Refiguring the Human and the Animal: Anthropomorphism & Zoomorphism in Twentieth Century American Poetry

A DISSERTATION

Submitted to the Faculty of the Department of English School of Arts and Sciences Of The Catholic University of America In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements For the Degree Doctor of Philosophy in English Language and Literature

By

Michael Levi Manglitz

Washington, D.C.

2016
This dissertation by Michael Levi Manglitz fulfills the dissertation requirement for the doctoral degree in English Language and Literature approved by Rosemary Winslow, Ph.D., as Director, and by Glen Johnson, Ph.D., and Ernest Suarez, Ph.D., as Readers.

____________________________________
Rosemary Winslow, Ph.D., Director

____________________________________
Glen Johnson, Ph.D., Reader

____________________________________
Ernest Suarez, Ph.D., Reader
Refiguring the Human and the Animal: Anthropomorphism & Zoomorphism in Twentieth Century American Poetry

Michael Levi Manglitz, Ph.D.

Director: Rosemary Winslow, Ph.D.

Anthropomorphism and zoomorphism date back to ancient times: even before the existence of the fable genre, artists have found creative ways of attributing human characteristics to animals, and have likewise attributed animal characteristics to humans. My dissertation addresses the question of how American poetry of the twentieth century participates in this tradition. Through a study of human-animal comparisons in the work of key American poets, I argue that the nature of comparisons between animals and humans changes within American poetry over the course of the twentieth century. My dissertation measures the growth of an anti-anthropocentrism movement within American poetry, a movement whose poetry esteems animals and humans equally (or even esteems animals over humans), as opposed to the traditionally predominant anthropocentric representations of humans and animals. My study combines and extends elements of perspectives that are already outlined in fields such as ecocriticism and animal studies in literature. The dissertation examines a variety of American poets, focused on Marianne Moore, Robinson Jeffers, Randall Jarrell, Denise Levertov, Galway Kinnell, Gary Snyder, and the poets surrounding them. I conclude with an examination of the relationship of my findings to broader cultural and historical trends.
Chapter One: Introduction

Statement of the Problem/Question

Anthropomorphism and zoomorphism date back to ancient times: even before the existence of the fable genre, artists have found creative ways of attributing human characteristics to animals (or non-living things), and have likewise attributed animal characteristics to humans. Twentieth century American poetry participates in this tradition, but what unique contexts and perspectives does it bring to that tradition? How, if at all, does the nature of comparisons between animals and humans change within American poetry over the course of the twentieth century? A study of human-animal comparisons in the work of some key American poets, organized chronologically, may yield answers to these questions.

Poetry about animals (and humans, and the relationships between them) is often considered a subset of nature poetry. Nature poetry has long occupied a prominent place among the subjects of professional literary criticism, and nature poetry of the twentieth century is no exception. A pivot point, however, occurs during the decades of the middle of the century. This period of time marks the beginning of what eventually came to be called “ecocriticism” (which, at least as a term, predates “ecopoetry,” itself a term whose use only appears very late in the century). Public concern for environmental issues developed and matured dramatically during the 1960s and 1970s, and its spread eventually gave rise to this ecologically-minded study of literature. Such criticism often discusses the larger trajectory of the tradition of American nature poetry and pertinent themes like vestiges of the Great Chain of Being concept and the recently growing mistrust of anthropocentrism, but animal representations and animal-human comparisons or relationships often receive secondary attention. Alternatively, the work of critics who focus specifically on the role of animals and human-animal associations in twentieth
century poetry often seeks to highlight the potential of poetry to enlighten or reform its readers’ perceptions of animals and human-animal relationships, without much concern for presenting such potential within the broader context of a historical development. My study combines and extends elements of these perspectives by investigating how human-animal comparisons in American poetry have changed and developed over the course of the twentieth century, and subsequently explores the degree to which such developments connect to any rise in a mistrust of anthropocentrism.

**Literature Review**

Representation of animals and animal-human relationships, as a topic, receives adequate attention in critical studies of modern drama and performance theory. However, although some criticism has addressed the importance of animals and animal figurations in the work of individual poets, no intensive study of animal representation in American poetry exists that is devoted to describing a broader chronological development. I hope that my study begins to fill this absence. It explores whether or not the manners and contexts of human-animal comparisons in American poetry differ across various time periods of the twentieth century and, as any such differences are discovered, offers an account for the nature of those differences and their relationships to cultural and/or historical trends.

A fair amount of literary criticism already exists that addresses the importance of animals and animal figurations in individual poets. Several of these critical works, mentioned in detail in later chapters, focus on a single author (or on a small group of authors), and offer explanations of the significance of animal themes in the author’s work, and of how such themes correspond to other themes or fit into the author’s broader oeuvre. These works of criticism provide already-invaluable analyses and recognitions of the work of animal-interested poets. Providing broader
context for such works of literary criticism, however, can help further unearth their value. Outlining how such poets create and interact with concepts of anti-anthropocentrism, and accounting for a broader chronological development of the work of such poets across the twentieth century, would re-contextualize the bodies of criticism on these individual poets. The poets, then, could be seen as participating in a larger poetic tradition of anti-anthropocentrism, one that grows, changes, and develops in form over the course of the century.

The Ecocritical Context: Achievements, Problems, and Opportunities

Of the current dominant trends in literary criticism, the one that offers the most relevance to my study is ecocriticism. However, ecocriticism primarily concerns itself with the treatment and representation of nature, the environment, the ecosystem, etc., thus making it a double-edged sword for the purposes of my study. Ecocriticism bears significant importance to my study, yet its focus is only adjacent to my study’s particular focus. Scholars of ecocriticism very often devote their attention to the very poets most germane to my own study, yet concern themselves primarily with nature as their (and the poets’) subject, with the subject of animals or animal-human comparisons being relegated to secondary discussion, if treated at all. Therefore, each chapter of my work will use and refer to multiple works by ecocritical scholars, but will contextualize those works with my own study in a variety of ways. Often I will present my own examination as simply an extension or augmentation of the ecocritical perspective, or as a clarification or observation that falls under the ecocriticism umbrella. Just as often, however, my findings will clash in some way with various ecocritics, and my study will then take a corrective or even oppositional stance towards ecocriticism. Some of the specific poets covered in later chapters will present various examples of this, whether through questions of their rhetorical stances, implicit value systems, primacies of subject matter, or other aspects.
Defining Terms

Literary critics have long taken up the subject of nature poetry, with many scholars, among them John Elder and Bernard Quetchenbach, addressing it in twentieth century American poetry specifically. Indeed, the widespread growth of public concern for environmental issues in the 1960s and 1970s eventually helped give rise to the term “ecocriticism,” an ecologically-minded study of literature introduced by William Rueckert (in his 1978 essay “Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism”) and others (e.g. Lawrence Buell, Karl Kroeber, Joseph Meeker). Such criticism often discusses the larger trajectory of the tradition of American nature poetry and pertinent themes like vestiges of the Great Chain of Being concept and the recently growing mistrust of anthropocentrism, but animal representations and animal-human comparisons or relationships often receive secondary attention. The term “anthropocentrism” itself, for instance, both for ecocritics and for students of animal-human comparisons and relationships, carries the primary meaning of “considering humans as central or of most importance.” For ecocritical scholars, however the term “anthropocentrism” most often includes the more specific reference to the belief that the natural world’s essential purpose is to provide service to human beings through its resources. In contrast, my study is not concerned with this element of the definition very much at all. It instead uses the term “anthropocentrism” to refer to the belief that the human perspective, as opposed to the perspective of other animals or species, is to be favored when assessing reality, and to the belief that animals are subordinate to humans in such qualities as moral standing. This distinction in the usage of the term reflects the differences of the two perspectives with respect to their processes of understanding literature: although both disciplines agree and overlap a great deal, their focuses of attention diverge, and even have the potential for competition and opposition.
Cooperations & Gaps

It is important to acknowledge the nature and extent of the overlap. Both ecocriticism and the focus on animality and humanity taken in my study share essential assumptions, not the least of which are a criticism and rejection of anthropocentrism, even if the two stances locate their targets differently within the concept itself. Both stances identify the same root cause of what is in need of revision, which Joseph Meeker defines as “a cultural tradition in the West of separation of culture from nature, and elevation of the former to moral predominance” (Meeker 126). Meeker’s *The Comedy of Survival*, published in 1974, one of the earliest works to be identified as part of ecocriticism (then more commonly referred to as “literary ecology”), crystallizes the compatibility of ecocriticism and animal studies with its primary example of “animal ethology,” not human ethology, as having superior ecological value, by embodying a process more successful at achieving homeostasis with the environment at large. At their most compatible, perspectives on literature from ecocriticism and from animal studies harmonize and provide each other supporting examples for the other’s argumentation.

Unfortunately, literature in general, and poetry in particular, has for the most part escaped the attention of the majority of what combinations exist between ecocriticism and animal studies. I intend my study to address this omission, and begin to fill a vacuum in the criticism. *Ecocriticism*, by Greg Garrard, part of *The New Critical Idiom* series designed to provide an explanatory overview of contemporary trends in cultural and literary criticism, provides a typical example of this oversight. Divided into sections according to the concepts that have most occupied ecocritics, *Ecocriticism* devotes attention to poets like Gary Snyder and Robinson Jeffers, but only in the sections on “Wilderness” and “Apocalypse.” In contrast, the section on “Animals” makes reference to popular culture, to works of fiction and non-fiction, and to
documentaries and movies, but includes no mention of any poets or poetry. This example illustrates the gap in criticism my study is intended to help fill.

Factors of Propaganda and Purpose

Another element problematizing much of the scholarship produced under the umbrella of ecocriticism is its dominant rhetorical stance. Ecocritical works often operate with respect to a very specific goal, cause, or agenda related to environmentalism, and their exploration of literature, therefore, occasionally reduces to a form of “literary recruitment,” a process of arguing that a given poet is or was actually a deep environmentalist, perhaps before his or her time. Some such work, such as John Felstiner’s *Can Poetry Save the Earth?*, has ample validity, but it mitigates its particular usefulness within a study such as mine that seeks simply to record changes in attitude and characterization over time, as subordinating poets and poetry to a greater cause, no matter how noble, can taint such a process.

Alternatively, a small but growing body of literary criticism, focused specifically on animals in literature, exists outside of, or adjacent to, ecocriticism. The work of critics like Randy Malamud in *Poetic Animals and Animal Souls* and Mark Payne in *The Animal Part: Human and Other Animals in the Poetic Imagination* focuses specifically on the role of animals and human-animal associations in twentieth century poetry. However, this work often seeks to highlight the potential of poetry to enlighten or reform its readers’ perceptions of animals and human-animal relationships, without much concern for presenting such potential within the broader context of a historical development. Such studies more often than not work towards contextualizing American poetry about animals and humans as part of a rhetorical act of persuasion, as furthering a cause akin to animal studies, much the way ecocriticism seeks to cast as many poets as possible as “green.” Again, these critical works offer great value in many
ways, but for the most part they fail to consider the poetry’s value outside of the purpose of persuasion, or exploring other possible contexts for it.

Other such critics present findings very analogous to mine, but with significant differences in focus or specific subject. Laura Brown, for instance, takes a broader approach than mine, spanning multiple centuries. Her work, *Homeless Dogs & Melancholy Apes: Humans and Other Animals in the Modern Literary Imagination*, “begins from the historical premise that the encounter with real animals in the eighteenth century generates a novel engagement with animal-kind [as companions] that continues to shape literary discourse through the modern era. I argue that the imaginary animals created by that engagement provide a new lens through which to examine the significance of the nonhuman being for human identity, human experience, and human history” (x). Brown focuses the majority of her study on imaginary animals (and, aptly enough, the “inter-species intimacy engineered by the rise of modern pet-keeping” [65]), and thus her subject differs significantly from mine. Still, her larger point comes very close to the heart of my own argument: literature, through imagination, offers a means of understanding animals outside of the normal “anthropomorphism or alterity” dichotomy, of escaping the choice between seeing animals either as ultimately like us (by ascribing them human qualities of viewing them through a human lens) or as ultimately other than humans and as therefore unrelatable (2). The breadth of Brown’s chosen scope for her work, however, means that she does not examine chronological changes within the twentieth century specifically; also, the majority of Brown’s work is focused on fiction and narrative rather than poetry and lyric.

Others

Still other works of criticism fall under the categories of neither ecocriticism nor animal studies, yet make observations relevant, or at least related, to the focus of my study. Barbara
Johnson, for instance, in *Persons and Things*, examines the various ways in which “anthropomorphism is built into common expressions, whether they are willed for an occasion or not” (16) and “is often part of language itself as an unconscious constraint on imagination” (15) in the way human characteristics are automatically, even unthinkingly, ascribed to inanimate objects (“table leg, clock hang, or chair arm” [15]) and images of deities alike. Johnson’s study, however, is directed towards categories and definitions of “person” and “non-person” and the ensuing psychosocial aspects and implications of them. Animals and animal aspects do not fall under her purview. A similar scope applies to Bryan L. Moore’s work, despite it qualifying very much as ecocriticism: *Ecology and Literature: Ecocentric Personification from Antiquity to the Twenty-first Century*. While Moore treats the concept of anthropocentrism very directly, as I will refer to his discussion of Robinson Jeffers in a later chapter, his concern rests primarily with issues related to representing the natural world with human traits. Moore does however, much like Johnson, examine the various ways in which anthropomorphism permeates language. Both authors help to point out two contradictory perceptions of anthropomorphism within literary scholarship. Anthropomorphism within the English language is considered ubiquitous, even as it simultaneously earns attention for being antiquated, unfashionable, or irrelevant. And, even more importantly, Moore organizes his argument chronologically, arriving among other things at the conclusion that “modernity has greatly altered the rules by which personification may be used plausibly. Not since the nineteenth century, if not the eighteenth, has the trope held credibility as a ready-made, catch-all signifier of nature as a transcendent teacher and guide” (194). Otherwise, as with other ecocritics, Moore occupies himself with representations of, and attitudes towards, nature, rather than animals specifically.
Overview/Organization/Outline of The Argument, Chapters

My study follows a chronological organization, and consists of five chapters: an introductory chapter, three chapters which correspond to different periods of time within the twentieth century, and a concluding chapter. This first chapter provides a literature review of ecocriticism, as well as an overview of general literary criticism relevant to the issues and themes that often arise in a discussion of human-animal comparisons in literature. It also addresses representations of animals and humans in some of the important figures of American poetry before the twentieth century, such as Dickinson, Whitman, and the Transcendentalists, and some lesser figures as well.

Each of the following three chapters examines the poetry of a particular time period of the twentieth century, and are collectively meant to provide a description of development over time. Chapter Two treats American poetry produced between the First and Second World Wars, but focuses primarily on the poems of Marianne Moore and Robinson Jeffers. Representations of animals and animal-human relationships figure very prominently in their work, enough to make them exceptions within the American poetry of their time in this regard. In this way, the two of them mark the beginning of anti-anthropocentrism in twentieth century American poetry. This second chapter presents examples of human-animal comparisons in the poetry of many of their contemporaries for contradistinction.

Chapter Three examines a range of American poetry produced between the mid-1940s and mid-1970s, foregrounding the poetry of Denise Levertov and Randall Jarrell, but also including that of Adrienne Rich, Gwendolyn Brooks and Robert Hayden. This chapter presents the findings of a search for examples of poets making animal-human comparisons in the spirit of Moore and Jeffers. As such it attempts to measure in some way the growth of an anti-
anthropocentrism movement within American poetry, a movement whose poetry esteems animals and humans equally (or even esteems animals over humans), as opposed to the typically predominant anthropocentric representations of humans and animals. The chapter examines the discovered changes in human-animal comparisons in terms of some of the time period’s cultural and poetic contexts and movements, such as issues of race and the Black Arts Movement, and issues of politics and war in the poetry of both World War II and the Vietnam War. Some poets’ work, like that of Brooks, offers an opportunity to examine the nature of human-animal comparisons even in oeuvres not particularly occupied with animals or with such comparisons.

Chapter Four examines American poetry from the mid-1970s through the 1990s, focusing primarily on the poetry of Galway Kinnell but including that of Gary Snyder, Gary Soto, Gjertrud Schnackenberg, John Haines, and Mary Oliver. This chapter surveys examples of animal-human comparisons in poetry and attempts to describe prevailing or recurring characteristics that differ from the comparisons made in the poetry of the earlier periods. As the poetry of this time is contemporary with the rise of ecocriticism, this chapter examines the degree with which the poetry of this time shares any aspects of ecocriticism, including rhetorical assumptions and implied audiences.

The fifth and final chapter includes a consideration of the evidence collected in the previous chapters and an application of that evidence towards some of the primary questions raised in the study, answering them to the degree possible. It draws that evidence together into a descriptive chronology, suggests implications for further work in the topic, and indicates possible methods for such work. The final chapter also draws implications for the relationship between ecology and poetry, or how poetry may provide a method of presenting concepts and images for meditating on and relating to the non-human world.
Dickinson and Whitman: Forebears and Precursors

Casting Jeffers and Moore as the original precursors of anti-anthropocentrism in American poetry would be misleading. An admiration for the vitality of animals, particularly in contrast with humans, along with the idea that animals have valuable means of perception different from those of humans, appears to a somewhat significant extent in Transcendentalist poetry, and certainly in the work of those like Dickinson, Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman. These representations of animals were still very rarely placed in prominent positions of poems the way that they are in Jeffers’ and Moore’s poetry. Still, they mark some very curious departures from or exceptions to the humanist assumption, occasionally made within the very same works, that the purest or most reliable assessment of reality comes through an exclusively human perspective.

Whitman

The persona of the speaker in Whitman’s “Song of Myself,” for instance, becomes a universal “self” that speaks for everyone, “for every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you” (1.3). The speaker undergoes a number of transformations, and by the end of the long poem he has held almost every occupation under the sun and experienced ages from infancy to senescence, not to mention both genders: “in all people I see myself, none more and not one a barleycorn less” (20.14). Whitman here makes a strong deviation from the norm in writing an epic poem that takes as its hero the collective human populace (with a particular focus on commoners) rather than a high-positioned figure with superhuman qualities. Yet, this universal speaker, wide enough to encompass all people, professing “I am large, I contain multitudes” (51.8), does not include animals within the scope of his identities, and in other poems like “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” Whitman even makes associations between animals and certain
negative traits, common for his time, as the speaker of the poem admits that he “Was wayward, vain, greedy, shallow, sly, cowardly, malignant, / The wolf, the snake, the hog” (74-5).

Whitman’s move in “Song of Myself” of merging his speaker’s identity with those from every walk of life is a dramatically original one for its time, but it still keeps within boundaries that will go untransgressed in poetry until the speakers of poems like Kinnell’s “The Bear” and Levertov’s “Song for Ishtar,” more than a century later.

Whitman’s human-encompassing persona aside, “Song of Myself” does espouse a certain connection between animals and humans, and grants animals a special value of their own, even one deserving of reverence for their abilities to offer perspectives that both augment and correct those of humans. Very early in the poem, the speaker celebrates a connection between himself and the mystery of life by comparing it to a carpenter’s structure, but mixes in an animal comparison: “Sure as the most certain sure, plumb in the uprights, well entretied, braced in the beams, / Stout as a horse, affectionate, haughty, electrical, / I and this mystery here we stand” (3.12-14). He underscores a deep kinship among animals and between animals and humans:

The sharp-hoof’d moose of the north, the cat on the house-sill, the chick-adee, the prairie-dog,

The litter of the grunting sow as they tug at her teats,

The brood of the turkey-hen and she with her half-spread wings,

I see in them and myself the same old law. (14.5-8)

The unity of animals and humans here is certainly of a spiritual nature, an emphasis on animals and humans as different manifestations of the same life-force, but it is very tempting to cast Whitman as in some way anticipating Darwin here. Ecocritic Bryan Moore, in one of the few times he focuses more on animals in poetry than on nature in poetry, makes a similar assessment:
Chant 31 [of “Song of Myself”] concludes with the speaker’s declaration that the whale, buzzard, snake, elk, and razorbilled auk cannot evade him. That the animals listed are typically not thought of as equally praiseworthy is in keeping with Whitman’s attempt to democratize everything in “Song of Myself,” and such a treatment anticipates the aims of later nature writers, from Darwin to the present, who observe and write about the ecological niches of all species (121).

Whitman here could certainly be identified as an influence on poets like Jeffers and Moore, and later poets like Jarrell, Kinnell, and Levertov, who seemed to make a point of enlisting unpopular, and even historically unappealing, animals in their anti-anthropocentric poems.

Indeed, the following section of “Song of Myself” includes lines that offer a presage of “inhumanism,” a concept of Robinson Jeffers’ to be discussed in the following chapter. In what is perhaps Whitman’s most misanthropic turn, he takes the escalating praise directed towards animals in the previous section and transforms it into an indictment of the culpabilities and ugliness of humanity:

I think I could turn and live with animals, they are so placid and self-contain’d;
I stand and look at them long and long.
They do not sweat and whine about their condition;
They do not lie awake in the dark and weep for their sins;
They do not make me sick discussing their duty to God;
Not one is dissatisfied—not one is demented with the mania of owning things;
Not one kneels to another, nor to his kind that lived thousands of years ago;
Not one is respectable or industrious over the whole earth (32.1-8).
These words may as well have been written by Robinson Jeffers, aligning with both his “inhumanist” content and his biblical style and rhetoric. Here we see Whitman at his closest to qualifying as a precursor to anti-anthropocentrism.

Occasionally the speaker of “Song of Myself” addresses animals directly, and with an intense humility and wonder, as when asking the question, “Oxen that rattle the yoke and chain or halt in the leafy shade, what is that you express in your eyes? / It seems to me more than all the print I have read in my life” (13.11-12). He even singles out animals’ lack of human experience and perspective as something honorable and uncorrupting, saying that he “do[es] not call the tortoise unworthy because she is not something else, / And the jay in the woods never studied the gamut, yet trills pretty well to me, / And the look of the bay mare shames silliness out of me” (13.18-20). This last line to the thirteenth section of the poem gives agency to the mare: for a moment the mare is the doctor, mentor, or teacher and the speaker is the patient, mentee, or student. One of the most famous phrases to come from “Song of Myself,” the sounding of “my barbaric yawp,” appears in the context of the less remembered preceding lines, which stage yet another scene of animal agency and human recipience. The last section of “The Song of Myself” begins, “The spotted hawk swoops by and accuses me, he complains of my gab and my loitering. / I too am not a bit tamed, I too am untranslatable, / I sound my barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world” (52.1-3). In a way Whitman allows this hawk’s appearance as a self-deprecating parenthesis for the entire poem: perhaps the proudly exuberant “Song of Myself” ends with a humble admission that the work itself might amount to nothing more than “gab” and “loitering” when looked at from a perspective other than an anthropocentric one. Yet the speaker, instead of answering the hawk’s accusation or offering a defense, immediately associates with the hawk as if taking its side, and announces himself as equally untamed, equally untranslatable (perhaps yet
another begrudging nod to the limitations of language), and equally removed from society, through a shared “barbarism,” as well as a shared ability of flight. Many have invoked Whitman’s “barbaric yawp” while failing to recognize that it is meant to be as much the yawp of a hawk as of a human. Perhaps the speaker of “Song of Myself” is not so far away from the animalized speakers to follow later in Kinnell’s “The Bear” or Levertov’s “Song for Ishtar.”

Of course, this reading of the conclusion to “Song of Myself” is subject to scrutiny in a number of ways. Primary to my interest, one might ask whether or not Whitman really seeks an honest representation of an animal here. Does Whitman invoke the spirit and perspective of the hawk here, or does he simply manipulate the idea of a hawk to serve the version of his poetic identity that he would most like to present at this point in the poem? Answering the question is difficult to do without flirting with the dangers of Wimsatt & Beardsley’s intentional fallacy by pretending to assume the role of Whitman’s psychoanalyst, but the question is a very important one with regards to the task of gauging Whitman’s (or any given poet’s) orientation towards animals, and animals in relation to humans. Ultimately the question, of whether or not a poem is first and foremost about animals or about people, always remains. If the answer is the latter, then it rings false with regard to animals, because the poems are about people – about our sensations when we happen to be around (our) animals. The poetry assumes a possessiveness that diminishes the integrity of animal subjects and any insights into their sensibilities; its demeanor casts animals as foils, springboards for our own deep and sensitive cleverness. . . . Animals in these poems are curiously Emersonian, for example, in Ralph Waldo Emerson’s “The Humble Bee” . . . or Lawrentian, as in D. H. Lawrence’s “Tortoise Gallantry” . . . or Dickinsonian, in Emily Dickinson’s poem about a caterpillar (Malamud 31-32).
John H. Lienhard of the University of Houston recounts the discovery of an image of a butterfly, drawn on paper and carefully cut out, in one of Whitman’s notebooks. This “butterfly” appears in one of the most famous photos taken of him, a “white-bearded Walt Whitman with a butterfly landing on his hand. He looks like some latter-day St. Francis – a child of nature” (“No. 1030: Whitman’s Butterfly”). The discovery of this paper cut-out reveals a version of Whitman very much in touch with his own self-image, and also somewhat dispels the version of Whitman as closely in touch with nature and animals as perhaps only a fabrication serving that very self-image. If we are interested in Whitman’s perception of animals, then, we must ask ourselves if the hawk in “Song of Myself” is like that butterfly, a cut-out designed to serve a poetic effect, instead of the genuine article. Whitman uses the poem to ascribe the qualities of a hawk to himself, but we cannot ignore the possibility that it is the other way around, that it is the presentation of a curiously Whitmanian hawk, cast as a "springboard" for Whitman's own deep and sensitive cleverness. We must ask ourselves whether or not that particular section of “Song of Myself” is really about hawks at all.

Dickinson

We might examine the same accusations of using animals as convenient looking-glasses rather than subjects for earnest contemplation, levied against that other parent of modern American poetry, Emily Dickinson, as levied by Randy Malamud above. The poem that Malamud mentions, “How soft a Caterpillar steps,” certainly offers ammunition for those wishing to attack Dickinson as an anthropocentric poet, naively casting animals in human contexts. In only eight short lines, the caterpillar of the poem receives several descriptors that bring human implications with them. The caterpillar “steps” (1) as people might, comes “from
such a velvet world” (3) described in terms of an expensively woven fabric, and both “travels” (5) and is “Intent upon its own career” (7), much the way a human might be. One would not make too much of a stretch to conclude that Dickinson is humanizing, even caricaturizing her animal subject here, perhaps sentimentally so.

Still, Dickinson wrote a great many poems in which animals make appearances, and the contexts of those appearances cover a much wider range than the isolated example volunteered by Malamud would indicate (although Dickinson indeed anthropomorphizes animals quite often in a manner similar to that of the aforementioned caterpillar). In fact, many of Dickinson’s poems reveal a very keen sense not only of the various aspects of animality, but of the responses humans often have to observations of animality, including their reactions to it and even their misconceptions of it. “A Bird came down the Walk,” for instance, narrates an examination of a bird through a number of lenses. It begins by matter-of-factly casting the bird as a ravenous savage, killing and feasting on a weaker creature, having “bit an Angle Worm in halves / And ate the fellow, raw” (3-4), but then contrasts and even undermines that first presentation. As Helen Vendler points out, “she has seen another side of the crass murderer: he drinks daintily a drop of Dew from the grass, and he makes way for a Beetle (whom he does not kill; on the contrary, he considerately steps aside)” (158). The fourth stanza undermines the savageness of the bird even further, showing that, despite the narrator’s fear of the bird (“Like on in danger, Cautious, / I offered him a Crumb” [13-14]), the bird is in fact the one carefully afraid, all too easily startled by the intrusion of the narrator’s presence: “I offered him a Crumb, / And he unrolled his feathers, / And rowed him softer Home –” (14-16). The poem contains a number of anthropomorphisms that might meet Malamud’s disapproval, as they mix animal and human terms together with varying levels of unreality: the victim Angle Worm is described as “the
fellow” (4), the bird’s eyes “looked like frightened Beads” (11), he has a “Velvet Head” (12), and his act of flying away is described as if he is rowing a boat, “rowed him softer Home – / Than Oars divide the Ocean” (16-17). Yet Dickinson could easily be offering these anthropomorphisms up for scrutiny, an act that would fit with the poem’s narrative of correcting a misinformed or incomplete first impression of a bird as a violent murderer. After all, just as the bird’s retreat surprises the narrator and leads her to reevaluate her perception of him, so might those anthropomorphisms be ultimately revealed as misconceptions, as they are couched by the uncertain phrase “I thought.” The bird’s eyes “looked like frightened Beads, I thought, / He stirred his Velvet Head” (11-12). Considering the end of the poem, with its breathtaking description of flight, Vendler concludes that “this is a poem about aesthetic ecstasy obliterating the memory of savagery” (160), but I would emphasize that the poem bases this statement on an interaction between the human imagination and the beauty of the natural world. In the poem Dickinson begins with an illustration of (and interrogation of) the misconceptions and misperceptions humans can have about the creatures around them, but ends with a sublimation of those imprecise human views into a celebration of animal beauty. While giving us two compact comparisons that suggest the elegance and litheness of a bird’s flight, Dickinson also implies a distance between nature and humanity and the difficulty in appropriating a complete view of nature, even as she champions the beauty of nature and the creative power of the human imagination in interaction with it.

