Death, Animals, and Ethics in David Bergen's *The Time in Between*

Katie Mullins

Death is a dominating presence in David Bergen's Giller Prize-winning novel *The Time in Between* (2005). Although Charles Boatman's suicide lies at the centre of the narrative, the novel — and Charles himself — is also haunted by other deaths: the death of Charles's ex-wife, Sara, the deaths of innocents in Vietnam, and the deaths of animals. It rotates around various absences and, as is frequently the case in Bergen's fiction, highlights individual suffering and alienation within the family unit[1]: Charles returns to Vietnam in the hope of ascribing meaning to the "great field of nothing" that he has experienced since the war (38), while two of his children, Ada and Jon, travel to Vietnam to search for their missing father only to discover he has committed suicide. Ada is repeatedly confronted by the loss of life, both human and animal, in her own experiences and through the experiences of others. Her reading of her father's confessional suicide note and of Dang Tho's *In a Dark Wood* — the fictional narrative embedded in the novel that her father reads before his death — provides Ada with accounts of past deaths that profoundly affect her own life. Such acts of learning and remembering through reading narrative perhaps offer models for our own reading of the book as an experience that encourages us to remember, or think about, the realities of war that surround the fictional lives of Bergen's characters. In doing so, the reader is also encouraged to be critically aware of the human and animal relationships presented in the novel and to consider the responsibilities one has toward the Other.[2] The relationship presented between human and animal deaths, in particular, draws attention to the ways in which characters recognize or fail to recognize the Other — human or non-human animal — as a subject, and highlights the ethical violence that may result from such a lack of recognition. My use of the term *recognition* draws on Judith Butler's theory of ethical relations. In *Giving an Account of Oneself,* Butler builds on a Levinasian ethics and argues that in order to recognize the Other, one must learn the "ability to affirm

what is contingent and incoherent" (41). For Butler, only by recognizing the limits of self-knowledge can one ethically recognize the Other; ethics, she argues, "requires us to risk ourselves precisely at moments of unknowingness" (136).[3] It is by recognizing the limits of their ability to definitively "know" the past and the Other that Charles and Ada, in separate ways, move toward a more ethical position.

Through the relationship between human and animal deaths, the novel confronts characters' epistemological limits and questions what it means to be human/humane, while suggesting the potentially humanizing effect of remembering and retelling the past. At the same time, however, it also suggests that the desire to understand the past can be a selfish pursuit that atrophies ties to the living in the present time. Indeed, as this tension between the desire for knowledge and the recognition of the inability to fully know suggests, the novel presents several opposing concerns that are held together by an overarching focus on death and ethics. For example, the relationship between narrative representations of humans and animals that reinforces the importance of an ethical relationship toward the Other is, at the same time, countered by the suggestion that the human capacity to tell stories sets us apart from animals; similarly, the potentially redemptive power of storytelling and of "looking back" is presented as dangerous when this focus on the past becomes narcissistic. These various threads, which are frequently in tension with each other, suggest the novel's interest in unsettling clearly defined categories (such as past/present, knowledge/ignorance, human/animal) and in presenting the complex, subjective human experience of feeling, as the novel's title suggests, in between these categories. Like the novel, this essay makes no attempt to resolve these tensions. I read Bergen's refusal to provide a teleological account of his characters' experiences as intentional: the relationship between human and animal deaths and the variety of often contradictory threads that I identify in the novel suggest a resistance to fixed meaning, understanding, or resolution, and thus echo the narrative's movement toward an ethics that recognizes the importance of unknowability and epistemic limits.

The narrative-within-a-narrative structure of *The Time in Between* draws attention to the frequently redemptive power of storytelling in the novel, but also to the novel's focus on suffering and on individual points of view. In *Regarding the Pain of Others,* Susan Sontag writes, "Remembering is an ethical act, has ethical value in and of itself.

Memory is, achingly, the only relation we can have with the dead" (115). In her discussion of the role of photographs in the remembering process, Sontag writes that "[harrowing] photographs do not inevitably lose their power to shock. But they are not much help if the task is to understand. Narratives can make us understand" (89). Reading Tho's account of Kiet's journey into his own "dark woods,"[4] Charles revives memories of his wartime experiences in an attempt to find meaning in them, just as Ada later attempts to understand her father's experiences by reading the same book. Kiet's descent into the abyss of wartime horrors is reminiscent of Dante's journey through hell in the *Inferno*, the opening lines of which are directly referenced in the title of the narrative: "In the middle of our life's way / I found myself in a wood so dark / That I couldn't tell where the straight path lay" (1-3). Although Charles often unwillingly remembers his experiences with death through dreams, he moves progressively toward a position of wilful remembering, most obviously displayed in his choice to return to Vietnam and read *In a Dark Wood*. As Charles reads Tho's book to try to make sense of his experiences, Ada, in turn, listens to her father's stories in the hope of better understanding him: she "believed that each successive story was like a thread, and she was collecting those pieces" (39). For instance, she rereads the part of Tho's story that describes the "death of the mother and baby" in order to imagine "the complexity of her father's response and how he might have seen himself in the story" (245).

