra lascia di brucare l’erba e sta ad aspettarla*” (“*Beasts are just like us others, and although they cannot speak they understand one another*.” See how Mora never leaves Balzana’s side, and if one lies down on the pasture, the other stops nibbling the grass and waits for her”).⁵⁴ I am particularly interested in Jeli’s concession that horses’ lack of verbal language does not inhibit their communicative abilities: “e sebbene non possano parlarsi s’intendono fra di loro” (“and although they cannot speak they understand one another”). Jeli does not specify how the horses are able to understand each other without speaking. However, first, because Jeli specifically instructs the narrator to look (“Vedi”)

⁵¹ Ibid., emphasis mine.

⁵² Although there are different possible interpretations of “noi altri” (“us others”), I read the phrase as creating a subject position in which Jeli is aligned with other humans. The “altri” here, based on the passage’s greater context, does not position Jeli and his listener outside the rest of the human community.

⁵³ Butler reminds us of figurative language’s slipperiness through her discussion of Franklin’s line. On the one hand, the singer “seems at first to suggest that some natural potential of her biological sex is actualized by her participation in the cultural position of ‘woman’ as object of heterosexual recognition.” On the other, she “[suggests] that this is a kind of metaphorical substitution, an act of imposture, a kind of sublime and momentary participation in an ontological illusion produced by the mundane operation of heterosexual drag.” Judith Butler, “Imitation and Gender Insubordination,” in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, ed. Henry Abelove, Michele Aina Barale, and David M. Halperin (New York: Routledge, 1993), 317.

⁵⁴ Abbozzo II, Verga, 140, emphasis mine.

and not to listen and, second, because the text makes no mention of sounds the horses make during their exchange, Jeli's direct discourse implies the horses' communication is not auditory but instead perhaps visual or multimodal. No matter the mode of their communication, the passage is clear on one front: the horses' "lack" ("non possono parlarsi") is not a privation in relation to the ability to communicate. If anything, the passage reveals a kind of envy for the horses' seemingly intuitive or instinctual communication: even or perhaps especially without words, they understand each other. As we will see in the coming pages, this envy will manifest itself more directly in later drafts through the character of don Alfonso, who envies Jeli not only his simple possessions but also his unusual knowledge.

After this direct discourse by Jeli, it is the narrator who continues:

Io gli raccontavo tutte le cose meravigliose che avevo visto fare a certi cavalli ammaestrati che indicavano le ore, leggevano dei nomi proprii, e andavano a trovare gli oggetti nascosti, egli sorrideva in aria incredula, colla selvaggia diffidenza del contadino, e poi se ne andava ad accarezzare la mora, *la quale pure era una bestia intelligente* che avrebbe capito dal movimento delle labbra quello che ei avesse voluto dirle, ma non avrebbe mai imparato a fare una sola di quelle cose sorprendenti.

(I would tell him all the marvelous things I had seen certain trained horses do: tell time, read their own names, and go find hidden objects, he would smile incredulously, with the wild distrust of a peasant, and then would go caress Mora, *who also was an intelligent beast* who would have understood from the movement of his lips what he wanted to tell her, but never would have learned to do even one of those surprising things.)⁵⁵

In this section of first-person narration, I am most interested in two aspects. First, the text's conferral of the adjective "intelligente" to describe a non-human animal seems both surprising and forward thinking in a text written more than a century ago.⁵⁶ Second, these sentences create an unsaid but nonetheless clear parallel between these cultured and uncultured horses and the cultured and uncultured humans in the story: *cultured horses : uncultured horses :: cultured humans : uncultured humans*. This concession, which comes relatively early on in the text, that there are two "classes" of horses—horses that can tell the time and read their own names and those that cannot—sets the stage for the human rivalries that will unfold in the novella, rivalries in which Jeli's social and economic class will be a determining factor in his success or lack thereof. The first-person narrator, who evolves into the rival don Alfonso in later drafts, is a higher class, cultured member of society. The narrator and don Alfonso are, then, "cavalli ammaestrati" ("trained horses"). Jeli, who reacts to the cultured horse's literacy with the "selvaggia diffidenza del contadino" ("wild distrust of a peasant") is characterized as a wild, uncivilized peasant. Jeli, then, is Mora: unable to read and write but nonetheless "una bestia intelligente" ("an intelligent beast") with his own set of valuable skills.

⁵⁵ Ibid., emphasis mine.

⁵⁶ Although we could argue the opposite, à la Berger, i.e. our detachment from other animals in post-industrial society causes us to be estranged from them and, perhaps in turn, their capacities. See John Berger, "Why Look at Animals?," in *Selected Essays* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2001).

Interestingly, while the narrator points out that these two classes of horses are different, he does not infer a necessarily hierarchical relationship between the two. The *mora* also possesses useful abilities: she is able to understand Jeli from the mere movement of his lips. A few pages later, we learn that the horses eavesdrop on Jeli and Mara's⁵⁷ conversations: "Le sue cavalle stavano a guardarli dall'alto drizzando le orecchie *per ascoltare quel che dicevano*, e quando la castalda cercava la Santa saliva sulla sponda del lavatojo, e gridava forte chiamandola per nome" ("His horses would watch them from above, pricking up their ears *to hear what they were saying*, and when Castalda would go searching for Santa, Jeli would climb up on the edge of the washhouse and yell loudly, calling her by name").⁵⁸ These lines, when combined with the previously cited passages, suggest the horses are capable of multimodal communication: they can successfully process visual (e.g. reading Jeli's lips), auditory (e.g. eavesdropping on Jeli and Mara; responding to Jeli's calls), and tactile (e.g. being calmed by Jeli's head rub) cues. While the dazzling abilities of the city-trained horses surprise and entertain their human audience, the text suggests that Jeli's horses' abilities are in fact more useful and perhaps even of greater value. More than mere spectacle, they are capable of true communication.⁵⁹ Because the text insists on the parallels between Jeli and his horses, we understand Jeli's knowledge, too, is more useful and valuable than that of the richer and literate class.

While *Abbozzo II* focuses on the communicative abilities of horses and Jeli's parallels with them, the published 1880 version privileges the importance of various species' (including humans') societal and economic values:

Poi, dopo che il puledro ricominciò a fiutare il trifoglio, e a darvi qualche boccata di malavoglia, — Vedi! a poco a poco comincia a dimenticarsene.

