1. Expanding Our Conversations of Justice: The Perfectionist Invitations of Indra Sinha's *Animal's People*

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Introduction

Indra Sinha's 2007 novel *Animal's People* offers a "voice" notably different from the canonical British, European, and American texts repeatedly drawn into conversation by Stanley Cavell. It is narrated by a profane, amoral, trickster figure, and it focuses on the social and political lives of disenfranchised poor residents of a fictional city modelled after Bhopal, India, where a leak and explosion at a Union Carbide petrochemical factory in 1984 killed and injured thousands of people immediately, and where countless others continue to suffer illness and premature death from unmitigated environmental toxicity.[1] Yet as I strive to show in what follows, Sinha's novel shares core features of the "outlook or dimension of thought" that Cavell calls moral (or Emersonian) perfectionism. Moreover, its outlook and voice—which combine playfulness, confrontation, political outrage and hope—may be read as instigating an aversive, perfectionist conversation with its reader and with criticism undertaken in a Cavellian spirit.[2] By drawing this novel into the endlessly developing "conversation" about perfectionism—and its links to justice—that Cavell teaches us to hear amongst admired books, I propose that *Animal's People* can contribute to perfectionist "literary-philosophical criticism" by challenging us to imagine a further, higher state of our own work.[3]

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1. For a thorough, albeit partisan, account of the disaster and subsequent events through spring of 2024, see Amnesty International, "Bhopal: 40 Years of Injustice" (Amnesty International Ltd., 2024).
2. Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome: The Constitution of Emersonian Perfectionism* (The University of Chicago Press, 1990), 4. Hereafter *CHU*.
3. Cavell uses the phrase "literary-philosophical criticism" to describe J.L. Austin's work, but it is perhaps an even more appropriate characterization of his own. See "Austin at Criticism," in *Must We Mean What We Say?: A Book of Essays* (Cambridge University Press, 1976), 110.

Animal's People is set two decades after the industrial disaster in Bhopal's fictional analogue, Khaufpur (an Urdu neologism that means, roughly, "city of terror").[4] In Sinha's Khaufpur, as in our Bhopal, local water sources remain poisonous, and rates of respiratory illness, cancer, congenital disorders, and other causes of premature death continue to be unusually high. Evidence indicates that corporate negligence caused the chemical leak and explosion, and activists have sought for decades to hold the American parent corporation financially, criminally, and environmentally responsible, but the corporation (referred to in the novel as "the Kampani") shields itself via legal maneuvering and collusion with corrupt local officials.[5] The novel spotlights what literary critic Rob Nixon terms the "slow violence" of outsourced risk and exploitation associated with transnational neoliberal capitalism, in which, "under cover of a free market ideology, powerful transnational corporations exploit the lopsided universe of deregulation, whereby laws and loopholes are selectively applied in a marketplace a lot freer for some societies and classes than for others."[6]

Readings of *Animal's People* typically focus on its postcolonial and post-humanist (or anti-humanist, according to some interpretations) critiques of reigning economic, legal, moral, and media systems.[7] As most note, the novel does not make a straightforward appeal for recognizing the individual rights of people like its central characters, as would a text whose ethical and political horizon is liberal-humanist universalism. The novel's narrator, a nineteen-year-old boy orphaned as a newborn the night of the industrial disaster, spurns such ethical and political frameworks. Tox-

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4. Jennifer Rickel, "'The Poor Remain': A Posthumanist Rethinking of Literary Humanitarianism in Indra Sinha's *Animal's People*," *ariel: a review of international english literature* 43, no. 1 (2012), 91.
5. Activists and politicians from Bhopal have filed numerous civil and criminal claims against executives and the corporation; Union Carbide (UC) was acquired by Dow Chemical in 2001, and representatives of the Bhopal survivors have subsequently sought from Dow additional compensation, accountability, and environmental remediation following a settlement between UC and Indian officials in the 1980s that many argue was inadequate, unjust and corrupt. The US Department of Justice first served summons to Dow from Bhopal's Chief Judicial Magistrate in 2023. The legal, health, and ecological situation remains unsettled. See Amnesty International, "Bhopal."
6. Rob Nixon, "Neoliberalism, slow violence, and the environmental picaresque," *MFS Modern Fiction Studies* 55, no. 3 (2009), 444.
7. Following Nixon's influential analysis of *Animal's People* as an "environmental picaresque," numerous critics have linked the novel's formal and generic experiments to its critique of contemporary political-economic systems and the uneven, hypocritical, or even "imperial" uses of liberal humanist rights discourses in "subaltern" contexts. See, especially, Rickel, "'The Poor Remain'"; Stacey Balkan, "A Memento Mori Tale: Indra Sinha's *Animal's People* and the Politics of Global Toxicity," *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 25, no. 1 (2018); Baron Haber, "Monster Ecologies: Material Eco-Rhapsody and the Bio-Gothic in *Animal's People*," *ariel: A Review of International English Literature* 55, no. 1 (2024); and Sadie Barker, "Silence, Dissonance, Noise: Guided Listening in Indra Sinha's *Animal's People*," *ariel: A Review of International English Literature* 55, no. 1 (2024).

ins have warped his spine to such an extent that he walks and runs using arms and legs like a four-footed animal, and he has embraced the name Animal—originally an epithet of bullying children—as an expression of his cynical, embittered rejection of human(ist) society.[8] Animal survives by begging and trickery, continuously lies, spies on women undressing, poisons a sexual rival, and disparages conventional humanist values and norms. His narration moreover interweaves critique of dominant moral and political-economic orders with reflexivity regarding novelistic conventions, as if *Animal's People* shares a common literary-historicist understanding of the novel genre's links to both political and economic liberalism.[9] As Stacey Balkan notes, whereas the novel genre has been praised or criticized for promoting liberal faith in the conjoined progress of individuals and society, *Animal's People* "parodies representational strategies that augment the project of global capitalism—specifically, the liberal narrative of development—through its episodic form, and with a narrator whose mutilated body illustrates the toxic underside of industrial progress."[10] It also challenges values associated with what Jennifer Rickel calls "literary humanitarianism," a conviction that literary fiction can "humanize" the disenfranchised, and that empathetically representing their plight contributes to cosmopolitan pursuits of justice.[11] The novel's opening pages in fact frame its ensuing narrative in opposition