These acts of reading mirror our own reading of *The Time in Between*. Reading the novel becomes a process that necessarily involves thinking about or imagining the suffering of others; as Butler writes in response to Sontag, narrative may be capable of producing an ethical pathos not available in photography (*Frames of War* 69). Such a focus on suffering runs throughout Bergen's fiction. As Neil Besner has discussed, Bergen's "fiction in general constitutes an inquiry into the nature of suffering, be it grief, the conflicts brought on by desire fulfilled or not (often illegitimate desire of one kind or another), the difficult but necessary yearning for salvation" (par. 4). The pathos of Bergen's writing evokes a responsiveness to suffering: *The Time in Between* upholds the value of looking back — of thinking about the traumatic past and the suffering of others in a way that encourages in its characters, and in us as readers, a reconsideration of the value of life, both human and animal. This is not to say that humans and animals

become equals in the story, but rather, as David Clark has insightfully claimed in his response to Emmanuel Levinas's short essay "The Name of a Dog, or Natural Rights," that both are "capable of illuminating each other in their separate darkness" (186). As Levinas's essay draws an "unstated analogy between the murder of the Jews and the killing of animals [in order to create] a *rhetorical* neighbourhood in which animals and humans dwell and summon each other into responsibility" (Clark 178), Bergen's narrative offers an analogy between human murders and the killing of animals in Vietnam. In this vein, *The Time in Between* appears heavily influenced by Timothy Findley's *The Wars* (1977) in its focus on the physical and psychological damage caused by war and in its questioning of what it means to be human through a depiction of human-animal relations.[5] For example, when Findley's protagonist, Robert, realizes that Captain Leather is about to allow hundreds of horses to burn to death, he kills the captain in order to save the animals: "if an animal had done this — we would call it mad and shoot it," he explains (178).

In *The Time in Between*, as in *The Wars*, it is storytelling, the act of remembering and retelling the past, which emerges as a specifically human pursuit that differentiates humans from animals while simultaneously connecting them through the "rhetorical neighbourhood" it creates. This emphasis on reading and storytelling also appears as a self-reflexive comment on Bergen's own fictional project and reminds us that any meaning located by characters in, or readers of, the novel exists only in the aesthetic realm. Still, *The Time in Between* is able to offer a humanistic, subjective portrayal (albeit fictional) of the struggle to locate meaning in the aftermath of the Vietnam war, which entails a movement away from an empirical, objective understanding of the events. This connection between narration and remembering points to the ethical considerations involved in telling stories. The acceptance of ignorance and the letting go of knowledge that both Ada and her father experience might also be read as a form of consolation for the inability to affect or intervene in the very real acts of violence that have already occurred. Through their attempt to remember and make sense of the past, Ada and Charles are ultimately brought into a position of *not* knowing, a position that suggests the ethical value of abandoning the desire to obtain totalizing knowledge for an acceptance of epistemic limits and an openness toward the Other.

By demonstrating the interrelationality of past and present and of humans and animals — the ways in which human experiences of death and suffering recall descriptions of animal deaths and suffering — *The Time in Between* suggests the potential value of looking back at death in order to move forward into a more ethical relationship with the Other. The very title references the temporal play in the novel: while time progresses and Charles and Ada evolve as characters, they psychologically travel into the past through their desire to remember and understand earlier events. This looking back seems to forge connections not only between past and present, but also between life and death: as Ada tells Jon after their father's suicide, "Dad's death is hovering somewhere beside us" (187). The connection between the family's last name (Boatman), the ferry journeys that frame the novel, and the Greek myth of Charon, the ferryman in Hades who carried souls across the rivers Acheron and Styx to the world of the dead, alludes to the ambiguous and dreamlike space[6] in between life and death that Charles and Ada occupy as they search for meaning in Vietnam.

The novel does, however, point to the dangers of focusing on the past rather than engaging with the present. Indeed, it shows that the ability to "turn back" to face what is behind is a Western privilege; although Ada wants the Vietnamese people in the village to remember her father's crime, Hoang Vu, the Vietnamese artist who becomes Ada's lover, explains that the people are more concerned with surviving and moving forward: "they don't want to remember" (212).[7] In many ways, Ada continues the search to find meaning in the past that her deceased father begins: as Vu observes, "Your father . . . needed to go back. As do you, Ada" (215). Still, while Ada continues to attempt to understand her father and the past, she is, like Charles, made increasingly aware of the impossibility of doing so. Early in the novel, her desire to know what has happened to her father is contrasted with her brother's lack of interest. Confronted by Ada's questioning of his apparent indifference, Jon responds, "*You* want to know, Ada. And because you're so desperate you think I should want the same thing. Well, I don't. Okay? I just don't" (74). Ada's desire "to know" is presented as a simultaneously enlightening and selfish pursuit. Shortly after Jon refuses to take part in her search to find their father, Ada recalls a memory from childhood in which she and Jon discover a nest of baby birds whose mother has a broken wing:

> Ada told [Jon] to come look. He said no. He said the birds would die. Yes, she said, but you can still come look. He shook his head and left her there. A few days later, when she went back alone to find the nest, the family was dead. The mother had managed to spin her way to the rocks below the nest. The babies were featherless and curled into one another. Their chests were translucent, like blue glass. (75)

In the context of Ada's need to know about her father, the passage proleptically indicates Charles's fate and speaks to Ada's desire to understand or "know" life and death, but it also suggests that she aestheticizes death and, like her father, focuses on it at the expense of engaging with the living.

Charles's memory of the bodies of the deceased seems to indicate that looking back is both desirable and inescapable. For example, when Charles dreams about his dead ex-wife, Sara, he sees "her head turned back to him as if to say goodbye" (39), a physical turning back that is echoed in his memory of the Vietnamese boy he murders whose head is "turned slightly as if to look over his shoulder" (43). In both cases, the bodies Charles dreams about seem to suggest a reciprocal looking back: as Charles looks back at death, death seems to look back at Charles. The monk in Dang Tho's story comments explicitly on this relationship: talking "about life and death," the monk asserts, "you cannot have one without the knowledge of the other. . . . [L]ife feeds on death and death on life" (92). Increasingly, though, Charles *chooses* to remember the past that "arrives, uninvited," despite his initial efforts to "send it away" (42). This choice to remember, to reflect on past decisions, emerges as a particularly humanizing pursuit. Rather than attempt to "not go there" or to "wipe out this nightmare," as his friend and fellow soldier Harry suggests he do, Charles makes the narcissistic decision to leave his children and return to Vietnam to confront his past actions (42).

The description of the murders Charles commits appears immediately after Harry's dismissive statement about remembering and seems to demonstrate a resistance to wilful forgetting. Having shot the boy, Charles shoots a pig and a dog, "as if to underscore the *necessity*" (43; emphasis added). This explanation immediately deconstructs itself: like the little boy who "didn't have a gun" (43), the animals are unarmed and uninvolved in the war. They do not pose a threat and there is, therefore, no necessity to kill them. It is here perhaps that the novel

most overtly questions the "necessity" of killing. By killing beings whose deaths he considers "acceptable," Charles seems to attempt to negate the value of the boy's life by reducing him to an animal position.[8] These deaths raise questions for the characters and perhaps for readers about which lives are recognized, and, to use Butler's words from her critique of violence, are "worth valuing and preserving" (*Precarious Life* 34). As is the case elsewhere in the novel, Bergen seems to engage with historical notions of race and animality in which certain humans were considered as belonging to a distinct species.[9] The ethical dangers of refusing to acknowledge a living being's ability to experience death and suffering are explored through Bergen's depiction of the murders that Charles commits.[10] Choosing to kill the dog and the pig in Vietnam, Charles not only assumes that the animals do not exist individually as subjects and therefore cannot die, but, in killing them to "underscore the necessity," he also places the boy outside of a subject position by attempting to "necessitate" his death with the deaths of those (animals) whose lives he deems expendable. Although the murders Charles commits complicate his humanity, his active remembering and attempt to understand his actions appear as very human endeavours.

Arguments around the necessity of killing are, of course, prevalent in the context of war, but they are also examined in the narrative through the killing of animals. For example, Charles's daughter Del announces her decision to become vegetarian after she witnesses the seemingly unnecessary killing and mutilation of Rosie, the pullet. Charles attempts to justify Rosie's death and dissection to his children by claiming, "we were going to eat her anyway. She's just furthering our education," to which Del responds, "But *she* is Rosie" (35). Del cannot partake in the dissection because she grants the pullet an identity as a subject. Furthermore, the scene is implicitly connected to human deaths through the comment Charles makes to his children directly before killing Rosie: "artists throughout the centuries, lacking models, had used cadavers" (35). Replying to Jon's subsequent question about the meaning of the word *cadavers*, Del answers, "A dead body, stupid" (35). That the reference to dead human bodies immediately precedes Rosie's dissection suggests that Del identifies a relation between Rosie's body and the human body, rendering her unable to subject the pullet to the evisceration that Charles encourages. The connection between cadavers and the dead pullet draws attention to the materiality of bodies, whether

human or animal, but again suggests that the ability to question death is a uniquely human quality.