— Ma anch'esso sarà venduto. I cavalli sono fatti per esser venduti; come gli agnelli nascono per andare al macello, e le nuvole portano la pioggia. Solo gli uccelli non hanno a far altro che cantare e volare tutto il giorno.

Le idee non gli venivano nette e filate l'una dietro l'altra [...]

— Anche gli uccelli, soggiunse, devono buscarsi il cibo, e quando la neve copre la terra se ne muiono.

Poi ci pensò su un pezzetto. — Tu sei come gli uccelli; ma quando arriva l'inverno te ne puoi stare al fuoco senza far nulla.

(Then, after the colt began to sniff the clover and take a couple of bites halfheartedly:

"See? Little by little he's beginning to forget all about her."

"But he'll be sold too. Horses are made to be sold, like lambs are born to be butchered, and clouds bring the rain. Only the birds have nothing to do but sing and fly all day."

Ideas didn't come to him clear and straight one after the other [...]

⁵⁷ In this draft, however, Mara is referred to both as Mara and Giovanna. See *Abbozzo II* in Verga, 137–46.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 144, emphasis mine.

⁵⁹ "True communication" is a term used by biologists to refer to any kind of interactive behavior that includes a sender and receiver that benefits both species. Perhaps surprisingly, most communication in the animal kingdom is of this type, even when it occurs between different species, including those in a predator/prey relationship. See, for example, David Dusenbery, *Sensory Ecology: How Organisms Acquire and Respond to Information* (New York: W.H. Freeman, 1992).

“The birds, too,” he added, “have to hunt up food, and when snow covers the ground they die.”

Then he thought it over awhile:

“You’re like the birds; but when the winter comes you can sit by the fire without doing anything.”⁶⁰

In this latter version, the difference between Jeli and his interlocuter (in *Abbozzo II*, a first-person narrator and in this published version, the young don Alfonso) is mainly don Alfonso’s reading of the animals as commodities. While Jeli is interested in the similarities between the colt and himself, the young don Alfonso is only interested in non-human entities—horses, lambs, and even clouds— insofar as they have an economic value. Jeli, however, is unable to think of the animals in this way, and he ends the passage by comparing don Alfonso to birds, the only animals don Alfonso couldn’t monetize. This passage demonstrates the abyss between Jeli’s agropastoral way of seeing and don Alfonso’s capitalistic viewpoint and foreshadows the tensions Jeli will continue to have with the villagers.

Invidiare e sapere: Jeli’s Valuable Knowledge and the Threat of Self-Sufficiency

Various instances in the text suggest Jeli possesses a valuable kind of knowledge, valuable in part because it is distinct from that of the people in the village. In the very first paragraph of the published version, the now-third-person narrator explains the various lessons Jeli taught his friend don Alfonso: “Jeli *insegnava* al suo amico come si fa ad arrampicarsi sino ai nidi delle gazze, sulle cime dei noci più alti del campanile di Licodia, a cogliere un passero a volo con una sassata, e montare con un salto sul dorso nudo delle sue bestie mezze selvaggie [sic]...” (“Jeli taught his friend how to climb up to the magpies’ nests, at the top of the walnut trees higher than the bell tower of Licodia, how to hit a sparrow in flight with a stone, or how to mount with a running jump on the bare backs of the yet-untamed mares...”).⁶¹ At first, it seems these lessons are little more than pleasurable tricks: what use, other than *divertimento*, does a wealthy *signorino* have for such knowledge?⁶² And yet the narrator makes clear that don Alfonso not only has nostalgia for these carefree days (“Ah! le belle scappate pei campi mietuti, colle criniere al vento! i bei giorni d’aprile...” [“Ah! the beautiful escapes over the reaped fields, with manes in the wind! the beautiful days of April...”]),⁶³ but also that he is envious of Jeli’s possessions and knowledge:

⁶⁰ 1880 version, Verga, 18 (Cecchetti, 25). Here, I provide Cecchetti’s translation with one significant change: inserting a paragraph break before “But he’ll be sold, too.” In Cecchetti’s translation, the phrase is incorrectly attributed to Jeli instead of Don Alfonso.

⁶¹ Ibid., 13, emphasis mine (Cecchetti, 19, emphasis mine). Here I provide Cecchetti’s translation, only changing “Jeli” to “Jeli” for consistency.

⁶² Mercuri, on the other hand, interprets Jeli and don Alfonso’s friendship as successfully breaking barriers of social and economic status: “il racconto della nascita della loro amicizia evidenzia l’annullamento delle differenze sociali e la parità del rapporto: in un primo momento Jeli dà dell’eccellenza a don Alfonso, ma poi diventano amici” (“the story of the birth of their friendship emphasizes the annulment of their social differences and the equality of the relationship: early on Jeli calls don Alfonso his excellency, but later they become friends”). See Mercuri, “Lettura,” 137. I could not disagree more. Don Alfonso’s friendship is from the beginning colored by envy. If there is an explanation for Jeli no longer calling don Alfonso *eccellenza*, it is not because they are now equals but rather because their initial hierarchy has now flipped.

⁶³ 1880 version, Verga, *Vita dei campi*, 13.

Don Alfonso che era tenuto nel cotone dai suoi genitori, *invidiava* al suo amico Jeli la tasca di tela dove ci aveva tutta la sua roba, il pane, le cipolle, il fiaschetto del vino, il fazzoletto pel freddo, il batuffoletto dei cenci col refe e gli aghi grossi, la scatoletta di latta coll'esca e la pietra focaja; *gli invidiava pure* la superba cavalla *vajata*, quella bestia dal ciuffetto di peli irti sulla fronte, che aveva gli occhi cattivi, e gonfiava le froge al pari di un mastino ringhioso quando qualcuno voleva montarla. Da Jeli invece si lasciava montare e grattare le orecchie, di cui era gelosa, e l'andava fiutando *per ascoltare quello che ei voleva dirle*. – Lascia stare la *vajata*, gli raccomandava Jeli, non è cattiva, ma non ti conosce.