8. Although I do not have space here to pursue this line of thinking further, I wish to note that the novel's critical perspective links two strands of prejudice typically called out by posthumanist critics: the (often described as Eurocentric) biases and exclusions inherent in the ideal of the rational, able-bodied, autonomous subject upheld by some variants of humanism, and anthropocentricism. There is a vibrant body of new work at the intersection of disability and critical animal studies that explores the possibilities and limitations involved in spotlighting correspondences between the logics of "dehumanizing" people with disabilities (along with non-European, poor, and other populations) and the species-ist assumption that dehumanization "naturally" rationalizes exploitation, exclusion, abuse, etc. A good place to dive into this literature is the "Animality/posthumanism/disability" special issue of *New Literary History* edited and introduced by Michael Lundblad, 51, no. 4 (2020).

9. Scholars largely agree that there exist affinities between liberalism and realist novels during the genre's 18th–19th century European heyday, although there is no consensus as to the causal lines between culture, representation, and economic and political change. For further discussion of such literary historicist accounts of the novel genre, see Erin Greer, *Fiction, Philosophy and the Ideal of Conversation* (Edinburgh University Press, 2023), 10.

10. Balkan, "A *Memento Mori* Tale," 116–117.

11. Joseph Slaughter coins this phrase in his pathbreaking work on correspondences between the genre of the bildungsroman (the novel of education & social integration) and human rights discourse. Rickel extends the framework beyond the bildungsroman genre "to refer to literature that seeks to extend the scope of juridical power and the influence of human rights projects by way of a relationship between narrator and reader that treats literature as testimony" (Rickel, "The Poor Remain," 88). This narrative structure casts a privileged reader as a witness to "suffering [conceived] primarily as an ethical concern" (ibid). It reinforces a power imbalance between privileged, benevolent (and voyeuristic) readers and the suffering "victims" figured as needing aid, and it even more problematically "depoliticizes suffering" and "allows a privileged readership to contemplate suffering as evidence of a universal ethical crisis rather than a situated political crisis" (ibid., 88–89).

to such beliefs, as Animal mocks a journalist who promises to share his story with compassionate Western audiences: people like Sinha's readers.

The present essay does not exactly dispute such postcolonial readings of the novel, but it seeks to reorient them by proposing that *Animal's People* also enacts what Cavell calls the "aversive conversation" of moral perfectionism, a key aspect of Cavell's own critiques of liberalism via a trope he calls the "conversation of justice." Reading *Animal's People* alongside Cavell, I make two interlinked arguments: Cavell's account of perfectionism helps to clarify and extend the novel's political project, and *Animal's People* reciprocally helps recast Cavell's ideas about perfectionism, and aesthetics, for pertinence in urgent, contemporary pursuits of environmental and economic justice. I begin by highlighting salient features of Cavell's accounts of moral perfectionism and the "conversation of justice." Then, I sketch how *Animal's People* contributes to a perfectionist outlook by staging an aversive conversation with conventional ideas about humanitarianism and literary representation. Through its reflexive critiques of novelistic and liberal-humanitarian outlooks, the novel insists readers question our own motives and responsibilities, enmeshed as we are not only as consumers in a global economy that treats populations like those in *Animal's People* as disposable, but also as readers, consumers of media that might inadvertently reinforce hierarchy and exploitation. I close by proposing that the novel's extension of perfectionist, Cavellian "conversation" discloses a valuable new outlook on interrelations of reading, criticism, and justice.

"The imperative to conversation": Perfectionism & Justice in Cavell

As readers of *Conversations* likely know, Cavell never offers a fixed theory of moral perfectionism. Instead, he describes his project as one of "reading and thematization," in which he sketches "perfectionism as an outlook or dimension of thought embodied and developed in a set of texts spanning the range of Western culture."[12] It is in this account that he describes the "fantasy" that inspires this special

12. Cavell, *CHU,* 4.

issue, in which "there is a place in the mind where the good books are in conversation, among themselves and with other sources of thought and pleasure."[13] This fantasy aptly reflects Cavell's practice of literary-philosophical criticism, which elsewhere I have described as giving "public expression to conversations he learns to hear in his mind, conversations that prove to be interlinked and whose continuations he remains acutely attuned for, as he continues to read philosophy, literature and film."[14] Perfectionism, then, is akin to a topic of conversation, an outlook on moral and political life that ripens and expands as the critic tunes and retunes texts' voices in a conversation that never comes to a definitive close. The critic ought to hold herself open to the "possible continuations" of this conversation, forever seeking new sources of thought and pleasure to recall and reframe the voices already inter-playing.[15]

Although he declines to define or theorize perfectionism, Cavell describes features common to perfectionist texts in a key passage that appears first in *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome* and again at the end of *Cities of Words*. Perfectionist texts, he writes, reflect "a mode of conversation" between friends, one of whom is "exemplary or representative of a life the other(s) are attracted to," an attraction through which the other(s) finds that they are "enchained, fixated" and "removed from reality," but also that their self is able to "turn (convert, revolutionize itself)" through "cultivating" a "further state of that self."[16] The practice of conversation is central to the specific, non-universalizable quality of the perfectionist education: we recognize our further selves as superior not by referencing abstract moral rubrics (in the deontological model of moral reasoning) nor by calculation (in the consequentialist model), but rather, by understanding that our responsiveness in this conversation depends on finding within us the voice of a self we are meant to be. As Cavell writes elsewhere, "The conversation decides" the further development of our self, our voice.[17] The transformation through conversation is above all a transformation in vision, expressed in voice: we perceive ourselves and our society anew, and this new