We see similar sentiments in several of Dickinson’s animal poems, a recurring emphasis on the mystery and power of the interaction (and simultaneous distance) between animals and humans. One of her more famous poems, “I heard a Fly buzz when I died,” is primarily seen as a statement on the finality of death and an expression of doubt about the Christian afterlife, but
that the symbol of these things comes in the form of a fly is very telling. Noteworthy for being fragile, simple, and small in comparison to so many other forms of life, the fly becomes an apt microcosm for the human experience of insignificance in the face of death. Yet, by appearing in the place of the expected Christ “the King” (7), the fly redirects the attention reserved for God back to the unpolished physical world, underscored by Dickinson’s use of sensory imagery: the “Buzz” of the final stanza (now capitalized where earlier it took the lower case) not only communicates sound, but sight (“Blue . . . Between the light – and me” [13-14]) and even a physical tangibility of being “uncertain – stumbling” (13). Where religion and experiences beyond the physical are expected, Dickinson gives us only a human interaction with nature, the senses, and the animal. “A narrow fellow in the Grass” follows an arc similar to that in “A Bird came down the Walk,” presenting a changing series of perceptions of the snake before ultimately settling on the most compelling representation of it in terms of imaginative and instinctual human responses to it. The narrator of the poem cannot help but confess that, despite seemingly having a deep knowledge of (and sympathy towards) animals, the physiological sensations of a fight-or-flight reaction always manifest themselves at the discovery of a snake:

Several of Nature’s People
I know and they know me
I feel for them a transport
Of Cordiality

But never met this Fellow
Attended or alone
Without a tighter Breathing

And Zero at the Bone. (17-24)

By the end of the poem it becomes plain that such professions of knowledge and “cordiality” ring at least a little hollow, as do the tongue-in-cheek anthropomorphisms of “Nature’s People” and “this Fellow.” Once again Dickinson presents a distance between humans and animals, but also a dynamic connection and interaction between them somehow unmitigated, despite that distance. Still, the focus of the poem ultimately rests on the human, and from a human perspective, not on the animal, and certainly not from an animal perspective.

For an illustration, by contrast, of Dickinson’s position, we might consider Brewster Ghiselin’s poem “Rattler, Alert,” published in 1946, sixty years after Dickinson’s death and during a time in which a change in attitudes towards animal-human comparisons was beginning to broaden within American poetry. The similarities between the situations and circumstances rendered in both “Rattler, Alert” and “A narrow fellow in the Grass” are striking enough for a reader to suspect very strongly that Ghiselin’s poem pays homage to Dickinson’s: it offers a brief series of accounts of a snake’s behavior before ultimately finishing with a focus on the natural human reaction to it, and the accompanying physiological elements of that reaction. However, Ghiselin attempts to present this scene from the perspective of the snake, strongly underscoring the differences between the sensory equipment of a snake and that of a human, beginning “Slowly he sways that head that cannot hear, / Two-jeweled cone of horn the yellow of rust” (1-2) and later representing a snake’s alternative means of sense with “by his tendril tongue’s tasting the air / He sips, perhaps, a secret of his race / Or feels for the known vibrations, heat, or trace” (5-7). The conclusions of Ghiselin’s poem contrasts with Dickinson’s even as it bears
striking similarities: both poems act out the scene of a person’s reaction to the sudden discovery of a snake, but Ghiselin renders Dickinson’s “tighter Breathing / And Zero at the Bone” (23-24) in a way that attempts to illuminate how a snake might perceive the same reaction (and interaction):

the aspirate of my half-held breath,

The crushing of my weight upon the dust,

My foamless heart, the bloodleap at the wrist. (9-11)

The extent to which Ghiselin successfully conveys the consciousness of a snake is certainly up for debate, but the simple attempt to do so moves the poem into territory unchartered by Dickinson, if only because it is territory that Dickinson finds uninteresting in comparison to that of her own (human) imagination.

Helen Vendler chooses to conclude her large critical work, *Dickinson: Selected Poems and Commentaries*, by focusing on an undated poem of Dickinson’s, and one of the shortest in her entire oeuvre. Vendler feels that “it seems to sum up (in fewer than thirty words) all of Dickinson’s work” (522), and I might add that it does the same for the importance and meaning of animals within Dickinson’s work:

To make a prairie it takes a clover and one bee,

One clover, and a bee.

And revery.
The revery alone will do,
If bees are few. (1-5)

Vendler expertly sums up the poem’s meaning that “she records her delight in clover and bee, but adds that if nature will not provide the real objects, she will make do with ‘revery’ to create her prairie” (522). Dickinson, then, is both a poet of nature and a poet of the imagination, but, when push comes to shove, if she is stripped down to her essence, she is ultimately the latter alone. Here, then, we might arrive at a fuller understanding of what it is in Dickinson and her representations of animals that Randy Malamud finds objectionable. In fact, Dickinson in a way has confessed in this poem to the very charges which Malamud has brought against her: ultimately her “poems are about people – about our sensations when we happen to be around (our) animals. The poetry assumes a possessiveness that diminishes the integrity of animal subjects and any insights into their sensibilities; its demeanor casts animals as foils, springboards for our own deep and sensitive cleverness” (31-32). Of course, Malamud is right. Dickinson indicts herself, or at least concedes a hierarchy within her imaginative process: for her, at the end of the day, her own imagination, and not the subjects of that imagination (however beautiful), is not only all that is necessary, but all that matters. Still, it would be hasty and harsh to dismiss Dickinson as completely anthropocentric, as any earnest reader of her work can feel the exquisite intensity of attention and wonder she pays to the animals in her poems, however deeply colored they are by aspects of her sublime imagination. After all, so many of the sparks of imagination in her poems come from animals and from animal-human interactions. If anything, Dickinson’s poetry indicates a strong self-awareness of the artistic liberties she takes with her animal subjects, and communicates the complexities and difficulties of achieving an honest perception of animals in the first place. Over the course of the development of American poetry, poets will
gradually move away from Dickinson’s orientation towards animals and begin to approximate one that suits Malamud’s preferences more closely, but we should never forget how many poets take their cues from Dickinson when it comes to the uses of a transformative imagination, especially when it comes to the inspiration to be found in animals, their mysteries, and their mysterious relationships to humans. The poems that result may be about animals, but they give ultimate priority to human beings: animals are ultimately only means to the end of illuminating human nature. Later, American poets will often value animals as subjects of poetry in a different way.

**Nineteenth-Century Contemporaries**

Before moving on to later periods, though, it’s important to at least briefly note the frequency with which poems were written, by contemporaries of Dickinson and Whitman, that equaled or exceeded any anthropocentric streaks in those two whose legacies, as parents of what is now considered American poetry, ultimately outlasted their then-successful peers. An examination of the works of these poetic peers can help demonstrate a “baseline” of anthropocentrism present in the animal-human comparisons of the poetry of the day, and help show that anthropocentric concepts, ethics, and images were the default or predominant mode within American poetry before the twentieth century. This mode is the baseline from which twentieth century poets, beginning with Marianne Moore and Robinson Jeffers, start to deviate, until by the end of the twentieth century the orientation will have completely flipped, and the default or predominate mode will have revolved from anthropocentrism to anti-anthropocentrism. This earlier baseline, though, of the nineteenth century, applies similarly to major and minor poets alike.
The poetry of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, for instance, the most popular and best-selling American poet of the nineteenth century, includes anthropocentric presentations of animal imagery in a number of forms, from the mawkish background animals of “the deer-haunted forests of Maine” in “The Building of the Ship” and the “doves / In quiet neighborhoods” in “My Lost Youth” to the animals who serve as sentimental supplements and extensions of their human masters, like Paul Revere’s trusty horse in “Paul Revere’s Ride,” who seems only to be known through the metonymies and synecdoches of “a hurry of hoofs in a village street” or “the hurrying hoof-beats,” whose only purposes are to signal the arrival of the human hero they carry. Of course there are also the animal images Longfellow pairs with his exoticized indigenous characters, the “wild war-drums made of serpent’s skin” belonging to the Aztec priests in “The Arsenal at Springfield,” and the oft-repeated “fiery serpents” and “great war-eagles” associated with the opposing forces of Megissogwon and Hiawatha in *The Song of Hiawatha*. Only here are humans characterized with animal features, and their relationships with animals take a different (and even inverted) form than the hierarchized relationship Paul Revere has with his horse, as Hiawatha sings, even prays, to “The Keneu, the great war-eagle, / Master of all fowls with feathers” and the injured Megissogwon “reeled and staggered forward, / Plunging like a wounded bison.” Longfellow reserves his zoomorphisms and his animalizations for his less civilized characters, as part of an imaginative dabbling in some exoticized exceptions to the anthropocentric endorsements of the Great Chain of Being concept characteristic of the majority of his poetry.

Countless other poets of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, many of whom never achieved the status of Longfellow, reinforce the same general conventions about animal-human figurations. Edwin Markham, writing “The Man With the Hoe” in 1899, objects to the evils of
the mistreatment of laborers, capable of bringing a man down to the level of an animal by making “him dead to rapture and despair, / A thing that grieves not and that never hopes, / Stolid and stunned, a brother to the ox?” (5-7), a situation made all the more abhorrent and unjust in that the victimized laborer is supposed to be “the Thing the Lord God made and gave / To have dominion over sea and land” (11-12). Markham invokes the Great Chain of Being even more directly than most, outlining exploitative labor’s pernicious work of bringing man low and juxtaposing it with the heavenly direction towards which man is ideally intended, exclaiming “What gulfs between him and the seraphim! / Slave of the wheel of labor, what to him / Are Plato and the swing of Pleiades?” (22-24). Using only the images presented in conjunction with this one character in Markham’s poem, a reader can plot data points along a perfect Chain of Being continuum, from animal, to degraded man, to man, to enlightened or noble man, to angel, to God.

**Placing The Transcendentalists**

The Transcendentalists can be hard to gauge within the context of this baseline of anthropocentrism. Their writing can appear anti-anthropocentric at times, yet they can demonstrate strong streaks of anthropocentrism just as easily. Ralph Waldo Emerson, the writer who comes closest to embodying the movement of Transcendentalism, perhaps also best epitomizes this ambivalence. In his lecture *The Natural History of Intellect*, for instance, Emerson lauds the animal perspective in a way that anticipates Robinson Jeffers’ inhumanism (as Whitman also does occasionally):

What strength belongs to every plant and animal in nature. The tree or the brook has no duplicity, no pretentiousness, no show. It is, with all its might and main, what it is, and
makes one and the same impression and effect at all times. All the thoughts of a turtle are turtles, and of a rabbit, rabbits. But a man is broken and dissipated by the giddiness of his will; he does not throw himself into his judgments; his genius leads him one way but it is likely his trade or politics in quite another.

Emerson’s views on animals have a flip side, though, as critics have already pointed out. Fredrik Brogger, for instance, refers to “the writings of Emerson and subsequent American transcendentalists” as having “strongly anthropomorphic and ultimately anthropocentric connotations” (30). Looking primarily at one of Emerson’s most well-known works, *Nature*, Brogger concludes that Emerson’s anthropocentrism is explicit and pervasive, encompassing everything from the material through the aesthetic to the moral, philosophical, and religious. Physically nature’s commodities (“[b]easts, fire, water, stones, and corn”) are there to “serve” man (11); aesthetically the world “exists to the soul to satisfy the desire of beauty” (17); and ethically “every animal function from the sponge up to Hercules, shall hint or thunder to man the laws of right and wrong, and echo the Ten Commandments” (26). (30-31)

Joel Kovel adds, in his article “Emerson, Earth Spirituality, and the Ecological Crisis” that “Emerson's virile anthropocentrism was the product of his times, and also an important part of the making of his times. In this respect, the term, ‘transcendentalism,’ is something of a misnomer. For all Emerson's efforts at transcendence, he reproduces the prevailing nineteenth century mythos of man over nature, nature serving man” (202). Brogger and Kovel are right, which makes it all the more puzzling that Emerson, in the same *Nature*, can write that “nature never became a toy to a wise spirit. The flowers, the animals, the mountains, reflected the
wisdom of his best hour, as much as they had delighted the simplicity of his childhood” (Ch.1). Emerson, then, may reflect some aspects of the dynamics later seen in Dickinson and Whitman when it comes to representing animals. He registers a fascination and reverence for them, but ultimately only within the context of his own imagination or his own human-centered persona.

A classic Emersonian pursuit of “an original relation to the universe,” to be conducted in seclusion and with nature as one’s setting, then understandably includes a deep ambivalence. Between the two key components of the relationship at the heart of transcendentalism, the individual (human) and nature, the question of which component is granted more significance within the perspective of the movement has ambiguous, contradictory answers. To the extent that transcendentalism influences American poetry of the following century, these inherited ambiguities and contradictions are ultimately rejected and cast off by Marianne Moore, Robinson Jeffers, and their followers. At least when it comes to a consideration of how to esteem humans relative to other species of life, these later poets refuse to vacillate about whether the human perspective or the non-human perspective deserves primacy. If transcendentalism includes aspects of anthropocentrism even as it directs a passionate and spiritual fascination with the non-human world, then the development of American poetry of the twentieth century would shirk the former element while nurturing the latter.
Works Cited


Chapter Two: The Adoption of Anti-Anthropomorphism

I offer a framework for understanding the way Marianne Moore and Robinson Jeffers use animals, animal imagery, and animal-human comparisons in their poetry. This framework addresses both authors within the larger context of American poetry of the twentieth century. It operates according to a basic assumption that both American culture and American poetry, from their inceptions, adopt essentially anthropocentric perspectives as their defaults, but that the predominance of this perspective erodes over the course of the twentieth century as perspectives against anthropocentrism develop and gather attention. In this way, by the end of the century, anthropocentrism, while still strong, no longer occupies its place of dominance within American culture, and holds even less authority within American poetry. Looking at Marianne Moore and Robinson Jeffers from this framework, they are seen as anti-anthropocentric poets operating within an anthropocentric period of time in America, offering in their poetry perspectives counter to the dominant attitudes present in the American culture and American poetry of their time. Because positions against anthropocentrism become more and more popular later in the century, if more so in American poetry than in American culture at large, Moore and Jeffers can then be seen as influences on and precursors to the anti-anthropocentric poetry that follows them. This perspective would, in a small but significant way, recontextualize how Jeffers and Moore relate to the American poetic tradition at large, in that both of them are often seen as somewhat marginalized with respect to larger trends in American poetry. Scholars often view both poets as being “without acknowledged followers” (Duplessis, qtd. in Leavell 223), in both senses, as having neither like-minded contemporaries nor inheritors of their perspectives, which are commonly described as idiosyncratic, “puzzling . . . suspicious . . . strange . . . unique . . . distinctive” or “wild . . . original . . . solitary” (Untermeyer 348-9, 357-8). Furthermore,
examining the poetry of Jeffers and Moore from this framework allows for an appreciation of their work and its meaning that is often overlooked and underemphasized: the poetry of Jeffers and Moore not only broke new ground in furthering the progress of a set of ideas that had not yet developed in American culture or American poetry, but it reveals a very careful navigation of the presentation and rhetoric of those ideas, and a wary consideration of the fact that those ideas had little cachet at the time, and therefore required unconventional manners of delivery and uses of form, sometimes vigorously aggressive or defensive, but often acrobatic, cautious, and subtle. A comparative examination of their poetic contemporaries reveals the uniqueness of the position within which Jeffers and Moore found themselves in the first half of the twentieth century.

**Review of Critical Literature: Robinson Jeffers**

This framework for examining the poetry of Jeffers and Moore differs from the majority of the critical work already present on the two poets, and it offers extensions or variations on some positions on Jeffers and Moore already taken within literary criticism at present. Of course, much criticism on either poet focuses on topics obliquely relevant to the subject of anthropocentrism or animal-human comparisons and issues: gender issues, relationships to the movement of modernism, and experimentation with poetic forms for Moore, and, for Jeffers, topics of politics, psychology, religion, science, and violence. According to Robert Zaller, Jeffers “tried to work out the implications of a Darwinian world from a theistic perspective, just as in his narratives he sought to find a place for man in it” (118), and in general Zaller treats Jeffers’ attention to animality as subordinate to his search for divinity, whereas I seek to emphasize the overlap between the two. Still other works of criticism follow lines of argument parallel to mine, but relating to different issues. The current trend of examining the “ecopoetics”
of Moore, for instance, embodied in articles like those by Sharla Hutchison and Josh Weinstein in *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, casts Moore as an early environmentalist, analogous to the way I seek to cast her as an early critic of anthropocentrism. Jordan Green and Steve Kowit offer examinations of the infamous aspects of misanthropy and “inhumanism” present in Jeffers’ poetry that align almost exactly with my perspective, but they direct their examinations towards the larger ethical implications of his work, instead of focusing on the rhetorical aspects of his original comparisons between animals and humans. My framework would offer an expansion on work like Bryan Moore’s “Robinson Jeffers and the Tragedy of Anthropocentrism,” in which he likewise presents Jeffers’ poetry as an alternative to anthropocentric poetry.

Research on Robinson Jeffers, especially that of the last twenty years, very often takes up the subject of his attention to animals and animal-human connections and divisions, but almost always subordinates such study as supplemental to any of a number of topics to be treated as more essential: the politics of Jeffers’ poetry, its religious or spiritual elements, its aspects of violence, or, currently most popular, Jeffers’ ecopoetics and its indication of him as a forbearer of current environmentalist ideology. This trend in criticism emphasizes the anti-anthropocentrism present in Jeffers’ work to an extent equal to that of the focus of my work, but in doing so it takes only a macrocosmic perspective; it magnifies what Jeffers has to say about the earth’s flora and ignores what he has to say about the earth’s fauna. For instance, David Rothman, in his article “Robinson Jeffers, Environmental Consciousness, and the Poetics of Nature,” touches on this common premise of Jeffers’ pioneering anti-anthropocentrism: “Jeffers was the first poet – indeed, perhaps the first artist – to build his poetics on an accurate, precise understanding of the natural world as articulated in modern physics, astronomy, geology,
biology, and other disciplines. . . . the first to express the pure nonanthropocentric view of reality in art, the idea that, as he puts it in ‘Credo,’ ‘The beauty of things was born before eyes and sufficient to itself; the heart-breaking beauty / Will remain when there is no heart to break for it.’ This distinctly modern vision of the natural world finds its first artistically coherent representation in Jeffers, making the subsequent development of environmental writing possible” (234). I concur wholeheartedly with Rothman, and would only like to add that this vision Jeffers represented allowed for the development of more than only environmental thinking and writing.

This is not to say that animal imagery and animal-human comparisons in Jeffers’ oeuvre do not receive ample attention. In fact, along the way towards making separate, and in many cases larger, points, many scholars have already articulated assessments of Jeffers’ attention to animals that align very closely to my own, which often comes naturally in the course of examining specific poems, as we will see is the case within the body of criticism on Moore as well. For example, Albert Gelpi, in his discussion of the climax of Jeffers’ long poem Cawdor, touches directly on the concept at the heart of my interpretation of the ultimate prescriptive statement implicitly present in Jeffers’ poetry about how and in what context animals and humans should be perceived in relationship to each other:

“The death of the eagle at the end of the poem – justifiably one of the most famous and widely cited passages in Jeffers' work – presents another kind of participation in life and death. While men are ‘sieves of leaking desire,’ the poem instructs us, ‘the unsocial birds are a greater race.’ So much greater that Jeffers interrupts the climactic moment to wonder ‘How can I speak of you?’ Nevertheless, human hubris or not, Jeffers presses limited human comprehension and language to the task of imagining what might be
called the eagle's human consciousness, free of ego and undivided from the biological processes of nature” (16-17).

Gelpi builds from this observation towards an examination of the violent “catharsis” enacted through the eagle’s death and its relevance to Jeffers’ environmental, and cosmological or existential, perspectives, arguing that “the violence here is not human destructiveness but the convulsions of continuity and renewal in which death and life, indistinguishable, constitute the divinity of nature” (17). I find it very rewarding to stop short of that next step in Gelpi’s thinking and to elaborate on this observation about Jeffers’ implicitly valuative comparisons between animal consciousness and human consciousness. It is this premise that Jeffers constructs about animals and people that, when combined with those of Moore, begins a tradition of anti-anthropocentrism in American poetry that revaluates the relationship between humans and animals, and not only humans and nature or humans and their environment at large.

George Hart echoes Gelpi in his work Inventing the Language to Tell It: Robinson Jeffers and the Biology of Human Consciousness. In it he offers an assessment of Jeffers’ attitude towards the relationship between human perception and animal perception. In a section titled “Jeffers's Brains: Death and the Biology of Consciousness,” Hart, like Gelpi, examines Cawdor and other poems and arrives at a conclusion that overlaps with Gelpi’s. The narrator of “Eagle’s Death Dream,” for instance, compares “humanity's higher-order consciousness to the eagle's primary consciousness” (66). According to Hart,

Jeffers here imagines the primary consciousness of the eagle as both concentrated and released. In reconnecting with the life of the universe, primary consciousness rises to its power, as opposed to the leaking, exhausted consciousness of the dying human brain. . . .
The description of the eagle's death dream goes on for many lines – the desire, which can be referred to only as “it” or “this,” rises above the canyon and the coast, finally seeing all living beings from a God's-eye view (66-67).

Hart states that much of Jeffers’ poetry “deploys avian imagery in explaining human consciousness's inability to connect directly to nature” and implies that “humanity's higher-order consciousness, which allows it reflexively to know itself and thereby know the God of the world, is nonetheless corrupted by its higher-order status” (67). These observations ultimately serve Hart’s larger focus on what he sees as Jeffers commitment, through his poetry, to exploring the scientific problem of representing the biological basis of thought, perception, and consciousness. For Hart, Jeffers’ chosen stage for this exploration is the human effort to comprehend nature and God, and to that end Hart directs his argument towards matters of neuroscience, ecocriticism, environmental thought, and religious studies.

In this way Hart, like Gelpi, makes a statement about the relationship between animal consciousness and human consciousness, one which lies very close to the heart of my own focus, only to move on to other concepts perceived as separate or more important. Hart’s observations, however, can serve as the basis for examining Jeffers’ work from a different direction. In his discussion of Cawdor, Hart distills and expresses one of the essential aspects of Jeffers’ attitude towards representing animals and humans: “Jeffers uses these passages to put forward a theory of consciousness that locates human mind in the cells and distinguishes between higher-order consciousness, which is unstable and easily dissolved, and the primary consciousness of animals, which, represented by the bird of prey, is more direct and enduring” (64). Here Hart provides a concept about Jeffers’ work that can serve at least two purposes beyond his own. First, as I hope to establish, it creates a link between Jeffers and Marianne Moore, as Hart’s statement applies
almost as much to the latter as to the former, and touches on an area in which the two poets’
concepts about animal-human comparisons overlap. Second, it encapsulates a basic assumption
of Jeffers’ which he seeks to express and defend throughout his work, an assumption later taken
up and developed by his poetic descendants who follow along the lines of anti-anthropocentrism
that for the most part begin with Jeffers and Moore. This assumption, over the course of the
twentieth century, moves from being a minority perspective to being a dominant, even default,
perspective.

Incidentally, a letter written by Jeffers corroborates both Gelpi’s and Hart’s
interpretations of the implicit meanings about animals and humans present in *Cawdor*.
Postmarked January 19, 1929, and written to Arthur Davidson Ficke, a friend and fellow poet,
the letter responds to Ficke’s comments about *Cawdor*, and admits that

> When I first thought of the story I thought of it with three little towers on it, like this –
digressions from the story – the old man's death-dream, Hood's death-dream, the
eagle's. Why shouldn't a predatory animal, as simpler and more passionate though less
intelligent, have a more successful ghost, if any, than a pithecoid one? (Jeffers 787)

There is even a quick sketch in the margins of the letter, illustrating the “like this” in reference to
the three towers, with an ascending progression in height, the eagle’s tower overlooking the two
shorter ones. The adjectives describing the animal’s consciousness are telling: “simpler,” “more
passionate,” “less intelligent,” and “more successful,” and harmonize very much with the
sentiments present in Marianne Moore’s work about animal traits and values, when juxtaposed
with human ones.
If the symbols of the rock and the hawk are the two main leitmotifs of Jeffers’ poetry, then the current trend in criticism is to emphasize the former at the expense of the latter, whereas my choice of focus is the opposite. Robert Zaller’s *Robinson Jeffers and the American Sublime* (2012), which currently offers the most thorough examination of Jeffers’ oeuvre present in a single critical work, extends this trend. Placing Jeffers within the traditions of the American sublime (and even the “Puritan sublime” and “democratic sublime”), it deals with Jeffers’ engagement of Darwinian and Freudian thinking as an avenue towards his personal versions of cosmology and theism. Applied specifically, for example, to “Rock and Hawk” (a poem I will focus on later in the chapter), Zaller’s perspective admits that these two symbols serve as “the wedding of ‘fierce consciousness’ – the undiluted desire of the predator – with the ‘disinterestedness’ of the stone that represents pure endurance, the perfect silence of desire” (Zaller 126), yet privileges the symbol of the elements and environment over the animal symbol: “the cure . . . is immersion in the natural world, and particularly the ‘massive / Mysticism of stone.’ This is a recurrent theme in Jeffers – the insistent theme of all his work. . . . Stone remained Jeffers’ abiding element, and the one he most frequently identified himself with” (127, Zaller’s emphasis). Similarly, Hart’s *Inventing the Language to Tell It* casts Jeffers as acting as a precursor to Snyder by laying groundwork for anti-anthropocentrism in American poetry, but in ecological terms rather than animal-human terms, focusing on the environmental and sacramental aspects of Jeffers that established a development of nature poetry and attention towards mysticism, spirituality, and non-Christian religious thought. My work acknowledges the importance and validity of examining Jeffers and his poetic descendants along these lines, but simply adds Jeffers’ comparative focus on animality and humanity as of equal importance and validity.
Review of Critical Literature: Marianne Moore

Within the current body of criticism on Marianne Moore’s poetry, her uses of animals, animal imagery, and animal-human comparisons are very often looked at as borrowing from a tradition of fables and folk tales, within which the animals are used as emblems or representations, as symbolic figures for illustrating particular lessons, morals, or values. This line of thinking would explain the purpose of Moore’s anthropomorphisms, since the characters in these short stories are traditionally animals that act and talk just like people do. My framework for understanding Moore’s work accepts much of this thinking and extends certain aspects of it, but it rejects other aspects, or at least warns against accepting them as primary to the meaning in Moore’s use of animals in her work.

Grace Schulman, certainly the most important Moore critic to draw attention to Moore’s use of the fable genre, wonderfully outlines the original and complex ways in which Moore borrows from the fabulist tradition in Marianne Moore: The Poetry of Engagement. She sees Moore as having “revitalized the fable metaphor by presenting animals simultaneously as men and women, and by fusing the comic and serious aspects of the form” (Schulman 35), using it for a number of purposes, including “investigating social attitudes” (37). Many critics have since followed suit with Schulman. Patricia C. Willis says that “Moore's genius was to seize on the device of hidden, emblematic meanings and to apply it to lizards, mountains, rodents, and birds” (47). According to Elizabeth Gregory, in Moore’s poetry “the animal reference gestures toward the canny wisdom of folk tales, camouflaged in apparent simplicity” (213) and, according to Brian Kim Stefans, Moore’s intentions with animals are to “use them as analogues” (qtd. in Leavell 227). Even Bonnie Costello, despite taking a more qualified approach in her
examination of fables in Moore’s work, finds them to be reflections on the human, ultimately: “The impulse of the fable remains strong even as the accuracy of the natural historian fuels the imagination. Moore’s animals, while they are respected as unique beings, also display features and behaviours to be found, or sought, in the human world” (172). Looking at Moore’s poetry in this way casts her as having an essentially anthropocentric outlook.

Criticism that focuses on Moore’s use of the fable genre is very useful for examining the complexities and multiple meanings and contexts that Marianne Moore invokes in many of her poems, but it fails to explain the significant ways in which Moore deviates from the manner of the fable, and therefore misses an important, original aspect of Moore’s poetry and its orientation towards animals. Moore filled her animal poems with more than enough realistic details and concrete bits of information about the particular animals themselves to violate the typical conventions of the fable genre. Moore chose real animals as her subjects, not caricatures or cartoons. As will later be discussed in greater detail, Moore differed from the majority of her contemporaries in the manner of her allusiveness. While many of the high modernist poets poured a variety of literary references into their works, Moore’s references came at least as equally from “non-literary” sources, and these sources were often from the sciences, especially used to illuminate the biology or behavior of a poem’s animal subject. In fact, this attention to (and incorporation of) scientific content serves as another connection between Moore and Robinson Jeffers. In any event, the way that Moore invokes scientific texts provides her animal studies with an authenticity counter to those who share Schulman’s focus, as Pinsky does when he says that “the drama in Moore’s poems is not the drama of seeing an animal in a zoo or in the wild, but rather the drama of examining a photograph” (118). Moore certainly borrowed from the fabulist tradition in meaningful ways, but readers would do her work a disservice to forget
the “real toads” in her “imaginary gardens,” the aspects of realism, backed by scholarly scientific sources, that Moore uses with respect to the animals in her poetry.