(Don Alfonso, who was kept in cotton by his parents, *envied* his friend Jeli the canvas sack where he kept all his things: his bread, his onions, his little flask of wine, his kerchief for the cold, his little bundle of rags with his thread and needles, his tin box with flint and tinder; *he envied him also* the haughty speckled mare, that animal with the tuft of hair sticking out on her forehead, who had mean eyes and swelled her nostrils like a surly mastiff when anybody wanted to mount her. Instead she let Jeli mount her and scratch her ears, which were especially sensitive, and she kept sniffing him *to listen to what he had to tell her*. “Leave that mare alone,” Jeli advised, “she’s not bad, but she doesn’t know you.”)⁶⁴

The paragraph emphasizes don Alfonso’s envy through the first sentence’s repetition of and parallel structure around the conjugated verb *invidiava*: “invidiava al suo amico Jeli” (“envied his friend Jeli”) and “gli invidiava pure” (“he envied him also”). The strength of this envy is further reinforced by the sentence’s length: the seemingly endless laundry list of what don Alfonso wishes he, too, had, leaves us breathless and empty. Don Alfonso’s parents have the monetary means to buy him these objects which are, for the most part, signs of poverty. However, don Alfonso is not envious of the possessions themselves but rather Jeli’s knowledge of how to use them. For example, it is not only the “superba cavalla *vajata*” (“haughty speckled mare”) that don Alfonso wants, but rather the ability to mount her, to scratch her ears, and to have her listen to him like Jeli—and Jeli alone—can do. Don Alfonso, coddled by his wealthy family, is, then, envious of Jeli’s autonomy or, to put it differently, Jeli’s ability to live outside traditional (human) networks of kinship.

The last turn of the paragraph brings us back to interspecific communication: Jeli’s special relationship to the *vajata* is founded on his ability to communicate with her: “l’andava fiutando per ascoltare quello che ei voleva dirle” (“she kept sniffing him to listen to what he had to tell her”). The text suggests that possessing this beautiful horse—and, in turn, all the other items enumerated above—would not be enough to satisfy don Alfonso. In order to truly enjoy these material goods, he would need to also possess Jeli’s capabilities, particularly Jeli’s ability to engage in interspecific communication. Don Alfonso is not, then, merely greedy in the traditional material sense: his envy is not only of Jeli’s possessions—which could be easily bought with his parents’ money—but rather of Jeli’s knowledge and abilities.⁶⁵

⁶⁴ Ibid., 17, emphasis mine (Cecchetti, 24, emphasis mine). Here I provide Cecchetti’s translation, only changing “Jeli” to “Jeli” for consistency.

⁶⁵ It could be argued that, more than Jeli’s objects or knowledge, don Alfonso envies the freedom (from his parents? from high society and its pressures?) they bring. However, the text’s long list of desirable objects and knowledge emphasizes possession of Jeli’s class-specific skills over liberty. Additionally, it’s important to remember that Jeli is

Don Alfonso is not alone in recognizing and valuing Jeli's unusual knowledge:

Ei sapeva fare ogni sorta di lavori coll'ago; e ci aveva un batuffoletto di cenci nella sacca di tela, per rattoppare al bisogno le brache e le maniche del giubbone; *sapeva anche* tessere dei treccioli di crini di cavallo, e si lavava anche da sè colla creta del vallone il fazzoletto che si metteva al collo, quando aveva freddo. Insomma, purchè ci avesse la sua sacca ad armacollo, *non aveva bisogno di nessuno al mondo*, fosse stato nei boschi di Resecone, o perduto in fondo alla piana di Caltagirone. La gnà Lia soleva dire: – Vedete Jeli il pastore? è stato sempre solo pei campi *come se l'avessero figliato le sue cavalle*, ed è perciò che sa farsi la croce con le due mani!

Del rimanente è vero che *Jeli non aveva bisogno di nessuno*, ma tutti quelli della fattoria avrebbe fatto volentieri qualche cosa per lui, poichè era un ragazzo servizievole, e ci era sempre il caso di buscarci qualche cosa da lui. La gnà Lia gli cuoceva il pane per amor del prossimo, ed ei la ricambiava con bei panierini di vimini per le ova, arcolai di canna, ed altre coserelle. – *Facciamo come fanno le sue bestie*, diceva la gnà Lia, *che si grattano il collo a vicenda*.

(He knew how to do all kinds of things with a needle; and he had a little bundle of rags in his canvas sack to patch his pants or the sleeves of his jacket when necessary; he also knew how to weave braids of horse hair, and he washed with the clay of the valley the kerchief he wore around his neck when it was cold. In short, as long as he had his sack on his shoulder he had no need for anyone in the world, whether he was in the woods of Resecone or lost deep in the plain of Caltagirone. Lia used to say:

“See Jeli the shepherd? He's always been alone in the fields, as if he'd been birthed by his horses, and that's why he knows how to cross himself with both hands.”

Furthermore, it was true that *Jeli had no need for anyone*, but everyone at the farm would have gladly done something for him, since he was a helpful boy and there was always a chance of getting something from him. Lia baked him bread out of love for one's neighbor, and in return he gave her well-made little wicker baskets to carry eggs in, cane winders, and other trifles.

*“We do as his beasts do,” Lia would say, “that scratch each other's necks.”*⁶⁶

This first paragraph, which comes only one page into the published version of the novella, enumerates useful skills Jeli possesses with rhetorical strategies similar to the paragraph which describes don Alfonso's envy found a few pages later. Here again the text strategically employs repetition and parallel structure (“*Ei sapeva fare...*” [“He knew how”] and “*sapeva anche...*” [“he also knew”]), coupled with the sentence's protracted length, to emphasize the impressive skillset Jeli possesses. Interestingly, the passage's first paragraph closes with the important zoomorphic

in a “class” of his own: in his poverty and his pastoral profession, he is ostracized both by and from the peasants in the nearby villages.