13. Ibid.
14. Greer, *Fiction, Philosophy and the Ideal of Conversation*, 15.
15. Cavell, *CHU*, 4.
16. Ibid, 6–7.
17. Cavell, *Cities of Words: Pedagogical Letters on a Register of the Moral Life* (The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004), 363. Hereafter *Cities*.

perspective resounds in our continuations of conversation. It can feel aversive, premised as it is on discomfort with where and how we presently stand, on discovering that this stance is unworthy of the person we are meant to be. But this aversiveness testifies to something like faith in our foundations, unsettling and rebuking us, but not unrooting and rejecting.

Throughout his work on perfectionism, Cavell plays with the Latin root shared by conversion, aversion, revolution and conversation: *vertĕre*, to turn.[18] We "turn" in place, aversively away from our previously fixed point of view, revolving and converting how we perceive ourselves, others, and the society in which we live. We might say that his textual exemplars—Plato's *Republic*, Emerson's essays, Hollywood remarriage comedies, Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, and many others—share not a theory of moral development but a foundation, an outlook from which moral life appears to be cultivated by conversation that unsettles us. Cavell's readings then "turn" us, illuminating how these exemplars direct attention in different directions from a shared foundation: toward marriage and friendship, education, skepticism, etc. Reading and thematizing become extensions of perfectionist conversation.

From this ideal of perfectionist conversation, Cavell develops a critique of political liberalism, specifically as expressed in John Rawls's emphasis on impersonality and "cooperation" in *Theory of Justice*. According to Cavell, Rawls's famous "veil of ignorance" thought experiment, in which we imagine ourselves to be ignorant of the position we would occupy in a society structured according to principles we affirm while thus veiled, is fundamentally mistaken. Rawls claims that a stable society depends upon its members' "cooperation" following their consent to a social contract recognized as fair because it is devised from behind this veil, which, Cavell notes, "suggests the idea of society as a whole either as having a project or, at the other extreme, as being a neutral field in which each can pursue his or her own projects."[19] Cavell continues:

> The idea of 'conversation,' in contrast, emphasizes neither a given social project nor a field of fairness for individual projects. (Nor, as I have insisted,

18. "convert (v.), Etymology," *OED Online* (Oxford University Press, 2024), https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/9819220478.
19. Cavell, *Cities*, 173.

> does it deny the importance of these ideas.) What it emphasizes is, I might say, the opacity, or non-transparence, of the present state of our interactions, co-operative or antagonistic—the present seen as the outcome of our history as the realization of attempts to reform ourselves in the direction of compliance with the principles of justice. The virtues most in request here are those of listening, the responsiveness to difference, the willingness for change [...] The imperative to conversation is meant to capture the sense that, even when the veil of ignorance is lifted, we still do not know what 'position' we occupy in society, who we have turned out to be, what our stance is toward whatever degree of compliance with justice we have reached. To know such things is to have a perspective on our lives, on the way we live, and this is precisely the province of what I call, of what interests me in, moral perfectionism. The idea of conversation expresses my sense that one cannot achieve this perspective alone, but only in the mirroring or confrontation of what Aristotle calls the friend (what Nietzsche calls my enemy, namely one who is, on my behalf, opposed to my present, unnecessary stance), what Emerson calls the true man, the neutral youth, my further, rejected self.[20]

As in the description of moral perfectionism cited above, here a person's sense of political justice requires conversation with another. And as in Cavell's account of acknowledgment—another activity in which conversation is crucial—self-disclosure and awareness are essential.[21] Conversation prompts new attunements not only to the justice or injustice of society, but also to one's own stance toward justice or injustice: for Cavell, we require awareness, not ignorance, of where we stand in society.

Cavell exemplifies such awareness in moments of reflection about the "position" of his own writing. He writes from a stance, and addresses readers likely to share this stance, that is in a high degree of compliance with whatever mix of justice and injustice our society currently manifests. It is "overwhelmingly likely," he reflects, that we "will continue to consent to the way things are" even after disturbed by visions of injustice, and this likelihood reflects a privilege he also refers to as our

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20. Ibid., 173–174.
21. On the links between acknowledgment and moral perfectionism, see the introduction and first two chapters of Greer, *Fiction, Philosophy and the Ideal of Conversation*.

"consent from above."[22] The confrontational conversation may prompt a sense that our consent "compromises" us, that "change is called for and to be striven for, beginning with myself," but this awareness may not move us into immediate action.[23] Any effort to change, he indicates, must be undertaken with honesty about the fact that "our collective distance from perfect justice is, though in moments painful to the point of intolerable, still habitable."[24] Cavell does not endorse quietist self-justification, but rather insists, aversively, that we face our compromised consent. There are no guarantees about how we will respond to this revelation.

Of course, if the "collective distance from perfect justice" is "habitable" for Cavell and his readers, he does not address those for whom it is literally uninhabitable: those killed, for instance, by industrial poisoning in Bhopal.

"I am talking to the eyes that are reading these words": The Perfectionist Provocations of *Animal's People*

Animal's People addresses readers similar to Cavell's, equipped with education, linguistic fluency, and tastes that index certain privileges. Sinha repeatedly reminds us of these privileges, adopting diverse formal strategies that cast the novel as the friend, or faithful enemy, of such a reader. The first pages of the main text—after a fictional Editor's Note (the significance of which I'll return to momentarily)—foreground two features underwriting my sense of the novel's affinity with Cavellian perfectionism: its attentiveness to stance and perspective, understood in literal, physical terms as well as ideological and political-economic terms; and the aversiveness of its profane, occasionally hostile narrative voice.