Charles's opinion that animal lives are expendable, however, appears to change over time and is increasingly challenged by his dreams and memories. Frequently, in dreams and thoughts, Charles recalls animal deaths as well as human deaths, implying that he recognizes a certain value in the lives of animals and acknowledges their suffering. This concern with experiences of suffering, both human and animal, runs throughout the novel and seems to differentiate the human from the animal. Indeed, images of human cruelty are often implicitly echoed in images of cruelty to animals; for example, Charles sees "a boy being beaten with a stick by two other boys while several people looked on and laughed" (139), which is later mirrored by the copulating dogs Ada sees running "in circles while a young boy beat them with a stick" (220). Charles's dream about the horrific death of a friend in Vietnam and the violent mutilation of a pig similarly connects human and animal suffering: "he dreamed about severed limbs and fire and the intestines of Jody Booth, a friend who had died beside him in a field outside Danang. He dreamed about pigs being strung from a rope and gutted alive and he dreamed about a young boy who looked up at him as if to ask, 'Why?'" (26). Including the description of animal deaths and of the "young boy" in the same sentence, Bergen invites us to read the boy's question (which is also, of course, Charles's question) as a reference to the killing of the pigs as well as an implicit interrogation of Charles's shooting of the boy. The dream implies that Charles, like Del, inwardly questions his stance on animal deaths and suffering.

In turn, this questioning also guides the reader's interpretation of animal death in relation to human death in the novel. In *In a Dark Wood*, the confessional narrative embedded within *The Time in Between*, Kiet's murder of the woman and the young baby not only parallels Charles's murder of the Vietnamese boy, but also is echoed in scenes that depict the killing of pigs. In Tho's story, Kiet has "difficulty killing the pig" (88), presumably because he is reminded of the murder of the mother and child. Each death reminds the reader, as it reminds Kiet, of previous deaths in the narrative, and so forces the reader to participate in the process of "turning back" that Charles and Ada demonstrate. After learning about her father's suicide and reading Tho's story, Ada imagines that "the objects in the room had become shapes of animals

and men" and she sees an image of "her father and Kiet standing side by side" (251). This hallucination explicitly comments on the doubling between Charles and Kiet, but the pairing of "animals and men" and of "Charles and Kiet" also suggests the connection between humans and animals. Certainly, the image of Kiet holding the knife while he considers the "pig's heavy neck" and hears its "screaming" (87) recalls the horrific description of the human murders he commits: "the brilliance of the sun off the blade of the scythe, the thin red line at the baby's throat, an infant's howl descending into a mother's wail, and then that wailing, too, gone, disappearing like the pink bubble that rose from the opening at the mother's neck" (84). The scene is echoed a third time in the main narrative when Ada watches Chi push "the blade of the knife into the [pig's] throat," hears the "tearing of flesh," and watches a "thin rope of blood hit Chi's chest" (231). In this case, the description of the pig's death also returns the reader to Charles's act of murder: "Chi's arms and legs were bloody" after killing the pig (231), just as Charles has "blood on his arms and boots" (45) after shooting the boy and the animals. The impact that Tho's story has on Ada and Charles, and on the reader (as well as the similarities between *In a Dark Wood* and *The Time in Between*), highlights the importance of storytelling as an aspect of the novel's own rhetorical practice but also as a redemptive pursuit. Although not made explicit, Ada's reaction to witnessing the pig's death, which makes her "feel dizzy" and prompts her to wash "her hands and face" as though to cleanse herself from her visual participation in the killing, suggests that she, like the reader, makes the connection between the murder of the pig, the murder of mother and child in Tho's story, and the murder Charles commits (231). Ada's impulse to wash herself, as well as her imagining a "white room with a bed and clean sheets and a window that offered a view of a perfectly clear sky" (231), indicates her desire to return to a moment of moral cleanliness and perfection in which she has no responsibility — a desire that mirrors her father's quest for meaning and redemption.

Like the baby that Kiet kills, the pig that Chi kills "howls" before it dies. The connection of the human and the animal through these howls points to the role that language or "voice" plays in rendering the Other a recognizable subject. Charles appears increasingly reluctant to take animal life, and although he hopes that "the prospect of stalking a wolf or a bear through the bush would carry him away," hunting leads