⁶⁶ 1880 version, Verga, 14–15, emphasis mine. My translation here is mainly based on Cecchetti, 21–22 but makes some significant changes that are important to my reading of the passage.

phrase I mentioned in passing earlier: “come se l’avessero figliato le sue cavalle” (“as if he’d been birthed by his horses”).⁶⁷ This phrase, when combined with the appositive given to Jeli in the very first line of the novella’s text—“Jeli, il guardiano di cavalli” (“Jeli, the horse guardian”)⁶⁸—solidifies Jeli’s characterization as grounded in his relationship to his horses: more than their caretaker, he is practically their offspring (and here again we see a thinly veiled envy of Jeli’s alternative kinship community). This description of Jeli is provided by gnà Lia, a secondary but nonetheless important character insofar as her voice “represents” the thoughts and prejudices of the community at large. Here, instead of the free indirect discourse Verga is famous for, the text employs direct discourse by Lia to provide us with insight into how the members of the human community see him: as a free agent, perhaps even a loner, as wild as the horses he tends.⁶⁹ In contrast to free indirect discourse, there is no mistaking Lia’s voice for the narrator’s own. By not commenting upon her words and instead inserting a paragraph break, the text encourages us to be suspicious of her discourse and analyze the veracity of her statements for ourselves.⁷⁰

While Lia’s comments—and the following mockery of Jeli’s (lack of) religious habits—seem playful enough, they also set up Jeli as more beast than man, as someone to be valued and used for his knowledge but decidedly not one of “them.” Lia’s voice positions Jeli as an outsider in the community, a community that, like all communities, needs an “outside” in order to exist. Jeli’s unusual knowledge literally sets him apart from this community: “non aveva bisogno di nessuno al mondo” (“he had no need for anyone in the world”).⁷¹ In other words, Jeli’s skills allow him to be self-sufficient. The phrase “come se l’avessero figliato le sue cavalle” (“as if he’d been birthed by his horses”) reveals that gnà Lia’s unease—which the text masks behind seemingly humorous and harmless direct dialogue—stems not, as we might first believe, from Jeli’s unusual lifestyle but rather from his self-sufficiency, which we will understand more clearly from the paragraph that follows.

The passage’s second paragraph establishes that the local human community has more need of him than he has for them: “Del rimanente è vero che Jeli non aveva bisogno di nessuno, ma [...] ci era sempre il caso di buscarci qualcosa da lui” (“Furthermore, it was true that Jeli had no need for anyone, but [...] there was always a chance of getting something from him”).⁷² An individual who does not need his fellow community members as much as they need him creates a perilous imbalance, especially in a modernizing capitalistic society. Similarly to the first paragraph, the threat of this imbalance is masked behind seemingly good-natured discourse: “tutti quelli della fattoria avrebbero fatto volentieri qualche cosa per lui” (“everyone at the farm would have gladly done something for him”) and “La gnà Lia gli cuoceva il pane per amor del

⁶⁷ Ibid., 15.

⁶⁸ Ibid., Verga, 12.

⁶⁹ For more on Verga’s use of free indirect discourse, see Vittorio Lugli, “Lo stile indiretto libero in Flaubert e in Verga,” in *Dante e Balzac con altri italiani e francesi* (Naples: Edizioni Scientifiche Italiane, 1952), 221–38. For more on the “choral” voice, see Leo Spitzer, “L’originalità della narrazione nei Malavoglia,” *Belfagor*, 11 (1956): 37–53 and Tibor Wlassics, “Gli ‘interlocutori corali,’” in *Nel mondo dei Malavoglia: Saggi verghiani* (Pisa: Giardini editori e stampatori, 1986), 43–55. Verga’s *verismo* texts often consciously avoid clear direct discourse to represent the fact that, in the small fictional Sicilian villages where his novels and short stories take place, the individual voice blurs with the communal. However, here, as I explain, the text employs Lia’s direct discourse for a similar purpose.

⁷⁰ For more on the rhetorical figures and stylistic choices in *Jeli* and the rest of the collection, see Daria Motta, *La Lingua Fusa: La prosa di Vita dei campi dal parlato popolare allo scritto-narrato* (Acireale: Bonanno, 2011).

⁷¹ 1880 version, Verga, 14.

⁷² Ibid., 15.

prossimo” (“Lia baked him bread out of love for one’s neighbor”).⁷³ In these lines, we see Verga’s famed free indirect discourse coming through: the community members’ voices blur with the narrator’s to reveal how they speak of Jeli and their relationship to him. They would have gladly done anything for Jeli, these voices say, and Lia barter her bread out of love and not her own need. However, as the previous paragraph and the first line of this one make clear through repetition, Jeli has no actual need for human others. Although he may receive something from these trades and barter, his self-sufficiency makes these transactions one-sided. The passage suggests, then, that the villagers are always slightly in Jeli’s debt, a debt that makes them uncomfortable and resentful. This suggestion is made all the clearer by Lia’s closing remark: “—Facciamo come fanno le sue bestie, diceva la gnà Lia, che si grattano il collo a vicenda” (“We do as his beasts do,” Lia would say, “that scratch each other’s necks”).⁷⁴ And yet it is not like Jeli’s beasts at all. Here, Lia implies their community is organized on pre-capitalist, non-hierarchical “animal” ideals of reciprocity when it is instead organized on capitalist, hierarchical “human” ideals of competition and class. Although Lia and the others tell themselves they have something to give Jeli, he has no need for them as his needs, instead, are met through his alternative (animal) kinship community. The placement of Lia’s direct discourse, coming as it does after these two paragraphs, creates a bitter contrast: they tell themselves Jeli needs them, too, but they know this is not the case.⁷⁵ The community members’ unease, hidden beneath the humor and denial in Lia’s direct discourse that closes each of these two paragraphs, foreshadows the chasm that will continue to separate Jeli from the text’s other human characters.

