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## Performance: SJ Fowler, *The Great Apes*, April 7th 2022 at St Johns on Bethnal Green

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In the following review, we will look at how SJ Fowler faces birth, evolution, grief, literature, religion in *The Great Apes* performance. Locating the event in a church, addressing evolutionary topics as well as confronting grief and birth, Fowler creates several sets of ambiguous figures simultaneously – drawing the audience into the practice and performance of these ambiguities while at the same time drawing meaning from their fecund juxtaposition. Bob Bright, Ailsa Holland, Chris Kerr aid in his performance by reading selections from his 10th poetry collection, *The Great Apes* published by Broken Sleep Books 2022. In this performance, Fowler illustrates some ambitious play with ambiguity.

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We consider the ways in which Fowler faces birth, evolution, grief, literature, religion, and how he reflects these experiences back to the audience. He identifies as a primate to insist that the great apes are a worthy subject for poetry; he is preaching to the audience seated in church pews at St Johns on Bethnal Green, London. He brings the religious and zoological meanings of the word primate face to face in his performance. Here we understand him to be making an ambiguous figure, where the outline of a vase is found in between the outlines of two faces in profile. This reversal of figure and ground in the face-vase ambiguous figure is essential for understanding the dynamic movements Fowler is making with *The Great Apes* performance.<sup>1</sup> We will utilize the face-vase figure in literal and metaphorical ways to illustrate how Fowler comes face to face with birth, evolution, grief, literature, and religion.

The vase that is found in between the outline of two faces is Rubin's vase; it is an ambiguous figure created by the phenomenologist and psychologist Edgar Rubin. Rubin writes, 'when two fields have a common border, and one is seen as figure and the other as ground, the immediate perceptual experience is characterized by a shaping effect which emerges from the common border of the fields and which operates only on one field or operates more strongly on one than on the other.'<sup>2</sup> Our reading of Rubin is that Fowler is making ambiguous figures inside his performance. Locating the event in a church, addressing evolutionary topics as well as confronting grief and birth, Fowler creates several sets of ambiguous figures simultaneously – drawing the audience into the practice and performance of these ambiguities while at the same time drawing meaning from their fecund juxtaposition. Literature is the vase found in between the outline of birth and evolution. He invited Bob Bright, Ailsa Holland, and Chris Kerr to read from his poetry collection, *The Great Apes*.<sup>3</sup> In these moments Fowler is face to face with his own words as heard through the voices of others, and the audience is held in the space between author and literature.

Birth is the vase found in between the outline of literature and religion. A book launch is a way of giving birth to a work of literature, and to hold the event in a church throws a religious light over the evening. SJ Fowler organized a launch event at St John's Church on Bethnal Green April 7<sup>th</sup> 2022, for his tenth poetry collection, *The Great Apes*, published by Broken Sleep Books. There were six other readers: Rishi Dastidar, Fiona Larkin, Alice Wickenden, George Ttoulli, Peter Zavada, and Stuart McPherson.<sup>4</sup> The event featured a mixture of experimental poetry readings and performances. It is important to note that this is a review of Fowler's performance. All performances were filmed and remain available to the public for viewing on Fowler's Youtube channel under the respective authors' names. Lewis attended the event and Franklin viewed the recording of the event, which we feel speaks to the continued relevance of this performance.

Literature is the vase found in between the outlines of birth and grief. The cover of *The Great Apes* features a primate skull; it is covered with grief literally and the birth as a book launch is metaphorical. The stuffed animal primates that Fowler has brought into the church illustrate his offspring. The stuffed animals stand in for the book he is launching as a baby and he throws his stuffed animals out into the church. His use of stuffed animals is more than necessity, it is a reference to the legendary researcher Jane Goodall who also utilizes stuffed animals in her talks about biodiversity, extinction, and primates. The Jane Goodall Institute names wildlife trafficking and illegal trade as one its projects.<sup>5</sup> The primate asks humans if we will continue to consume nature and its creatures knowing as we do that we will consume ourselves?