Along the same lines, my focus on Moore’s work qualifies Schulman’s perspective on this issue, especially her reading of the larger meanings in Moore’s use of the fable, saying that “when a person appears in any of Marianne Moore’s early animal poems, she emphasizes the human being who observes, examines, remembers, and learns” (36). Schulman sees Moore’s poems as ultimately human-centered rather than animal-centered. Again, the majority of literary critics have gotten in line with Schulman here. “That Moore’s . . . animals are emblems of the self has long been recognized” (57), according to Alicia Ostriker, who goes on to cite Schulman on the issue. Richard Howard finds that Moore “had discovered in the world of creatures a vocabulary, a nomenclature of analogies, for herself. The trouble was that her poems were not really about animals – they were about the poet and about themselves, of course. She used this extraordinary manner of apparently exact description to render, in what we might call a zoophrasty or a zoophrasis, a world of suffused statement about herself” (2-3), and that her animal poems “were the confessions and acknowledgments of a compromised and vulnerable self” (3). Other critics follow this line of thinking forward into gender issues and issues of sexual orientation, playing the armchair psychologist for Marianne Moore the individual. Sandra Gilbert’s readings of many of Moore’s poems lead her to conclude, “it becomes plain that the animals through which she critiques culture are often female, like females, or associated with females” (41), and recent articles like Susan McCabe’s “Survival of the queerly fit: Darwin, Marianne Moore, and Elizabeth Bishop” and Benjamin Kahan’s “‘The viper's traffic-knot’: celibacy and queerness in the ‘late’ Marianne Moore” consider Moore’s animal poems to be her means of living out her sexuality vicariously through her animal subjects, or as manifestations of
Moore’s veiled personal wishes for the creation of sexual lifestyle options beyond the limited ones available during her own time. Schulman and her supporters are essentially correct here, but they miss a crucial and fundamental aspect of Moore’s animal poems: that they are honest attempts to describe, explain, study, and understand animals themselves, often in relationship to humans but sometimes by themselves alone. It must be concluded that in Schulman’s statement quoted above she paints with quite a broad brush, only because there are too many examples of Moore emphasizing the animal over the human, as will be examined later on.

Some critics already share my desire to amend or correct this view of Moore as essentially fabulist, and implicitly anthropocentric. Srikanth Reddy, in discussing Moore’s poem “The Pangolin,” complains that “in contravention of the poem's title, Moore's most rigorous and sympathetic interpreters have maintained over the years that ‘The Pangolin’ is not about a pangolin” (37), and outlines the dominant critical view of Moore as a classical fabulist, seen most visibly in Schulman:

One critical approach to reading this text construes religious grace as the author's true subject; Linda Leavell, for instance, writes that ‘the subject of the poem is not strictly the pangolin, but “grace”’ (Visual, 191), and Ann Struthers argues that ‘the major thrust of the poem is, indeed, toward the very point of defining “grace”’ (qtd. Willis, Moore, 130). Another common interpretation of ‘The Pangolin’ regards human nature as the actual subject of this text; Grace Schulman writes that ‘the true subject of the poem is man as a seeing being’ (qtd. Willis, Moore, 90), and Bernard Engel holds that ‘Moore's real subject is the nature of man’ (Marianne Moore, 78). To interpret a poem as employing animals as a pretext for exploring religious matters or human nature is to
classify it as an allegory or fable, yet such readings overlook what sets the pangolin apart from the sphere of the human (37-38).

Reddy warns against “fabulist ‘simpletons’ who misconstrue her anteater as a surrogate for man. Moore, a fastidious translator of La Fontaine, examined the uses of fable more closely than any other American poet in this century – yet critical interpretations of ‘The Pangolin’ have disregarded Moore's own refusal to consider this animal a living fable” (38). This is a recent rehabilitation of a perspective on Moore first established by Vivienne Koch as long ago as the middle of the twentieth century.

Koch had conceded that “Marianne Moore is in the tradition of the great fabulists, for her method is the method of discourse. The differential resides in her tone which is conversational, rather than as with the older fabulists rhetorical” (153, Koch’s emphasis), but adds the important qualification that Moore proceeds well beyond the scope of the fable genre by incorporating so many realistic and scientific elements. More than that, the larger meaning of Moore’s poems concerns the value and potential of humans contemplating, learning from, and interacting with real animals:

Always her quaint animals are meant to illuminate qualities and, unlike the fabulists’ practice, they are not necessarily human ones. In the oriental fable or in those of La Fontaine, one does not find the animals acting themselves out, as do Miss Moore's, to give us knowledge of humanity; instead, the fabulist endows the animal with human traits and attributes. With Miss Moore the animals as animals count for just as much as the humans they may eventually inform. In Marianne Moore's exotic cosmology it is always a real elephant, a real dragon, and a real man (if there is a man at all in her oddly-
denuded-of-humans domain). Once we have seen them clearly, the points at which their respective spheres of conduct touch are, as it were, lit up. We see the elephant as (not is) man; the man as (not is) elephant. Qualities are reciprocal, mutually illuminating, and serve to adumbrate a huge transcendental correspondence of eidolons in a pantheistic, Emersonian sense. In the end, it is not only people we understand better, but animals too. (154-155, Koch’s emphases)

Here Koch contests what has since become the common assumption that Moore’s poems are ultimately about humans and human perception, and only about animals to a secondary degree because, after all, they are the work of a poet who composed her work about animals that she had read about but only seen in zoos, if at all. This dynamic within Moore criticism resonates with that within Jeffers criticism: study of their work treats their attention to and meditation on animals as a lens through which to examine some greater concept or idea, ignoring or minimizing the possibility that the greater concept might be the very lens, or at least what is mistaken to be the lens, itself.

Randy Malamud echoes this sentiment, identifying weaknesses or problems of the dominant trend in Moore criticism, arguing that within it “some scholars acknowledge the presence of the animals and the keen poetic attention paid to them, but believe that the poem more fundamentally concerns human cultural and intellectual attitudes and that the animals serve merely as a metaphoric vehicle” (102, Malamud’s emphasis). As an example, Malamud chooses a target already cited above by Reddy: “Linda Leavell suggests that Moore, in her early poetry, ‘adopt[ed] animals as subjects instead of persons’ so that ‘the moral critic could go disguised as animal lover’ (155)” (102). Malamud’s objection to this perspective follows a line of thinking very similar to that used by Koch now so long ago:
Such an argument misses the point that Moore posits so fiercely throughout her canon: animals and people are inextricably, for better or worse, connected with each other. Animals pervade our culture, and we cannot write about ourselves without including them, inviting them into our poesis, which is exactly what Moore does so enthusiastically. She doesn’t use animals as fronts or disguises or symbols for other, more important things; they \textit{are} the important things.” (102-3, Koch’s emphasis)

This not only holds true for Moore, but for Robinson Jeffers as well. Considering the two of them as independently discovering positions of anti-anthropocentrism which greatly overlap will open up the possibility of tracing a lineage of the development of this position that progresses and amplifies gradually over the course of the twentieth century in American poetry beginning, at least for the most part, with Jeffers and Moore.

\textbf{Jeffers and Moore: Anti-Anthropocentrism Activates}

\textbf{Moore}

In one of Marianne Moore’s first published poems, “Diligence Is to Magic as Progress Is to Flight,” a woman is faced with a choice between two forms of transportation: either by elephant or by flying carpet. Flying carpets might serve the imagination (“the semblance of speed” \textit{[6]}) but, for the purpose of a voyage, an elephant would operate much more pragmatically:

So far as magic carpets are concerned, she knows that although the semblance of speed may attach to scarecrows of aesthetic procedure, the substance of it is embodied in such of those tough-grained animals as have outstripped man’s whim to suppose
them ephemera, and have earned that fruit of their ability to endure blows
which dubs them prosaic necessities—not curios. (5-10)

Here Moore makes a number of implicit statements, but among them is an essential prescription:
despite their tendency to be disregarded or underappreciated, animals offer important use, and
even means towards greater knowledge and understanding. Animals can be vehicles, and not
only in the literal sense. The poet is embodied in the poem by the female traveler, but is
represented to an even greater extent by the “tough-grained” elephant species that defies and
survives the trivializing “blows” of man, the voices that say “You are less than me,” “You are
perhaps comical and interesting, but not important,” or “You are ugly, something to be used and
discarded.” Moore speaks very directly towards the value of animals that resists humanity’s
dismissive perception of them, but the poem also corresponds to Moore’s worries of how her
poetry will be received and perceived. Moore is more than the female traveler here. Moore is
the elephant, and can offer what the elephant can offer. The elephant’s speed and her poetic
aptitude are analogous; like the elephant, the poem rushes forward through enjambed lines until
it concludes with the booming dismount of “not curios,” set up by the dash. Yet Moore is also
the elephant in that she is similarly open to attack and derision. The harassment of the elephants
that the poem portrays may very well represent Moore’s expectation of the critical reception of
Observations that would indeed characterize her as a “curio,” as something ornamental and
idiosyncratic, which is communicated through the double meaning of “prosaic” (both “like
prose” and “lacking poetic beauty”). Here Moore parallels Robinson Jeffers in her painful
awareness of how likely it was that her work would often be attacked and misunderstood, looked
at as awkward and freakish. Both poets would take careful rhetorical measures in anticipation of
their critics, inserting answers to the expected objections. Moore aligns herself with the
elephants in their confident assertions of identity: they both have abilities outside of their outlandish appearances and they share in common a toughness of skin, the capacity to shield themselves from outside pressure and from critics’ insensitivities, mischaracterizations, and lack of recognition. They are “prosaic necessities – not curios.”

Not only did Moore’s prophecy come true about many of her misunderstanding critics dealing her blows but, ironically, many of her most appreciative critics would misunderstand Moore’s focus on real animals and their relationships to humans, perceiving them to be strictly fabulist or metaphorical or stepping stones to a greater philosophical treatment of an abstract concept or value. After all, “Diligence Is to Magic” is also a poem that celebrates the vast potential for enrichment that can be gleaned from a reverent cooperation with real-life animals. Indeed, the analogy between Moore’s poetic trajectory and the laborious elephant’s journey would ring true, as time and again Moore would return to this leitmotif of animals’ potential to elicit precious and useful insights humans could not arrive at alone. They take a number of different forms and offer different lessons and values each time. In “Baseball and Writing,” they bring up qualities of observation, “Owlman watching from the press box” (10), and qualities of action, “with cruel / puma paw, Elston Howard lumbers lightly / back to plate. (His spring / de-winged a bat swing.)” (14-17), and even cosmology, “O flashing Orion, / your stars are muscled like the lion” (84-85), although the last is actually a small tongue-in-cheek satire of the human tendency towards anthropomorphism, in this case its breadth reaching as high as the stars and across the cosmos. Her animal-human comparisons can take turns for the cleverly nonsensical, as in “letters are written / not in Spanish, not in Greek, not in Latin, not in shorthand / but in plain American which cats and dogs can read!” of the poem “England,” a cute observation that borders on the cartoonish but jokingly pokes at the divisiveness of nationalism, a ridiculousness
to which animals have yet to stoop. Yet Moore’s animal-human comparisons can also follow
careful, strange, syllogistic lines of reasoning, as in the analogies posited in “The Mind Is an
Enchanting Thing,” which describes the mind

like the glaze on a
katydid-wing

subdivided by sun
till the nettings are legion.
Like Gieseking playing Scarlatti;

like the apteryx-awl

as a beak, or the
kiwi's rain-shawl

of haired feathers, the mind
feeling its way as though blind,
walks with its eyes on the ground.

It has memory's ear

that can hear without
having to hear. (2-15)

In myriad ways, Moore compares humans to animals in ways that flatter humans, as if humans
should be lucky to receive the comparison, and she does so during a time when animal-human
comparisons were (and usually still are) quite usually anything but flattering. In “Dock Rats,”
one of the very few poems (I count only two) in which Moore takes the audacious step past
simple observation of animals and attempts to speak directly from an animal’s perspective, she
opens with the lines “There are human beings who seem to regard the place / as craftily as we do
— who seem to feel that it is a / good place to come home to” (1-3). The current trend of
ecocriticism would quite correctly emphasize Moore’s implicit argument for a greater
appreciation of and reverence for our environment and the Earth, but a reader of Moore should
never forget that one can arrive at that argument, as Moore arrives at most of her arguments, only
through a close observation of animals, a consideration of animals’ perspectives, and a careful
meditation on the relationships between animals and humans.

In the poem “Poetry,” Moore offers her manifesto for what makes poetry authentic. She
champions a certain type of functionality, genuineness, and usefulness in poetry, achieved
through a balanced combination of imagination and reality. Time and again in the poem,
however, she illustrates her argument with examples of animals. By the time the poem reaches
its oft-quoted phrase, naming poetry’s results as “‘imaginary gardens with real toads in them’”
(24) in the last stanza, it applies just as much to a philosophy of animal-human relationships as to
a philosophy of poetry. If poetry harnesses a mutual relationship between imagination and
reality in order to reach a deeper appreciation or understanding of some misunderstood or
underappreciated subject, to recover the importance of something discarded or underestimated,
or to give attention to a subject deserving of more attention than it has gotten, then “Poetry”
seems to imply that poets need look no further than our neighboring species for exemplars of
such conditions.
In the first half of the poem two lists of examples and images are presented, one that moves from the human to the animal and another that moves gradually back from the animal to the human. The first list immediately follows the lines “one discovers in / it [poetry] after all, a place for the genuine” (2-3), as if to imply that the list will now present examples of “the genuine” substance of poetry. “Hands that can grasp, eyes / that can dilate, hair that can rise / if it must” (4-6) moves from hands, body parts thought of as particularly human (although perhaps already the list begins in a gray area within the assumed animal-human continuum: depending on definition, hands could belong only to primates, but other mammals [for instance, raccoons, who have opposable thumbs], and even amphibians and reptiles [real toads!], have terminal parts of their limbs that certainly “can grasp”), to eyes, not exclusively human by any means, to hair, which, although not described as fur, “can rise if it must” (5-6), an action associated much more with the fur of animals than with the hair of humans. In any case, Moore’s first examples of “the genuine” as found in poetry apply vaguely to both animals and humans. More importantly, these examples begin Moore’s argument about poetry in that they “are important not because a / high-sounding interpretation can be put upon them but because they are / useful” (6-8). Moore would agree with William Carlos Williams that poems should be functional but, for Moore, poems, rather than operating like “machines made out of words,” should consist of working body parts the way that humans (and animals!) do.

The second list serves another element of Moore’s argument in “Poetry” about poetry: it should not only be useful, but it should advance understanding, particularly of things difficult or impossible to fully understand, and should therefore include any and all useful experience and not “discriminate against ‘business documents and / school-books’; all these phenomena are important” (17-18). Introduced as a list of “what / we cannot understand” (10-11), but also as a
list of “they” (8), the substances or subjects of poetry, an extension of the earlier list of “the genuine” in lines 4 and 5, this list begins with a string of animals, as if animals are particularly appropriate examples of what we cannot understand, but halfway through switches from animal examples to human ones:

we cannot understand: the bat

holding on upside down or in quest of something to
eat, elephants pushing, a wild horse taking a roll, a tireless wolf under

a tree, the immovable critic twitching his skin like a horse that feels a flea, the
televising sports fan, the statistician (11-15).

By presenting much of the poem up to this point in the non-hierarchical form of catalogues or lists, Moore makes certain implicit statements. First, she implies that our understanding of humanity and human behavior is no less limited than our understanding of animality and animal behavior, which means, among other things, that humans provide no less a mysterious subject for art than animals do. Second, she implies that animals and humans are equally worthy of attention, particularly artistic, imaginative, and poetic attention. Finally, she implies that understanding of one subject corresponds to an understanding of the other, that the animal-human similarity runs so deep that even the civilized, complex, and cultured activity of criticism (presumably artistic or literary), reserved only for humans and securely removed, supposedly, from the animal kingdom, actually bears at its essence the instinctive physical reaction of a horse feeling a flea on its skin. If Moore warns humans, and artists in particular, not to neglect the importance and value of animals any more than that of “business documents and school-
books,’’ it is not only because they make for excellent subjects of art, but because they offer a special means of perceiving the human condition.

In the poem’s fourth and fifth stanza, Moore turns attention away from what poetry is and what it can do towards how to create it in the first place. The promise of those imaginary gardens with those real toads can only be delivered once “the poets among us can be / ‘literalists of / the imagination’ – above / insolence and triviality and can present / for inspection” such gardens (20-24). These final stanzas of the poem, however, describe only the potential, not the actual. The language of them never leaves the conditional tense: “One must” (18), “nor till” and “can be” (20), “can present” (23), “shall we” (24), and “if you demand” (25). Earlier in the poem, the second stanza and its introduction of that important list does not just tell us that we do not understand the elements of the list; it tells us that “we cannot understand” (11). The imaginary gardens have not yet been created. This sobering caveat applies just as much to the theme of animals as to the theme of poetry: just as an achievement of this ideal poetry that Moore describes may be impossible, so may a full and true perception and understanding of animals be impossible. Even while “Poetry” highlights essential similarities between animals and humans, and emphasizes the value of attempting to understand animals, it warns readers of just how presumptuous it would be to think that one fully understands them. Unlike the presentation of animals in the poetry of, say, D.H. Lawrence, no assumed knowledge of any deep psychology exists about Moore’s animals and, as there is no possibility of fully and truly adopting or understanding an animal’s perception and perspective, there is no potential to merge with them or to participate with them or to share in their energy. Moore stops short of "getting in touch with your animal side,” although she certainly gestures towards the existence of such an "animal side.”
In fact, in “Poetry” Moore explicitly (yet very discreetly) crosses swords with a number of important figures on the topic of poetry. Her resolution not to “discriminate against ‘business documents and / school-books’” (17-18) uses Tolstoy’s own words against him: Moore herself provides a footnote to the poem quoting Tolstoy’s conclusion that “poetry is everything with the exception of business documents and school books.” She likewise takes sides against Yeats (and with Blake) in declaring the need for poets to be “literalists of the imagination,” a term Yeats uses pejoratively in describing Blake’s imaginative excess (which Moore cites just as carefully as she does with Tolstoy). An implicit disagreement with Williams is already mentioned above, and in a similar sense Moore’s “Poetry” offers a critique of some of Eliot’s convictions about poetry.

At heart, Eliot and Moore find themselves in agreement more often than in disagreement. Both were earnest fans of each other’s work, both were anglophiles, and within the world of poetry they very often shared similar opinions and employed similar styles and techniques. Many formal aspects of “Poetry” would merit the approval of most fans of Eliot’s essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent”: it shares Eliot’s emphasis on observation and on scientific precision (much of the language of “Poetry” is in the proper third person passive voice used in documenting science experiments). On balancing imagination with reality, it follows Eliot’s advice of relegating passion and personality to the background, and it shares Eliot’s penchant for allusions. One of the main points in “Poetry,” however, is that the material of poetry should just as likely come from common, “low,” and unliterary authorities as from the “high” canonical ones preferred by Eliot. “Poetry” uses a conversational tone throughout, often keeping a short distance between speaker and reader (with several direct addresses and even using the second person twice in the final stanza), and positions itself against difficulty, obscurity, and confusion.
in poetry by objecting to “high-sounding interpretation” (7) and that which makes poetry “become unintelligible” (8). Just as Moore’s reclamation of discarded, misunderstood, and underappreciated sources for poetry corresponds to her emphasis on the honor and importance of animals, so the disagreement of these two authors about the substance and texture of good poetry parallels the opposing orientations towards animals in their poetry, to be discussed later in the chapter.

Moore’s other poems, like “An Octopus,” one of the longest poems in her oeuvre, find strikingly different means of counterpointing animal value and human value in ways that continue her theme of reclaiming useful concepts from the neglected world of animals. It begins with a comparison that will sustain the majority of the poem, between the animal of the octopus and the similarly shaped glacier surrounding Mount Rainier, with its “clearly defined pseudopodia / made of glass that will bend – a much needed invention” (4-5). Pseudopodia is the scientific word for “tentacle,” and so it applies to the octopus, but it also refers to the tendril-like protrusion of the cytoplasm of an amoeba, used for locomotion or food-gathering, and so Moore uses it to compare a utility of the basest of life-forms to the not-yet-realized potential ingenuity of humans. Here, with a comparison reaching towards both extremes of the evolutionary spectrum, Moore implicitly states that animals provide a “much needed” model for human development, even in the specifically human terms of science and technology. Later, as another reminder and warning for humanity to be humble, Moore includes the lines “Completing a circle, / you have been deceived into thinking that you have progressed” (23-4). Continuing with a tone that echoes Jeffers’ spirit of “Inhumanism,” the poem also describes a particular lake as a “lady-fingerlike depression in the shape of the left human foot, / which prejudices you in favor of itself / before you have had time to see the others” (31-33), warning of the inaccuracies of judgment
that come from the human tendency to see itself reflected in animals and nature. When humans’ capacities are measure against animals’, Moore lists the complicated processes of which animals are capable, including those “of thoughtful beavers / making drains which seem the work of careful men with shovels” (45-6), subtly implying that, in many regards, animal resourcefulness without tools easily matches that of humans, even granted their tools. Another list “of a diversity of creatures” of which “Big Snow Mountain is the home” (75) mentions countless animals, but only after beginning with the hiking tourists, mountain guides and trappers, presented in the style of National Geographic “nature habitat” descriptions: “those who ‘have lived in hotels / but who now live in camps” (76-7). At the end of the list, Moore sarcastically inserts the quoted line “‘They make a nice appearance, don’t they’” (with Moore’s own footnote indicating that the line is from something “overheard at the circus”), followed directly by the indictment “happy seeing nothing” (92-93), which refers pejoratively to the circus-goers even as it refers to the knowing, yet deceptively tranquil, perception of the animals mentioned in the preceding list. Moore’s note calls to mind the circus as a sordid counterpart to the majestic scene of Mount Rainier, a base place where animals are trained and transformed into a spectacle with the purpose of affirming the anthropocentric view of animals as, at their best, amusingly imperfect versions of the human. Moore’s juxtaposition ridicules this limited perception of animals, but expertly does so in as little space as possible, only two lines and a note, which serves a double purpose: it allows her criticism to work by implication rather than by direct rhetoric (much the way Jeffers exercises wariness of being too bombastic in one’s defense of animality), but it also refuses to dignify the anthropocentric perspective by denying it (in fact, denying even its mention in counterargument) any prominence in the poem, as if “An Octopus” cannot be too concerned with it, even with a
counterargument against its ignorance, for more than a short mention in a few words, since it has a much more engaging and important topic to which the lives in its habitat belong.

One last example from “An Octopus” has double significance to my argument. Not only does it show Moore using animal-human comparisons to undermine the hierarchizing of human over animal, but it demonstrates a connection between Moore’s anti-anthropocentrism and the more developed and matured anti-anthropocentrism of the very late 20th century. Championing animal qualities and criticizing human foibles, the blue-jay is “secretive, with a look of wisdom and distinction” (155) but “knows no Greek, / ‘that pride producing language’” (157-8), defending and supporting pre-lingual understanding and merits. Moore inserts a surprising line of logic concerning the animal-human connections’ effect on human ability and happiness:

The Greeks . . .

ascribing what we clumsily call happiness,

to ‘an accident or a quality,
a spiritual substance or the soul itself,
an act, a disposition, or a habit,
or a habit infused to which the soul has been persuaded,
or something distinct from a habit, a power –’
such power as Adam had and we are still devoid of (174, 179-185).

On a side note, Adam, and Eve, for that matter, become subjects for a surprising number of poems in the late part of the 20th century. They represent for recent American poets what they represent here for Moore: the ability to communicate and directly connect with animals and,
according to the Bible, the ability to properly identify them by their original names, to perceive
them wholly.

Along the same lines, Moore in her poetry often reminds humanity that it has lost some
of its sense of immediate community with animals, and its means of perception of animals,
supposedly present in ancient or biblical or pre-civilized times. In the middle stanza of her poem
“The Pangolin,” she interrupts a long commentary on the artfulness and usefulness of the
anteater’s behaviors and physical traits to add that the anteater is an animal “which simpletons
thought a living fable / whom the stones had nourished, whereas ants had done / so” (49-51).
Humans display a tendency to view animals through a distorted, fantastic lens: if they are not
seen as versions or perversions of the human, then they are often seen as creatures of magic.
Moore attempts to rehabilitate (or at least undermine or criticize) that perspective of animals by
describing humans in animal terms, rather than the other way around. For the final three stanzas
of the poem, the pangolin all but disappears, and Moore’s focus turns from the anteater to the
human, as if to compare the two, sometimes directly, usually implicitly. Calling to mind the
comparisons between the resourcefulness of animals and that of humans that begins “An
Octopus,” Moore lists examples of man “needing to choose wisely how to use the strength” (71):

  a paper-maker like the wasp; a tractor of food-stuffs,

  like the ant; spidering a length

  of web from bluffs

  above a stream; in fighting, mechanicked

  like the pangolin; capsizing in

  disheartenment (72-7).
Man’s ingenuity at its finest is animal-like. Here Moore makes a small self-reference, to an animal-human comparison in the first stanza of the poem that concerns the theme of invention, but goes in the direction of the human from the animal, again reversing the typical course.

Rather than comparing human inventions to animal behavior, Moore describes the anteater as “Leonardo da Vinci’s replica” (6), and also as “keeping / the fragile grace of the Thomas- / of-Leighton Buzzard Westminster Abbey wrought-iron vine” (22-4). In both cases Moore compliments her subjects, first animal and then human, first by implying that the anteater is anatomically constructed the way da Vinci would have intended (even with its “tail, graceful tool, as prop or hand or broom or axe” [46]), then by likening human creativity to that of particular animals. For Moore, animals and humans, when they display their best or most admirable qualities, share common inspirations, resemble each other, and even (or, at least, often) come from the same “formula – warm blood, no gills, two pairs of hands and a few hairs – that / is a mammal; there he sits in his own habitat, / serge-clad, strong-shod” (91-3). Yet, perhaps the poem’s simplest, most explicit statement about animals and humans in relation to each other includes a very Jeffers-like admonition of the human: “Sun and moon and day and night and man and beast / each with a splendor / which man in all his vileness cannot / set aside; each with an excellence!” (30-3). Moore cannot help but chide as “vile” anyone who would deny a “beast” (or, for that matter, “sun,” “moon,” “day,” “night,” or “man”) its “splendor,” just as she ridicules the “simpletons” who imagine animals as so foreign from humans that they work through magic, but these harsh tones are only momentary blips, and they have immediate contexts of celebration, even of adoration, which Jeffers almost always denies humanity but which Moore grants to animality and humanity alike. For Moore, humanity may have its “vileness,” but its vileness does not compromise the “splendor” and the “excellence” of nature.
and nature’s creatures. Humanity being part of nature’s creatures, therefore, its vileness is exceeded by its own splendor and excellence (although celebrating it is inextricably tied with celebrating nature itself and with celebrating nature’s other, no less noble creatures). As Linda Leavell points out, "by the end of the poem, pangolin and human become conflated in the pronoun he" (290, Leavell’s emphasis). Where Jeffers seeks to purge humanity of its unnaturalness and of its deviation from the integrity and vitality of its animal nature, Moore seeks to celebrate the positive qualities animals and humans still share.

Jeffers

Although Jeffers shares Marianne Moore’s estimation of animals and her emphasis on their poetic value, he prefers to stress communion, connection, and contact with animals, more in the spirit of Lawrence, as opposed to Moore’s stately focus on observation, perception, and contemplation of (and learning through) them. At times, however, Jeffers resembles Moore very closely in his examination of the animal kingdom for lessons and values to be extracted for the assistance, guidance, or correction of mankind. Although Jeffers certainly anthropomorphizes animals (although always from a positive, qualified attitude of reverence for animals rather than a subordination of them to human aspects) as in “Divinely Superfluous Beauty,” which begins “The storm-dances of gulls, the barking game of seals” (1), he very carefully draws a line past which anthropomorphism should not cross, and even criticizes the shallow foolishness of assuming that animals simply possess a diminished version of human values. In “Joy,” Jeffers emphatically corrects the naïve idea that animals might share the tendency many humans have towards living according to a set of criteria for “happiness”:
Though joy is better than sorrow joy is not great;
Peace is great, strength is great.
Not for joy the stars burn, not for joy the vulture
Spreads her gray sails in the air (1-4).

The poem even ends with a direct counterargument addressed towards those who “seek joy” (8) above all else in their lives, accusing them of “The weakness of your breed: yet at length quietness / Will cover those wistful eyes” (9-10). The lowering of humanity to “breed” here, or “species,” even while in this context it is couched within a reprimand, does not contain the denigration or embarrassment one might expect, which is one of the crucial elements that sets Jeffers apart from his poetic peers. When Jeffers engages concepts of Darwinism in his poetry, he does so without the anxiety, discomfiture, or humiliation present in, say, Eliot or Frost. Without any trace of the shame-filled tones of disgust with which Eliot presents Apeneck Sweeney or Frost presents the disgraceful human owner of “a paw” in “The Subverted Flower,” Jeffers refers to humans as “the two-footed / Mammal” (15-16) in “November Surf.” In “Night Without Sleep” he describes the period of transition in the evolution of humans from primates as “when the ape’s children first ran in packs, chipped flint to an edge” (3). He does so matter-of-factly, and even welcomes the Darwinian concepts of man being “descended” from animals as something that should be taken by humans as a compliment or a badge of honor, rather than repudiated the way a nobleman might brush away accusations after having recently discovered some disreputable ancestry.

In his poem “Fawn’s Foster-Mother,” the speaker, seeing an old woman arguing with her daughter, remembers the woman telling him a story of how once, while a young mother, she
nursed an abandoned fawn with her own breast. As in Moore’s “Poetry,” Jeffers presents human-animal interaction (although in this case direct, physical interaction rather than through imagination) as potentially leading to peak experiences: not only does the woman admit that she “had more joy from that [fawn] than from the others [her children]” (16), but the poem closes with the speaker’s perception of her as having momentarily shared in the larger life force, merging with nature through intimacy with an animal, saying “I see that once in her spring she lived in the streaming arteries, / The stir of the world, the music of the mountain” (21-2). By using the phrase “her spring” to express the old woman’s youth (although not a very uncommon expression) Jeffers refigures her as a planet with seasons: she is the Earth and her youth was her spring. Describing the old woman as a planet completes an arc begun in the four previous lines. When emphasizing her old age, Jeffers describes her, long removed from that peak experience of nursing a fawn, in terms of civilization rather than terms of nature: “Her face is deformed with age, furrowed like a bad road / With market-wagons, mean cares and decay” (17-18). As is the case here, Jeffers’ descriptions reveal the misanthropy characteristic of his poetry. Comparisons to civilization and humans appear in negative terms, comparisons to animals and nature in positive terms. Here, there is an important transition between these two descriptions, one negative and one positive, of the old woman. Jeffers uses the human body as a metaphor for the Earth, artfully setting up the description of the old woman as a planet (as paradoxically both a planet herself and as fully integrated with the planet Earth) that ends the poem: “She is thrown up to the surface of things, a cell of dry skin / Soon to be shed from the earth’s old eyebrows” (19-20). In the span of only four lines, the perspective on this old woman changes drastically, a complete inversion, from being world-encompassing to world-encompassed, as one moment she is likened to a flake, whereas in the previous moment she was likened to an entire world.
“Fawn’s Foster-Mother” transforms a small moment of intimacy between a human and an animal into a stage on which a cosmic merging of humanity with nature is enacted.