“...si fosse fracassate le reni lui”: Interspecific Empathy in the Injured Colt Scene

In later drafts, the “work” done by Passage A is achieved, albeit more indirectly, by the injured colt scene mentioned earlier. The drafts vary with respect to what exactly happens to the colt—either his “collo” or his “reni” are broken⁷⁶—and even which colt it is that gets injured and later killed—either the colt who had earlier lost his mother or another colt entirely.⁷⁷ Despite these slight variations from draft to draft, the passage’s key elements remain the same: (1) communication takes place between Jeli and the colt; (2) the colt, particularly in his communication, is characterized in anthropomorphic terms; and (3) Jeli is not only deeply saddened by the colt’s injury and ensuing death but also feels the colt’s pain as his own.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Their need is not mutual nor reciprocal. Lia and the other villagers use Jeli for their own benefit. In the 1880 version, Lia again uses Jeli for her own devices (at his expense) when she and her husband marry off their daughter Mara—who is now unfit to marry the desirable son of *massaro* Neri due to her philandering—to Jeli. This marriage not only helps Mara to retain (some) honor but also gives her more economic and societal stability, especially seeing as Jeli and Mara’s union does not prevent don Alfonso from continuing his affair (and its corresponding economic perks) with her. Although we could interpret the marriage as a mutually beneficial arrangement (seeing as Jeli has always loved and desired to marry Mara), it again represents a decidedly unequal “neck scratching,” to use Lia’s words.

⁷⁶ Compare “Giusto in quel punto la strada correva sul lato di un burrone e fu dove il puledro stellato si spezzò il collo” (Abbozzo III, Verga, 160; [“Precisely at that point the road ran along the side of a ravine and it was where the Stellato colt broke his neck”]) and “...perchè il quel posto la strada correva lungo il burrone, e fu nel burrone che lo *stellato* si fracassò le reni” (1880 version, Verga, 29; [“because at that place the road ran along the ravine, and it was in the ravine that Stellato broke his back”]).

⁷⁷ In Abbozzo II, the *stellato* colt who loses his mother is the same as the colt who is injured and then killed. In the 1880 version, it is the *zaino* colt that loses his mother but the *stellato* who is injured and killed.

Sometimes, all three of these elements are present in one single sentence, as in the following excerpt from *Abbozzo III*:

Da principio Jeli non se n'era accorto, ma quando contò le sue bestie, al barlume delle stelle, e vide che mancava lo stellato, si cacciò le mani nei capelli, e *andava chiamandolo* a gran voce auh! auh! auh! in mezzo alla notte.

Lo stellato *rispose* finalmente con un *nitrito doloroso* dal burrone, *come avesse avuto la parola*, povera bestia! che il pastore *solo a sentirlo* si mise a *piangere*.

(At first Jeli hadn't realized, but when he counted his beasts, by the glimmer of the stars, and saw that Stellato was missing, he threw his hands in his hair, and went calling him in a loud voice auh! auh! auh! in the middle of the night.

Stellato responded finally with a painful neigh from the ravine, as though he had speech, poor beast! that the shepherd only hearing him began to cry.)⁷⁸

The use of “rispose” (“responded”) characterizes the colt’s vocalization as a response to Jeli’s calls, implying that it is not a mere bestial reaction to the pain he feels but an attempt at communication with Jeli. The sound the colt produces is “un nitrito doloroso”: while *nitrito* is the characteristic sound of a horse (a “neigh” or “whinny”), the word *doloroso* presents more interpretive flexibility. The adjective, meaning either “painful,” “distressing,” or “sorrowful,” implies both the quality of the whinny itself (because it is caused by pain) and the reaction it elicits in the receiver (the whinny is painful to hear). The phrase “come avesse avuto la parola, povera bestia!” (“as though he had speech, poor beast!”) reinforces that, despite being produced by a non-human, the signal possesses human-like characteristics. Though decidedly distinct from a simile in the present tense (in which “like,” as discussed earlier, simultaneously suggests both identity and difference), the text’s use here of past perfect subjunctive implies a suspension of disbelief is necessary—for the narrator, the reader, or Jeli himself—to imagine a situation in which the colt could speak human language. This positioning of the horse with respect to the human does not rule out the possibility that horses are capable of communication (in fact, Jeli says as much in Passage A), but that they do not, in the imagined present indicative of the narrative’s unfolding, speak *human* language (“la parola”). In other words, despite not being able to “speak,” the colt nonetheless does communicate through auditory signals, even to species other than his own, implying the colt has a voice even if he doesn’t have words. While the phrase “come avesse avuto la parola” (“as though he had speech”) at first seems to modify “nitrito doloroso” (“painful neigh”), upon a closer look, it seems the phrase refers to an earlier part of the sentence: “Lo stellato rispose finalmente...” (“Stellato responded finally”). The human-like quality of the colt’s whinny is its communicative ability: it is not a mere instinctual reaction to the pain he is experiencing but rather a way for him to communicate this pain to a receiver. The receiver processes the sender’s signal immediately and correctly: “il pastore *solo a sentirlo* si mise a *piangere*” (“the shepherd only hearing him began to cry”). Hearing the colt’s whinny, Jeli begins to cry; the message conveys to Jeli the severity of the colt’s injury, confirming Jeli’s worst fears.

The communication and connection between Jeli and the colt continue throughout the rest of this section as Jeli talks to the colt “come potesse farsi intendere” (“as though he could be

⁷⁸ *Abbozzo III*, Verga, 160, emphasis mine.