Grief is the vase found in between the outlines of evolution and religion. Language is a mirror to the world as it is delineated by the agent the poet the priest. Fowler takes the rug that the priest stands on, sits his stuffed great apes on top, and then pulls the rug and apes onto himself. The poet is concealed by the ape image he has created. The image stands in for *The Great Apes* book that Fowler is launching. Here is the mirror image as a series of physical objects and not merely a metaphor. Let us see apes and monkeys as agents. Fowler makes the rug into a nest for resting, he has made the church into a forest. The elevated space is analogous to a tree. So the performance ends with the poet occupying the position of the priest in the church, using the rug as a blanket. Is this the literature of evolution or is it returning the literary event to the realm of humanity alone? The poet leaves the audience sleeping with a stuffed animal primate, a remembrance. It is a refusal, a remixing of hierarchy in that the primate and the priest end standing over the poet as ghosts.

Religion is the vase found in between the outlines of birth and literature. The poet gives birth to himself as an orangutan in order to give birth to his latest poetry collection, *The Great Apes*. Fowler takes off his boots, both pairs of socks, and the microphone. He continues taking off his coat, turning it inside out, and putting it back on his body. The shearling coat becomes extensive with his own hair, putting that mullet to good use; the coat becomes him. He becomes the orangutan. He becomes a nonhuman primate to remind us that our history is always inside us. He was always a primate. The word primate has religious and zoological meanings. A primate is a chief bishop of the Anglican church or a member of the order of mammals including apes, bushbabies, humans, lemurs, marmosets, monkeys, and tarsiers.<sup>6</sup>

Literature is the vase found in between the outlines of evolution and grief. The primate worships the greatest of the stuffed animal primates and takes it onto the dais to worship again. Here is the primate of primates. The primate and the primate of the primate listen to the poet Chris Kerr read from *The Great Apes*. The primate of the primate wipes the primate's eyes as tears born on his face. The tears leave his eyes behind. The primate

orangutan and the primate of the primate man and/or offspring worship the fire and then they blow out the candle the man lit for his brother. The primate rushes under the rug and pulls it over himself as if to hide his face from his face, humans, and the nonhuman primates. The rug suggests the forest habitat that is between disturbed and destroyed for the primates. Here is a gesture toward embarrassment. It disrupts the seated nonhuman primates as the primate buries himself beneath them as the humans were disturbed by his actions. His shame is manufactured to test the limits of empathy among the audience. The audience is immersed and mirrored. We want to attribute this action to savagery and lack of human decency in experimental poetry, in performance art, in Fowler's representation of non-human primates. And yet, did he not bring the grief and religion into the performance as he brought the audience into sympathy with the man and his deceased brother? He foregrounded this act of grieving in his own book launch.

Grief is the vase found in between the outlines of birth and evolution. Fowler is suggesting that humans look on great apes as great apes look on monkeys, so he must become a monkey on this night. He becomes more excited, vocalizing, and performing several monkey rolls. He is importing the martial arts term monkey roll. Humans use monkeys as the vehicle of a metaphor for a movement or a response. This illustrates how humans have been influenced by monkeys. He is holding up a mirror to humanity. He is vocalizing intensely as he faces the stuffed animals as though he is trying to get the attention of this grown of primates strewn all over the rug. He is beckoning them to follow him to higher ground on the stairs. The primate brings the rug down the stairs and arranges a series of nonhuman primates arranged on the rug facing the audience in the pews and the poets in the pews reading from *The Great Apes*. Bob Bright, Ailsa Holland, Chris Kerr are facing and reading to Fowler's personal collection of stuffed animals.