The radicalism of Jeffers’ representations of animals reaches far past simply celebrating the positive potential of animal-human communion and interactions. Much more than assume the stance of a kind of animal apologist hoping to claim a measure of dignity for animals in comparison to humans, Jeffers elevates the distinction and significance of animals well beyond that of the human. Many of his poems reverse the anthropocentrism of his day, often for effect but always with full sincerity. “Hurt Hawks,” for example, adopts a perspective in direct opposition to that of, say, Eliot’s poetry, within which human nature, if placed along a continuum between perfection and imperfection, between the holy and the infernal, belongs well above the animal:

The wild God of the world is sometimes merciful to those
That ask mercy, not often to the arrogant.
You do not know him, you communal people, or you have forgotten him;
Intemperate and savage, the hawk remembers him;
Beautiful and wild, the hawks, and men that are dying, remember him. (13-17)

Here Jeffers sets up binary oppositions but switches which terms are privileged: the terms “wild,” “intemperate,” and “savage” apply to God, or knowing or remembering God, and the term “communal” here implies an absence of a knowledge of God, directly opposing the Christian New Testament sentiments of “wherever two or three have gathered together in My name, I am there in their midst.” The linguistic context exaggerates “communal” as negative: it appears in the context of a rebuke in the style of the Old Testament, with the word “communal”
located where a more traditionally unholy adjective would usually be placed, and the repeated “you” emphasizes a tone of accusation. At this particular moment in the poem, “Hurt Hawks” parallels the rhetoric of “Fawn’s Foster-Mother”: both concede the possibility of a formerly unspoiled contact with God or nature, but offer only the possibility of lamenting it or reminiscing about it at present. Line 15 of “Hurt Hawks” implies that, perhaps even worse than never having known God in the first place, people have possibly known in the past and yet forgotten God through arrogance and pride. Although any given human may have once possessed the holy qualities of wildness, intemperance, and savageness that encourage immediate connection with God, becoming “communal,” and embracing the interferences of social roles and manmade rules, has eroded such a connection.

The second stanza of the poem begins with a harsh manifestation of this reversal of the animal-human hierarchy, a caveat qualifying the speaker’s mercy killing of the wounded hawk that plainly confesses: “I’d sooner, except the penalties, kill a man than a hawk” (18). It concludes, however, with a solemn supervision of the hawk passing on into its afterlife in such a way that it merits comparison to animal tropes serving as sites for meditations on the afterlife in Frost’s “After Apple-Picking” and Eliot’s Old Possum’s Book of Practical Cats. Unlike Eliot and Frost, however, Jeffers presents the hawk’s death without any meditation on or reference to human death, or even the afterlife proper. Perhaps the only comparison to classical conceptions of death and the hereafter come in the final sentence’s contrast between “falling” and “soaring,” but even this device, while perhaps evoking the model of death and resurrection, operates much more closely in association with terms of flight appropriate to a bird of prey: “What fell was relaxed, / Owl-downy, soft feminine feathers; but what / Soared: the fierce rush: the night-herons by the flooded river cried fear at its rising / Before it was quite unsheathed from reality” (24-7).
The comparison of the hawk’s spirit to a sword implies energy, honor, passion, and strength at least as much as it does violence, and perhaps even more significant is the comparison of reality to a sheath, a scabbard, a mere container or covering, a cocoon, or an encumbrance to be shed, perhaps in implicit association with the community, referred to in the first stanza, holding its people within reality in a way that makes them forget God. Both “Fawn’s Foster-Mother” and “Hurt Hawks” stage meditations within scenes of animal caretaking: they champion a spirit of stewardship, but, rather than one predicated on obligation due to humanity’s superiority to animals and nature, one that comes from a sense of reverence for something that in some way surpasses the human. Reverent meditations on animals occur in various forms within American poetry, but Jeffers offers some of the earliest examples of such meditations occurring free from any subordinated comparisons to humans, demonstrating the possibility of such a topic being explored on its own, without any added anthropocentric contexts.

In fact, many of Jeffers’ poems devoted to animals seem to go out of their way to emphasize the absence of any human comparisons, giving the reader definitions by negation, statements of what an animal or a natural phenomenon is not (or is not “like”), as if needing to correct some fixation with the human, or some general consensus that humankind serves as the only genuine measuring stick of significance. The majority of American poetry written in the early twentieth century that happens to deal with the differences between animals and humans emphasizes those differences in a manner that favors the human as above the animal, characterizing the animal as lacking and the human as deserving reverence. Poets writing at this time who sought to reclaim some of that reverence for animals could do so in one of two ways: either by emphasizing the often overlooked similarities and shared experiences between animals and humans or by emphasizing the differences in a way that highlighted the favorable qualities
of the animal. Jeffers prefers the second method, maintaining a type of misanthropy that sees human nature not as a condition worth celebrating (or even tolerating) but merely as a starting point towards something nobler. Not long before writing poems like “Fawn’s Foster-Mother” and “Hurt Hawks,” he writes, in the long poem *Roan Stallion*, that “Humanity is the mould to break away from, the crust to break through, the coal to break into fire, / The atom to be split,” and the vitality he sees in animals and in nature can serve as inspirations for such a transcendence.

Another poem with his favorite animal as its subject, “Rock and Hawk” epitomizes Jeffers’ aspiration to shift the center of attention and admiration away from the human and towards the animal and the natural. A very directly argumentative poem even for Jeffers, it presents the dual symbols of its title and makes the case for them as deserving of meditation and reverence: the first three stanzas present the image of the rock and combine it with the perched falcon. However, exactly at the poem’s midpoint, as if momentarily coming out of a trance and seeing a need to communicate the seriousness involved, the speaker, for the remainder of the poem, implores the reader to leave the religious and social compasses of humanity at the door in order to give the symbol at hand its due respect:

I think, here is your emblem
To hang in the future sky;
Not the cross, not the hive,
But this; bright power, dark peace;
Fierce consciousness joined with final
Disinterestedness;
Life with calm death; the falcon’s
Realist eyes and act
Married to the massive
Mysticism of stone,
Which failure cannot cast down
Nor success make proud. (10-21)

Jeffers presents rock and falcon as a gesture towards a design that operates beyond ideas of religious or social order (“the cross” or “the hive”) superficially imposed by humans, completely disinterested in the human illusions of “failure” or “success.” These terms always have negative markers for accompaniment: “cross” and “hive” each get their own “not” (12) and “failure” and “success” are escorted by words like “cannot,” “down,” and “nor” (20-21). Every negating term of the poem, save one in line 6, occurs within these two very short spaces: the rest of the poem is very affirmative and positive when focused squarely on the emblem itself (rather than on defining what the emblem contrasts), communicating confidence (“calm” [16] and “bright power” [13]), energy (“earthquake-proved” [7] and “fierce” [14]), and union (“joined” [14] and “married” [18]). It is as if the poem invites its readers into an act of adoration, but then must periodically remind its participants of the necessity to purge themselves of contaminated points of reference or ways of perceiving and thinking. American poets writing later in the century, perhaps in part thanks to Jeffers, will have the luxury of choosing to address animal-human comparisons and relationships similar to the way Jeffers and Moore do without as strong a necessity to correct or negate as predominant an anthropocentrism. Sentiments like Jeffers’ and Moore’s can be expressed to an American audience of the 1960s or 70s with much less guardedness and even less of a spirit of rebellion than to an audience of the 1920s or 30s. By
then positions against anthropocentrism will appear less revolutionary, and some poets will even be able to assume that many audiences already share such a position.

In fact, as Robinson Jeffers lived until 1962, some of his last poems actually fulfill these later conditions. Whether or not Jeffers was aware of the trend against anthropocentrism beginning to take hold within American poetry around the time of his death, these final poems maintain, and often augment, Jeffers’ attitude of “Inhumanism” even as they relax the guarded rhetoric and the tone of a minority voice’s opposition towards a conflicting majority. They even assume more of a casual, matter-of-fact tone, and become surprisingly positive and celebratory, happy only to champion “Inhumanism,” without any need to undermine anthropocentrism. His poem “Vulture,” published the year after his death, illustrates this change nicely. The poem turns an encounter with a vulture into an opportunity to fantasize about dying to feed it and subsequently becoming subsumed into its identity. It mixes different conceptions of the afterlife together in its language: from the perspective of the speaker meditating on this kind of a death, the vulture is “wheeling high up in heaven” (2), being consumed by the vulture is “an enskyment” (11), and it is awarded descriptions akin to those of a Christian angel with “flight-feathers” (4) and “great wings” (6); it looks “beautiful” as it is “gliding down / On those great sails” (8-9). Jeffers also, however, makes subtle references to afterlife by reincarnation. “To be eaten” by the vulture means “to share those wings” (10), assuming the life of an animal even as it implies taking angelic form, and the poem has several subtle references to the cyclical movement of life: “wheeling” (2), “orbit” (3), and “the flight-feathers . . . make their circle” (4-5).

Implications of a Christian afterlife and reincarnation are mixed together here, not in opposition like in “Rock and Hawk.” Perhaps most importantly, the death in “Vulture” means assuming the experiences and perception of the animal: “I was sorry to have disappointed him. To be eaten by
that beak and become part of him, to share those wings and those eyes – / What a sublime end of
one’s body, what an enskymement; what a life after death” (10-11). Merging with the identity of a
wild animal, even if it means being violently consumed, qualifies as a kind of Heaven for Jeffers.

At the end of *Song of Myself*, Whitman bequeaths himself “to the dirt to grow from the grass I
love” and asks his reader to “look for me under your boot-soles” (1339-40). Jeffers chooses
fauna, rather than flora, as the ideal place for his soul. And, perhaps just as importantly, he
doesn’t show much of a desire for “fellow” humans to go looking for him after he’s gone.

Yet, returning to “Rock and Hawk,” the gift being given or the process being undertaken
is ultimately human, not animal, in nature. The poem may celebrate a meditation on, and even
worship of, animals and nature, but humans, after all, are the ones that must do the celebrating,
meditating, and worshipping. Despite presenting certain markers of humanity in patently
negative contexts in “Rock and Hawk,” Jeffers chooses to use a very self-consciously human-
oriented diction, even mixing natural elements with social descriptors. In the very first stanza
“high tragic thoughts” are anthropomorphized to “watch their own eyes” (2-3). The “gray rock”
is “standing tall” (4), and “ages of storms” have “signatured” it (7-8), and the falcon is described
as “Married to the massive / Mysticism of stone” (18-19). The very emblem of the poem is not
presented as something to simply behold: it is something for the reader “To hang in the future
sky” (11) in the manner one might domestically decorate one’s home. Jeffers still uses
anthropocentric, anthropomorphic language, but subordinates it to a cause against
anthropocentrism. Although performed much more abstractly in “Rock and Hawk” than in
“Fawn’s Foster-Mother” and “Hurt Hawks,” Jeffers offers an advocacy for humans to undertake
a deep connection with animals and with nature.
Marianne Moore, like Jeffers, sees an enviable balance in the lives and perspectives of animals but, unlike Jeffers, does not attempt to connect directly with them or to share in their energy or perspective, as if such an attempt would be far too presumptuous. Jeffers reminds us of the connections we share with animals that we often forget, ignore, or repudiate, but Moore reminds us of the distance between us and animals, with no less reverence, as animals are objects for study and understanding, and therefore admiration and inspiration: models for humans rather than the other way around. In that regard, for Jeffers and Moore alike, the presence of animals serves as a corrective for humans, and exemplifies a sorely needed sense of balance.

Their Contemporaries: The Rule To Which They Are Exceptions

If Marianne Moore and Robinson Jeffers stand out for their anti-anthropocentrism, then anthropocentrism characterizes the majority of their contemporaries in American poetry. The general orientation towards animals in such poetry typically opposes the orientation taken by Jeffers and Moore: most American poetry before World War II reproduces the predominant concept that humanity is at the center of existence, or at least the center of all living creatures. Animals are to be compared to humans, not the other way around, and such comparisons almost always imply a judgmental preference for human characteristics. Describing an animal as human-like (as happens in most anthropomorphisms) elevates that animal’s status, or at least compliments it, and describing a human as animal-like is almost always a disparagement or an insult.

This orientation pervades the majority of American poetry in the early twentieth century. Langdon Smith’s poem “Evolution” illustrates anthropocentric language according to a natural progression that matches its particular theme. First published in 1909, it tells the story of two lovers and the transmigration of their souls across evolutionary history, beginning with the line,
“When you were a tadpole and I was a fish.” The early animal manifestations of the lovers, even in this clever and funny poem, are marked by clichéd characterizations of animality. The animal ancestors of the lovers are lesser, simpler, more primitive, if innocently happier, versions of their human selves: “Mindless we lived and mindless we loved / And mindless at last we died” (9-10). Other animal manifestations are compared to humans in a clearly hierarchized manner, as the lovers’ later amphibian forms are “scaled and tailed, / And drab as a dead man's hand” (17-18), and “dumb, / With never a spark in the empty dark / To hint at a life to come” (22-24). The animals are presented as lower forms, existing only to wait patiently for evolution to improve them and bring them closer to the perfection of humanity. When the poem’s narrative reaches earliest humans, animal language indicates their incompleteness and lack of sophistication: “I was thewed like an Auroch bull / And tusked like the great cave bear” (49-50) and “Loud I howled through the moonlit wastes, / Loud answered our kith and kin . . . with many a growl” (65-66, 71). Animal-human comparisons, when they are applied to animals, are meant to point up what they are lacking relative to humans. When they are applied to humans, they amount to belittlement, disgrace, or ridicule, whether comic or serious.

Comparable examples come from other poets early in the century. Allen Tate in “Ode to the Confederate Dead” describes the disoriented searching of one’s environment as “turning like the blind crab” (24), and grim resignation to the erosion of recognition over time is embodied in “The hound bitch / Toothless and dying, in a musty cellar” (56-57). The animal imagery of the final ten lines of the poem alternatingly represents a dynamic of self-destruction (“the jaguar leaps / For his own image in a jungle pool, his victim”) and a pernicious agent of death and hostility towards human life (“The gentle serpent, green in the mulberry bush, / Riots with his tongue through the hush – / Sentinel of the grave who counts us all!”). In another poem, “Mr.
Pope,” Tate skillfully manipulates the negative associations of animal descriptions, using phrases like “he who dribbled couplets like a snake / Coiled to a lithe precision in the sun” (9-10) to describe the poet whose “tight back was rather a goat's than man's” (4). Edwin Arlington Robinson similarly dips into the pool of dark connotations belonging to animals in some of his poems. In “Souvenir,” “over me, among / The moths and mysteries, a blurred bat flew” (7-8) as a harbinger of “an evanescent faded noise . . . the voice / Of one whose occupation was to die” (12-14). “Verlaine” is unfavorably described as “a sick satyr” (4), his fans or followers are unfavorably described as “long-clawed scavengers” (1), and the ugly, yet darkly appreciated, work of decomposition is left to an animal agent: “Let the man go: let the dead flesh be dead, / And let the worms be its biographers” (7-8). There are exceptions to the rule of animal imagery in poetry of the period, but the rule is that animality is associated with baseness and ignobility.

John Crowe Ransom’s poetry also demonstrates the way animals and animal-human comparisons or interactions characteristically appear in American poetry contemporary to Jeffers and Moore. Two of Ransom’s best-known poems, “Bells for John Whiteside’s Daughter” and “Dead Boy,” each an elegy mourning the loss of a child, capture two very characteristic manifestations of an anthropocentric point of reference: one benevolently describes animals as human-like, the other unflatteringly compares a boy to an animal. The first poem, memorializing the young girl by recounting her enjoyment of chasing geese, presents the geese as “sleepy and proud, / Who cried in goose, Alas” (11-12). Ransom not only allows the geese the power of language (however figuratively), but presents them as using that language in an expression of grief and sorrow, at the death of a young member of a separate species no less. The geese’s “noon apple-dreams” (15) that the girl disrupts only enhances the vivid anthropomorphism,
expertly serving the wistful, softly comedic tone of the poem before its grim final stanza, in which even animals mourn a human loss, and do so in humanized terms.

The poem “Dead Boy” is a complex representation of the mixed feelings involved in mourning the death of a young boy. When needing a means of contrasting sentimentality by admitting the deceased’s lesser qualities, though, it uses a straightforward animal comparison, describing the boy as “A pig with a pasty face, so I had said, / Squealing for cookies, kinned by poor pretense / With a noble house” (9-11). Not only does animalization equate to disparagement here, but it specifically contrasts with the boy’s class, with his breeding: being like an animal would make him disagreeable in any case, but his family’s standing enhances the contrast. Ransom evokes ideas of social hierarchy, a hierarchy among humans to match the implied hierarchy between humans and animals. “Dead Boy” is a finely nuanced poem, but among those nuances are stock uses of animal figurations.

Again, Ransom is no exception. One can see T. S. Eliot, for instance, choosing very similar uses for animals (except perhaps when used as biblical or religious symbols) in his poetry. Animal comparisons very often bring negativity or crudeness to whatever is being described as animal. “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” has its pernicious yellow fog, described as animal-like in that it “rubbs its muzzle on the window-panes” (16) and “curled once about the house, and fell asleep” (22) in the manner of a dog. In a particular moment of desperation, the poem’s narrator chides himself with the self-deprecation “I should have been a pair of ragged claws / Scuttling across the floors of silent seas” (73-4). Eliot chooses animal comparisons as one of the most captivating methods for presenting people as mundane and vulgar, as in his opening to “Sweeney among the Nightingales”: 
Apeneck Sweeney spread his knees
Letting his arms hang down to laugh,
The zebra stripes along his jaw
Swelling to maculate giraffe. (1-4)

Eliot’s use of the word maculate naturally evokes its more commonly used opposite, “immaculate,” along with its religious connotations: the character of this poem, having a nature far from divine or faultless, points in a direction away from divinity, towards the animal. For Jeffers and Moore the sacred and the animal intersect, but for Eliot the sacred and the animal are, more often than not, mutually exclusive and at opposite poles; the place of the animal more often than not acts as a site of desecration, as “in rats’ alley / Where the dead men lost their bones” (“The Waste Land” 115-6).

Another example of the consensus within American poetry of the early twentieth century about the typical context for animal metaphors, Robert Frost’s poetry generally presents animals as subordinate to humans. Befitting the rural New England farm culture persona exemplified in the speakers of his poems, animals appear matter-of-factly as property, or they are romantically anthropomorphized as having human characteristics (in which case their status and value are elevated or idealized, in the same way that a human is degraded and diminished if presented as somehow animal). In “Mending Wall” animals are coolly presented as simple property (cows) that might justify the need for walls, or as instruments of hunting, whether on the side of the hunter (dogs) or the hunted (rabbits). Animals are also, however, romanticized as humanlike. The “little horse” of “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening” “must think it queer” (5) and “gives his harness bells a shake / To ask if there is some mistake” (9-10), and even in “The Need of Being Versed in Country Things,” a poem that satirizes the personification of nature, animals
“drum on the floor with scurrying hoofs” (11) and, while the poem implies that it would be sentimental to imagine the birds as sighing or weeping like humans, “they rejoiced in the nest they kept” seemingly without irony (22). Robert Frost finds exquisite uses for these common animal tropes: the woodchuck of “After Apple-Picking,” while romantically imagined as capable of speech and communication with the speaker, still offers an appealing stage for meditation on death and sleep in terms of hibernation, and though the dimpled spider of “Design” is “holding up a moth” (2), in human fashion, “like a white piece of rigid satin cloth” (3), Frost expertly fashions such a typical anthropomorphosis into a deeply ambiguous interrogation of the existence of divine, or social, order. When it comes to the poetic tools for representing animals, Jeffers and Moore often try their hands at fashioning new instruments, while Frost is all too happy to work with those present, available, and already agreed upon as appropriate.
Works Cited


Gilbert, Sandra. “Marianne Moore as Female Female Impersonator.” *Parisi* 41.


Chapter Three: Moving from Deflection to Rejection

Anti-Anthropocentrism in Mid-Century: Randall Jarrell

Animal-human comparisons and dynamics mark countless of Randall Jarrell’s poems that span his career, beginning even before the publication of his first collection of poetry (and at least as early as “The Ways and the Peoples,” published in the July 1939 issue of Poetry magazine). Poems of the early 1940s, before Jarrell had begun to make a name for himself, include the philosophical poem (published in 1942) “Time and the Thing-in-Itself in a Textbook” with its final image of a fisher who “Falls to the Nothing whence he drew his fish / And never reappears except in textbooks, / Where he and his fish acquire a ghastly sheen” (24-26) and its final line coyly juxtaposing the animal and the human, “As though – as though the fish, at least, were rotten” (27). The soldier-speaker of “Absent with Official Leave,” published in the August 1943 issue of Poetry, “moans like a bear in his enchanted sleep” (23). Many, many more poems of the 1940s present and grapple with aspects of animality and humanity: “Man” (1942), “A Front,” “A Lullaby,” and “The Sick Nought” (1944), “The Dream of Waking,” “Hohensalzburg,” “Leave,” and “Mail Call” (1945), and “Afterwards,” “The Breath of Night,” “A Country Life,” “The King's Hunt,” and “Terms” (1948), only to name a few. The frequency both of references to animals and of animal-human comparisons would only gradually increase over the course of Jarrell’s career.

Review of the Criticism

This makes the relatively meager amount of attention given to animal themes in Jarrell’s poetry, let alone animal-human comparisons, so surprising. The body of criticism on Jarrell includes many of the same aspects that mark critical examinations of the poetry of Marianne
Moore and Robinson Jeffers. The importance of animal imagery and animal themes in Jarrell’s poems is overwhelmingly passed over in order to pay attention to other contexts, other subjects, and other themes. “90 North,” for example, is commonly studied among Jarrell’s early poems. A meditation on the themes of imagination and childhood memory, and their stark contrasts with the harsh, dark, painful elements of reality, it is littered with mixings of animal and human description. In its very first line an animalized speaker announces himself to the reader and begins his story: “At home, in my flannel gown, like a bear to its floe, / I clambered to bed” (1-2). Literary critics emphasize the main themes of the poem and cast the animal and animal-human elements as operating merely in service of those larger themes, ignoring the possibility that a meditation on human nature as connected to or juxtaposed with animal nature might itself be one of the poem’s main themes. Stephen Burt, for instance, observes that “the ‘huddling’ flakes, and the dogs, are plural and alive; only the poet’s ‘I’ and his flagpole stand alone” (147), but relates this dynamic only to the loneliness and pointlessness with which the adult dreamer is left, neglecting attention to the possible associations and connections being made between childhood dreaming and vitality with the adventure, energy, and wildness that animals represent. Charlotte Beck commits a similar oversight in her essay “Unicorn to Eland: The Rilkean Spirit in the Poetry of Randall Jarrell.” She focuses on a number of animal aspects in Jarrell’s poems only in terms of their evidence of Rilke’s influence on Jarrell, and even hits the nail on the head in her interpretation that, in “90 North,” “childhood is an Eden” to Jarrell. She uses this term, however, to evoke Jarrell’s emphasis on Edenic childhood innocence and imagination and freedom from social exigencies, when Jarrell just as importantly conjures up the immediate contact and communication with animals that is also associated with Eden (48). According to Florian Hild, “the speaker of ‘90 North’ sees clearly at last: the ‘Cloud-Cuckoo-Land’ was a
world of illusion, the illusion that it was meaningful” (140), reiterating the “cloud” aspects and the theme of the loss of childhood imagination but bypassing the “cuckoo” part and the animal images paired so tightly with this representation of childhood psychology and the direction of the thrusts of make-believing in the poem. As readers have been wont to do with Marianne Moore, so scholars of Jarrell see animals as emblematic of other qualities and themes and neglect their potential significance as animals emblematic, first and foremost, of animals.

This oversight bears out in critical analyses of later Jarrell poems as well. The speaker of the 1950 poem “Seele im Raum” (the poem referred to in the title of the Beck essay mentioned above) struggles over the inability to decide if she has really seen an eland or only imagined it. In the very premise of the poem we can see connections to “90 North” and similar dynamics to that of the discussion of “90 North” repeating themselves. Stephen Burt nicely summarizes the debate over the meaning of this eland, before joining it himself:

The poem has occasioned unusual disagreement. Russell Fowler argues that the woman of ‘Seele im Raum’ is ‘childlike,’ therefore ‘exceptionally fortunate . . . She has not lost her “soul,” like most of the “adults” of Jarrell’s poetry’ (183). Charlotte Beck, on the other hand, believes her ‘psychotic’; Pritchard considers the eland ‘a symbol for her sickness’ (Worlds 19; 270). Suzanne Ferguson’s nuanced reading explains the eland as a ‘projection’ which seems, after the woman is cured of her illness, to represent the incommunicability of inner experience: ‘the outer world inevitably falsifies the inner’ (Poetry 151-54). All take the eland (derived from Rilke’s ‘Unicorn’) to represent the woman’s own ‘soul in space,’ her imagination or inner self. All, I think, see only part of the eland, because all overlook the way in which Jarrell’s style constructs, and his eland presents, an interpersonal context in which her innerness can make itself known (156).
All of these interpretations hold measures of validity, yet none of them seem to consider that the eland, fantastical as it is, might be less abstractly symbolic than one might think, that a great deal of the eland’s significance may come from the simple fact that it is an animal. Such a consideration would both simplify these interpretations and augment them, as the prospect of examining how Jarrell connects the concept of animality (perhaps especially animality within humanity) to that of childhood or psychosis or spirituality or inner experience might point the study of Jarrell’s work towards new and interesting territories.

Neglect of the importance Jarrell seems to place on animals and humans appearing in relation to one another in his poetry take a number of other forms. Much critical discussion of poems such as “Next Day” or “The Woman at the Washington Zoo” downplays meditations on the juxtaposition between animal identity and human identity in favor of showing how the poems “even more dramatically resolve or dissolve gender distinction by regularly taking on other-gendered personae” (Merrin 52). The poem then is about gender roles and not about what it means to be animal and/or human. Even Stephen Burt, one of the few critics to give significant attention to some of the uses of animal figuration in Jarrell’s poetry, interprets animal images as ultimately embodying psychoanalytical dynamics. So Burt sees the speaker of “The Woman at the Washington Zoo” as “an analyst’s patient” experiencing “such exchanges . . . at the same time felt as work between people and as searches inside, stripping off inessential roles to reveal some previously invisible core” (Burt 111, his emphases). Burt’s insight is certainly endorsable, but with the one crucially important caveat that, in the case of the poem at least, the human speaker’s analyst is a real-life vulture and not a fellow human at all. Even the most explicitly animal-occupied of Jarrell’s poems, those of his children’s literature, also discussed later, are seen as emblematic or symbolic, as referring to the human world exclusively, rather than
interested in the animal world, or the interplay between the animal world and the human world. Richard Flynn, for instance, argues that “these poems in the context of *The Bat-Poet* are emblematic of the Bat-Poet’s commitment to an intuitive rather than a pedantic poetics, and the latter takes childhood as its central subject. (In addition to this, of course they concern the poet’s search for an audience.)” (106). It would be a disservice to the poems to forget that, as its subject, animality takes on just as much importance as childhood or poetics, if not precedence over both. Such interpretations of these poems, then, fall into the same mistakes made with dominant readings of “90 North” and “Seele im Raum.” Simply concluding that “time and time again, the freshness of the child’s vision – the child’s capacity of wonder – is played against the confused, commonplace, and solitary awareness of adults” (Flynn 106) misses the poems’ parallel, and equally important, commentary on the animal’s vision in relation to the human’s vision. Considering the warnings that must be kept in mind as we read Marianne Moore, if we neglect that the animals in Jarrell’s poems are indeed animals, we do so at the peril of our understanding of what his poems ask of us.

**Jarrell’s Work: Poems**

One of the very few poets to write so well about World War II so soon after it had ended, Randall Jarrell finds a number of different uses for animal figurations. In many of Jarrell’s poems, especially his early poems, the moods attached to his animal-human comparisons are much more ambiguous than Eliot’s or Ransom’s, and even than Jeffers’ or Moore’s, and many of the comparisons operate as literal and figurative descriptions simultaneously, as in the first two lines of his well-known short poem, “The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner”: “From my mother’s sleep I fell into the State, / And I hunched in its belly till my wet fur froze” (1-2). The “wet fur” can work as part of an animal comparison if the speaker’s sweat-drenched hair is being described
as fur, but “wet fur” could simply refer to the lining of his gunner’s jacket, moist with blood or sweat or “the early morning mist of takeoff” (Dawson 29). A third connotation becomes possible within the poem’s context of likening the speaker’s setting to a womb. The speaker coming “from my mother’s sleep” and being “hunched” in the “belly” of the turret can then evoke the “wet fur” of a newborn, although of course the word “fur” emphasizes animal aspects much more than the word “hair” would. Other critics have noticed possible animal aspects to the meaning of this small, yet important, phrase: Richard Fein sees “hunched as my wet fur froze” as evoking a speaker who “crouches in his fear like a frightened, defenseless animal” (157), and Leven Dawson argues that the phrase “must also turn the reader’s mind to the fact that man in his natural state does not have fur . . . and to the fact that the human fetus does, however, go through an ‘unnatural’ regressive state in which it is completely covered in down or ‘wet fur’”(29).