understood”).⁷⁹ Here, the imperfect subjunctive “potesse” suggests improbability (the colt *probably* doesn’t understand Jeli) but still open possibility (the colt *may* actually understand). As compared to the past perfect subjunctive of “avesse avuto,” which gestures towards horses’ imagined and unreal abilities for human speech, the imperfect subjunctive of “potesse” gestures towards the possibility of true interspecific understanding. In other words, the colt’s not having access to human words (“la parola”) does not prevent him from the possibility of understanding them (“intendere”). Additionally, we learn Jeli feels the colt’s pain within his own body: “*Non vedete come si duole? diceva Jeli bianco in viso quasi si fosse fracassate le reni lui*” (“Don’t you see he’s in pain?” Jeli said white in the face almost as though he had broken his own back”).⁸⁰ While Jeli’s body exhibits a physical reaction (i.e. the paling of his face) to the colt’s suffering, Jeli’s voice encourages the *fattore* to see (“Non vedete...” [“Don’t you see...”]) and thereby experience and empathize with the colt’s pain. This direct dialogue from Jeli, slightly altered in the 1880 published version,⁸¹ implies that Jeli does not believe his ability to sympathize with other species to be unique: if only the *fattore* would use his eyes to receive the message of the colt’s pain (through the visual signals that the colt is sending), perhaps the *fattore* would treat the colt with more empathy, be moved by his pain, and act accordingly. The colt, too, attempts visual communication with the *fattore*; however, the latter refuses to acknowledge it: “Lo stellato che non si poteva muovere voltava il capo con grandi occhi sbarrati verso il fattore quasi capisse ogni cosa e il pelo gli si arricciava ad onde, lungo le costole, come ci corresse sotto un brivido” (“Stellato who was unable to move turned his head with big wide eyes towards the *fattore* almost as though understanding everything and his hair curled in waves, along his ribs, as though a shiver ran under them”).⁸² Here again the use of imperfect subjunctive in “capisse” holds out the possibility for interspecific understanding (the colt *may* in fact understand everything). In this draft, the colt’s eyes are on the *fattore*; in the 1880 version, this is not specified.⁸³ This failed communication attempt anticipates the most vivid moment of human/non-human interpellation in the entire novella when Jeli feels the *fattore*’s bullet resound in his own body: “Così il fattore lo uccise sul luogo *per cavarne almeno la pelle*, e il rumore fiacco che fece dentro le carni vive il colpo tirato a bruciapelo parve a Jeli *di sentirselo dentro di sé*” (“So the *fattore* killed him on the spot *to get at least the hide*, and the dull sound the point-blank shot made inside the living flesh Jeli seemed *to feel inside himself*”).⁸⁴ The *fattore* refuses to acknowledge the colt’s gaze, and we hear his sentiment-free economic argument through the free indirect discourse of “per cavarne almeno la pelle” (“to get at least the hide”). When combined, these two sentences illustrate what is, I argue, the text’s most important gulf: a gulf not between humans and other animals but rather between Jeli and other humans. Jeli’s character embodies humans’ latent capability to think and feel beyond the confines of the human/animal binary made possible by the formation of alternative kinship networks outside species lines. This queering of

⁷⁹ Ibid., 160.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 161, emphasis mine.

⁸¹ While in Abbozzo III Jeli’s direct discourse is phrased as a question, in the 1880 version it is phrased as an exclamation: “Non vedete che non si può muovere, povera bestia!” (“Don’t you see that he can’t move, poor beast!”) (Verga 30). I find the punctuation in Abbozzo III to be more interpretively interesting, since in it Jeli directly interpellates the *fattore*.

⁸² Abbozzo III, Verga, 161.

⁸³ Compare: “Lo stellato, non potendosi muovere, volgeva il capo con grandi occhi sbarrati quasi avesse inteso ogni cosa...” (“Stellato, unable to move, turned his head with big wide eyes almost as though having understood everything”) (1880 version, Verga 31).

⁸⁴ Abbozzo III, Verga 161, emphasis mine.

traditional kinship and community boundaries is something no other human character in the text is willing to do. The coldhearted *fattore* represents the ideal foil to Jeli himself, who literally feels the *fattore*'s fatal bullet within his own human body. This act of violence against non-human animals foreshadows the novella's murderous conclusion.

Zoomorphic Figurative Language in *Jeli*: The Dancing at the *Festa* Scene

Next, I would like to take us to the dancing at the *festa* scene, a passage that comes approximately halfway through the published version. While the passages mentioned above suggested that “beasts” are like us due to their communicative abilities, the *festa* scene suggests its complement—humans are like beasts—through its strategic use of zoomorphic similes.⁸⁵ Here, I am interested in how the zoomorphic figurative language evolves from draft to draft: the fact that each draft significantly modifies the zoomorphic similes used implies they are important to the text.

At this point in the novella, Jeli is distraught. Only hours earlier, the colt near and dear to him was ruthlessly killed by the *fattore* who, blaming Jeli for the colt's injury, has fired him, leaving him unemployed. Worst of all, Jeli is finally reunited with his childhood love, Mara, only to discover she is being courted by a wealthy youth, the son of *massaro* Neri. This scene marks a turning point for Jeli: it is the first time he realizes he will lose Mara. I am providing here two versions of this passage: Abbozzo III and the 1880 version. Abbozzo III employs zoomorphic similes to describe the dancing of *massaro* Neri's son and Mara:

[...] li condusse al ballo, e a veder il cosmorama, pagando per tutti, e anche per Jeli che andava dietro anche lui, tirandosi dietro i piedi, a vedere ballare il figlio di *massaro* Neri colla Mara, che saltavano *come due puledri*, ed ella gli rispondeva girandosi intorno *come una colomba* sul colombajo, e tenendosi tesa con bel garbo una cocca del grembiale.

([...] he took them dancing, and to see the cosmorama, paying for everyone, and even for Jeli who followed behind, too, dragging his feet, to see *massaro* Neri's son dance with Mara, who jumped *like two colts*, and she responded by circling him *like a dove* on a dovecot, and gracefully stretching out the corner of her apron.)⁸⁶

Mara and the boy both jump like colts, and she responds to his advances like a dove. In the 1880 version, however, each significant character present is described as a different animal:

[...] li condusse al ballo, e al cosmorama, dove si vedeva il mondo vecchio e il mondo nuovo, pagando lui per tutti, anche per Jeli il quale andava dietro la comitiva *come un cane senza padrone*, a veder ballare il figlio di *massaro* Neri colla Mara, la quale girava in tondo e si accoccolava *come una colombella sulle tegole*, e teneva tesa con bel garbo una cocca del grembiale, e il figlio de *massaro* Neri saltava *come un puledro*.

⁸⁵ It is perhaps not surprising that the characters become more “animal”-like at the *festa*, given the setting's tropes of diversion and irrationality that echo pagan rituals.

⁸⁶ Abbozzo III, Verga, 164, emphasis mine.

([...] he took them dancing, and to the cosmorama, where one could see the old world and the new, paying for everyone, even for Jeli who followed behind the group *like a dog without a master*, to see *massaro* Neri's son dance with Mara, who twirled around and curtsied *like a dove* on the rooftop, and gracefully stretched out a corner of her apron, and *massaro* Neri's son jumped *like a colt*.)⁸⁷

We see in this 1880 version three zoomorphic similes comparing each character to a distinct animal: “come un cane senza padrone” (“like a dog without a master,” describing Jeli), “come una colombella sulle tegole” (“like a dove on the rooftop,” describing Mara), and “come un puledro” (“like a colt,” describing the son of *massaro* Neri). The evolution from *Abbozzo III* to the 1880 version suggests getting these zoomorphic similes “right” was important to Verga. The three similes, especially given they are all compacted into one sentence, are overwhelming and demand our interpretive attention.