Animal introduces himself as having once "walk[ed] on two feet just like a human being," then offers a characteristically vulgar account of the quadrupedal perspective he has adopted since the childhood onset of his scoliosis:

> The world of humans is meant to be viewed from eye level. Your eyes. Lift my head I'm staring into someone's crotch. Whole nother world it's, below the

22. Cavell, *CHU*, 112.
23. Ibid.
24. Ibid.

> waist. Believe me, I know which one hasn't washed his balls, I can smell pissy gussets and shitty backsides.[25]

This provocative second-person address continues throughout the novel, repeatedly returning our attention to our own stance as readers, our literal and ideological perspectives. We are presumed, by the narration, to perceive the world from "eye level," both as able-bodied, upright human beings, and as readers whose access to Animal's world is mediated through the visual activity of reading. We cannot share in the smells and sounds central to his world, and as we will see, Animal repeatedly challenges the moral and ideological outlook presumed of readers of Anglophone literary fiction about "subaltern" experience.

The novel is a frame narrative, presented as a "story recorded in Hindi on a series of tapes by a nineteen-year-old boy" ("Editor's Note," np). A prefatory, fictional Editor's Note gestures unconvincingly toward editorial neutrality and the alleged verisimilitude of this multiply-mediated document, translated and transcribed from recordings made by Animal at the urging of a journalist:

> True to the agreement between the boy and the journalist who befriended him, the story is told entirely in the boy's words as recorded on the tapes. Apart from translating to English, nothing has been changed. Difficult expressions which turned out to be French are rendered in correct spelling for ease of comprehension. Places where a recording was stopped and later recommenced on the same tape are indicated by gaps. The recordings are of various lengths, and the tapes are presented in the order of numbering. Some tapes contain long sections in which there is no speech, only sounds such as bicycle bells, birds, snatches of music and in one case several minutes of sustained and inexplicable laughter. (np)

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25. Indra Sinha, *Animal's People* (Simon & Schuster, 2007), 1–2. Subsequent citations will be made in the main text of this essay. See Justin Omar Johnston for an illuminating discussion of this passage's "postcolonial parody" of a footnote to *Civilization and its Discontents,* in which Freud associates bipedalism with "civilization" via the "depreciation of [the human] sense of smell" and sexual repression (Freud qtd. in Johnston, 122). Johnston, "'A Nother World' in Indra Sinha's Animal's People," *Twentieth Century Literature* 62, no. 2 (2016), 122.

In the text that follows, we find no indications of instances or durations of bells, birds, music, or laughter. It is a stretch to say that the journalist "befriends" Animal. Moreover, Animal consistently reminds the reader of the gap between our world and his, such as when he describes listening to one of his tapes and wondering, "Do I speak that rough-tongue way? You don't answer. I keep forgetting you do not hear me. The things I say, by the time they reach you they'll have been changed out of Hindi, made into Inglis et français [...] For you they're just words written on a page" (21). Animal's narration continues its invitational, conversational address to the reader just as persistently as it reminds us of the limitations of this conversation.

The novel challenges the ethical and political premises of texts it might appear to resemble. In their initial exchange, the journalist explains to Animal (via a local middleman, Chunaram) that his story can be put to humanitarian use, raising global awareness about the ongoing suffering in Khaufpur. At this notion, Animal scoffs: "many books have been written about this place, not one has changed anything for the better, how will yours be different? You will bleat like all the rest. You'll talk of *rights, law, justice*" (3). The irony underlying Animal's characterization of the language of human rights as inhuman "bleating" repeats two pages later, when he dehumanizes the journalist in a simile that yolks together the disempowered poor and their perhaps unwittingly predatory benefactors:

> You were like all the others, come to suck our stories from us, so strangers in far off countries can marvel there's so much pain in the world. Like vultures are you jarnaliss. Somewhere a bad thing happens, tears like rain in the wind, and look, here you come, drawn by the smell of blood. (5)

According to Chunaram, the journalist assures Animal he "'will write what you say in his book. Thousands will read it. Maybe you will become famous. Look at him, see his eyes. He says thousands of other people are looking through his eyes. Think of that'" (7). Animal finds this an "awful idea," the journalist's "eyes full of eyes. Thousands staring at me through the holes in your head," the promised readers' "curiosity [...] like acid on my skin" (7). He imagines that his words generate a "picture" and that "the eyes settle on it like flies" (13). If journalists are birds of prey scenting blood,

their audiences are even lowlier, flies drawn to disposable, carrion poor. The simile once more expresses Animal's sense that the literary marketplace for "humanitarian" stories about suffering and injustice dehumanizes all involved, and the novel explicitly locates its reader in this media marketplace and its attendant ethical dilemmas.

The "you" of *Animal's People* is complicated, however. Initially, the second person addressee is the journalist, but Animal explains that he will follow advice the journalist offers and imagine one reader, one set of eyes: "from this moment I am no longer speaking to [the journalist…], I am talking to the eyes that are reading these words. Now I am talking to you" (12). He continues: "My job is to talk, yours is to listen. So now listen" (14). This "you" is our fictional analogue—the fictional reader of the fictional journalist's book transcribing the fictional Animal's story—just as Khaufpur is a fictional analogue of Bhopal (and other similarly exploited, neglected sites).[26] The frame narrative's faux-documentary conceit reflexively mirrors and accentuates the blurred bounds of fictionality, truth, and politics inherent to Sinha's own "translation" of Bhopal into Khaufpur. Sinha has further blurred the lines between fiction and nonfiction by creating a (now defunct) website allegedly belonging to Khaufpur's Chamber of Commerce, publishing an article imagining Animal and another character traveling from Khaufpur to Bhopal, and acknowledging the inspiration of real-world activists for characters in his book.[27] Again, this blurring of fiction and nonfiction pertains not only to the represented world, but also to the reader's identity. The very ambiguity of the "you" is crucial to the novel's aversiveness, its provocations that we seek a "job" beyond witnessing. Our most fundamental job, I propose, is that of self-reflection, of discovering our stance as readers in relation to this text and the nonfictional world—our world—that it multiply mediates.