Helen Vendler offers a comparison between the “wet fur” here and the language Jarrell uses in another poem, more directly related to animals: “Bats.” Here, then, the ball turret gunner is “but a baby who has lost his mother,” and yet “the luckier baby who has his mother” is the infant bat who “clings to her long fur / by his thumbs and toes and teeth” (5). Vendler goes on to describe the soldiers in Jarrell’s poems as “his babies, his lambs to the slaughter – he broods over them” (42). Many of these potential meanings share the deep ambiguity of the poem itself, not necessarily implying any valuative judgments of animals or humans in relation to each other, but some of these possible meanings present the soft, subtle beginning of a special appreciation of animal aspects, and even a favoring of animal over human, especially considering that the human condition here is only offered within the context of the terrible dehumanizing violence of the Second World War.
The animal-human comparisons in “Eighth Air Force” have much less of the ambiguity present in “Ball Turret Gunner,” but the comparisons in it clash. The soldiers are described alternatively as puppies and as wolves. Even though the soldiers pass the time by playing cards with each other, the speaker presents a reminder that “This is a war . . . But since these play, before they die, / Like puppies with their puppy” (11-12). The poem crystallizes its juxtaposition of innocence and guilt, of destructiveness and vulnerability, at its end by echoing Pilate’s refusal to find fault with Jesus, but it sets up this tension with the animal comparisons in the stanzas leading up to that end. The poem’s ending returns the reader to the question in the first stanza, “shall I say that man / Is not as men have said: a wolf to man?” without offering a clear answer (4-5). Jarrell’s animal-human comparisons reflect on man’s behavior and on collective man rather than on individual man, a divergence from the attitudes and contexts that mark Robinson Jeffers’ animal-human comparisons (in Jarrell’s essay, “The End of the Line,” he criticized Jeffers’ preference of a hawk to a man as “absurd” and an example of “individualism so exaggerated that it contemptuously rejects affectations, obligations, relations of any kind whatsoever” [82], and continued to cite a reaction to this general attitude toward collectivism, beginning in the 1930s). In “Eighth Air Force” Jarrell finds animal comparisons a useful means of eliciting a meditation on humanity’s coexistent aggression and helplessness, a reference point to turn to for help in interpreting the broad scope of destruction during World War II. Another Jarrell poem, “Second Air Force,” includes a line and a half, “The crews in the steady winter of the sky / Tremble in their wired fur” (50-51) that echoes the animal meanings of both “Ball Turret Gunner” and “Eighth Air Force.” Within the context of war pitting human against human, animal comparisons and figurations take on negative, even perverse aspects, as if war brings out animal aspects of humanity, but only in unnatural, depraved terms.
In these early war poems of Jarrell’s, animal figurations take on complex and (understandably) dark or macabre contexts. The speaker of “Gunner,” for instance (perhaps the same speaker of “The Death of The Ball Turret Gunner,” as both present posthumous voices in dryly bitter tones), rails against the arbitrariness and impersonality of the system for which he died, but the set of frustrated questions are framed, both in the beginning and the end, by references to the speaker’s cat. The poem begins by asking, “Did they send me away from my cat and my wife / To a doctor who poked me and counted my teeth” (1-2) and ends with the question, “Has my wife a pension of so many mice? Did the medals go home to my cat?” (11-12). The short poem even includes an animal comparison in the middle of “the fighters rolled into the tracers like rabbits” (5). Some critics, like David Vaughan, rightfully emphasize the bitter negativity directed against the dehumanizing aspects of the war machine: “Jarrell’s heartless, semi-comic depiction of the ‘Gunner’ shows another who dies a wasted death, whose medals are sent home to his cat. This poem illustrates Jarrell’s poetic gift at its best, as the juxtaposition of unlike nouns – fighter, tracer, rabbits; pension, medals, cat – emphasizes the terrible unreality of illogical events that the world has come not only to accept, but even to take for granted” (39, Vaughn’s emphases). Vaughan’s point is well taken, and one could even add to it the dehumanization of being treated like an animal by the military doctor who “poked me and counted my teeth” as a staff member at a shoddy zoo would. Yet, inklings of positivity towards animal figurations, and animal-human comparisons, can be detected in the poem. After all, the speaker’s cat and wife are presented as parataxis, as equal emblems of the safe comfort of home, operating in conjunction without hierarchy. In fact, the term “home” is mentioned only in the last line of the poem, and in connection with the cat rather than the wife, and in the opening line the speaker mentions the cat first: he’s sent away from “my cat and my wife,” not “my wife and
my cat,” as if, if one of the two were to be identified as of primary concern to him, it would be
his cat rather than his wife. And then of course there are the feline aspects ascribed to the wife in
the poem’s penultimate line, granting her a pension of mice. There is certainly ridiculousness to
the cat and wife blending or switching roles here, yet the fact remains that the final image of the
poem is one of a woman taking on the characteristics of an animal and a pet taking on the
characteristics of a spouse. The sordid image of the speaker’s cat receiving his medals can of
course be taken as grotesque, yet perhaps there are aspects of dignity and seriousness to be
mixed in with the dark and the comic. Perhaps for the speaker of the poem the final question is
asked not sarcastically but imploringly; perhaps the speaker’s cat is in fact presented as the most
fitting steward of his war medals. Such a reading may run counter to the mainstream, but it bears
some precedence within the context of Jarrell’s devoted love for his own cat, Kitten, and in fact
it wouldn’t be the only example of Jarrell elevating the status of a cat in wartime. According to
Stephen Burt, Jarrell’s wife Mary relates a story of a college professor teasing Jarrell at a
cocktail party: “to be funny perhaps, the professor interjected a story he’d heard about Randall
giving his meat-ration coupons to the cat during the war. ‘Why of course!’ Randall flashed
sparks. ‘What would you expect? He’s only a poor cat, and has to eat what he can. People can
eat anything. What an absurd remark’” (250-251, Burt’s emphasis). Perhaps only an added joke
about a military wife subsisting on a pension of mice would connect the story more closely to
“Gunner.” In any event, both in the story and in the poem, we may see the beginnings of an
undercurrent, albeit an undercurrent with ambiguous ebbs and flows, towards positive figurations
of animals in comparison to and in relation with humans in Jarrell’s poetry, one that becomes
more and more consistent and more and more dominant in his later poems of the 1950s and
1960s.
As Randall Jarrell’s life and oeuvre progressed and developed, his work began to show more frequent use of animal imagery and animal-human comparisons. By the 1960s, during the last years of his life, such examples would occur in much less ambiguous contexts, trending even more clearly in the direction of an anti-anthropocentrism. As we will see in examples from Robert Hayden and others, this arc characterizes a surprising number of other major poets of the mid-twentieth century. For Jarrell, perhaps the best poem to mark this development and progression is “The Woman at the Washington Zoo,” the title poem of his most notable and most career-validating collection of poetry, published in 1960. The speaker of the poem contemplates the animals at the zoo, alternatively relating to them, commiserating with them, and envying them.

The animal-human comparisons in “The Woman at the Washington Zoo” follow a measured progression that crescendoes in intensity and urgency, but also in degree of relationship and connection to animal aspects of experience and perception, if ultimately only from the perspective of the speaker’s emotion and imagination. Following this pattern, the poem begins with an innocuous comparison between the appearances of humans and of animals, yet gradually and quickly progresses and intensifies until it concludes with the speaker’s wish to be possessed and even subsumed by one of the animals, a vulture no less, much like Robinson Jeffers’ fantasy of dying to become vulture food in his poem “Vulture.” In between the poem’s gentle beginning and its radical conclusion, however, the speaker begins to feel a deep connection with the animals in the zoo, and commiserates with them by imagining that she experiences captivity in much the same way that they do. The speaker imagines herself, and specifically her body, as being seen “In the eyes of animals, these beings trapped / As I am trapped, but not, themselves, the trap” (15-16). Jarrell himself, in his essay collection A Sad
Heart at the Supermarket, has commented on these lines in a way that emphasizes an animal perspective even more, writing that the woman in the poem is “looking so intently into its cages that she sees her own reflection in the eyes of the animals” (91, Jarrell’s emphasis). In any event, the animals in the zoo are confined in cages of one sort or another but, for the woman, her body is her cage. According to Jarrell, for the speaker this aspect combines with an aspect of self-knowledge, as “she recognizes herself in the animals – and recognizes herself, also, in the cages” (92). Affiliation leads to commiseration. When the speaker cries, “Oh, bars of my own body, open, open!” (19), the speaker begins to lament her situation more deeply, which leads to her seeing an animal state, even a captive one, as preferable to her own. Emphasizing that the organization of the poem follows a progression, a sequenced crescendo, in the manner of its animal-human comparisons, Jarrell writes that after this line in the poem

there is a space, and the middle of the poem begins evenly – since her despair is beyond expression – in a statement of accomplished fact: The world goes by my cage and never sees me. Inside the mechanical official cage of her life, her body, she lives invisibly; no one feeds this animal, reads out its name, pokes a stick through the bars at it – the cage is empty. She feels that she is even worse off than the other animals of the zoo: they are still wild animals – since they do not know how to change into domesticated animals, beings that are their own cages – and they are surrounded by a world that does not know how to surrender them, still thinks them part of itself. This natural world comes through or over the bars of the cages, on its continual visits to those within: to those who are not machine parts, convicts behind the bars of their penitentiary, but wild animals – the free beasts come to their imprisoned brothers and never know that they are not also free (95, Jarrell’s emphasis).
Here Jarrell quite clearly casts animal nature as having aspects preferable to their corresponding aspects in human nature. Animality is seen as encompassing a type of freedom that is lost in humanity. Even when animals are caged, and trapped, at least they are “not, themselves, the trap” (16). A large part of the woman’s unbearable frustration and desperation comes from her awareness that she herself is her own warden. She “yearns for change and voices a plea for a radical, if impossible, alteration toward a primal, carnal, and free, if frightening, state of being” (Travisano 274, his emphasis). This qualifies as a preference for an animal existence and a rejection of a human existence, considered in concretely physical terms, on par with Robinson Jeffers’ in “Vulture,” but also Robert Hayden’s in “Bone-Flower Elegy,” Denise Levertov’s in “Song for Ishtar,” and Galway Kinnell’s in “The Bear.” Continuing to demonstrate how the poem progresses towards its extreme conclusion, Jarrell pulls no punches in his explanation of just how despicable the speaker of the poem considers her human life:

In saying mournfully that the wild animals do not come to her as they come to the animals of the zoo, she is wishing for their human equivalent to come to her. But she is right in believing that she has become her own cage – she has changed so much, in her manless, childless, fleshless existence, that her longing wish has inside it an increasing repugnance and horror: the innocent sparrows pecking the llamas’ grain become larger in the pigeons settling on (not fluttering to) the bears’ bread; and these grow larger and larger, come (with grace first, far off in the sky, but at last with horror) as turkey buzzards seizing, no, tearing the meat the flies have clouded. She herself is that stale leftover flesh, nauseating just as what comes to it is horrible and nauseating (95, Jarrell’s emphases).
This Randall Jarrell of the 1960s engages in much more subversion of anthropocentrism than the Randall Jarrell of the 1940s who, while not quite an anthropocentrist himself, could still scoff at Robinson Jeffers’ preference of a hawk over a man as not possibly to be taken seriously. The Jarrell of the 1960s echoes Jeffers more resonantly than the 1940s Jarrell could have possibly imagined.

The conclusion of “The Woman at the Washington Zoo,” in fact, finds itself in step with Jeffers’ “inhumanism” in general and with Jeffers’ poem “Vulture” in particular. Thomas Travisano offers a reading of the poem’s conclusion as a rejection of social norms, a preference for the animal over the human, and a discovery of a source of strength, vitality, and transformation in embracing animal aspects. For him, “the woman’s voice embodies a yearning to escape conventional moral judgments, such as those that might dismiss a vulture as scabrously inferior, and a still stronger yearning to achieve a state of independent power, to become ‘the great lioness’ who stalks forth (embodying life?) to claim recognition and to acknowledge a complementary power (embodying – or escaping – death?) in another” (274). We have already seen in Jeffers’ poem “Vulture” this acknowledgment of animals in general (and the vulture in particular) as possessing contradictory potentials for vitality and for death in awe-inspiring fashion. The speaker of Jeffers’ poem imagines death at the hands of a vulture as a welcome, mystical transformation, and Jarrell likewise says about the speaker of his poem that “her own life is so terrible to her that, to change, she is willing to accept even this, changing it as best she can” (96). Yet, in Jarrell’s poem, the vulture is now described in human terms even while the human speaker is desiring to exist in animal terms, which would certainly be a departure from Jeffers: “step to me as man: / The wild brother at whose feet the white wolves fawn, / To whose hand of power the great lioness / Stalks, purring” (28-31). Jarrell conflates the animal and the
human in a bizarre and intricate way here, as his human speaker addresses an animal and requests that the animal relate to her (and change her!) as if the animal were “man as he was first, still must be, is: the animals’ natural lord” (Jarrell 96). Jarrell has taken the Adamic dynamic between animal and human and reversed it in a most startling way. In fact, the conclusion artfully returns to the (seemingly) innocent animal-human comparison that begins the poem, and sets the speaker on a thought process that would lead to her radical wish for animalistic transformation: “The saris go by me from the embassies. / Cloth from the moon. Cloth from another planet. / They look back at the leopard like the leopard” (1-3). Jarrell begins with what seems like a clever, lighthearted (if mock-xenophobic) animal-human comparison but, like a fuse for a bomb, it ultimately leads to a dark explosion of anti-anthropocentrism, and even inhumanism, in its final representation of the connections and contrasts between the human and the animal.

“The Woman at the Washington Zoo” is only one example of how much of Jarrell’s work began to revolve around animals, beginning in the 1960s. Some poems echo the bleaker, “inhumanistic” part of the sentiment expressed in “The Woman at the Washington Zoo,” focusing on animal-human comparisons as a way to commiserate, or to lament the ennui of a human life characterized by artificiality and spiritlessness. “Well Water” compares “the dailiness of life” (3) to “a squirrel-wheel / A sick squirrel turns slowly” (7-8), and in “Next Day” a mature female speaker, similar to the speaker of “The Woman at the Washington Zoo,” describes typical grocery shoppers as “The slacked or shorted, basketed, identical / Food-gathering flocks” (4-5) and later blandly juxtaposes pet, servant, and self: “The dog, the maid, / And I go through the sure unvarying days” (38-9). In poems like these, animals somehow lose dignity by being placed in human contexts and animal-human comparisons, being privileged
over humans only simply by virtue of not bearing the dishearteningly humdrum aspects of human life, unless being unnaturally forced into positions that do so. Other poems privilege animal aspects through more positive animal-human comparisons that bestow benefits on humans through an invigoration of animal energy or insight. “A Man Meets a Woman in the Street” begins with a male speaker comparing the recognition of his wife with the way that goslings demonstrate the psychological phenomenon of imprinting, and it culminates with a philosophical consideration of themes of change, permanence, connection, and desire, finishing with a strong animal association: “Really I began the day / Not with a man’s wish: ‘May this day be different,’ / But with the birds’ wish: ‘May this day / Be the same day, the day of my life.’” (90-93). The long title work of Jarrell’s final volume of poetry, *The Lost World*, a long meditation on childhood and temporality, runs quite a gamut of animal figurations, from papier-mâché dinosaurs on the set of the film that gives the poem its title, to wolves appearing in dreams, to the Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer lion. A particularly poignant scene in the poem occurs when the young speaker’s mother kills a chicken on the family farm by snapping its neck. “The body hurls / Itself out—lunging, reeling, it begins to run / Away from Something.” (288-90) and the boy thinks to himself, “Could such a thing / Happen to anything?” (294-5), even to his pet rabbit, even to the speaker himself? Here death equalizes animal and human alike by dooming them to the same fate; death, an experience to be shared by animals and humans in identical ways, is presented matter-of-factly as the elimination of a form of life, and implies that all life forms are forms of the same essence, and therefore share a common identity.

**Jarrell’s Work: Prose**

In 1963, Jarrell published an essay titled “Fifty Years of American Poetry,” examining a number of important poets writing between the years 1910 and 1960. Looking at Jarrell’s own
words about Marianne Moore and Robinson Jeffers and their uses of animal-human comparisons and figurations can offer further insights into how Jarrell thought about the same phenomenon in his own work. The language he uses presents complex, ambiguous, and even contradictory statements on the issue. In the only paragraph of the essay devoted to Robinson Jeffers, Jarrell amazingly points to Jeffers’ “inhumanism” and intense preference for animals as grounds for serious criticism, and ultimately as a weakness in his poetry. Jarrell writes that Jeffers’ “heart goes out to animals rather than to human beings, to minerals rather than to animals, since he despises the bonds and qualifications of existence. Because of all this, his poems do not have the exactness and concision of the best poetry; his style and temperament, his whole world view, are to a surprising extent a matter of simple exaggeration” (Jarrell 246). Jarrell makes this statement exactly during the period of his poetic career most marked by animal figurations, many of which seem to indicate a celebration of animal aspects and a suspicion of human aspects that approach Jeffersian qualities, even if they never quite reach that level. Of course, there are a great number of important differences, any of which would certainly qualify as grounds enough in Jarrell’s mind to repudiate a deep connection with Jeffers. Jarrell’s objection is directed only to the extent to which Jeffers goes in his anti-anthropocentrism, and to the form and style with which he goes there. In either case (or in both cases), Jarrell seems to be denying significant similarities in the sentiments about animals and humans present in both poets’ bodies of work, a situation made all the more ironic by Jarrell’s impressive job of adapting so many aspects of Jeffers’ inhumanism to his own poetry and making those aspects of inhumanism more acceptable, digestible, and matter-of-fact, as anti-anthropocentrism moves more towards the mainstream of American poetry during the middle of the twentieth century.
Complicating the issue even further, Jarrell dispenses generous portions of praise for Marianne Moore in the same essay, and the reasons for the praise very closely resemble the very reasons that earn criticism for Jeffers. Still, some ambiguities, qualifications, and suppositions mark Jarrell’s adoration of Moore:

Because so much of our own world is evil, she has transformed the Animal Kingdom, that amoral realm, into a realm of good; her consolatory, fabulous bestiary is more accurate than, but is almost as arranged as, any medieval one. The poems say, sometimes, to the beasts: “You reassure me and people don’t, except when they are like you – but really they are always like you”; and it is wonderful to have it said so, and for a moment to forget, behind the animals of a darkening landscape, their dark companions (243).

Despite including an extremely impressive (and even accurate) one-sentence summary of Marianne Moore’s attitudes and philosophy of animals, humans, and the relationships between them, a significant portion of Jarrell’s statement here has the ingredients of a backhanded compliment. All the more surprising, Jarrell takes an almost uniformly positive tone for the rest of his evaluation, calling Moore the greatest female American poet of the period. The language Jarrell uses here makes a monolithic opinion of her difficult to suss out. Even before this essay, Jarrell had certainly criticized Moore’s use of animals within other contexts, as in a review of Moore’s “In Distrust of Merits,” in which he accuses her of naivety when it comes to war: “If Miss Moore had read a history of the European ‘colonization’ of our planet (instead of natural histories full of the quaint animals of those colonies) she would be astonished at nothing in the last world war, or in this one, or in the next” (Jarrell “Poetry in War and Peace” 129). He had even complained of her animal figurations in a 1953 essay “Her Shield”: “Nature, in Miss
Moore’s poll of it, is overwhelmingly in favor of morality; but the results were implicit in the sampling – like the *Literary Digest*, she sent postcards to only the nicer animals” (Jarrell *Poetry and the Age* 198). Does Jarrell see her as a fantastically gifted poet whose rose-colored glasses, when it comes to animals, serve simultaneously as her greatest strength and weakness? Whereas Jarrell seems to laud Moore where he laments Jeffers, in both cases he implies some emotional, psychological, and perhaps even ethical, weakness or inaccuracy merited in each poet’s manner of anti-anthropocentrism. This certainly creates difficulty in supposing how Jarrell viewed the animal elements and anti-anthropocentrism present in his own work.

**Jarrell’s Work: Children’s Literature**

Another complicating caveat to any complete understanding of how animals figure into Jarrell’s poetry comes from a surprising sidebar within his full oeuvre, one almost completely (and understandably) neglected by critics and poets alike. During Jarrell’s life he not only translated a number of the Grimm brothers’ fairy tales, but he created no less than four books written for children, all composed during the last two years of his life: *The Gingerbread Rabbit* (1964), *The Bat-Poet* (1964), *The Animal Family* (1965), and *Fly by Night* (1976). Of course, the genre of children’s literature is characteristically marked by use of animals and anthropomorphic elements, but Jarrell includes a particularly remarkable focus on animal-human comparisons and connections that deserve to be looked at side-by-side with his many poems that share such a focus. In fact, the poem “Bats,” which Helen Vendler examines in connection to “The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner,” as mentioned above, is found in *The Bat-Poet*, a story with the protagonist of a bat who likes to stay awake during the daytime and therefore doesn’t quite feel at home with the rest of his kind, or even in his own skin, similar to the speakers of “Next Day” and “The Woman at the Washington Zoo.” The bat searches for companionship and
understanding (and for audiences for his poetry) among other animals, writing and reciting poetry about what it must be like to be different kinds of animals, even ending with a reflection on what it means to have fur and yet be born “naked and blind.” Reflections on identity, and what it means to be animal or to be human, characterize the other books as well. In *The Gingerbread Rabbit*, a (human) mother is so startled and moved by an encounter with a rabbit that she attempts to reproduce its likeness with a gingerbread cookie. The gingerbread rabbit then comes to life and when he is told that he is a rabbit and immediately asks, “What’s a rabbit?” (6), the kitchen utensils are all too eager to inform him that people shoot and eat rabbits. The cookie is eventually adopted by a pair of (real-life) rabbits, a theme resonant with *The Animal Family*, perhaps Jarrell’s most beautiful work out of the four. It tells the story of a lonely hunter and a “mermaid” (in reality a female seal) agreeing to live together (she trusts him because “he himself was as patient as an animal”). They even start a family by bringing home a bear cub and a baby spotted lynx (who in turn brings home a human boy). Even *Fly by Night*, although not expressly about animal-human connections, tells the story of a boy who can fly during the nighttime, but also whose only friends are animals. Even considering the typicality of animal-human comparisons and connections within the genre of children’s literature, Jarrell’s saturation with the theme in his own contributions to the genre lend credibility to the idea that the interplay between animality and humanity greatly occupied his mind, especially during the composition of his poems during the 1960s.
Robert Hayden

Robert Hayden makes animal-human comparisons in his poetry that parallel those of Jarrell. They share ambiguity and they refuse, at least initially, to take sides in the debate about whether or not animals are undervalued in relation to humans, either explicitly or implicitly, but later in their careers they do so with gusto. Like Jarrell, Hayden is not concerned with animals directly in the beginning of his career, but, as Jarrell does, Hayden finds animal figurations useful referent points within his poetic themes and, over the course of his poetic work, animals take on more and more central meanings. If Jarrell early in his career employs animal-human comparisons as items for meditation in connection with the subjects of violence and war, then Hayden in kind employs them as items for meditation in connection with the subjects of violence and race relations.

The topic of animal-human comparisons clearly takes on added complexities within the context of race. For many racial minorities, but particularly blacks, animal-human comparisons bear a long history of being used as justification and support for racial oppression. Seeing blacks as less civilized or intelligent and as more primitive or savage than whites often came from the argument that blacks were closer in “nature” to animals than whites were, key within the perspective of social Darwinism. In his long poem “Middle Passage,” Hayden renders this perspective very concretely in the way he selects quotations from certain primary sources: a report of the 1839 Amistad slave ship mutiny includes a description of the event as occurring “swift as the puma’s leap” (125), and the mutineers are referred to as “these apes” (143) from the white author’s account. Hayden spares no wart in his depictions of such attitudes towards blacks.
“Night, Death, Mississippi,” a poem about racial lynching, given from the perspective of a white family closely acquainted with the practice, begins “A quavering cry. Screech-owl? / Or one of them? / The old man in his reek / and gauntness laughs – / One of them, I bet –” (1-5) and later includes a description of lynching as “better / than hunting bear / which don’t know why / you want him dead” (30-33), a description pregnant with potential meanings (impressing a sense of horror at treating blacks as animals but simultaneously, and perhaps secondarily, evoking sympathy for hunted animals as well). Hayden subtly points these animal descriptions in the direction of the white lynchers as well: shortly after the lynch victims cries are described as “squealing” (15), one of the lynchers “hawks and spits” (19), a curious homonym for “hocks and spits.” The possible double meaning behind the line “You kids fetch Paw” would be easier to overlook if it didn’t appear only two lines after the comparison between lynching blacks and hunting bears. Even while faithfully representing the horrors of a practice based on treating fellow human beings “like animals” in the very worst possible sense, Hayden very carefully and deftly poses the question of whether or not any human character in the poem is really any more or less like an “animal” than another.

Yet animal-human comparisons can take on ambiguities that lean in a more positive direction even for a poet like Hayden, despite his deep awareness of the potential for damage that animal-human comparisons have. “Homage to the Empress of the Blues,” about blues singer Bessie Smith, celebrates the animal aspects of playful costuming and performing, describing a man “in a candystripe silk shirt, / gracile and dangerous as a jaguar” (1-2), and Smith herself as “out on the stage in ostrich feathers, beaded satin, / and shone that smile on us and sang” (11-12). More seriously, Hayden elegizes another singer (this time gospel singer Lula Butler Hurst) in “Mourning Poem for the Queen of Sunday,” which opens with the lines “Lord’s lost Him His
mockingbird, / His fancy warbler” (1-2). Hayden adds extra emphasis to the typical description of a singer as a songbird by mixing the animal with the human in the pun warbler, meaning simply “one who sings” but also referring to a specific kind of bird. Animals and animal descriptions do not characterize most of Robert Hayden’s poetry, but they appear more and more frequently as he gets older, so that the very last poems of his life include a high frequency of animal figurations. For instance, the title poem of *American Journal*, the last volume of poetry before the posthumous collection of his works, is written from the perspective of an extraterrestrial who examines Americans as a species, and alternatively embraces and resists the urge to see them as being like animals. The poem takes a larger perspective on the questions of racial identity that Hayden had raised during the first few decades of his career, shifting more towards issues of humanity in general. “Bone-Flower Elegy,” a haunting meditation on death written not long before Hayden’s own death, recounts a dream in which the speaker enters a house “where presences in vulture masks / play scenes of erotic violence / on a scaffold stage” (5-7) and is later trapped by a grove of bone-flowers “caging me for you beastangel / raging toward me / angelbeast shining come / to rend me and redeem” (23-26). Oddly reminiscent of Robinson Jeffers’ imagination of death by being consumed by a vulture (in the poem “Vulture”), Hayden’s “Bone-Flower Elegy” depicts death as like being amalgamated, whether willingly or not, by surreal forces of nature but also by this creature alternatively referred to as “beastangel” and “angelbeast,” an authority having both animal and spiritual aspects. Hayden’s oeuvre makes for a telling case study in the changes in animal figurations in American poetry, particularly because he begins publishing poetry in the 1940s and continues until his death in 1980. The ambiguity of his animal-human comparisons in the poetry of the first half of his career typify a transition period for animal figurations going on within American poetry in general at the time,
yet, by the time of his death, animal figurations, both in his poetry in particular and in American poetry at large, have become more frequent, less anthropocentric, and more reverent of animals.

Other Mid-Century African American Poets

Animal imagery appears in new contexts and forms within the poetry of (and shortly after) the Black Arts Movement. The movement itself, typically referred to as spanning from the mid-60s to the mid-70s, overlaps with the period of time in which associating with the animal, in American poetry, starts becoming the norm. Race-conscious poetry written by blacks in the 60s, 70s, and 80s, then, takes on an especially complex relationship with the use of animal-human comparisons. These poets often present for scrutiny those uses of animal-human comparisons that are made in some way to endorse racist perspectives, as Hayden does in his poetry, yet the same poets often also include animal-human comparisons that align in tone with those of Levertov. Black poets during this time period add their voices to the vibrant discussion going on within the world of poetry at the time about exactly which perspectives on animals, humans, and the relationships between the two, are harmful, ignorant, and ultimately unenlightening, and which perspectives might in some way serve a better awareness and understanding of animality and humanity.