Birth is the vase found in between the outlines of evolution and religion. The poets were stationary as they read. Publication of a collection makes the poems fixed to the page and stationary. Here, however, is the primate. He exits the building extending the boundaries of the event; it is doors and mirrors all the way down. The primate is lost to the audience through the door in a moment that echoes the grief of primates lost to human activity. Grief is the boundary that defines the space outside the forest for primates. In the *Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard discusses how the inside of a house works on its occupants. This is the very boundary that defines a human in a home. He writes:

How concrete everything becomes in the world of the spirit when an object, a mere door, can give images of hesitation, temptation, desire, security, welcome and respect. If one were to give an account of all the doors one has closed and opened, of all the doors one would like to re-open, one would have to tell the story of one's entire life.<sup>7</sup>

Birth is the first exit and death is the second door. Doors and reflections are both boundaries essential to human thought. The space between the faces of the Bright, Holland, Kerr, and Fowler falls entirely behind the audience for a time. The reading is occurring inside and outside St John's on Bethnal Green. His leaving the church and returning is mirrored in the postscript to the performance when he lights the candle that he had blown out.

Evolution is the vase found in between the outlines of birth and literature. If it is born, then it deserves the attention of literature and religion. See the evolution of literary kinds. Extending the range of human sympathies through experimental poetry is an important part of Fowler's curatorial and poetic practice. He has expanded the boundaries of human experience in *Poem Brut*. He has created a greater field to reflect the nature of lived experience, perception, and poetry. It is a meeting place for dyslexics and migraineurs among others.<sup>8</sup> The primate performance itself comes full circle to ask poets who among them is worthy to read as opposed to sit in the audience. The intense miniature hierarchies within the poetry world are present at book launches. Of course, the poet launching their book is being celebrated as the first poet and the poets in the audience are not even recognized. This rigid hierarchal thinking is utterly disrupted by the primate. He is and is not the poet, he is and is not alone, he is and is not performing when he is on the other side of the church door during the performance. He is reminding the audience that they are all poets.

Literature is the vase found in between the outlines of birth and evolution. Fowler tells the audience that he is concerned with the dignity of the poet; then, he spends the rest of the performance imitating great apes and monkeys. This might be seen as making his former statement ironic. Or it might be seen as completing his former statement with the concept of employing the dignity of the poet to illustrate the dignity of the great apes. The origin of dignity is worth. The primate in all his ambiguity is insisting that the great apes are a worthy subject for poetry; he is preaching to the audience. The great apes enter the poetry reading and the church to save us outsiders trapped inside this traditional location. They give us the evolution of humanity. The presence of the different species of great apes serves as a mirror for the different possibilities for language. They ask us to expand our sympathies and reduce our sense of self-importance. The great apes tell us that if we cannot see their humanity, then we are smaller than we thought ourselves before the performance. They are merely here to reflect our humanity back to us; they are here to stand beside us and let us admire the reflected breadth of poetry.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> SJ Fowler. *The Great Apes*, online video recording, YouTube, 7 April 2022, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RtvYEdlG5ec>> [accessed 12 April 2022].
- <sup>2</sup> Edgar Rubin, 'Figure and Ground,' eds. by D. C. Beardslee and M. Wertheimer, *Readings in perception* (1958), 194–203. [English translation of key sections from Rubin's 1915 dissertation by D. Van Nostrand].
- <sup>3</sup> SJ Fowler, *The Great Apes*, (Rhydwen, Wales: Broken Sleep Books, 2022).
- <sup>4</sup> SJ Fowler, *A Note on Launching Great Apes By Being an Ape*, <<https://steven-fowler-1pys.squarespace.com/blog/2022/4/13/a-note-on-launching-great-apes-by-being-an-ape>> [accessed 10 April 2022].
- <sup>5</sup> Jane Goodall Institute, 'PROJECT ISSUE: WILDLIFE TRAFFICKING & ILLEGAL TRADE', *Jane Goodall Institute*, <<https://www.janegoodall.org/wildlife-trafficking-trade/>> [accessed 15 April 2022].
- <sup>6</sup> Lexico, 'Primate', *UK Dictionary*, <<https://www.lexico.com/definition/primate>> [accessed 2 May 2022].
- <sup>7</sup> Gaston Bachelard, *Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1994) p. 224.
- <sup>8</sup> SJ Fowler, 'About Poem Brut', *Poem Brut*, <<https://www.poembrut.com>> [accessed 10 May 2022].

## Competing Interests

JRL has read and performed at many literary events organized by SJ Fowler during the past five years.

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