him "more and more . . . into a darker place" (99). Charles seems to hear the "voice" of the animal when he encounters the wolf that Del's lover, Tomas, shoots and maims during a hunting trip. Although Charles is presented with the opportunity to kill the injured wolf, he allows it to live. In many ways, this scene appears as a re-enactment of the Vietnam shootings, especially given Charles's admission that hunting reminds him of "walking point" in Vietnam: Charles is faced a second time with the option to kill a human and an animal but on this occasion decides not to kill the wolf, or to kill Tomas, whom he wants "for a small moment" to shoot (101). Charles does not give Tomas a reason for not killing the wolf but cryptically tells him: "[we] make certain decisions and the decisions take on a story and the story has a history of its own" (102). The remark, which serves as another reminder of the significance of storytelling in Bergen's narrative, expresses Charles's need to correct his previous decisions and to "re-write" his story in order to avoid repeating a history that he so regrets. His dream about the wolf suggests the significance of his choice: "During the night he woke from a dream in which he had come face to face with the wolf and shot it between the eyes. . . . In the dream, just before he had killed the wolf, it had called out in a language that was mournful and ancient" (103). The dreamed shooting of the wolf presents a stark alternative to the actual decision Charles makes *not* to kill the wolf. We might read the dreamed "face-to-face" interaction between Charles and the wolf in terms of a Levinasian ethics, where one is faced with a temptation to kill as well as a command not to kill as one looks at the Other.[11] In "Ethics and Spirit," Levinas observes,

> The face, for its part, is inviolable; those eyes, which are absolutely without protection, the most naked part of the human body, nonetheless offer an absolute resistance to possession, an absolute resistance in which the temptation to murder is inscribed. . . . This temptation to murder and this impossibility of murder constitute the very vision of the face. To see a face is already to hear "You shall not kill." (6)

While Levinas suggests that only humans can have a "face," Charles's decision not to kill the wolf during the actual hunt seems to resist such anthropocentric thinking and thus challenges Levinas's position. In "A Missed Opportunity," Paola Cavalieri points out that Levinas's theoretical privileging of passivity in the interaction between subject and Other

is contradicted by the re-emergence, in his thinking of the animal-human relationship, of "the Same that he has so strongly challenged. The Same — that is, just that consciousness that knowledge and freedom allow to subjugate the Other" (105-106). Charles's recognition of the wolf, a recognition that allows the animal to live, may then be read as a kind of ethical passivity toward the animal that acknowledges its vulnerability. In making the decision not to kill, Charles suggests that he sees a face, hears the mournful language of the wolf, and translates it into a demand not to kill. This "language" appears as a plea for life and as a demand to be recognized as a subject, and functions in a similar way to the mother's "wail" and the baby's "howl" in Tho's story, the pig's "screaming" in the central narrative, and the "question" that the Vietnamese boy appears to be asking as Charles kills him (45).

Bergen's novel gestures to the role that refusing language plays in the process of refusing subjectivity, which resonates with Butler's argument that language is a weapon in war that can produce lives or negate them (*Precarious Life* 1-18). On another level, however, the novel suggests that the face of the Other signals an "utterance that is not, strictly speaking, linguistic" (133), that the face is in itself "a kind of sound, the sound of language evacuating its sense" (134). The "utterances" of the mother, child, wolf, and pigs may each be read not as a "linguistic" language, but metaphorically as a "wordless vocalization of suffering that marks the limits of linguistic translation" (134). Indeed, in her work on torture and pain, Elaine Scarry argues that pain "does not simply resist language but actively destroys it, bringing about an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned" (4). Like the "ancient" language of the wolf that Charles hears in his dream, the pig that Chi slaughters emits a similarly "wordless vocalization" of suffering: "The screams were higher now, and they filled the courtyard like some ancient and infernal call" (231). Although the repetition of the word "ancient" adds a mystical and dreamlike tone to the description of both pig and wolf, the brutally stark account of the pig's death and the syntactical focus on its body — "neck," "snout," "throat," "flesh," "blood" — draws attention to its material life. Not only is the pig's death horrific in itself but its "voice" also forces the reader to recall descriptions of human killings in the novel: the pig's "screams" evoke a human response to such suffering, and its "howls [become] muted and muffled" (231), just as the

"infant's howl" is silenced in Dang Tho's narrative (84). Indeed, the novel increasingly conflates animal and human "voices" to the extent that Ada seems unable to distinguish between the two: "Someone was sweeping leaves in the neighbour's yard. Voices, the yelp of a puppy, cry of a small child" (229). Here, it is the reader's task to recognize the suffering of human individuals (the crying mother and child, for example) as separate from that of the animal.

For Charles, animal voices assume a profound significance. Dogs, in particular, are intimately connected to Charles throughout the novel and seem, at times, to appear as redemptive figures. When recalling his interaction with Harry during the war, for example, Charles describes how "in the village" (presumably the village where he kills the boy and the animals), "a dog that had survived lifted its head and howled at the sun" (42). That this recollection occurs immediately before the first description of the Vietnam killings indicates that the dog's howl somehow connects to Charles's own reaction to the deaths: the dog seems intrinsically linked to Charles's memory of the killings, and its howl appears to vocalize Charles's own suffering — the grief that he experiences but cannot express. The dog that Charles shoots during the war seems to establish this relationship; it is described as "a mongrel. An ugly little thing with a crippled back leg. No hair on the back, as if it were a large rat that *deserved to die*" (43; emphasis added). That the dog's poor physical appearance provides Charles with reason to think it deserves to die indicates the arbitrariness of his decision to shoot. However, because the dog reappears at the scene of Charles's own death, it acquires meaning in Charles's life, like the animals in his dreams, that transcends its apparently abject status. When Charles decides that he, too, "deserves to die," a dog emerges "out of the darkness" and stands "before him, growling" (154). The dog appears and then disappears just before Charles drowns, suggesting that it may be a hallucination of the dog he remembers killing in the war. The passage continues,