The poetry of Derek Walcott, while technically African Caribbean rather than African American, merits attention because it brings these issues into relief as well as that of almost any other poet, whether American in particular or North American in general. His work dexterously handles the contradictory urges to embrace animal-human comparisons and to keep them at arm’s length. If animal-human comparisons are a double-edged sword to a poet concerned with
race, then Walcott finds a way to wield it with both ferocity and grace. His passionate poem “A Far Cry from Africa,” for instance, begins with both anthropomorphism and zoomorphism:

A wind is ruffling the tawny pelt
Of Africa. Kikuyu, quick as flies,
Batten upon the bloodstreams of the veldt.
Corpses are scattered through a paradise.
Only the worm, colonel of carrion, cries:
“Waste no compassion on these separate dead!” (1-6)

Here the very continent of Africa is an animal with a “tawny pelt” for its geography, and the Mau Mau fighters of the East African Kikuyu tribe are aptly described as flies, both for their appearances on an animal’s hide and their status as persistent nuisances and pests to the British colonial settlers in Kenya. Yet the animal-human comparisons apply to both ends of the pole: a continent and its people are animals, yet the actual animals, meager worms no less, are described as humans, even as humans of high military rank, and are humanized further by being awarded the only speaking line in the entire poem. These anthropomorphisms and zoomorphisms work in both directions, of course, as the term “colonel of carrion” should call to mind two subjects: the worm itself, who wins final control over the casualties of war, but also the leadership of the British military (the only people to whom the term “colonel” could literally apply) fighting insurrection, whose agency bears the ultimate responsibility of producing most of the “carrion” in the first place. Walcott’s poem jumbles up any regular orientations towards the great chain of being by beginning with a group of animal-human comparisons that have multiple referents, collapsing the gap between human and animal.
Of course, all of the human-animal comparisons in this case ultimately serve a larger meditation on the relationship between violence and ideas of racial superiority. Still, those comparisons expand the scope of that meditation even further, so that questions about the nature of violence overlap with questions about the differences and similarities between people and animals. Walcott makes a tongue-in-cheek reference to the way that social Darwinism and ideas of racial purity and superiority stimulate universal endorsements of violent conflict in the line “The gorilla wrestles with the superman” (25), but, as the line itself includes a sly reference to the ignoble comparison between Africans and apes, Walcott also considers how those ideas might relate to animal-human comparisons in general:

The violence of beast on beast is read
As natural law, but upright man
Seeks his divinity by inflicting pain. (15-17)

The comparison pits primality against civility, but the examples given undermine the typical inclination to prefer the latter over the former. If animals fight for food or survival according to “natural law,” then humanity’s tendency to fight for group dominance, or for the sake of beliefs and ideologies, whether religious or social, can only be seen as proceeding from a law unnatural. The markers used to separate animal and human from each other only extend this indictment: the adjective “upright,” an indicator of having evolved into a form of life superior to other species, rings sarcastically here, and in this case “divinity” is a status achieved by the basest and unholiest of means. Walcott implicitly sorts into two groups a list of qualities specific to either animals or humans: one side includes violence as part of a natural cycle or order, and the other side includes systematic violence operating behind the appearance of civility and the accompanying religious and social beliefs. Although Walcott does not seek to reconsider the
status of animals here, as other twentieth-century poets do, he undermines anthropocentric perspectives no less passionately.

Other African American poets also focus on how animal-human comparisons factor into dynamics of race. Gwendolyn Brooks’ poem “The Life of Lincoln West,” first published in 1970, tells the story of its main character, singled out for his “savage Negro” features, but, rather than repudiate the animal-human comparisons derisively placed onto blacks by whites, it revises and reclaims them. This occurs rather incidentally, as the main theme of the poem concerns the way people react to racial appearance in the case of the character Lincoln West, “a little boy who has African features, and African features are not considered beautiful in the West. So nobody feels that he is pretty at all and this is made plain to him” (Brooks 117) over the course of his life through various other characters, like his kindergarten teacher “whose / concern for him was composed of one / part sympathy and two parts repulsion” (48-50) and, while walking him home one day out of pity at his loneliness, “had not walked far before / she regretted it. The little monkey. / Must everyone look?” (66-68). Another character in the poem draws out the full implications, complete with its racial tones, of these animal comparisons that plague Lincoln West:

One day, while he was yet seven,
a thing happened. In the down-town movies
with his mother a white
man in the seat beside him whispered
loudly to a companion, and pointed at
the little Linc.
“THERE! That’s the kind I’ve been wanting
to show you! One of the best
examples of the specie. Not like
those diluted Negroes you see so much of on
the streets these days, but the
real thing.
Black, ugly, and odd. You
can see the savagery. The blunt
blankness. That is the real
thing.” (97-112)

A surprising turning point in the poem occurs here, in which Lincoln West begins to find consolation in the animal comparisons imposed on him, so that he can “zero in on the fact that he is the real thing, as somebody has said of him, not meaning it as a compliment. But he takes it as a compliment . . . feeling quite happy about himself, although not understanding why” (Brooks 117). In this way the poem offers an example that typifies *signifyin’*, a major element of the black experience in American history and a means of coping with the oppressing gaze of the majority culture by reclaiming and redirecting the tools and terminology they use. Much earlier in the poem Lincoln West’s strong character and loving qualities are mentioned as a contrast to his appearance, but they are casually framed within his kinship with animals: “What a pity what a pity. No love / for one so loving. The little Lincoln / loved Everybody. Ants. The changing / caterpillar. His much-missing mother. / His kindergarten teacher.” (43-47). Brooks, through her character Lincoln West, performs a delicate operation here: she addresses the ugly associations and implications animal-human comparisons have for race relations so that they can be cleansed, renovated, and rehabilitated for their proper use of pointing up the ideal kinship among animals and humans. Even more impressively, she does so while simultaneously exposing the harshness of racism and its effects on the self-perceptions of those who suffer because of it, and presenting possibly recuperative means of responding to such racism.
Another Analogue: Adrienne Rich

The Black Arts Movement coincided with the beginning of Second Wave Feminism, and poets concerning themselves with issues of gender more so than issues of race still very often use animal-human comparisons along similar parallels. Adrienne Rich serves as a fine example of a poet and feminist whose work, although not immediately concerned with animals, begins as essentially anthropocentric but moves away from, and even against, such an orientation during the 60s and 70s. Rich occasionally uses animal imagery and human-animal comparisons in order to explore elements of human nature, but over time those comparisons and images place more importance and positivity on animality relative to humanity. Take, for instance, two of her most widely read poems: “Aunt Jennifer’s Tigers,” published in 1951 as part of Rich’s first collection of poetry, and “Diving into the Wreck,” published in 1973. Although very different in form and in length, both poems adopt complex attitudes towards patriarchal society, and both use animal imagery to illustrate them. In the earlier Rich poem, Aunt Jennifer must “fear . . . men” (3), unlike the tigers in the jungle scenery she stitches, and feel “The massive weight of Uncle’s wedding band” (7). The tigers represent a freedom, independence, and wildness Aunt Jennifer yearns for but, stuck within her social role, can only experience through her artistic endeavors, and even those within quite a small scope and of a very domestic nature. Yet this small experience is championed to the extent that, even after Aunt Jennifer’s death, “The tigers in the panel that she made / Will go on prancing, proud and unafraid” (11-12). Still, the animal symbolism, despite being central to the poem, and uniformly positive, lacks concreteness and immediacy, as if being held at arm’s length, a small consolation for the confined social reality that Aunt Jennifer, and women in general, must endure. Like the form of the poem itself, fixed within the traditional iambic pentameter of heroic couplets, the animal symbolism is ultimately
rendered without potential for real change, surprise, or transformation. It offers the pleasant
dream of assuming some animalistic qualities, but nothing more than a dream.

“Diving into the Wreck,” written about twenty years after “Aunt Jennifer’s Tigers,”
moves beyond simple dreaming or, if it does not, at the very least includes a serious plan for
action, and even revolution, based on its dreaming. Unlike “Aunt Jennifer’s Tigers,” it assumes
a very loose free verse, complete with wildly changing line lengths, and enjambments that cross
stanza breaks. Although both poems concern themselves with adopting a feminist desire for
change, and ultimately focus on the human, not the animal, “Diving into the Wreck” uses
zoomorphism as the means of enacting that change. The animal aspects begin with a simple
comparison as, early in the poem, the speaker crawls “like an insect down the ladder” (30) into
the ocean. Still, choosing as a point of comparison an animal class that can undergo
metamorphosis during its life cycle emphasizes the transformative aspects of the speaker’s
search for new identity. After all, the following lines officially begin the journey of self-
discovery by descending into the ocean, reversing the direction of Darwinian evolution, although
without much of a feeling of certainty about it: “there is no one / to tell me when the ocean / will
begin” (31-33). The change in the speaker, however, becomes less symbolic, and comparison
gives way to a more literal description:

And I am here, the mermaid whose dark hair
streams black, the merman in his armored body
We circle silently
about the wreck
we dive into the hold.
I am she: I am he (72-77)
Rich’s poem about the search for a new way of thinking about gender roles involves a speaker who changes species, not just gender. Far from the contemplation and dreaming of “Aunt Jennifer’s Tigers,” in “Diving into the Wreck” Rich seeks to enact a revolution against obsolete myths about men and women, yet she chooses the process of becoming an animal-human hybrid as her model for this revolution, and emerges with something akin to the end of Levertov’s “Song for Ishtar.” While Rich encourages her reader to explore and critique the continuities and differences between genders, she invokes as its parallel the continuities and differences between animals and humans, something equally in need of reexamination. Although Rich’s focus on feminist issues in her poetry remains a constant throughout her oeuvre, the nature of her combination of animal-human comparisons with those issues changes over time, so that identification with animal aspects only increases in earnestness, immediacy, and intensity.

**Regularizing Positive Animal Associations in the 1960s:**

**The Transition from Mid-Century to Late-Century**

Denise Levertov

Numerous poetic careers that developed in the middle of (or latter half of) the twentieth century trace, in some way, the trajectory taken in Jarrell’s and Hayden’s, at least where animal figurations are concerned. A great many American poets, writing during and after the mid-point of the century, at various stages in their career undergo some kind of change in their orientation towards animals. This change invariably consists of a movement away from anthropocentrism. Gwendolyn Brooks, Denise Levertov, and Adrienne Rich all fit this trajectory in different ways. Often times the change is gradual, and frequently it arises as an augmentation of a valuation of animals already present earlier in their poetry (simply a closer association with them, a higher reverence for them, etc.), but American poets writing after modernism, much more often than
not, demonstrate some kind of increase in the frequency and/or intensity of animal figurations in
general, and particularly of comparisons between animals and humans that allow generous
respect for the animal side of the comparison. Examining the animal figurations in a poet’s early
work in relation to those in the poet’s later work very often bears this out. Although the timing
of such changes or increases in a poet’s work varies from poet to poet, the 1960s (perhaps
extending from the late 50s into the early or middle 70s) seem to coincide with many such
changes. Such is the case with Denise Levertov.

An example from the 1970s of Levertov looking back and out on the landscape of poetry
and taking stock of the options and trends present at the time will perhaps help to demonstrate
this attitude Levertov had by then developed towards animals and humans in relation to each
other. In 1973, in response to the death of Chilean poet Pablo Neruda, Levertov published an
essay titled “Poetry and Revolution: Neruda Is Dead – Neruda Lives.” By this time Levertov
had already for some time been fully dedicating her time and energy, and a great deal of her
poetry, to the antiwar movement. As such, the essay examines and celebrates Neruda’s
achievements in order to explore the question, so dear to Levertov’s heart at the time, of the
place of politics in poetry. In it Levertov lauds Neruda for the reason that his “genius lay
precisely in his having frequently fused the polemical and lyrical impulses into an unusual
degree of unity” while lamenting that “English-language poets present few relevant examples” of
such an accomplishment, presumably in large part due to the tradition of valuing poetry that
abstains from “stooping” to issues of politics (130). Levertov saw in this aspect of Neruda an
indication of how political aspects of poetry could potentially be harnessed for the development
of the genre, and considered Neruda to be a model for herself and for other poets in this way.
Later in the essay, however, Levertov outlines some of the larger values she sees at the core of Neruda’s political-poetic ethos:

Neruda’s revolutionary politics is founded in revolutionary love – the same love Che Guevara spoke of. Revolutionary love subsumes a bitter anger against oppression and oppressors . . . But revolutionary love is not merely anthropocentric; it reaches out to the rest of creation. Neruda’s celebration of animals . . . of vegetables . . . are not irrelevant, dispensable, coincidental to his revolutionary convictions, but an integral part of them (133-134).

Levertov’s comments about Neruda’s poetry apply equally to her own. She considers her poetry and her politics to share a common source in a foundational orientation and worldview of anti-anthropocentrism, as she feels Neruda’s does.

This point is easy to miss. The attention given to the poetry Levertov was writing and publishing around the time of this essay, for instance, focuses on the political, antiwar aspects of Levertov’s poetry with little mention of the significance of the animal and human figurations therein. Levertov herself understandably contributed to such a dynamic through her focus on the more immediate goal of her cause at the time to formulate, clarify, and express emotions and ideas about the current war in Vietnam: her references in other later works of prose to the concept of “the anthropocentric view of Man” and “anthropocentric arrogance” (179) were almost always made in service either to the antiwar cause or to environmentalism, as in when anthropocentrism “leads mankind to exploit Nature instead of respecting and harmonizing with Nature” (183). In Levertov’s poetry (both in its lyrical and its polemical forms), however, we see clearer and more direct manifestations of Levertov’s anti-anthropocentrism. Yet, similar to
what we have already seen within the critical responses to Marianne Moore and Robinson Jeffers, Levertov’s attitudes towards animals and humans are often mistaken as incidental or coincidental, as only symptomatic of larger concepts or issues in her poetry, when more often than not the “larger concepts” are themselves born out of her meditations on what it means to be animal and/or human.

The extant trends within the accumulated body of critical work on Levertov’s oeuvre bear out a similar dynamic: assessments of her uses of animal-human comparisons are almost exclusively found buried within examinations of other aspects of her poetry, such as gender issues, political issues, or themes of family, sexuality, etc. In her poems’ comparisons between animals and humans, scholars much more often than not see her concepts of anti-anthropocentrism as subordinate supporting elements to larger causes, as simple demonstrations made in the service of larger and more important points. These critical observations are extremely useful in that these assessments of such aspects in Levertov’s work almost always align in an agreement with my own assessments in almost every way, usually with the only exception being one of emphasis. These “greater concerns” of Levertov then, these concepts of ethics, identity, politics, etc., can actually be seen as coming out of Levertov’s fundamental concepts about human life forms and their duties to and relationships with other life forms, whether human or animal (or vegetable or mineral, although that would proceed into subjects outside the bounds of this study). Following along the lines of my manner of revising the canons of critical work on Jeffers and Moore, I hope to resuscitate the level of importance to be placed on Levertov’s attention to animals and humans in relationship to each other, casting it as of primary importance rather than secondary.
Take, for instance, an early collection of Levertov’s poems, *Overland to the Islands*, published in 1958. A poem in the collection, “Illustrious Ancestors,” is rightfully interpreted by Levertov biographers and scholars alike as a paean to the Hasidic ancestry on her father’s side and a conscious placement of Levertov’s philosophy of poetics and poetic voice within a tradition of Jewish (and ultimately Judeo-Christian) mysticism. Paul A. Lacey reads in it lessons that apply equally to students of poetry as to students of religion: avoiding “a temptation to greater pride in the piling up of power” in order to focus “on ‘listening well’ and praying with’ the tools and furniture of his workaday life” (qtd. in Bloom 71) and Donna Hollenberg sees the poem as evidence that “her interest in Hasidism was awakened” and that “she allies her poetics with her religious heritage, drawing directly from Buber’s *Tales of the Hasidism*” (150). Yet, of the poem’s eighteen lines, one third of them refer to animals, in this case birds. The rabbi of the poem

\[
\text{. . . declined,}
\]
\[
\text{in his youth, to learn the}
\]
\[
\text{language of birds, because}
\]
\[
\text{the extraneous did not interest him; nevertheless}
\]
\[
\text{when he grew old it was found}
\]
\[
\text{he understood them anyway, having}
\]
\[
\text{listened well, and as it is said, ‘prayed}
\]
\[
\text{with the bench and the floor.’ He used}
\]
\[
\text{what was at hand (2-10)}
\]

The vehicle within the poem by which Lacey and Hollenberg’s interpretations come to fruition is the acquisition of an Adamic ability to communicate with animals. Specifically, the allegiance Hollenberg identifies between Levertov’s poetics and her religious heritage is made by way of
attunement to animal “speech” and is presented in blunt and direct fashion with the intrusion of the first person:

Well, I would like to make,

thinking some line still taut between me and them,

poems direct as what the birds said,

hard as floor, sound as a bench (13-16)

In fact, of the two thrusts of the poem, one towards connection with the speaker’s ancestors and one towards connection with animals, it’s not quite clear which thrust is the means and which thrust is the end. Is the speaker vowing to “learn the language of birds” in order to connect with her ancestors? Or does her connection to her heritage serve the purpose of making poetry that captures the authenticity and immediacy of an “animal” voice? Either way the poem espouses a promise to develop a poetics of “what the birds said.” Lacey concedes that “there might be the danger of pride in the Rav’s decision that the language of the birds was uninteresting and extraneous” (qtd. in Bloom 71), yet he braves repeating the Rav’s same dangerously dismissive decision himself, as he offers little further attention to the subject of the birds in the poem while devoting lengthy development to the subjects of family, inheritance, poetics, religion, and tradition. Likewise, the biographer Hollenberg admits that “as Levertov explained later, she had read, in Mircea Eliade’s Patterns in Comparative Religion, that becoming conversant with the language of animals, especially birds, ‘symbolizes access to the transcendent reality,’ a concept that corresponded with her myth of pilgrimage, or ‘passage from one spiritual state into another’” (150). Hollenberg continues to elaborate on Levertov’s growing interest in Hasidic mysticism, prayer, and religion, but with no further mention of animals. A key element to
Levertov’s attitudes towards ethics, philosophy, politics, and religion is being overlooked here, and an element that merits attention as a central subject of Levertov’s in its own right.

Yet, Hollenberg and Lacey’s observations are invaluable in their application to some of Levertov’s other poems: they help illuminate the connections and overlaps between Levertov’s thinking about animal-human figurations and her thinking about philosophical and religious issues. For example, both critics cite Levertov’s extensive reading of the Hasidic philosopher Martin Buber and see her as drawing directly from his writing in “Illustrious Ancestors.” This helps us identify a poem of one of Levertov’s later collections, 1967’s *The Sorrow Dance*, titled “The Cat as Cat,” while more unmistakably an animal poem, as occupying an intersection, similar to that of “Illustrious Ancestors,” of animal relations and existential or religious thought. The speaker of the poem emphatically stakes out an anti-anthropocentric position by philosophizing that “the cat on my bosom” (1) “is a metaphor only if I / force him to be one” (5-6), yet the poem concludes with a reference to Buber’s best known concept, addressing the cat directly: “I-Thou, cat, I-Thou” (16). Here we see a wonderful compatibility between a focus on animal-human comparisons and the focus of critics like Hollenberg and Lacey, in that Levertov seems to have quite often been thinking about questions of animality and humanity while concurrently considering philosophical and religious questions. Hollenberg herself inadvertently identifies other such sites in Levertov’s poem “Wings in the Pedlar’s Pack,” and in her essay “The Sack Full of Wings,” which refers to a “pedlar’s sack [that] contained ‘wings which would enable people to fly like birds,’ and he [the Rav] later interpreted that knowledge to incorporate the Gospel of Jesus as the Messiah” (11). The flying like birds here seems like a sequential progression from the poetics of talking like birds as outlined in “Illustrious Ancestors.” Hollenberg even happens to mention that “in ‘Nativity: An Alterpiece,’ referring to an
anonymous church artifact, Levertov posits that the ‘wondering animals’ recognized the spiritual significance of Christ’s birth before the wise men or the sleeping shepherds did” (385).

Another poem, the title poem of *Overland to the Islands*, receives an illustrative reading of another scholar managing the outcome of looking at a Levertov animal poem through a perspective within which animal-human issues are not central. Glenn Sheldon, in his study of “the relationships, direct or indirect, of poets visiting Mexico and writing poems that grapple with issues of the self and others, issues that become prominent because of geographical and cultural dislocations” (2), includes Levertov in his study because of her time spent living in Mexico from 1956 to 1958. As such, Sheldon’s examination of “Overland to the Islands” focuses on the representation of the Mexican landscape and topography, but must find a way to incorporate the fact that the majority of the poem is presented through the perspective of a dog. This leads to an attitude towards the poem that observes in the first two lines (“Let’s go – much as that dog goes, / intently haphazard”) “a valuing of curiosity about places known but not yet totally known” (133) with only minor considerations of how Levertov might be presenting a valuing of animal perspectives. Somehow gender perspectives (implicitly masculine tourist attitudes here being undermined, ostensibly), in fact, receive more attention and development than animal perspectives (which I would offer as more dramatically juxtaposed than whatever might represent stereotypical tourist perspectives). It should be noted that other critics do come much closer to paying significant attention to the animal aspects of the poem. Diana Surman Collecott argues that “the dog is the projective movement of the poem: his interest leads us from one perception to the next. Levertov has no inhibition about presenting the dog . . . as a model for the poet” (112-13, Surman’s emphasis) and Julian Gitzen sees that Levertov “commends as an example for humans the forward progress of a dog” (127). Sheldon too makes an admission
“that Levertov counsels us to remain, like the dog, with our imaginations active,” but the larger concepts addressed by Sheldon (“engagement of the unfolding moment,” nonlinear movement, “an invitation to experience Mexico firsthand” [as opposed to an invitation to experience the perspective of an animal firsthand], immersion in Mexican culture, etc.) are not directly connected to the aspects of unity between the dog and the speaker of the poem (134). Again, many of these concepts and observations offer a valuable opportunity to be recast as elements that would operate very comfortably as supplements of Levertov’s concept of anti-anthropocentrism.

Perhaps the epitome of this dynamic, returning to Levertov’s meditations on the place of politics in poetry (and vice versa), especially in the context of the anti-Vietnam War movement, is seen in the heated responses, both critical and mainstream, to the poem “Life at War,” from Levertov’s 1967 collection The Sorrow Dance. Critics, poets, and content-sensitive readers of all kinds had strong reactions to the graphic lines that grabbed audiences’ attention, including references to specific anatomically detailed results of war on its human casualties, such as “the scheduled breaking open of breasts” (28), “the entrails of still-alive babies” (29), and, perhaps the most salacious of all, “implosion of skinned penises into carcass-gulleys” (31). Although many critics applauded the poem’s use of a style of language both physical and philosophical to evoke visceral responses to the horrors of war, several other “critics have felt the language too strong or the subject too taboo” (Rodgers 82). Contemporary readers objected to what was deemed an excessive shock value; others quibbled with what they saw as a sacrifice of artistry at the altar of anti-war didacticism, polemicism, and rhetoric. The poem was seen as using a “shocking . . . profoundly disturbing . . . unflinching directness of imagery” (Marten 18) and having an “extremity of images” that bordered “on polemical cliché and sentimentality” from
which it would “take several volumes before Levertov can begin to regain her equilibrium” (Smith 160). Levertov was accused of using “pity for the cruelty of war as her primary antiwar argument” and in order to convey this pity “she employs a technique combining heightened emotion with a blunt immediacy that brings the war before our eyes more vividly than we probably wish” (Stout 224). Most painful for Levertov herself, the poem even resulted in an ensuing “rift between her and Robert Duncan, the second most important man in her life” (Hollenberg 224) over

his belated response . . . in a letter written six months after receiving the poem, [which] asked Levertov what ‘root in [her]’ had given rise to the violent imagery in the lines that refer to the ‘scheduled breaking open of breasts’ and other physical horrors. Looking back in 1975, after their friendship had ended, Levertov remembered Duncan’s question about the violent imagery in ‘Life at War’ as the beginning of a loss of mutual understanding (228).

Understandably, then, these aspects of the poem, its physicality, its violent imagery, and its embrace of politics and direct rhetoric (it being “the first poem she had written from an antiwar perspective that referred explicitly to Vietnam” [224]) receive so much of the lion’s share of its attention that it’s no wonder little attention is paid to the poem being as much about the relationships between animals and humans as it is about the Vietnam War.

In fact, the stanza containing the violent imagery that led to so much attention and controversy (and the destruction of one of Levertov’s most important poetic collaborations) operates grammatically as only the second half of a dependent clause, the first half of which is composed of a series of animal-human comparisons. The extended noun clause is presented as
an essential quandary of human nature, as an etiology of the source of its potential for ethical
decay, and as synonymous with the war:

the knowledge that humankind,

delicate Man, whose flesh

responds to a caress, whose eyes

are flowers that perceive the stars,

whose music excels the music of the birds,

whose laughter matches the laughter of dogs,

whose understanding manifests designs

fairer than the spider’s most intricate web (19-26)

These lines, of course, set up the shockingly violent images that follow: humans have so many
positive capabilities, yet have equally astounding capacity for dehumanization and destruction on
mass scales, particularly through the processes of war. Yet this poem, so often accused of being
overly blunt and didactic in its condemnation of war, actually couches its argument within a
broader statement about human nature as juxtaposed with animal nature. Contrary to the
common argument that humanity’s potential for war draws its source from the animalistic
aspects of its nature, Levertov’s poem presents animal aspects as the counterweight to
humanity’s indulgences in violence, and equates humanity’s path towards positive creation and
harmony as a logical extension of and progression from what nature and animals already present.

What is commonly (and correctly) taken to be a condemnation war in general (and the Vietnam
War in particular) is also a prescription for peace and ethical growth, which Levertov imagines as humans following, and eventually exceeding, what animals model for us in nature.

Animals mark many of Levertov’s poems, regardless of when in her career they were written, and the animal figurations in even her earliest poetry communicate much more awe and reverence, and much less ambiguity, than say the animal figurations of early Jarrell, or of Robert Hayden at any point. Yet, Levertov’s first few collections of poetry, as full of animals as they are, very rarely include animal figurations not used as symbols, or as tools of defamiliarization. The title poem of her second collection of poetry, *The Sharks* (1952), is a dark contemplation of danger and mystery, but ultimately stays within typical associations people have with sharks (although the poem is often mentioned, even many years later, in the letters between Levertov and Robert Duncan, who in a 1963 letter, for instance, calls it one of the “fulfillments of the earlier poems” [433]).

Later in the 1950s Levertov would experiment by juxtaposing the natures of different images and objects with each other, which had a very interesting effect on her animal imagery. For instance, in “Pleasures” she mixes the animate with the inanimate and a “discovery of the unknown within the known” (Collecott 66), describing “Gull feathers of glass, hidden / in white pulp: the bones of squid / which I pull out and lay / blade by blade on the draining board” (6-9). Her surrealist “The Dog of Art” greatly expands the symbolic use of animals that characterize her very early poetry: “That dog with daisies for eyes / who flashes forth / flame of his very self at every bark / is the Dog of Art” which “turns to the world / the quietness of his eyes” (1-4, 14-15). Animal imagery for Levertov, at this point, has taken on great significance, but only in the 1960s does she begin to present an overlap between animal identity and human identity in some of her poems (as in “The Cat as Cat,” mentioned above), blurring the distinction between animal
and speaker, as she does in “Song for Ishtar,” the opening poem of her 1964 collection *O Taste and See*.

If its composition can be treated as an event, “Song for Ishtar” straddles what Levertov biographer Dana Greene marks as a possible turning point in Levertov’s concept of her poetic career and herself as poet. The poem was initially composed in 1959, and was first published in a magazine in 1962 before leading off 1964’s *O Taste and See*, but between first composition and first publication Levertov experienced a kind of poetic initiation, an event Greene uses to bookend the chapter of her biography titled “The Making of a Poet.” During the summer of 1961, Levertov’s husband had been “commissioned to write a travel article on Greece” (72), affording Levertov the opportunity to accompany him and to make a pilgrimage to the shrine of Apollo “high in the mountains of Greece . . . [at] Delphi, the sacred center of the world, the place where heaven and earth meet” (50), an experience Levertov references in her poem “The Prayer.” At the shrine Levertov

took her ‘final vows’ to poetry . . . praying that the flame of the poem be kept alive in her. Although she became violently ill when she drank water from a nearby brackish spring, she nonetheless sang and danced. She speculated that perhaps it was not Apollo who heard her, but another god, Dionysus, the one she claimed as name-patron. . . . Her vocation was irrevocable” (50).

What Greene sees as a turning point in Levertov’s vocation as poet happens to coincide with a dramatic change in her treatment of animal imagery, which in turn takes its cues from her experimentation with surprising identities for the speakers of her poems, often seen as part of Levertov’s re-visioning of herself as poet or speaker. Robert Duncan happens to locate such a
dramatic change a few years earlier than 1961, in a poetic sequence Levertov composed in the mid-50s, as he tells her directly in a letter to her in 1963. Making an attempt “at recalling phases in my reading your work” (430), Duncan says that “‘An Innocent’ I, II, and III open a new phase in your work. . . . These three all operate on a two-fold sight: where the cat and the scavenger are also the artist. The earlier poems has advanced ideas of the poem; now ideas of the poet emerge clearly” (432). Here Duncan’s “I, II, and III” actually refer to “The Innocent” and the first and second versions of “An Innocent,” respectively, the first of which is a meditation on the “innocence” of a cat hunting and killing a mouse, ending with the line “How cruel the cat is to our guilty eyes” (11). In any event, wherever in the Levertov chronology one locates her transformation into anti-anthropocentrist, Duncan and Greene each offer examples of how changes in the way Levertov represents animals and humans in her poetry accompany larger-scale developments in her progression as a poet.

A meditation on the ancient Babylonian goddess and the moon, Levertov’s “Song for Ishtar” creates a shared identity among animal, earth, and human in the way it mixes animal imagery with nature imagery, presented as part of the first-person speaker:

The moon is a sow
and grunts in my throat
Her great shining shines through me
so the mud of my hollow gleams
and breaks in silver bubbles

She is a sow
and I a pig and a poet
When she opens her white
lips to devour me I bite back
and laughter rocks the moon

In the black of desire
we rock and grunt, grunt and
shine (1-13)

The “I” of the poem, simultaneously moon, pig, and poet, ultimately becomes the “we” of the last two lines. Shared identity with animals becomes a somewhat common theme in American poetry beginning in the 60s: first-person deliveries from animal-poet-speakers appear in poems by Dickey, Kinnell, Snyder, and others during the 60s and 70s (not to mention Jarrell’s Bat-Poet for children). Furthermore, sharing identity with some form of animal nature, from this time period forward, is far more often than not presented as positive, if not sacred and honorable, as opposed to the negativity, the shamefulness, and the degradation typical within early-century poets’ depictions of humanity mixing with animality. Directness and simplicity usually characterizes these mid-century and late-century amalgamations with the animal: the guarded reiterations Jeffers often found necessary no longer need to appear. At one time in the history of American poetry, mixing the animal and the human resulted in “Apeneck Sweeney.” Fifty years later, the speakers of American poems could “rock and grunt, grunt and shine,” without any shame, in a uniformly positive tone.