The story we are reading is emphatically not a bid for charitable interest, as the journalist initially promises. Nor is it an effort to publicize subaltern "truths," conceptualized as self-representation. The novel presents itself as the textual trace of Animal's way of exploring his own priorities, goals, and identity. He says he begins recording the tapes not "for truth," money, or fame, but because he has "a choice to make,

26. Sinha has said that "The book could have been set anywhere where the chemical industry has destroyed people's lives" (qtd. in Nixon, "Neoliberalism," 446).
27. Jesse Oak Taylor offers an illuminating summary and analysis of the slippery "status of the real" in the novel and its paratexts. See Taylor, "Powers of Zero: Aggregation, Negation, and the Dimensions of Scale in Indra Sinha's Animal's People," *Literature and Medicine* 31, no. 2 (2013), 179–180.

let's say it's between heaven and hell, my problem is knowing which is which" (11). The choice is revealed at the end of the novel: whether to travel to the US for a surgery that will enable him to walk upright, but with prosthetic aids that would be challenging to use in Khaufpur's narrow alleys and uneven streets. He decides in the end to forgo surgery, reflecting, "If I'm an upright human, I would be one of millions, not even a healthy one at that. Stay four-foot, I'm the one and only Animal" (366).

We might say, in a Cavellian mode, that Animal seeks his further self through a mirroring and confrontation with the imagined reader, and that the resulting, aversive conversation pushes both Animal and his readers to perceive anew. We, like him, will be urged to reconceptualize his body, his world, and our own responsibilities, according to criteria we can only discover in the process, if we allow the conversation to decide.

"There's simple humanity? Isn't there?": The Novel's Turns From, and Toward, Humanism

A key part of the reader's share of this conversation, if she takes the novel's invitations, unfolds through Animal's confrontations with humanism and humanitarianism. As we saw in the analogies between journalists and vultures, and readers and flies, the novel criticizes the exploitative and/or naive voyeurism that might accompany humanitarian representation. It also voices familiar criticisms of the hierarchical normativity implicit in certain expressions of humanism, thereby complicating any analysis of the injustice in Khaufpur (or Bhopal) as a simple matter of denying human rights or dignity to poor communities. For example, when reflecting on other characters' encouragement to "cease thinking of myself as an animal and become human again," Animal comments, "if I agree to be a human being, I'll also have to agree that I'm wrong-shaped and abnormal. But let me be a quatre pattes animal, four-footed and free, then I am whole, my own proper shape, just a different kind of animal from say Jara [his dog companion], or a cow, or a camel" (207–8). As Baron Haber glosses, "Discourses of humanism, the novel shows, are often a trap for those who occupy bodies like Animal's; their acceptance into the circle of humanity is con-

tingent upon accepting a subaltern or secondary status."[28] "Rough-tongue[d]," disabled, and part of a community deemed expendable, Animal's life is distant in many ways from pictures of human flourishing conventionally elevated in humanist moral frameworks, from consequentialist calculations of trade-offs between suffering and happiness, to deontological accounts centering the rational and autonomous, enlightened subject. Moreover, we can read Animal's decision not to pursue a surgical "cure" as part of the novel's larger critique of, in Jesse Oak Taylor's words, "humanism's universalizing platitudes," as he prefers to remain "the one and only Animal."[29]

Yet *Animal's People* does not simply rehearse critiques of normative and Eurocentric, ableist (and patriarchal, classist, etc.) humanism(s) and the humanitarianism that would strive to incorporate Animal into such norms. Animal's antagonism toward such ideals coincides with his longing to participate in human community. Moreover, the novel makes the perfectionist suggestion that a key problem with humanist ideals is that they can interfere with what Cavell calls the "responsibility of responsiveness."[30] As Cavell's readers know, this suggests the novel does not disavow such ideals altogether.

The novel's ambivalence toward humanist and humanitarian ideals is most developed in its depiction of Elli Barber, an American doctor who moves to Khaufpur to open a free clinic for poisoning survivors. Elli is met with suspicion and resistance, which stem not only from the community's experiences of manipulation and neglect by other health authorities, but also from the fact that she arrives at the same time local activists achieve their first legal success in decades: a judge has ruled that the Kampani must send representatives to court or else have its Indian assets frozen. The novel's central activist, a man named Zafar, organizes a boycott of Elli's clinic out of concern that she is an emissary of the Kampani, sent to gather bogus medical data or otherwise lay groundwork for further evasions of justice. Zafar hires Animal to spy on Elli to discern her motives, and the latter two thus form an unusual relationship in which each holds unacknowledged powers over the other.