> Its rear end was furless and as the animal circled Charles could see that it favoured a hind leg; a reprobate creature that saw an equal in Charles. Charles picked up a stick and swung out, hitting the dog across the snout. It howled and backed away, its rear furrowing the sand. "Get lost, you piece of shit," Charles said, and the dog tilted its head, as if the language it heard was unexpected. (154)

There is a sense that the dog *listens* to Charles's "unexpected" language in a way that highlights Charles's refusal of the dog's communication and also builds upon the novel's refusal of Levinas's suggestion that only humans can have a face; here, as in Charles's dream of the wolf, a moment of face-to-face recognition passes between Charles and the animal. As the dog recognizes Charles as "an equal," as a similarly "reprobate creature," Charles's unprovoked violent reaction to the dog implies that he recognizes the dog as a kind of embodied reminder of his crime in Vietnam — an emblem of his immoral act. His violent lashing out, then, indicates a certain self-admonishment for his past actions but also a refusal to confront and live with those actions. Indeed, this dog, whose howls make him seem "aware of what was to pass" (155), appears as an embodiment of Besner's description of redemption in Bergen's fiction: "a dim and receding, but also a vital and necessary hope — invoked, ironized, then revoked" (par. 4). In this sense, the dog appears to be not so much a subject as a rhetorical device that encourages the reader to consider the "humanness" of Charles's actions.

The possibility that the dog operates as a kind of double to Charles is implied a few pages earlier. After his lover, Elaine, leaves, Charles goes down to the harbour and sees in the water "the corpse of a dog, hugely distended, moving back and forth with the waves" (146). The lines that follow indicate the significance of this drowned dog: "Footsteps behind him. He turned as three men in suits passed by. Charles stepped back. He heard the men's sudden laughter and the wind and the clicking of the palm trees. The bloated moon. A hole had opened up before him" (146). Apparently distanced from "the human," from the men and their laughter, Charles chooses to commit himself to the same fate as the dead dog; after his suicide, Charles's own corpse is found, "grey and bloated," moving in the waves, just like the dog (159). The "hole" that opens before Charles might, then, be read as his recognition of his inability to make sense of the past, but also of his own precariousness in his position as human subject. Yet, although the bodies of both Charles and dog are similar in death, the novel suggests that it is Charles's attempt to remember and make sense of his past that returns him to the realm of the human. As Charles tells his children in his suicide note, "he had imagined coming back to this place and solving some mystery, that then he would understand what had happened to him," but in the end, "Nothing made sense" (168). Choosing to die like the animal that

reminds him of his crime suggests that Charles lets go of the notion of himself as a superior being, as well as of his search to "make sense." Ada's remark about the rat that Vu later captures and drowns — "it was a terrible thing to think of an animal drowning" (241) — seems to comment on her father's death. But the fact that Charles *chooses* to die this way, a distinctly human decision, ultimately renders him more human than animal. Although his suicide allows Charles to assert control over his death in a way that is not available to the boy he kills or to the animals in the story, it may also be read as sacrificial.[12] By giving up his search for meaning in Vietnam to consciously step into the void of death, or the "hole" that opens before him as he gazes at the corpse of the dead dog, Charles seems to accept a position of ignorance and unknowingness. As Vu tells Ada, "killing one's self required strength. It was like running toward danger. Running toward the unknown" (215).

The humanness of Charles's reflecting, remembering, and decision-making in life is contrasted by the position he assumes in death. However, Bergen complicates the vulnerability of this position by situating the human-animal relationships he presents in an ecologically ordered system. Indeed, just as wartime killing has traditionally been associated with the presumed brutality of animal "nature," once dead, Charles's body is "dissected" by animals in a way that reverses his own treatment of Rosie, the pullet: parts of his body are eaten, his eyes are pried free by a swimming crab, and seahorses "study the holes" (156). This scene seems to make porous the human-animal divide by pointing to the unstable boundary between the recognized human body and flesh, but it also reveals the changing ecological position of Charles's body. The blunt description of Charles's death and decomposition seems to mock the self-absorbed search for redemption that drives his journey to Vietnam. Rather than finding salvation in relationships with others, Charles dies alone and blinded by his impossible quest to return to an ethically pure state — it is not surprising that after his death his "eyes would go first" (156). In this perversion of the ecological pyramid, the crab that eats Charles's eyes appears, like the dog, as a rhetorical figure that highlights Charles's myopic vision and redeems him, albeit in death, from the trap of outward rather than inward sight.