As mentioned earlier, from *Abbozzo III* onwards, there is no first-person narrator. Therefore, as readers of these later versions, we are left to ascribe the text's perspective and language to a third-person narrator or to specific characters. Here, we are not seeing this scene from the perspective of an external or a choral voice. Instead, this passage is free indirect discourse in the mind of Jeli. Who else but Jeli would think that dance moves look like the jumping up and down of an agitated colt? Seeing as Jeli himself spends the majority of his time among other animals, it seems logical he would view and describe situations in terms of what he knows: that is, in terms of the animal world. This becomes particularly important when we come to the novella's conclusion, when Jeli cuts his rival's throat “proprio come un capretto” (“just like a goatling”). Interestingly, the violent finale also takes place during a dance scene, suggesting that Jeli is more able to recognize Mara's infidelity and to register his jealousy towards don Alfonso since it recalls this earlier dance scene at the *festa* with another rival.

Zoomorphic Figurative Language in *Jeli*: The Zoomorphic Murder(er) Conclusion

In the early drafts in which there is a first-person narrator and there is no don Alfonso, the novella's conclusion leaves Jeli alone with his animals and never having married Mara. These endings are somber and idyllic. *Abbozzo II*, for example, ends: “Le prime foglie erano cominciate a cadere, *ogni cosa taceva* e solo in lontananza per la campagna vasta *si udiva il campanaccio della bianca* che pascolava” (“The first leaves had begun to fall, *everything was hushed* and only in the distance across the vast countryside *the bell of Bianca* was heard as she grazed”).⁸⁸ We are left with the sound of a horse's bell, as if the horse is communicating with us through music. The bell becomes the horse's voice, the only voice audible throughout the fields. Jeli is lonely without Mara, but he is not alone: in his alternative kinship network, he has his horses and they have him.

In *Abbozzo III*, the first draft in which don Alfonso is killed, Jeli's act of zoomorphic murder is described as “come un agnello” (“like a lamb”). This throat slitting comes soon after the *padrone* has asked for a list of farm animals to be killed for a large feast. Jeli hears—and is visibly shook by—the dying animals' voices:

⁸⁷ 1880 version, Verga, 34, emphasis mine.

⁸⁸ *Abbozzo II*, Verga, 146, emphasis mine.

Il padrone volle che gli sgozzassero *due capretti, per quel giorno, e il castrato di un anno, e dei polli, e un tacchino*. Insomma volle fare le cose all'ingrande, e senza risparmio, per farsi onore coi suoi amici.

Jeli, mentre tosava, teneva il capo chino badando a non pungere il ventre delle pecore. *Ma come i capretti strillavano sotto il coltello, e le galline schiamazzavano, Jeli bianco bianco*, come aveva visto suo padre quando stava per morire nel casolare davanti al fuoco, di tratto in tratto gli pareva che la lana bianca che andava tosando, e l'erba verde su cui le pecore belavano avvampasse di rosso.

(The master wanted the throats to be cut of *two goatlings, for that day, and the year-old wether and some chickens, and a turkey*. In short he wanted to do things in a big way, and sparing nothing, to show off for his friends.

Jeli, as he sheared, had his head bowed careful to not prick the stomach of the sheep. *But as the goatlings shrieked under the knife, and the hens screamed, Jeli white white*, as he had seen his father when he was about to die in the cottage in front of the fire, from time to time it seemed to him that the white wool he was shearing, and the green grass upon which the sheep bleated were flaring with red).⁸⁹

Only lines later, when Jeli sees don Alfonso take Mara by the hand to dance, Jeli makes the surprising and seemingly impulsive decision to slit don Alfonso's throat.

Ma Jeli tutt'a un tratto, come vide che don Alfonso, colla bella barba ricciuta, e colla giacchetta di velluto, e la catenella sul panciotto, prese Mara per la mano, si rizzò sulla vita, colla forbice in pugno, si slanciò su don Alfonso, l'afferrò per la barba nera, e gli tagliò la gola con un solo colpo, *come un agnello*.

(But Jeli all at once, as he saw that don Alfonso, with his fine curly beard, and his velvet jacket, and the chain on his vest, took Mara by the hand, straightened up, with the scissors in his fist, hurled himself on don Alfonso, seized him by his black beard, and slit his throat with a single stroke, *like a lamb*.)⁹⁰

In the 1880 version of the text, don Alfonso is compared to a goatling (“come un capretto”) rather than a lamb (“come un agnello”). We could guess at the potential religious connotations behind this switch;⁹¹ however, I argue the choice of *capretto* has more to do with internal consistency within the scene itself than with possible religious valences: goatlings are the first animal listed to be killed for the feast, and Jeli, already demonstrated to possess interspecific empathy through earlier scenes, is severely agitated by their dying voices. Let us compare the

⁸⁹ Abbozzo III, Verga, 174–5, emphasis mine.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 175, emphasis mine.

⁹¹ In her paper currently in progress, Fondazione Verga president Gabriella Alfieri is interested in the religious connotation of *agnello* in Abbozzo III when compared to *capretto* in the later published version. We often associate “agnello” with Easter—Jesus is the innocent, sacrificial lamb who dies for our sins. By choosing “agnello,” it would seem the text exudes a more religious overtone. However, Alfieri argues goat meat was traditionally served in Sicily for Easter, so she believes the choice of “capretto” in the final version maintains a religious connotation.

Abbozzo III quote above with the 1880 ending to see what other significant differences emerge besides the *agnello/capretto* switch:

Il padrone aveva ordinato che gli sgozzassero *due capretti, e il castrato di un anno, e dei polli, e un tacchino*. Insomma voleva fare le cose in grande, e senza risparmio, per farsi onore coi suoi amici, e mentre tutte quelle bestie schiamazzavano dal dolore, e i capretti strillavano sotto il coltello, Jeli si sentiva tremare le ginocchia e di tratto in tratto gli pareva che la lana che andava tosando e l'erba in cui le pecore saltellavano avvampassero di sangue. [...] Tutt'a un tratto come vide che don Alfonso, colla bella barba ricciuta, e la giacchetta di velluto e la catenella d'oro sul panciotto, prese Mara per la mano per ballare, solo allora, come vide che la toccava, si slanciò su di lui, e gli tagliò la gola di un sol colpo, *proprio come un capretto*.