A pivotal sequence begins when Elli asks Animal to take her to the "Kingdom of the Poor"—his phrase for the community and area most afflicted by ongoing tox-

28. Haber, "Monster Ecologies,"4.
29. Taylor, "Powers of Zero," 186.
30. Cavell, *A Pitch of Philosophy: Autobiographical Exercises* (Harvard University Press, 1994), 126.

icity—so that she can "'confront them in their own houses'" about their refusal to visit her clinic.[31] When Animal asks her to pay him for the service, explaining, "'for this type of work I always get a fee,'" she is affronted and appeals first to his "conscience," then to their budding friendship. Animal affirms their friendship but stresses the significance of the fact that they are "not equal friends." He challenges her to imagine how much money he lives on per day, and when he tells her—four rupees, roughly "ten cents US"—she is shocked. Yet she insists that friendship is a zone of equality, because "each of us gives freely" according to what they can. Animal replies, "Elli, this equality leaves me broke." The exchange underscores the salience to friendship and moral "conscience" of material outlook—each person's position in economic and geopolitical systems—while also suggesting that Elli falters in her responsiveness to Animal due to her assumptions about the principles underwriting friendship and morality. She defaults to abstract ideals of friendship, freedom, conscience, and equality precisely when Animal tries to attune her to the particulars of their relative stances. That Animal is secretly spying on Elli (a paid "type of work" through which, in a previous scene, he watches her bathe from a tree outside her window) is part of the novel's eschewal of moralistic or predictable critique.

A similar dynamic repeats several pages later. Animal has agreed to show Elli the Kingdom of the Poor without payment, and at the end of the tour, he takes her to his own home, a section of abandoned Kampani factory he shares with a senile nun, a semi-feral dog, scorpions, and other creatures. Startled by these living conditions, Elli "pigeon-coos, 'Oh poor Animal, what a life!'"[32] Animal, "wanting to explode," begins to outline to her "what disgusts me about this place, which isn't what disgusts you, such as scorpions, filth, lack of hygiene, etc." He then digresses into a tribute to the benefits of "communal shitting," the local practice of defecating near the railroad tracks ("hardly your fault," Elli interjects). Animal is both ironic and sincere when describing the "camaraderie" and "chance to discuss things" afforded by communal shitting, when those without indoor plumbing exchange "jokes and insults," "philosophies," and "medical" opinions about unusual stools. Finally, he returns to his initial point: "What really disgusts me is that we people seem so wretched to you out-

31. The citations in this paragraph draw from a conversation spanning pages 174–176.
32. The citations in this paragraph draw from a conversation spanning pages 184–186.

siders that you look at us with that so-soft expression, speak to us with that so-pious tone in your voice." In response, Elli "asks very seriously, 'Don't people here deserve respect?'" Animal challenges: "'It's not respect, is it? I can read feelings. People like you are fascinated by places like this. It's written all over you, all you folk from Amrika and Vilayet, jarnaliss, filmwallas, photographass, anthrapologiss.'" Elli protests, but Animal concludes, "'You are a good-hearted doctress but nothing do you fucking understand.'" She responds that she might not "'know what such suffering is like, but it doesn't mean we have nothing in common. There's simple humanity? Isn't there?'"

On one level, the novel resoundingly says *yes,* there is "simple humanity." It condemns the denial by corporations and geopolitical systems of the "simple humanity" of people like Animal and the Khaufpuri poor. Yet in the scene at hand, Elli's recourse to the abstraction of "simple humanity" again dampens her responsiveness to what Animal is showing and saying to her. His point is not that Elli lacks first-hand experience of "what such suffering is like," but instead that she fails to perceive the condescension and presumptions of her own "so-pious" fascination and "respect." The homage to communal shitting underscores Elli's failures of responsiveness. Neither pure sarcasm nor fetishization of the poor, Animal's speech offers Elli and the reader a glimpse of the fundamentally different perspective by which he experiences the world: a profane, angry, clever and playful perspective we might not trade for our own, but to which we cannot aptly respond while holding tightly to prior ideals.

The exchange ends neither dismissing nor endorsing Elli's outlook. Animal replies to her question about their shared humanity that it is "'[n]o good asking" him, because he "'long ago gave up trying to be human,'" but to his reader he editorializes that he is a "Cheap lying bastard" (186). He has not, in fact, given up hoping for inclusion in "simple humanity," dreaming at this point in the novel that Elli will "cure" him, enabling him to walk upright. Yet his criticisms of her blinkered, abstracting idealism are neither cheap nor dishonest. Reading with Cavell in mind—placing Sinha's book into conversation with other voices Cavell draws on—helps us see that Elli's responsiveness is blocked by her assumptions about what a good life is, what "simple humanity" demands and affords, and why Animal refuses her version of "re-

spect." She cannot—at this stage—allow their conversation to "decide," because she does not allow it to reveal herself to herself.

The novel thus enables us to draw perfectionism into conversation with familiar postcolonial and post-humanist critiques of the mistaken substitution of western norms for supposedly universal ideals, from generalizing conceptions of physical and rational fitness to values such as autonomy, equality, and freedom (often hazily construed). Where perfectionism and such critiques of western humanist/humanitarian outlooks meet, the root problem illuminated is something other than imperialist assumptions of western superiority, or even the specific values associated with humanist ideals as such. Instead, it is that such good-hearted idealism easily becomes its own veil of ignorance, obstructing the perspective on our own lives—our ways of living—that the perfectionist outlook insists we must learn if we are to contribute to the conversation of justice. We need not foreswear our humanism, in other words, or even our western outlook. But we must be willing to allow the conversation to turn our attention aversively back toward that very outlook, questioning its compliances and allowing for transformation. For the novel, as for Cavell, morally (and politically) responsible responsiveness requires us to be prepared to reexamine our present stance, which in turn requires a looser grasp on our ideals.