Charles's death, his suicide note, and the story about Kiet that Ada eventually reads draw her into a position where she becomes acutely aware of her father's suffering and of the human potential to fail to

recognize the Other, human or animal, as a subject. This recognition is such that it leads her to break down the boundary between human and animal and to tell Vu that she is "some small animal" (227). Following this realization, Ada *forces* herself to watch Chi slaughter a pig: "Ada stood just inside the doorway and shuddered slightly. She wanted to but did not leave. She did not turn away" (230). Walking home directly after watching the pig's death, she experiences an apparent revelation:

> A man on a motorcycle called out, *You*, and then again, *You*, until she turned to him and cried, "I do not know you." He laughed and drove away. She bent her head and carried on, watching her feet as they moved, aware that a window had been flung open onto a view of an alien and foreign place, and then, just as suddenly, it had closed. (232)

The passage suggests that the pig's death induces Ada's recognition of her inability to understand or make sense of death and her father's past, but also her inability to know or fully understand another being. As her declaration, "I do not know you," appears after an event that evokes her father's actions, it is inviting to read it as referring to her father, Chi, the pig, and even Vu, who deserts Ada a few pages earlier, as well as the anonymous motorcyclist. Indeed, throughout the novel, Ada's assumptions about others and her desire to "know" are continually challenged. For example, Dat, the police officer in Danang who helps Ada and Jon look for their father, tells her, "You must not assume to know me" (57). Vu, whose name suggests his insight, models this openness for Ada, telling her that "to talk too much about Ada would reduce Ada" (266). These epistemological issues link back to storytelling: the narratives within the novel, Charles's confessional suicide note, and Tho's *In a Dark Wood*, for example, confront the characters, and the reader, with the impossibility of ever truly knowing another's story. Building on Levinas's philosophy, Butler asserts,

> As we ask to know the other, or ask that the other say, finally or definitively, who she or he is, it will be important not to expect an answer that can ever satisfy. By not pursuing satisfaction, and by letting the question remain open, even enduring, we let the other live, since life might be understood as precisely that which exceeds any account we may try to give of it. If letting the other live is part of any ethical definition of recognition, then this version will be less

> based on knowledge than on an apprehension of epistemic limits. (*Giving an Account* 42-43)

In approaching a position of ignorance, an acceptance of the impossibility of knowing, Charles and Ada, in separate ways, move toward a more ethical position.

The novel does not, however, diminish the difficulty of achieving such a position; indeed, despite her apparent reconsideration of the value of human and animal life and her realization of her inability to "know" another being, Ada enacts a kind of ethical violence on the young boy, Yen, who attempts to assist her during her stay in Vietnam. Yen's generosity toward Ada and his perceptive comments on her emotions — it is Yen, for example, who recognizes her pain at leaving Vu — are not reciprocated by Ada, who is dismissive of the young boy's affection; as Yen disappointedly tells her, "You don't take me seriously" (269). Just as Charles refuses the "language" of the dog that follows him to the water, Ada refuses to listen to Yen, or to recognize his position as a subject. Indeed, the novel suggests a further doubling between Yen, who loyally follows Ada during her time in Vietnam, and the figure of the dog that haunts Charles. In the novel's final pages, Ada discovers Yen in her room "holding her underwear and whispering to himself," and she reacts violently in a way that mirrors her father's reaction to the dog that growls at him on the beach before he drowns: "reaching him, she struck his head with an open hand. He ducked and because he ducked and seemed so helpless, she struck him again. This time with her fist and she felt the softness at the side of his face" (271). As the dog appears as a redemptive figure for Charles, Yen, too, may be read as a redemptive figure for Ada. Her search for meaning and redemption, like her father's, is based on an apparent desire to return to a kind of prelapsarian existence of ethical purity that is devoid of responsibility and wrongdoing. The narcissistic nature of her search is highlighted by Yen, who offers Ada a mode of redemption that is based on human interaction; her refusal of Yen — like Charles's refusal of the dog and, in some ways, of his own children — is also, then, a refusal to be redeemed through human relationships.

Although Ada later wanders through the streets calling his name, suggesting that she feels remorse for her actions and wishes to apologise, the violence she displays toward Yen, as is the case with Charles and the dog on the beach, seems to stem from her recognition of their common-

ality: like Ada, Yen experiences an ambiguous sadness, and he reaches out to her emotionally and physically in a way that echoes her own reaching out to Vu. Yen appears to understand Ada's pain in a way that she finds threatening. When the pair first meet, for example, Yen indicates his understanding of Ada's suffering in his dismissal of her hired translator, Dinh: "'He is very well educated but he doesn't understand people.' Yen patted his stomach. 'Here,' he said. 'He doesn't understand things right here'" (14). When Yen appears in her room, Ada wonders if he is "dangerous" and looks "around for an object to hold, something to protect herself" before attacking him (271).[13] The scene resonates with the murder Charles commits in Vietnam, where the young boy who appears to be asking Charles a question (like Yen, who wants to talk to Ada about the bicycle) is assumed to be dangerous and is violently dispatched. Although Ada increasingly recognizes the suffering of animals and of her father and the victims of the war, she fails to recognize Yen's suffering. This is not to say that the novel dismisses the task of responsibility as one that will inevitably fail, but rather that it is concerned with presenting the complexity of the struggles involved in moving toward an ethical position.