Più tardi, mentre lo conducevano dinanzi al giudice, legato, disfatto, senza che avesse osato opporre la menoma resistenza.

— Come! — diceva — Non dovevo ucciderlo nemmeno? ... Se mi aveva preso la Mara!...

(The master had ordered that the throats be cut of *two goatlings, and the year-old wether, and some chickens, and a turkey*. In short he wanted to do things in a big way, and sparing nothing, to show off for his friends, and while all the beasts screamed out in pain, and the goatlings shrieked under the knife, Jeli felt his knees shake and from time to time it seemed to him that the wool he was shearing and the grass upon which the sheep jumped were flaring with blood. [...] All at once as he saw that don Alfonso, with his fine curly beard, and the velvet jacket and the gold chain on his vest, took Mara by the hand to dance, only then, as he saw him touch her, he hurled himself upon him, and slit his throat in a single stroke, *just like a goatling*.

Later, when they were bringing him in front of the judge, tied, undone, without having dared offer the least resistance.

“What!” he would say. “I shouldn’t have even killed him? ... If he had taken Mara!...”⁹²

In both versions, we can see the animals ordered to be killed are the same: “due capretti, e il castrato di un anno, e dei polli, e un tacchino” (“two goatlings, and the year-old wether and some chickens, and a turkey”). The final version is, overall, more compact. It combines the list of animals to be killed, Jeli’s sheep shearing, and his vision of blood all into one paragraph instead of two. Because of its concision, the final version more clearly demonstrates the connections between the violence of the animal killing, Jeli’s anxiety, and the act of slitting don Alfonso’s throat.

What is perhaps most significant in this passage, after having investigated the evolution of the zoomorphic similes in the *fiesta* scene, is identifying the focalization of the narrative voice. This is third-person narration, but as the figurative language in the *fiesta* scene suggests, these zoomorphic similes seem to take place in the mind of Jeli, not in the voice of a third-person omniscient narrator or even a choral voice. “Proprio come un capretto” (“Just like a goatling”),

⁹² 1880 version, Verga, 46–47, emphasis mine.

in my reading, is not a simile put forth by the narrator to accurately describe the murderous action or a description from the perspective of other human characters present at this moment. Instead, the belief that Jeli was killing don Alfonso “proprio come un capretto” comes from Jeli himself. The phrase is yet another example of free indirect discourse, focalized in Jeli, and this interpretation is supported by Jeli’s preoccupation with and empathy for non-human animals throughout the text.

Interpreting the zoomorphic simile “proprio come un capretto” as free indirect discourse focalized in Jeli helps us to better contextualize his surprising and seemingly out-of-character murderous act. Without understanding this focalization, his act could be interpreted variously, for example, as Jeli leaving “nature” behind and finally entering human society. Up to this point in the text, Jeli has naively refused to accept Mara’s infidelity; here, he finally sees it with his own eyes so perhaps must come to terms with it. However, having had access to these manuscript drafts, I now interpret Jeli’s final act differently. *It is Jeli* who believes he is slitting don Alfonso’s throat in a way analogous to the slitting of the goatlings’ throats taking place nearby. The drafts characterize Jeli as believing other animal species are like us. Jeli does not understand the fundamental difference between *zoe* and *bios*—in part because he himself has been relegated to *zoe* status by his exclusion from the human sociopolitical community—and therefore does not understand the fundamental difference between “putting to death” and “murder.” Therefore, another way to interpret the novella’s ending is Jeli’s misunderstanding of his contemporaries’ speciesism. Beasts are like us, he says in Abbozzo II, and we are like beasts, he says through zoomorphic similes in the *fiesta* scene. Jeli’s confused reaction to his culpability—“Non dovevo ucciderlo nemmeno?...Se mi aveva preso la Mara!” (“I shouldn’t have even killed him? ... If he had taken Mara!...”)—speaks not only to Jeli’s continued outsider status in the human community but also to his confusion regarding the unequal treatment of other species.

Here, in this violent finale, the threads of Clever Hans and Derrida’s “Thou shalt not”’s begin to weave together: if we were able to recognize other animals’ capacity to communicate, perhaps by communicating with them ourselves, would we not reconsider where we draw our biopolitical lines? Once we recognize an animal individual is capable of communication and, in turn, can constitute a viable subject position, the differences between “putting to death” and “murder” become more tenuous. In so doing, we would be forced to reconsider, as Jeli does at the end of the novella, why the killing of non-human animals is licit while the killing of human animals is illicit. Perhaps, then, Jeli is Italian *verismo*’s representative of the rare individual Derrida seeks: someone who interprets “thou shalt not kill” as “thou shalt not put to death the living in general.” In his physical and societal marginalization, Jeli embodies the turning point between an agropastoral way of life and a modernizing capitalistic society—epitomized in the text by Lia and don Alfonso—which sees and values animal lives differently. As John Berger writes in “Why Look at Animals?,” our modern relationship to other animals is intimately tied with industrialization:

The nineteenth century, in western Europe and North America, saw the beginning of a process, today being completed by twentieth century corporate capitalism, by which every tradition which has previously mediated between man and nature was broken. Before this rupture, animals constituted the first circle of what surrounded man. Perhaps that already suggests too great a distance. They were with man at the center of his world.⁹³

⁹³ Berger, “Why Look at Animals?,” 3.

As non-human animals became more physically marginalized, confined, and, in turn, exploited through the processes of industrialism and post-industrialism, an ideology of the non-human animal as an industrial commodity was born. By engaging with other animals as communicative subjects rather than exploitable, expendable objects, Verga's text helps us see our own modern-day speciesism more critically by anticipating the importance of interspecific communication and alternative kinship networks. Indeed, imagining a way out of our own contemporary and post-industrial disengagement with other animal lives begins exactly where *Jeli* ends: non dobbiamo ucciderli nemmeno? ("Should we not kill them at all?")