Such loosening and re-examination occur in Elli's case. She revises ideas about the conditions of a good life (or body), and she also perceives anew her own relation to the conditions that make certain lives possible. Elli proves most useful to Khaufpuris, according to the outlook of *Animal's People*, not through her medical expertise but instead through her contribution to their political and legal cause. Late in the novel, notoriously corrupt local politicians plan to strike a deal with Kampani lawyers, despite massive protests demanding the Kampani stand trial in court and that those most affected participate in drafting terms of redress for individual, collective, and environmental harms. One of the lawyers is Elli's ex-husband, who tries to coax her back to the US and hints at Kampani plans. An ostensibly secret meeting between lawyers and politicians is interrupted by a stink bomb planted by an unknown figure dressed in a burka, which recalls an earlier occasion in which the senile nun with whom Animal lives, Ma Franci, is disguised in a burka by her Khaufpuri friends to evade a church official who plans to escort her to retirement. The stink

bomb itself—a roguish, playful prank—recalls Animal's behavior and his simultaneously ironic and sincere outlook.

Implying that the burka-clad figure is Elli, the text suggests she has learned a new outlook and set of tactics during her time among the people of Khaufpur. Underscoring this transformation is her stark contrast to the lawyers working to keep the Kampani out of court, who tell the protesters that they want "to offer generous humanitarian aid to the people of Khaufpur" (306). The corporation "bleats" about humanitarianism to dodge financial and criminal responsibility. Elli's humanitarianism has been more sincere, but by the novel's end she quietly puts into action another kind of "aid" learned from the locals, joining their fight and using their tactics. She has shifted from (or added to) a humanitarian-ethical outlook in which she offers empathy/pity and medical aid, to a political framework, in which she acts in solidarity.

At the novel's close, Elli is a trusted member of the community, romantically involved with a local man. Her medical aid, moreover, is now welcomed. *Animal's People* does not present a binary choice between humanitarianism and political pursuits of justice. Instead, it presents humanism and humanitarianism as drawn into a higher, politicized state, through local responsiveness that requires self-awareness, responsiveness to difference, and a willingness for change—including changing one's ideas about "the higher" and the values of simple humanity.

"Poetic justice […] is not the same as real justice": Turning our Conversation Outward

When Animal learns of the prank that derails the meeting between Kampani lawyers and local officials, he remarks that it represents "poetic justice of a fully rhyming kind," as the would-be dealmakers initially fear "they'd been attacked with the same gas that leaked on that night, and every man there knew exactly how horrible were the deaths of those who breathed the Kampani's poisons" (361). Zafar, however, replies "that poetic justice, rhyming or not, is not the same as real justice," then adds, "but being the only kind available to the Khaufpuris was at least better than nothing" (361). This exchange

occurs just a few pages before the final words of the novel, and as Andrew Mahlstedt notes, its "oblique reference to an aesthetic form of justice" seems to be Sinha's acknowledgment "that his novel will not bring 'real justice' to Bhopal."[33] Indeed, the conclusion of *Animal's People* leaves the Khaufpuris in a state of limbo, invigorated by the small victory of preventing a settlement and thereby sustaining the possibility of justice, but not having achieved their goals of holding the corporation financially and criminally liable. The water is still poisoned, and Elli's clinic, no longer boycotted, is busy with patients whose primary cause of sickness remains unaddressed. The text's closing words are haunting: "All things pass, but the poor remain. We are the people of the Apokalis. Tomorrow there will be more of us" (366). Many read this closing as presaging—perhaps with a threatening tenor—the trajectory of our warming, unequal planet, the "expanding zones of apocalyptic capitalism that mark out a more likely futurity for many, perhaps for most."[34] Mahlstedt links the concluding distinction between poetic and real justice to "the politics of subaltern experience," in which "real justice for the disenfranchised will never be reached."[35]

Yet it is not only in reference to "the politics of subaltern experience" that we might wish to differentiate poetic justice from "real" justice. A long tradition of aesthetic and critical theory posits that novels and other works of art can offer nothing more than poetic justice, whether such justice is understood as the "merely formal purposiveness" or "purposiveness without purpose" of Kantian aesthetic autonomy, the ethical representation associated with literary humanism, or something else.[36]

Nothing more than poetic justice, but also nothing less.[37]

As I draw this essay to a close, I want to suggest that the persistently aversive "conversation" *Animal's People* stages with its reader modestly reconfigures relations

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33. Andrew Mahlstedt, "Animal's Eyes: Spectacular Invisibility and the Terms of Recognition in Indra Sinha's *Animal's People*," *Mosaic: a journal for the interdisciplinary study of literature* (2013), 72.
34. Johnston, "'A Nother World,'" 142.
35. Mahlstedt, "Animal's Eyes," 72.
36. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans J. H. Bernard (Free Press, 1951), §15, 62. Dorothy Hale's *The Novel and the New Ethics* (Stanford University Press, 2020) offers a thorough account of the changing-yet-persisting ideals of literary humanism, and a compelling, recent defense of Kantian aesthetic autonomy is Nicholas Brown's *Autonomy: The social ontology of art under capitalism* (Duke University Press, 2019). I discuss affinities between Kantian aesthetics and Cavellian conversation in *Fiction, Philosophy and the Ideal of Conversation*.
37. I am of course alluding to Cavell's gloss of language as offering "nothing more and nothing less than shared forms of life" as the foundations of our mutual understanding: a "thin net" between people that is both imperfect and sufficient. See Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (Oxford University Press, 1979), 168.

between poetic and "real" justice, suggesting a kind of encounter between aesthetic purposiveness and politics that avoids instrumentalizing aesthetics, on the one hand, and deceiving oneself about aesthetic power, on the other. This reconfiguration, I propose, itself invites a further state of literary-philosophical criticism undertaken in a Cavellian, perfectionist spirit.