Levertov’s later poetry extends this trajectory. Her collection The Sorrow Dance (1967), directly following O Taste and See, also opens with a first-person poem laden with identity
issues and animal overtones, as the “central tension” in “The Wings” “revolves around the
unknown contents of a heavy black hump the speaker carries on her back” (Pope 88). Before
resting on the uneasy conclusion that the hump might contain two very different “embryo wings”
(29), the speaker asks, “But what if, / like a camel, it’s / pure energy I store, / and carry humped
and heavy?” (15-18). Only two years later the poem “Wings of a God” reimagines “Zeus’s rape
of the swan as poetic transformation” (Sadoff 251), again with a female, first-person, poet-
speaker invigorated enough by the animal spirit to “rise up / with changed vision, / a singing in
my ears” (22-24). Much later still, in the 1980s, animal-human combinations offer even more
sure-handed and transcendent power in poems like “Man Wearing Bird,” which
extrapolates upon a newspaper account of a mental patient who stopped traffic along a
roadway by standing with two large wings flapping above his head. In a surrealistic re-
vision of this account the poet imagines herself as the patient. The bird, representative of
the abused natural world of “Prisoners” and ancient symbol of the Holy Spirit, is dead
and awaits resurrection through the poet’s prophecy: “It died / for me to find, / to lift like
the Host // and place aloft. . . .” Long a baker of bread, the poet will find her mission in
transubstantiation of the abandoned divinity (Kouidis 270).

“Zeroing In” begins the second section of Levertov’s 1987 collection Breathing the Water, and it
advances a number of steps beyond the simple concept at the heart of “The Innocent,” written
more than thirty years earlier, and within which Robert Duncan saw a germination of Levertov’s
identity as poet. Further exploring the concept of “innocent violence” and its potential within
both animals and humans alike, Levertov presents “the story of a dog . . . which had to be put
down because it bit a child who touched an injured spot on its head; at the end of the poem the
woman says” (Wakoski 55):
“Yes, we learn that.
It’s not terror, it’s pain we’re talking about:
those places in us, like your dog’s bruised head,
that are bruised forever, that time
never assuages, never” (32-36).

Here Levertov maps out a landscape of overlapping territory in the animal kingdom, concepts and experiences shared by animals and humans; she offers a connecting comparison that likens humans to animals as much as, or even more than, the other way around. The human element is presented in animal terms without “bringing it down,” without degrading or demeaning its dignity, morality, or value. Levertov’s poetic progression, like so many others writing poetry during the latter half of the century, spans a movement from mild anti-anthropocentrism to full anti-anthropocentrism.
Works Cited


Sadoff, Dianne T. “Mythopoeia, the Moon, and Contemporary Women’s Poetry.” Wagner Martin 245-54.


Chapter Four: The 60s, 70s, and Beyond

Registering A Change In Context

The trajectory of animal figurations in American poetry over the course of the twentieth century follows a slow and steady course: animals gradually receive more importance and reverence, and terms of comparison and communion between animals and humans progressively shift their center away from the human and towards the animal. Although the middle decades of the century see perhaps the most dramatic results of the push in this direction, as seen in the last chapter, this change doesn’t slow down with the end of the 1960s or 1970s; the shift towards the animal continues.

At some point late in the century, however, this mode and/or orientation takes on the status of being a matter of fact. At some point during the middle decades, probably by the end of the 1960s and certainly by the end of the 1970s, highly valuing the animal has become the predominant mode in American poetry, the rule rather than the exception. These attitudes and orientations towards issues of animality and humanity, notable for their newness and unfamiliarity during the time of Jeffers and Moore, no longer seem strange or out of place in the landscape of American poetry. For the first time in the century, then, such a rhetorical stance on the subject can be more directly accepted or presumed.

Animal-minded poets of the latter part of the century, then, are allotted more room with which to operate, a greater amount of freedom and a greater number of options than those previously allowed for Jeffers and Moore. Animal-human comparisons can be addressed or presented in a much more casual tone, thanks to the position of anti-anthropocentrism no longer being considered as revolutionary or abnormal to the same extent that it was earlier in the century. Poets can even assume, for the first time in the century, that a fair proportion of their
audiences come to their poetry already exhibiting sympathy to anti-anthropocentric ideas. The strong rhetoric and the careful defensiveness of Jeffers’ “Rock and Hawk,” for instance, or the modest, self-aware, almost self-effacing eccentricities of Moore’s poems, often no longer apply to poets writing about animals after the 1960s. A reverent attitude towards animals, and an anti-anthropocentric attitude, at some point late in the century, even moves more into the background of poetic works, as something presented nonchalantly or even an assumed or implied position not needed to be stated explicitly at all. The late twentieth century eventually provides poets with a gradually won, altogether different atmosphere for poetic meditations on the human and the animal.

**Galway Kinnell**

The poetic career of Galway Kinnell spans this particular change. Moreover, it marks and measures that change with great sensitivity, since Kinnell’s work, from its beginning on, reflects a deep focus on animality. In fact, examining his poetry from a chronological perspective, reveals it to be divided into two overlapping, yet distinct, periods, each on opposing sides of about 1982, the year Kinnell was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry, that together exemplify the change in orientation towards anti-anthropocentrism as outlined above. It is common within the body of literary criticism on Kinnell to describe an “early” Kinnell and a “late” Kinnell. The first registers influences of surrealism, “deep image” poetry, and poetry of the Black Mountain school (although Kinnell himself never admitted to aligning himself with any of these mid-century movements in American poetry), and the second gravitates away from the abstract, the dreamlike, and the fantastic, and moves towards aspects of confessionalism that present experiences of daily life in more conversational tones. This division inevitably oversimplifies Kinnell’s work: many qualities of his poetry bridge both halves. Still, it may be
fruitful to examine these broad changes within the context of Kinnell’s uses of animal nature as subject matter, and to observe possible relationships between these two parallel trajectories in his work.

**Critical Attention to Kinnell’s Animal Figurations**

Critics and readers alike glean the peculiar importance of animals in the poetry of Galway Kinnell, for at least two striking reasons. First, the frequency, and often originality, of Kinnell’s use of animals has caused it to accumulate status as one of his main calling cards. In addition to holding a sacred reverence for animals, which alone wouldn’t merit so much originality, the speakers in Kinnell’s poetry take on animal characteristics themselves. Whereas earlier in the century it is considered revolutionary enough simply to criticize or undermine anthropocentrism, Kinnell takes the stock poetic device of anthropomorphizing animals and reverses the direction of influence, implying that perhaps humans should take on animal attributes rather than the other way around. Second, an awareness of Kinnell’s poetic treatment of animals becomes instrumental in understanding most of his other major methods and themes. Entering the lives of animals serves as a stage for the dramatization of themes like mortality, self-transcendence, experience of the natural world, awareness of oneself as part of that world, and a return to primal, sacred elements of life as it occurs outside human history. Indeed, this poetic process seeks to offer means of healing the wounds that such a history has merited.

The current body of critical work on Kinnell’s poetry already bears this out, as the importance of animals, animal nature, and Kinnell’s particular manipulation of animal-human comparisons is widely recognized as significant, even central. Katarzyna Malecka sees a deep connection between the animal content of Kinnell’s poetry and its manipulations of aspects of form, arguing that he
transfigures poetic personality and tests lyric subjectivity by running them through a more cosmic and “traditional force than human self-absorption or incomprehensible stylistic exercises. His animalization of the self by nature and shifting of identities are well exemplified by his mythical animal poems, “The Bear” and “The Porcupine,” where at times we may have difficulties following the speaker’s true “I” (24).

This process is subordinated to an ethical function, seeking “to bring the human and animal element together without sacrificing the identity of either” (Malecka 78), so that “out of this identity turmoil and through the pain of the suffering animal emerges the poet’s own clear and strong voice, bringing himself, the [animal] and the reader together in search of whatever it is that we share and need to fill this post/modern emptiness caused by, among other things, lack of openness, extreme self-consciousness, fearfulness, or hostility” (24-25). Samuel Maio echoes Malecka’s assessment of Kinnell’s search for the usefulness of poetic animalization: “Kinnell explores the possibilities of changing not merely into another mask, but altogether from the human form into animal form. From this persona, with its shifting perspective, Kinnell attempts to augment his self-knowledge, particularly in order to overcome his speaker’s fear of dying” (104). Linda Cullum adds that Kinnell’s poetry contains implicit invitations for the reader, as “his treatment of death in the animal kingdom calls for us to consider our intimate connection with other beings and our common fate as inhabitants of the same planet” (160). Quite simply, Kinnell’s poems “explore the communality between man and animal” (MacGowan 135).

Other critics note the connections across repeated subjects in Kinnell’s poems. The leitmotif of the connections between animality and humanity become integral to Kinnell’s meditations on other themes. Andrew Taylor elaborates on Cullum’s assessment of Kinnell’s poetic purpose of finding meaning in death, emphasizing that his poems “do not involve death as
we usually think of it. Rather, it is a withdrawal to a prehuman or preconscious state, an ‘animal’ state, consistently represented by animal imagery” (qtd. in Nelson 30-31). Lee Zimmerman considers Kinnell’s animal-human comparisons to be a certain integral manifestation of his poems’ implied core value of compassionate mindfulness, of “an awareness of how far we must come to meet the world halfway,” and of “the continually renewed need to discover the world” (95). Charles Molesworth, in an essay published during the early half of Kinnell’s career (in 1979), defines this as an ethics of empathy, and casts the significance of Kinnell’s animal poems in a broad perspective. He sees Kinnell’s poems as vehicles in which Kinnell moves most clearly beyond the suspension of irony toward the immersion of empathy, and they are, I believe, sure indicators of a new postmodern aesthetic in contemporary American poetry. By empathy I mean something other than Keats’s “negative capability,” though that concept forms part of Kinnell’s poetics. Empathy in Kinnell’s poetry, however, results in an important way at the edges of experience, that boundary along which the organism and the environment become interdefinitional. (qtd. in Nelson 52-53)

That Molesworth writes this in 1979 is important as, if we are to accept his pronouncement of this “new aesthetic” in American poetry, it might simultaneously serve as a marker for the late-century changes in animal-human figurations described above, interconnected with these broader changes in ethics and aesthetics.

Kinnell’s Interviews

One of the reasons Kinnell criticism acknowledges and emphasizes the significance of animal imagery and animal-human associations to an extent not quite found in Jeffers criticism, Moore criticism, Jarrell criticism, or Levertov criticism, is that Kinnell makes so many explicit
statements about their significance in his essays and interviews. Much of what Kinnell says on these matters is presented in terms of problems and solutions, and of concepts and concerns with large stakes, and thus creates a function for the literary criticism to serve in exploring and explicating how these concepts appear in his poetry. In a 1981 conversation with Pearl London, for instance, Kinnell frames his comments of the presentation of animals and nature in poetry within a broadly historical and spiritual context:

> Once the Christians projected everything sacred, including themselves, to heaven, nature became, so to speak, a kind of inert matter. Once the notion of heaven has disappeared from the earth, nothing on earth is sacred. I think that’s the source of what we call alienation. The realization that animals are our ancestors and that the planet and the creatures that make it up are our ancestors is not very startling. Obviously they are our only ancestors. We were not set down here from heaven. We are as much nature as anything else, and it’s only our special self-regard that makes us draw an absolute division between man and nature. (Neubauer 111)

These comments seem to endorse Molesworth’s assessment of Kinnell’s poetry as embodying this revolution of aesthetics and movement from irony to empathy, and imply a connection between this philosophical attitude and an orientation towards relationships between animals and humans. In fact, Kinnell equates this revolution to a rejection of the “great chain of being” concept, essential to anthropocentric hierarchies: “The idea that we and our creations don’t belong to ‘nature’ comes from the notion that the human being is a special being created in God’s image to have dominion over all else. We are becoming aware of our connection with other beings. That’s hopeful since for several centuries our civilization has done all it could to forget it” (qtd. in Calhoun 21). Here we can see Kinnell confidently taking up a position that
overlaps a great deal with those of Marianne Moore and Robinson Jeffers, but doing so with a directness and ease not found in his predecessors. Whereas Jeffers and Moore, all too aware of the unpopularity of and even hostility towards such a view, felt the need to adopt defenses or disguises when they addressed their audiences, Kinnell does not. Kinnell’s reference to predominant views changing and becoming opposed to those of tradition would not have applied during the early-century context within which Jeffers and Moore wrote, half a century before that of Kinnell. Kinnell can use the collective pronoun “we” in his discussion, knowing that he speaks for a growing number of people who are sympathetic to, or at least understanding of, his view, if they do not share it already; Jeffers and Moore, however, always, from the beginnings of their careers to their deaths, wrote with a painful awareness that their attitudes towards animals and humans predicated an opposition or disagreement between them and their audiences, and the rhetorical stances taken within their poems differ from Kinnell’s accordingly. Kinnell’s “we” refers simultaneously to himself and to his readership, and even to society at large, a situation of which Jeffers and Moore could only dream.

As if such statements that connect Kinnell’s animal concerns to deep philosophical issues weren’t enough to cement their importance to his poetry, Kinnell in his interviews even makes seemingly flippant comments about the desirability and/or potential for animalization. One such comment can help demonstrate differences between “early” Kinnell and “late” Kinnell when it comes to his rhetorical stances towards animal-human comparisons. In his answer to an interviewer’s question of whether or not he thought a person had to be crazy or unbalanced in some way to be a writer, Kinnell responds, “I guess there has to be something wrong with you. If everything were satisfactory, you might sing, as do dolphins, but you certainly wouldn’t sweat out long novels or involved poems” (Lammon 261). The lightheartedness of this comment aside,
Kinnell doesn’t make such a statement simply for effect; the collapsed distinction between animality and humanity here is made in earnest. Yet, the statement, of course, is made partly for effect. The wry, and even smug, tone of the comment betrays an oppositional stance towards anthropocentrists, one that, despite its aspects of levity, might be more closely aligned with a Jeffers than a later Kinnell. The implicit statement of Kinnell’s here is that literary art, coming out of that “special self-regard that makes us draw an absolute division between man and nature” (quoted earlier from Neubauer 111), is fraught with the artificialities, anxieties, and imperfections that mar human communication and that somehow do not exist in the same way for animals, and this implicit meaning is intended to contest the anthropocentric assumption that animal behavior and communication is uncivilized, less complex and organized than, and therefore beneath, that of humans. It is important to note that this “singing dolphin” comment comes in an interview given in 1976, earlier even than either of the other interviews cited above. The anti-anthropocentric stance, both in Kinnell’s interviews and in his poetry, has not yet become comfortably matter-of-fact by this point, although later in his career it does, and even takes a step towards the background in his later work. The poem that perhaps best exemplifies this orientation of “early” Kinnell towards animal-human comparisons is “The Bear,” written during the last few years of the part of Kinnell’s career during which he could still be considered to be blazing the trail for late anti-anthropocentrism.

Kinnell’s Early Poems

From the very beginning of his career, Kinnell holds animals dear to the heart of his poetry. His early poetry during the 60s and 70s, particularly in his collection Body Rags, can be paired quite meaningfully with some of Levertov’s poems. Most similar to Levertov’s “Song for Ishtar” is Kinnell’s poem from Body Rags, “The Bear.” Both poems conclude with a speaker
who has undergone a transformation since the beginning of the poem, moving from description and observation of an animal to taking on the identity of the animal itself. In Kinnell’s poem it comes in the form of a dream vision, but one described in vivid sensory detail, and the speaker awakens while continuing to experience a very real connection to the bear that has just been tracked. As John Felstiner encapsulates it, “The ‘I’ in ‘The Bear,’ an Eskimo hunter, step by step turns bearlike, searching long sentences past mythic way-stations along the ‘fairway of the bears’” (311). “In Kinnell’s mythology, like Yeats’s (or Ovid’s, for that matter), the point is always transformation,” according to Anthony Libby, and “no reader can forget the eucharistic climax of ‘The Bear,’ as the poet hunter enters into communion with the dying bear/god” (Fleming 289). Libby even equates Kinnell’s brutally anatomical and realistic details in “The Bear” as a step towards an authentic (if neoromantic) representation of animals and away from the fabulist treatments of animals that mark earlier poetry:

As critics have suggested, Kinnell’s intention here is to find new life through identification with the other. For Joseph Bruchac the bear is a ‘totem animal,’ ‘a sort of were-bear, a being neither man nor truly natural animal,’ who allows the poet to imagine an ‘initiation rite’ which takes him through death and reincarnation (Nelson 206, 203).

Kinnell imagines this rite, this ‘parabola of bear-transcendence’ (93) in such naturalistic terms that the ancient business of mystic union with the other acquires a new immediacy. Shamanism is cut with magic realism. (289)

In fact, the final lines of “The Bear,” much like the ending of “Song of Ishtar,” present a shared identity with the animal as significant in its means of becoming a source of a new consciousness and new creativity: the “sticky infusion, that rank flavor of blood” is “that poetry, by which I
lived” (93-94), simply a much rawer, grittier version of the concept of “songs of the dolphins” so
tongue-in-cheekly referred to in Kinnell’s interview.

Returning to the significance of those Kinnell interviews, and “The Bear” being a
representative example of the strong rhetorical stance Kinnell adopted both in his early poetry
and in his early interviews, towards anti-anthropocentric causes: that stance was very often made
in relation to clearly-voiced oppositions to the animal aspects in Kinnell’s poetry. Donald Davie,
for instance, literary critic and fellow poet (part of “The Movement” in British poetry), wrote a
particularly scathing review of Kinnell’s work in a 1974 issue of *Parnassus*, singling out “The
Bear” for his most passionate slights:

In a poem like ‘The Bear’ the poet, determined to reach the absolute one way if not
another, and unable to leap above his humanity into the divine, chooses to sink beneath it
into the bestial. It is a sort of transcendence certainly. But what a fearsome
responsibility for a poet, to lead his readers into bestiality. . . . A challenge worthy of a
titan! So Charles Manson may have thought. Will Galway Kinnell choose to be a titan,
or a human being? (qtd. in Nelson 156)

Published just over a year before the interview in which Kinnell makes his “dolphin comment,”
Davie here embodies a potential instigator (and target) of Kinnell’s sassiness in such an
interview. Davie offers an enthusiastic voice of apologists for anthropocentrism at the time.
Such a position no doubt is still adopted among many readers today, especially by those
ascribing to a concept of Christianity that sanctions the value of “reaching the absolute” by way
of “leaping above humanity into the divine” according to the terms as Davie presents them
above, but that position almost certainly has less traction now than it did in the 1970s, and
Davie’s comments, if made today, would be received with much less patience, let alone
acceptance, than it did at the time of publication. Tracing the evolutions and transformations of rhetorical positions regarding animal-human comparisons in poetry over the course of Kinnell’s career in particular (and over the course of the twentieth century in general), chronologically, Davie here may represent one of the last dying cries of a majority endorsement of the concept of the great chain of being in poetry and literature.

In any event, for Kinnell, as for Levertov, a shared identity with animals is a source for poetry. Both poets participate in the relatively new sentiment of the time that, before a poet is able to write about an animal, that poet must use the best imaginative tools at his or her disposal to represent, if not embody, the perspective of the animal itself. Even early in both of their careers, Charles Molesworth identifies the overlapping philosophies of poetics in Kinnell and Levertov, linking Kinnell’s “reflexive act of sensory consciousness” to Levertov’s “definition of organic poetry” as “a method of apperception, i.e., of recognizing what we perceive, and based on an intuition of an order, a form beyond forms, in which forms partake, and of which man’s creative works are analogies, resemblances, natural allegories” (53). During the 60s and 70s Kinnell produced a number of animal poems that sought to associate with animals in various ways, and often differently than in “The Bear.” “Saint Francis and the Sow,” of the same 1968 collection Body Rags, presents communion with animals in a much gentler tone, and a number of characters (including Kinnell’s infant son at the time) share animal identities in The Book of Nightmares, published in 1971, in which entering the lives of animals serves as a stage for dramatizing themes like mortality, self-transcendence, and experience of the natural world. Much as in “Saint Francis and the Sow,” the narrator of “Another Night in the Ruins,” a poem first published in the Paris Review in 1966, experiences a primal, pre-lingual act of communication with a cow as he “hears ‘nothing,’ but this nothing is a presence that unites the
internal world of ‘bones’ with the external one of ‘the cow’” (Zimmerman 96, his emphasis), and in one section of the poem Kinnell presents what might have been a form of Wallace Stevens’ “The Snow Man” if such a poem had revolved around animals rather than around the environment: “I listen. / I hear nothing. Only / the cow, the cow / of nothingness, mooing / down the bones” (30-34). “How Many Nights,” published in Poetry magazine in 1966, inspires Katarzyna Malecka to echo Andrew Taylor’s assessment that Kinnell “senses the pulse of life” in animals and “that Kinnell often needs animal imagery to ‘move back into life,’ . . . here the ‘faint, peaceful breaths . . .’ of a ‘snake, / bear, earthworm, ant . . .’ seem to stand as much for the prospective rebirth as for death, since it is winter and all the creatures are in a state of hibernation” (Malecka 125). The first twenty or twenty-five years of Kinnell’s career coincided with a vigorous rise in the acceptance and importance of associating with animals in American poetry, and his work, like Levertov’s, participated very closely with that revolution against anthropocentrism.

**The Book of Nightmares: Attending to Neglected Animal Associations**

Critics have rightfully devoted plenty of attention to the significance of animals in Kinnell’s poetry, but have focused mainly on a small handful of them: those animals that appear most frequently or that most obviously carry great importance, as have already been discussed above, like the bear, the various birds, the porcupine, the snake, the cow or the sow. Insects, however, have so far garnered little critical examination, certainly far less than they deserve. An examination of insects, particularly the flea, the fly, the louse, and the spider (technically an arachnid, but an insect at least in popular parlance and imagination), and their place within Kinnell’s poetry, particularly his 1971 collection *The Book of Nightmares*, reveals that they hold a deep symbolic significance that differs from the nature of that of other animals for Kinnell, and
provide a crucial medium for him to demonstrate his work’s essential themes of cruelty, love, mortality, and violence. Even more than that, Kinnell’s attention to insects demonstrates a peculiar way in which he commits to representing animals genuinely and to espousing a fully authentic anti-anthropocentrism. What greater challenge for a poet seeking to elicit empathy, sympathy, and fellowship with animals than to take up as a subject those animals commonly considered the most detested, most disgusting, most insignificant, and, paradoxically, the most feared (if measured by frequency of reported phobias) creatures in the animal kingdom?

Insects figure most prominently in one of The Book of Nightmares’ ten sections: the fifth, “In the Hotel of Lost Light.” The speaker begins the section from the position of one lying down in a hotel room bed, in which an alcoholic had previously died. The speaker observes and ruminates on a fly caught in a spider’s web, using it as an opportunity to consider the inevitability, and consistent approach, of death, and how one might prepare for it. After this beginning strophe of the fifth section, its second strophe (each of the collection’s sections has seven) contains a meditation on the insects that must have fed on the deceased alcoholic, both during and after his death, while he lay in the hotel room, indeed, in the very bed in which the speaker currently rests. Insects then disappear from the poem until its seventh and final strophe, which ends with a comparison between the light from the moon and the light from a spider’s eyes. The rest of The Book of Nightmares contains little more than this already small amount of insect imagery in the fifth section of the collection, although insects do appear briefly in other sections, and often at expressly important points. Kinnell constructed The Book of Nightmares with an extremely high level of self-reference, and the appearances of insects, although few they might be, relate very closely and meaningfully to each other. Furthermore, due to this general crisscross of self-references among the sections, the significance of insects in the collection
becomes tangled up with a host of other significant images and themes, a dimension to which I will return later.

Narrowing our focus to Kinnell’s meditation on insects also allows us a special opportunity to contextualize Kinnell chronologically in terms of the course of American poetry. Kinnell, here still operating in the “early” part of his career, sought to legitimize his focus on animals by invoking a tradition of animal poets that came before him. As we acknowledge and consider the relationship between Kinnell’s use of insects and the way members of his American poetic heritage have used insects in their work, specifically Emily Dickinson, T. S. Eliot, and Walt Whitman, we will find that Kinnell paid painstakingly careful attention to the animal poets who preceded him. More than one critic has already identified Dickinson’s “I Heard a Fly Buzz When I Died,” a poem which Kinnell even takes as the subject of one of his essays, as important to the tenth section of *The Book of Nightmares*, and, although I completely agree with such criticism, the poem bears even more importance to the fifth section. This importance takes much the same nature, however: much of what critics say about Dickinson’s influence on the last section can apply perfectly well to the fifth. Samuel Maio rightly points out that “this last section of *The Book of Nightmares* is, in theme, similar to Emily Dickinson’s ‘I Heard a Fly Buzz When I Died’ in that it attempts to imagine the ‘increased life,’ the heightened feeling one experiences for the world upon leaving it. And what brings this ‘strange brightening, this last moment of increased life’ (as Kinnell wrote of the Dickinson poem [‘Poetics’ 135]), is the knowledge that it is about to be left behind forever” (161). Yet Maio’s comments could just as easily, and perhaps more aptly, describe “In the Hotel of Lost Light,” in which a “drunk smelling of autopsies” actually “must have watched a fly” soon before his death (*Nightmares* V.1). The “strange brightening, this last moment of increased life,” of which Maio mentions Kinnell
speaking, that comes from an awareness of the imminence of death, is precisely echoed in this fifth section by the fly itself, who eventually

cesses to struggle, his wings

flutter out the music blooming with failure

of one who gets ready to die, as Roland’s horn, winding down

from the Pyrenees, saved its dark, full flourishes

for last. (V.1)

Kinnell intends a recognizable beauty in that final “dark, full flourish,” but a beauty fiercely compromised by the harshly realistic ugliness of death. Lee Zimmerman, like Maio, focuses on the final section of *The Book of Nightmares*, relating Dickinson’s fly to Kinnell’s flea:

‘Lastness,’ Kinnell remarks, was written ‘imagining the heightened feeling she would have for the world when she left it’ (*WDS* 23). ‘She’ is Emily Dickinson, whose buzzing fly prefigures Kinnell’s laughing flea. His reading of her poem is likewise a commentary on the end of the road of his own: ‘Of course, it is repulsive that a fly come to you if you are dying and if it may be a corpse fly, its thorax the hysterical green color of slime. And yet in the illumination of the dying moment, everything the poet knew is transfigured. The fly appears, physical, voracious, a last vital sign. The most ordinary thing, the most despised, may be the one chosen to bear the strange brightening, this last moment of increased life’ (*PPW* 120). (182-3)

I would only add that Dickinson’s buzzing fly also prefigures Kinnell’s buzzing fly, and not just his laughing flea. In fact, Kinnell’s talk of the corpse fly, and the repulsiveness of death, relates, more than to any part of “Lastness,” to the second strophe of “In the Hotel of Lost Light,” in
which Kinnell pulls no punches in his physical description of the death process, including a host of insects having its way with the alcoholic’s dead body. Kinnell gratefully draws from Dickinson’s well in his establishment of a connection between insect imagery and his treatment of death in *The Book of Nightmares*.

While critics acknowledge Dickinson’s bugs as important to Kinnell, they have yet to mention Eliot’s or Whitman’s. In an interview with Wayne Dodd and Stanley Plumly only the year after *The Book of Nightmares’* publication, Kinnell says that we as a society need what “Whitman seeks in the music of his verse, what he calls the ‘perfect rectitude and insouciance of the movements of animals,’” and proceeds to recite a line from Whitman’s poem “Respondez!”:

“Let the cow, the horse, the camel, the garden-bee – let the mud-fish, the lobster, the mussel, eel, the sting-ray, and the grunting pig-fish – let these, and the like of these, be put on a perfect equality with man and woman!” (Kinnell 47). Kinnell uses Whitman as a predecessor and support in his championing a reverence for animals. Considering the general themes of *The Book of Nightmares*, one must admit that Whitman’s “A Noiseless Patient Spider” complements Kinnell’s spirit quite nicely, as Whitman relates his spider to humanity primarily through its experience of isolation, meant to represent the loneliness of the secluded human soul. Kinnell’s speaker directly encourages sympathy for the helpless, suffering fly rather than the spider, yet refuses to describe the spider as malevolent, no matter what fright and danger it causes. Indeed, Kinnell and Whitman share a view of the spider as a diligent, disinterested, friendless, intelligent creature: Kinnell’s spider gives only an “abstracted stare,” and Whitman describes his spider as quiet and “isolated,” yet “patient” and “tireless.” Scholars connect this poem to a memo in Whitman’s notebook that reads “small in theme yet has it the sweep of the universe” (Whitman 19). The same note could apply to Kinnell’s conclusion of the fifth section of *The Book of*
Nightmares, in which “the joined hemispheres of the spider’s eyes” stand in for the moon itself, implying that the sweep of our universe might take place along something resembling the landscape of a spider hide (V.7).