By foregrounding death in the lives of its characters, Bergen's novel speaks to the ways in which lives are valued or devalued and highlights the ethical potential of remembering the dead in the process of living. *The Time in Between* suggests that storytelling is inextricably linked to remembering; it is through storytelling, remembering, and thinking that one is confronted by the limits of one's ability to *know*, but also by the humanness of one's existence. By suggesting a commonality between human and animal deaths, the novel explores the frailty and limits of the human position, particularly the limits of knowing, and the struggles involved in having a responsibility toward the Other.

Notes

[1] Such issues arise in *A Year of Lesser* (1996), *See the Child* (1999), *The Case of Lena S.* (2003), *The Retreat* (2008), and in Bergen's most recent novel, *The Matter with Morris* (2010).

[2] My use of the term *Other* draws on the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas — for whom the Other is not knowable — and Judith Butler, for whom the ethical recognition of the Other is founded on the acknowledgment of one's own epistemic limits. Although both Levinas and Butler position the Other as specifically human, I suggest that their thinking

may be used to consider the non-human Other. As Butler writes in *Giving an Account of Oneself*, "An ability to affirm what is contingent and incoherent in oneself may allow one to affirm others who may or may not 'mirror' one's own constitution" (41).

[3] Butler's position echoes Levinas's focus on passivity as central to ethical relations; as Paola Cavalieri argues, Levinas's ethical theory is "innovative" in its "avowed centrality of passivity against the long-standing obsession with knowledge and power" (104).

[4] Here, I refer to the "dark woods" in terms of the meaning they are ascribed in the *Inferno*: as broadly representative of sin and of the "'straight path' lost," as well as of "some kind of internal morass" (Zimmerman xi).

[5] See David Ingham's article "Bashing the Fascists: The Moral Dimensions of Findley's Fiction" for a discussion of human-animal relationships in *The Wars*.

[6] In an interview with Nikaela Peters, Bergen refers to *The Time in Between* as "interior" and "dream-like" ("Interview").

[7] Svetlana Boym's work on nostalgia is pertinent here with regards to the difficulties of remembering. Writing about the experience of immigrants, Boym connects the fear of looking back to the story of Lot's wife: "a fear that looking back might paralyze you forever, turning you into a pillar of salt, a pitiful monument to your own grief" (xv).

[8] In *When Species Meet*, Donna Haraway argues that "it is a misstep to separate the world's beings into those who may be killed and those who may not and a misstep to pretend to live outside killing" (79). See "Sharing Suffering: Instrumental Relations" in *When Species Meet* for a detailed theoretical reflection on human and animal death.

[9] See *Romantic Ecologies and Colonial Cultures in the British-Atlantic World 1770-1850,* in which Kevin Hutchings discusses how "race and species, as categories of difference, were conflated, [and] various racial groups were deemed separate and distinct species rather than members of the same human family" (50).

[10] Charles's position on animal deaths evokes Heideggarian theories of *Dasein* and death. For Heidegger, "Dasein is an entity for which, in its Being, that Being is an issue" (*Being and Time* 236). In other words, a *Dasein* is troubled by its own existence and impending death in a way that animals, according to Heidegger, and apparently Charles, are not. From this principle, Heidegger argues that animals cannot experience death: "To die means to be capable of death. Only man dies. The animal perishes. It has neither death ahead of itself nor behind it" ("The Thing" 176).

[11] In "The Animal that Therefore I am (More to Follow)," Derrida edges close to Levinas when he argues that when the animal *looks* at us, we are stripped of thought and philosophy and brought into a position of ignorance from which we can begin to think: "The animal looks at us, and we are naked before it. Thinking perhaps begins here" (397). Charles's dream, in which he looks into the face of the wolf, might be considered through the lens of Derrida's notion of "thinking" about the animal.

[12] See Ervin Beck's "Resolving Dualisms in David Bergen's *Sitting Opposite My Brother*" for a discussion of Bergen's use of the "martyr archetype" in his 1993 short-story collection.

[13] One might argue that Yen's interest in Ada's underwear vaguely implies that he might commit an act of (sexual) violence toward her; however, Yen's desire to talk to Ada, his passive response to her aggressive reaction, and his kindness toward her throughout the novel counters this reading.

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