Cavell describes the task of philosophical writing informed by perfectionism as that of "composing" a "conversation" that rebukes society in its current state, while also "achieving [...] a promise of expression that can attract the good stranger to enter the precincts of its city of words."[38] Analogising perfectionist writing to a promise, Cavell invokes a performative utterance with a unique relation to time: when we promise, we are performing the act of promising, but we are also gesturing toward an unguaranteed future. If the "conversation" enacted in literary-philosophical criticism shares the temporality of a promise, its aspiration toward a further, higher state can be rendered felicitous or infelicitous, not true or false, in some future of unknown contingencies. This future depends on others, uptake and transformation by good strangers, in conditions beyond the presently visible horizon.

Writing—writing essays like this one—is a way to continue the conversation initiated by *Animal's People* and made audible by reading the novel alongside Cavell. Indeed, criticism is an essential voice in the continuation and extension of conversations prompted or turned toward further horizons by texts like Sinha's. Not only does the critic draw new readers into the conversation—readers likelier to find essays like the present one than they are to find the novel *Animal's People*—but also, the critic's fluencies differ from those of the novel, and critical expression forges new forms of life inviting to, habitable by, those most fluent in philosophy, as well as those most fluent in literary criticism and (for instance) postcolonial, South Asian literature and politics. Literary-philosophical criticism can invite new voices into ongoing conversations, and it can retune the voices thereby assembled, where the good books are in conversation. This mode of criticism turns new texts toward one another and outward toward their common interests; in the case of the present essay, the common interests encompass environmental injustice, poverty, humanitarianism, and reading itself. Such weaving and retuning of textual forms is an expressive act that itself

38. Cavell, *CHU,* 7.

transforms the outlooks we perceive as readers standing on foundations of literature and philosophy, on nothing more and nothing less than the forms of life we rely on, and also transform, in our conversations.

And yet, as my attention to this specific novel's aversions has tried to illuminate, there are conversational turns that insist the conversation shift to a new form of life, from the literary-philosophical and critical, the reading and thematizing, to the actual. This is what full responsiveness to a text like *Animal's People* paradoxically entails. I say paradoxically, because the novel's own "formal purposiveness" is intrinsically not "*merely* formal." The text's perfectionist aversiveness continuously turns away from reading and thematizing, away from (but also toward) cities of words, and toward (while also away from) worlds and projects outside its precincts.

Having performed the "job" of "listening" to *Animal's People* as if it were such a good stranger, I find that Sinha's novel has altered—revolved—not my understanding of perfectionism, but my attunement to the limits and possibilities of reading itself as part of perfectionist experience, especially perfectionist "conversations of justice" that necessarily turn us beyond our pages. The allusion to the limits of poetic justice joins the novel's ambivalent, perfectionist address to our "Eyes," its blurring of boundaries between fiction and nonfiction, and its critical depictions of Elli's goodhearted ethical abstractions, to insist that readers consider our stance *as readers*. It repeatedly calls on us to perceive ourselves as, in Cavell's words, "removed from reality"—and possibly compromised—specifically because our relation to certain aspects of reality is mediated by reading. This mediation, the novel stresses, indexes the privileges of education and distance implicit in the Anglophone literary marketplace, and the humanist idealism associated with that market's circulation of "subaltern" literary fiction. Our "stance toward whatever degree of compliance with justice we have reached" is therefore likely to be one of "consent from above": above the (crotch-level) outlook of our narrator, in a city of words perched on a high outlook amidst a global market. While Cavell reads texts like Emerson's essays and the remarriage films as if they were soliciting his, and America's, further self, *Animal's People* urges an additional turn to the perfectionist literary-philosophical critic's encounter: if reading is to be part of the conversation of justice, we need to discover where we stand as readers, and how our literary-philosophical cities of words are positioned in

relation to other cities, whose inhabitants may find no uses for our own highest words.

In short, *Animal's People* enacts the Cavellian vision of reading as a conversational encounter with arguably greater (further?) faith to perfectionism than many of Cavell's interlocutors. Its voice is demanding; to read it well, fully, is to become dissatisfied with reading a text well and fully, to feel the conversation straining to turn beyond cities of words. It evokes a "responsibility of responsiveness" not only to itself, but also to the world it helps us see anew: our Bhopals, Kampanis, marketplaces, legal systems, and increasingly urgent conversations of justice in a world we encounter from our very specific stances as readers, but also as human persons of specific demographic, professional, and political coordinates. To respond to this novel, we need not disavow our humanist, perfectionist, literary-aesthetic commitments, just as Elli, our exemplar, need not disavow her medical expertise, American privilege, and humanitarian compassion. But we must allow ourselves to be turned outward, and we must allow such conversation to transfigure, convert or revolutionize, the ideals grounding our commitments. Derek Gottlieb has written in this journal that perfectionist "conversation reveals the extent to which we do or do not in fact live together, and elucidates the conditions under which we may continue—or begin—to do so."[39] As I read *Animal's People*, it strives to unsettle us by drawing attention to how we "live together" with novels, but probably not with the "real" people of the Apokalis. Perhaps, however, we might.

We might read the novel's final lines, "Tomorrow there will be more of us," as a promise that doubles as an invitation, attracting us not to the novel's city of words, but to the precincts in ours where we could join with "the poor," increasing their numbers in political struggles we enter not as readers, and perhaps not only as writers, but also as actors. When we close this novel, it is our turn in the conversation—our moment of risk and self-disclosure as readers, critics, and embodied persons in this world. If "the conversation decides" the directions in which literary-philosophical critics turn, our responsiveness will express itself differently in different cases. Yet *Animal's People* suggests that, at some point, we, like Elli, might dis-

39. Derek Gottlieb, "Something Must Be Shown: Consent, Conversation, and the End of Reasons," *Conversations: The Journal of Cavellian Studies* 5 (2017), 34.

cover our further selves only through active, political responsiveness: informed by turns of attention urged by reading, but also by learning to listen to “rough-tongued,” unfamiliar voices pertinent to the conversation.