The relationship of Kinnell’s spider to other elements in The Book of Nightmares could also reflect Eliot’s peculiar treatment of the spider in “Gerontion” and, the poem it was originally intended to serve as the introduction for, “The Waste Land.” Although these spiders of Eliot’s probably hold less importance than Dickinson’s or Whitman’s, they do echo elements of Kinnell’s, and critics have already identified “The Waste Land” as having an important influence on The Book of Nightmares. In “Gerontion,” much as Kinnell excuses his spider from any accusations or negative depictions, Eliot asks “What will the spider do, / Suspend its operations, will the weevil / Delay?” (66-68). The spider must be forgiven for being a spider. In the same stanza of “Gerontion” Eliot even mentions “the shuddering Bear,” an animal symbol of even greater importance to The Book of Nightmares. In any event, this positive portrayal of the spider spills over into the “Datta” stanza of the fifth section of “The Waste Land,” “What the Thunder Said,” which mentions “memories draped by the beneficent spider” (408), itself a reference to the fifth act of John Webster’s seventeenth century play, The White Devil: “they’ll remarry / Ere the worm pierce your winding-sheet, ere the spider / Make a thin curtain for your epitaphs” (5.6). In this way the spider of “The Waste Land” connects to Kinnell’s spider both in its association with death and its ability to somehow remain kindly, and “beneficent.” Kinnell builds upon this American poetic tradition of having a mixed-yet-positive portrayal of a creature that, within most cultures, usually typifies danger, disgust, fear, and ugliness. Furthermore, this dynamic feeds directly into the greatest purpose and theme of The Book of Nightmares in the first place: to face death, in all its power and inevitability, and to somehow integrate it within a worldview that can
still remain beautiful, healthy, and positive. On the dedication page, Kinnell prefaces the collection with an epigraph from Rilke: “But this, though: death, / the whole of death, – even before life’s begun, / to hold it also gently, and be good: / this is beyond description!” Accepting a creature like the spider, with all its accompanying symbolism of horror and mortality, serves as an important step in this embrace of death.

The significance Kinnell places on the spider of The Book of Nightmares demands great care from one expecting to address it properly: its importance can be just as easily misinterpreted as underestimated in the first place. In keeping with an orientation of anti-anthropocentrism, Kinnell may keep his spider safe from a negative tone even as it serves as a gruesomely indifferent harbinger of death, but he does not allow for a strong human association or sympathy with it either. The speaker of the poem may identify with the hen or the fly, and we may associate Kinnell’s son with the bear or the fish, but neither the speaker, nor anyone close to him, takes on the qualities, let alone the perspective, of the spider. In fact, the spider assumes a personality of distant indifference, as seen in its “abstracted stare” (V.1), which stands in for the matter-of-factness of death and violence as part of the life cycle. This personality perfectly suits a creature that for Kinnell somehow possesses the ability to transcend and even contain the mental and physical landscape of the poem. That “abstracted stare” encloses the speaker’s very journey of the mind; the spider has a “stare / in which even the nightmare spatters out its horrors / and dies,” as a true confrontation with the certainty of death (such as what the fly must experience while trapped in the spider’s web) ends the fearfulness of its anticipation, allowing the fly, and implicitly the speaker and reader, to “cease to struggle” as “one who gets ready to die” nobly, which the following reference to Roland’s horn indicates (V.1). In fully demonstrating an undeniable and inescapable promise of death, the spider also brings a hypnotic
release from the mind’s fear of it and servitude to that fear of it, thanks to the “abstracted stare.” Kinnell doesn’t limit the spider to this power alone; the spider encompasses not just the poem’s mental landscape, but its physical landscape (or rather its skyscape). The final strophe of “In the Hotel of Lost Light” concludes with a summative account of these ruminations on death and near-death experiences, which trail off into a horizon with the spider’s eyes as its vanishing point:

The foregoing scribed down
In March, of the year Seventy,
on my sixteen-thousandth night of war and madness,
in the Hotel of Lost Light, under the freeway
which roams out into the dark
of the moon, in the absolute spell
of departure, and by the light
from the joined hemispheres of the spider’s eyes. (V.7)

Likening the spider’s eyes to the source of the moonlight, Kinnell equates the darkness of the spider’s hide with the darkness of the night sky. In this way the human perspective becomes subsumed by the animal perspective, as the black outer space of our universe may as well rest on the surface of a spider. Here Kinnell extends the concept of being able to “feel as free on earth as fleas on the bodies of men” (VII.2), an image that recurs at the end of the entire poetic sequence and that embodies one of its main lessons. If we should gain comfort and liberation from comparing ourselves on this planet to bugs on a human body, we should temper it with the unsettling and equally true comparison of ourselves on this planet to humans on a bug’s body, or, still more harrowing, bugs in a spider’s web.
This significance of the spider as a representation of the darker side of life’s coin takes on crucial implications when one considers its position within *The Book of Nightmares*’ narrative sequence. Critics rightly point out Kinnell’s clear placement of “In the Hotel of Lost Light” and “The Dead Shall Be Raised Incorruptible” as the book’s fifth and sixth sections respectively: the collection’s midpoint. Without coincidence, then, these two sections score as the book’s darkest, the middle nadir of its trajectory: in “V and VI, the book moves under ‘the absolute spell of departure,’ the neon zeroes of death” (Hilberry 216). They bring us into the heart of the nightmare. While “In the Hotel of Lost Light” highlights the maddening inevitability and disgustingness of death, “The Dead Shall Be Raised Incorruptible” draws our attention to the equally maddening horror and senselessness of the causes of needless death, played out on the human theater of the Vietnam War. As Robert Langbaum points out in his review of the collection, the fifth section, “where the murderousness of nature is so sordid that nightmare overwhelms reality, is the book’s nadir, its inferno. ‘In the Hotel of Lost Light, under the freeway,’ with the Vietnam war raging outside, the poet writes ‘by the light / from the joined hemispheres of the spider’s eyes’” (59). As in any pair of adjacent sections in *The Book of Nightmares*, the transition takes meaning; the “sordid murderousness of nature” morphs into the even less tenable murderousness of man. The sixth section dramatizes “the gross violence (culminating in Vietnam) done by Christian man to himself and to others” as part of “the spider-fly principle in human life. These basic motifs are interwoven in subtle ways” (Rosenthal 85). Yet a stark difference clearly exists, one that emphasizes Kinnell’s anti-anthropocentrism. Kinnell excuses the spider, but he indicts “Christian man” (VI.4), which includes himself; the speaker of *Nightmares* continually speaks for “Christian man” in the first person. Man’s inhumanity to man embodies the worst of the “spider’s clasped forebrains” (V.1), the ability to
consciously rationalize violence as admissible or, worse yet, as part of one’s duty to God or country. The spider, like any animal, only kills for food or for self-preservation, and its cycle of death occurs within the homeostasis of its environment. In “The Dead Shall Be Raised Incorruptible,” “a voice in the second section admits to the thrill of firing a gun, of shredding a pilot’s body ‘down to catgut’” (MacGowan 244); humanity differentiates itself from animals (thanks to its own “clasped forebrains”) in that it possess the capacity to kill for pleasure or sport. The sixth poem in *The Book of Nightmares* not only amplifies, perverts, and extends the already-harrowing natural cycle of death it presents in the previous poem, but it presents a sobering list of charges against humanity’s ethical integrity, especially when compared to the integrity of the animal kingdom.

Although Kinnell’s spider attains a degree of association with the specifically human atrocities of death and war, other degrees of association point it towards a different, more positive relation to humans: in “In the Hotel of Lost Light,” Kinnell associates the spider directly with the louse and the flea, which in turn illustrate one of *The Book of Nightmares*’ most human means for coping with its pervasive theme of death. Both the louse and the flea are parasitic insects; they essentially spend the entirety of their lives on the bodies of their hosts, relying on their host’s blood for sustenance. In the second strophe of “In the Hotel of Lost Light,” the one that follows the exchange between spider and fly, the scene shifts focus onto these bugs, or, as Kinnell calls them, these “spiders of blood,” as they feed on the body of the alcoholic who died in what is now the speaker’s hotel room:

> In the light
> left behind by the little
> spiders of blood who garbled
their memoirs across his shoulders
and chest, the room echoes with the tiny thrumps
of crotch hairs plucking themselves
from their spots; on the stripped skin
the love-sick crab lice
struggle to unstuck themselves and sprint from the doomed position –
and stop,
heads buried
for one last taste of the love-flesh. (V.2)

Just as Kinnell finds a way to spare his spider from any disparaging tone despite its frightening victimization of the fly, so he manages to portray the lice benevolently despite their defilement of the alcoholic’s corpse. Describing the crab lice as “love-sick” (what a fantastic pun!) and unable to keep themselves from “one last taste of the love-flesh” creates a sense of benevolence towards them that even borders on the comical, despite their “doomed position.” Critics invariably direct their attention of Kinnell’s bugs no further than the flea of The Book of Nightmares’ final section, because of its obvious importance as the collection’s conclusion, but the lice passage serves as an extension of it. After all, both strophes depict parasitic insects on corpses. Besides, the lice passage goes into detail that the conclusion does not; it adds a sense of the attractiveness of life and its drives and passions, even while it involves baseness and an admission of being short-lived. Here Kinnell presents a foreshadowing of his conclusion, and one that develops and complicates it.

Kinnell’s word choice in this strophe also sends associations out towards other sections of The Book of Nightmares, and further buttresses the implicit analogy between these insects and
people. On the body of this dead man, the “spiders of blood,” the crab lice, “garbled / their memoirs across his shoulders / and chest” (V.2). Here the world “garbled” takes on two surprisingly significant meanings. The first, primary meanings of “garble,” “to select suppress, improperly emphasize, or distort parts of (a story, etc.) in telling, so as to mislead or misrepresent” and “to confuse or mix up (a quotation, story, etc.) unintentionally” (“Garble”), play quite nicely into Kinnell’s larger work. Just as the spiders garble their memoirs, so Kinnell presents us the garbled and fragmented poetic sequence of *The Book of Nightmares* itself, including a variety of memoirs such as the “final postcards to posterity” for the dead alcoholic, the speaker’s own last will and testament in “The Dead Shall Be Raised Incorruptible,” and letters from the character of “Virginia.” However, Kinnell has a love for older usages of words as, in an essay called “The Wright That a Poem Can Carry,” he admits that “I love it when I run across an archaic word that seems to me terribly expressive, I entertain the possibility of its resurrection” (Zimmerman 166). And so here Kinnell also invokes one of those rarer, more archaic definitions of the word “garble,” one that touches on a subtly pervasive secondary theme in *The Book of Nightmares*: “to take out the best of” (“Garble”). After all, the memoirs the lice “garble” come about by them biting the body of the corpse and sucking its blood. This idea of extracting substances of value or necessity recurs frequently, and redoubles the connection between people and insects like fleas and lice. Furthermore, within a universe of *The Book of Nightmares* in which, to further emphasize the inescapability of death, it is made clear that matter cannot be created or destroyed, it becomes that much more important to be able to manipulate or transport matter if it helps make one’s situation more copasetic. This act of “sucking” or “taking the best out of” appears and reappears in the most positive of contexts, and offers some examples of one of Kinnell’s favorite poetic moves: animalization, the reversal of
traditional anthropomorphism. It relates to the birth of Kinnell’s daughter in “Under the Maud Moon,” as “Her head / enters the headhold / which starts sucking her forth: being itself / closes down all over her” (I.5). In “Little Sleep’s-Head Sprouting Hair in the Moonlight,” Kinnell promises to do anything to keep her daughter safe, even saying that “I would suck the rot from your fingernail” (VII.2). Kinnell reminds us of the ways in which humans are like animals, even lowly bugs. Introducing another insect worthy of further attention within Kinnell criticism, “The Call Across the Valley of Not-Knowing” introduces “the bees, dreamers not yet / dipped into the acids / of the craving for anything, not yet burned down into flies, sucking / the blossom-dust / from the pear-tree in spring” (VIII.4). The verb “suck” again takes on a positive connotation within The Book of Nightmares, and “garble” borrows from that connotation and extends it so that it creates a positive undercurrent within the dark situation of “In the Hotel of Lost Light.” In spite of everything, the spiders of blood garble their memoirs just before their one last experience of the love-flesh.

This intersection of the two themes, of arachnids/insects and their various representations of the human and of the positive function of garbling or sucking, recurs again in the seventh strophe of the tenth section “Lastness,” at the very conclusion of The Book of Nightmares, as a final manifestation of its theme of coping with death. Kinnell frames the conclusion as a direct address to his son:

Sancho Fergus! Don’t cry!

Or else, cry.

On the body,

on the blued flesh, when it is

laid out, see if you can find
the one flea which is laughing. (X.7)

Ending the book with a flea, Kinnell evokes the other parasitic insect, the louse, if not bugs in general, like the previous bee and spider. As mentioned before, this strophe also suggests another bug, the fly of Dickinson’s “I Heard a Fly Buzz When I Died”: Zimmerman points out that “‘Lastness,’ Kinnell remarks, was written ‘imagining the heightened feeling she would have for the world when she left it’ (WDS 23). ‘She’ is Emily Dickinson, whose buzzing fly prefigures Kinnell’s laughing flea” (182). And a proper reading of this happy conclusion to The Book of Nightmares must take into account its strong coupling with death; after all, not only does the blued flesh refer to a corpse, but because of that the laughing flea will die soon as well, as the blued flesh won’t offer it sustenance for much longer, the same way the crab lice get their one last taste of the love-flesh from their “doomed position.” The flea, like the fly, faces its imminent death, but, also like the fly, it gains a cathartic release in doing so. The flea can face its death and laugh. Humans, at their best, can only hope that they are able to follow the flea’s example.

Yet this final scene in The Book of Nightmares also refers implicitly to the positive action of garbling or sucking. The flea itself will suck whatever blood it can from the blued flesh of the corpse, just as Kinnell in this poetic work sucks whatever nourishment he can from his topic of death. Even the linguistic situation of the conclusion, as an address of consolation to his crying son, should remind any reader of the address of consolation to his crying daughter, Maud, as she wakes from a nightmare in “Little Sleep’s Head Sprouting Hair in the Moonlight,” in which the speaker declares to her “I would suck the rot from your fingernail” (VII.2). The “blued flesh” itself connects to the daughter, who routinely appears alongside the color blue. “The blueness of Maud’s flesh,” Zimmerman explains, “re-emerges in the ‘blue, vanished water’ (29)” of her bed,
“the ‘Violet bruises’ on the tramp’s dying flesh (37)” which repeats imagery of her birth, “the ‘blue spittle / of snakes’ (68)” in her father’s clothes, “the ‘eerie blue light’ that ‘blooms / on all the ridges of the world’ (68), and the ‘blued flesh’ of the poet’s corpse (75)” (153-4).

Zimmerman brings up an important point: more than one critic identifies the corpse at the conclusion of *The Book of Nightmares* as the corpse of Kinnell himself, which would lend that much more urgency to his plea for his children to accept death without a sense of tragedy or trauma, as it would grow out of a desire for them to properly cope with his own death, the death of their father. In any event, various elements of the book’s conclusion, like this use of the color blue, echo both of Kinnell’s children, as well as the revered action of sucking. Although an interpretation of the “blued flesh” as belonging to a corpse makes perfect sense, I offer an alternate reading of that “blued flesh” of this conclusion: if the flea, laughing, can act as human, then the “blued flesh” can represent the surface of the blue marble, the planet Earth. Within such a reading, Kinnell would now be directing his children to the flea as a representation of humanity: both fleas and humans rely on parasitic relationships to their hosts, whether on the surface of a body or on the surface of the earth, without which they could not live, and their lives span relatively short times compared to the lifespan of those hosts, again, whether body or planet, although the hosts themselves face a death no less inevitable for them than for their parasites. The color blue already refers to a number of earth-related elements, even as it relates to Kinnell’s daughter, like the water and the light that “blooms / on all the ridges of the world” (IX.6). Cary Nelson points out that “Maud awakens as a blue flower opening and grows in concert with all organic life, her hair ‘sprouting’ and her gums ‘budding’” (81). So *The Book of Nightmares* ends with an intricate set of self-references: to Maud and Fergus, to the act of sucking, to the color blue and its connection to life, to insects and their situations as paralleling
those of humans, and even to the notion of our beautifully delicate, yet relatively insignificant, position within the grand universe (think again of the end of “In the Hotel of Lost Light,” with its description of the moon as simply part of the spider’s eyes). I can’t imagine a better way for Kinnell to sign off on his central message with a flourish: “see if you can find / the one flea which is laughing” (X.7), see if you can find a way to enjoy (and, like the flea, garble, suck out the best of) life, and, even as you acknowledge your inevitable death, see if you can find a way to laugh in its very face.

Critics point out Kinnell’s artful manipulation of animal imagery and symbolism and its centrality to The Book of Nightmares. The importance of particular animals readily sticks out: for instance, the bear obviously takes on a symbolic connection to Kinnell’s son, and of course the hen gets its own section title (“The Hen Flower”). Bugs in The Book of Nightmares, however, if granted the attention they deserve, reveal themselves not only as equally important and as underappreciated in Kinnell criticism, but as actually central to the essential theme of the entire poetic sequence itself. Kinnell ingeniously employs a class of animals that have historically embodied powerful cultural symbolism: humans have a higher incidence of phobias of bugs than of any other kind of animal. They represent an extremely common, everyday object of our disgust and fear, and why not? Aside from ruining our food, many of them can bite us, sting us, poison us, or even kill us. What better animal for Kinnell to place before us, front and center within his death-song about the destructibility of all living things, animal and human alike?

Kinnell’s Later Poetry

Kinnell’s later poetry, of the 80s and 90s, doesn’t hold any less regard or reverence for animals and for connecting with animals. The animal associations in them, however, become
much less dramatic than in his previous poetry. During this time domestic themes take more of a center stage in Kinnell’s work, and when animal figurations do appear, they appear with humor and warmth, even quietness, in surprising contrast to the wild energy of “The Bear” and *The Book of Nightmares*. For instance, the achingly bittersweet poem “Parkinson’s Disease,” from the 1994 collection *Imperfect Thirst*, warmly compares the facial expressions of a father, being cared for by his daughter while he endures the advanced stages of Parkinson’s, to those of hypothetical animals:

The flesh

of his face is hard, perhaps
from years spent facing down others
until they fell back, and harder
from years of being himself faced down
and falling back in his turn, and harder still
from all the while frowning
and beaming and worrying and shouting
and probably letting go in rages.

His face softens into a kind
of quizzical wince, as if one
of the other animals were working at
getting the knack of the human smile. (27-39)

The poem could be accused of leveraging a sentimentalized image of animals’ innocence and/or helplessness, if it weren’t for the phrase “other animals,” the reminder that humans, after all, are animals too. Then, the softness of the facial expression that merits comparison with an animal
putting on human affectation can only be considered in contrast to the sentence that precedes its description, a litany of all the artificially fraught facial expressions that encompass what a human confined by intricately pressured social roles and situations must go through. Although “Parkinson’s Disease” criticizes human experience and lauds animal experience much more quietly than the Kinnell poems of the 60s and 70s, it does so with just as much (if not more) confidence as in Kinnell’s early poems.

This period of time in Kinnell’s career doesn’t see a change in the quality of Kinnell’s appreciation for animals and animal-human connections, even if it does see a change in kind. In fact, the poetry of this later period includes some of the most direct treatments of the theme of how animals and humans relate to each other. Rather than communicating through dramatic images and transformations, this older, more conversational Kinnell instead speaks very plainly about animals in many of his poems. In “On the Oregon Coast,” for instance, a beautiful elegy published in 1985 for his friend, the poet Richard Hugo, calmly gives voice to the changing orientation towards animal and human nature in American poetry at large:

The last time I was on this coast Richard Hugo and I had dinner together just north of here, in a restaurant overlooking the sea.

The conversation came around to personification.

We agreed that eighteenth- and nineteenth-century poets almost had to personify, it was like mouth-to-mouth resuscitation, the only way they could imagine to keep the world from turning into dead matter.

And that as post-Darwinians it was up to us to anthropomorphize the world less and animalize, vegetable-ize, and mineralize ourselves more.
We doubted that pre-Darwinian language would let us.

Our talk turned to James Wright, how his kinship with salamanders, spiders, and mosquitoes allowed him to drift his way back through the evolutionary stages.

(9-14)

Here modern American poetry’s orientation against anthropocentrism is voiced most directly. Although Kinnell expresses a mistrust of language’s ability to combat anthropocentrism, and perhaps rightly so, an examination of the development of American poetry over time reveals a tendency to push language slowly in that direction, thanks in part to poets like Kinnell himself.

Other Late Century Poets of Anti-Anthropocentrism

In fact, Kinnell and his like-minded contemporaries play a large part in the state of animal figurations in American poetry from the 1980s until the present. The last decades of the century see this sea change against anthropocentrism assume a comfortable ubiquity: comparing animals and humans on an even keel, giving humans animal qualities, and exploring human themes through the means of mediations on animals, are now all unremarkable parts of the scenery. Animal figurations in the spirit begun with Jeffers and Moore now more often than not appear quietly, matter-of-factly, and without much fanfare, as if they no longer demand a defense or an explanation or even a great deal of attention.

Direct descendants of Jeffers and Moore appear on the American poetry scene in this latter third of the century, and we can see that the tradition of anti-anthropocentrism in American poetry makes it influences visible in concentrated ways as well as broad and diffuse ways. Gary Snyder, for instance, takes up Jeffers’ mantle quite directly. Their connection runs much deeper than the surface similarity by which they are most commonly linked, as nature poets who take
the same West Coast landscape as their most favorite of settings for their poems. While stopping well short of an “inhumanist” philosophy, Snyder’s work exemplifies the spirit of ecopoetics, which, as Angela Hume writes, “is said to inherit projects such as Robinson Jeffers’s and Gary Snyder’s,” although “contemporary ecopoetics has demonstrated that it can now take on almost any form . . . belonging to no single school or camp . . . [and being] expansive in its reach” (751).

In fact, Snyder’s work is often associated with the term “posthumanism” rather than “inhumanism,” as Snyder seeks to emphasize humanity as being part of nature and intrinsically related to nature, rather than essentially opposed to nature. His representations of animals and humans, then, are as lifeforms partaking in equal shares of membership within the greater ecosystem. Snyder’s rhetorical stances to issues of anti-anthropocentrism, then, can be seen as modifying, and as naturally progressing out of, those of Jeffers.

Snyder’s *Mountains and Rivers Without End*, intermittently published over the course of more than forty years until its final form in 1996, demonstrates this stage in the progression of American poetic anti-anthropocentrism, especially in the poem “The Blue Sky.” The final three lines of the poem describe a scene of the blue sky as the land "where the Eagle / that Flies out of Sight / flies" (130-2). Although the eagle (a bird sacred both to Americans and to many Native American tribes, who thought of them as messengers between the spirit world and the human world) unquestionably still flies, the naked eye can no longer perceive it; only imagination can still hold the image, just as, in the repeated "Shantih" of Eliot’s "The Waste Land," the very imagination (and prayer) of peace itself brings peace, even though the peace itself cannot be understood, and certainly does not visibly exist along the horizon. For Snyder, though, unlike for Eliot, the peace includes an aspect of animality to accompany its spirituality, as the eagle, in
both imagined and real manifestations, represents for humans a transcendence of the human
form.

In this sprawling nature poem, Snyder chooses as his protagonists beings beyond
humanity, deities that possess and enact means of healing, peace, and wholeness. These deities
also happen to take forms both human and animal: the three characters that hold primary status in
the poem are Buddha, the Hopi shaman Kokopilau, and Coyote. A somewhat ambiguous symbol
within Native American traditions, the Coyote,

who expresses symbolically the mischief and destructiveness of the human psyche, is
beyond enlightenment. In another way, he represents the divine principle, and the same
American Indian myth cycles that describe him as a clown or trickster also portray him as
a creator god like the Hindu figure Prajapati (Almon 20).

Instrumental in multiple Native American creation myths, the coyote "lives at the margins of the
dominant culture and reminds us through its wild but appealing songs that there are possibilities
outside the campfire of civilization. As a mythical figure, it embodies the natural, the sacred,
and the human" (Almon 43-44). Snyder imbues this magical figure with both animal and human
characteristics. Appearing in a handful of other poems beyond “The Blue Sky,” the character is
occasionally referred to not just as “Coyote” but as “Old Man Coyote,” “the self-contradictory
trickster, an ‘old man,’ yet a puppy; ‘ugly’ and self-indulgent, yet the ‘bringer of goodies.’”
(Bright 13). In “A Berry Feast,” Coyote tongue-in-cheekly warns the world “that ‘The people
are coming’ – the human species, the Indians for whom provision should be made” (13), and tells
the berries themselves that “you will grow thick and green, people / will eat you, you berries!”
(53-54). Coyote playfully alternates between celebration and censure of the various overlapping
groups within which he fits as a member: animals, humans, and nature. In Snyder’s essay, “The Incredible Survival of Coyote,” “he sums up a motif found in dozens of Indian myths: ‘Coyote never dies, he gets killed plenty of times, but he always comes back to life again, and then he goes right on traveling’ (Snyder, qtd. in Bright 18). One of many later American poets to experiment with the significance of the coyote, Greg Williamson examines how this motif has been transplanted onto American popular culture with “The Life and Times of Wile E. Coyote, Super Genius,” a poem addressed to the popular Looney Tunes cartoon character which concludes, “The better life, your failure—like my own. / Wile E. Everyman. Come, Trickster, let us / Feast on our clay chicken, our tin can.” (22-24). Snyder and Williamson, examined together, tap into a fantastic overlapping of broader contexts, of perspectives both Native American and popular American, for meditations on the significance of merging representations of the animal with representations of the human.

Examples of this new context and tone concerning animals and humans come from a variety of other poets writing in the 1980s or later. The poet Mary Oliver, often identified as writing ecopoetry, reverently turns to animals as examples for guidance and insight in her work. For Oliver, “the significant world is primarily the world of nature – of the pond, the bramble, the damselfly, the humpback whale. She will extract the lessons of mortality from the last blaze of autumn or the leap of a bobcat” (Gregerson 38). Much commentary on Oliver’s poetry might just as well have been written about the poetry of Marianne Moore that precedes it: “she does not savor landscape and fauna chiefly as pretexts for metaphor or meditation. She does not unveil ecology or treks through the woods as self-portrait writ large, and she specifically eschews the fashionable plunder of environment for the sake of poetic ornament – the overstuffed catalogues of clotted detail that smother or preclude the real work of curiosity” (38). Jeffrey Thomson’s
assessment of Oliver’s poems directly states her place in the lineage of Jeffers and Moore, deciding that her poems “become sacraments of the dark animal life within the human being and vice versa” (157). In Oliver’s poem “Some Questions You Might Ask,” the questions of “what the soul is” ultimately imply an answer that “the only definition of a soul broad enough to suit [Oliver] is the energy manifest in all entities” (Christensen 139), but the majority of the questions echo the question at the heart of Eliot’s Old Possum’s Book of Practical Cats: in what way are the spiritual essences of humans like those of other animals? The comparisons and questions use animal imagery to cover a plethora of characterizations: “is it tender and breakable, like / the wings of a moth in the beak of an owl?” (2-3), “The face of the moose is as sad / as the face of Jesus.” (6-7), is the soul “like the eye of a hummingbird? / Does it have one lung, like the snake and the scallop? / Why should I have it, and not the anteater / who loves her children? / Why should I have it, and not the camel?” (12-16). Oliver imbues a sense of spiritual finality to the ultimate question of what separates us from, and unites us with, our fellow members of the animal kingdom.

Countless other examples of connections and overlappings between the animal and the human pepper the landscape of recent American poetry. In Gjertrud Schnackenberg’s “Nightfishing,” even though “A bat slices the air / Near us,” the speaker, rather than the bat, lets slip an animal cry: “I shriek . . . The mighty hills shriek back” (14-15, 17). Joshua Mehigan’s sonnet “Rabbit’s Foot” is addressed to the rabbit from which the speaker has received his lucky charm, and becomes a meditative direct comparison of the two species whose “hearts, too, are very little, / and race with blood as tenuous as our fate: / We also tremble helplessly or flee” (5-7). The speaker wishes that “with this relic of your ancient luck, / so may we also often procreate, / and burrow always toward the mystery / below,” incanting a comical yet solemn
prayer that humans take on the best of the animal aspects of rabbits. A drunk neighbor at an outdoor party in Andrew Hudgins’ “Heat Lightning in a Time of Drought” is likened to a dog in heat: “when my neighbor screams out in his yard / like one dog howling for another dog” (15-16). In Ted Kooser’s “The Salesman,” “the dog of your willpower cowers and growls, / then crawls in under the basement steps, / making the jingle of coin with its tags” (24-26). In “Eating Poetry,” Mark Strand likens the transformation brought about by reading poetry to an animalization. The speaker having been transformed, the librarian “does not understand. / When I get on my knees and lick her hand, / she screams. / I am a new man. / I snarl at her and bark. / I romp with joy in the bookish dark.” (13-18). John Haines, whose “Rain Country” includes the “insane / pride of the fox-eyed men” (84-85), is reviewed by H. R. Hays as exemplifying the push and pull of deeply embedded animal association in modern human experience:

For the human being, animals have always been a means of self-discovery. Every since the forging of the ancient hunting ethos, man has maintained a janus-faced attitude. At times he sees himself as an animal, at times he rejects the kinship. As symbols, as living things endowed like him with beating hearts, sexual appetites, as objects of aesthetic delight, animals have been used to dramatize man’s blood lusts, his potency, his ideals and self images. The ‘otherness’ of these creatures is a tantalizing part of human experience. Haines feels the weight of tradition in his use of animals; he draws upon deep layers of the unconscious. (7)

The issues raised by Jeffers and Moore, then, find their way to central places, not only in the work of poets like Jarrell, Levertov, and Kinnell, but in many poets that follow.
“Practicing Eulogies,” by Gary Soto, like Schnackenberg’s “Nightfishing,” reveals an influence from Kinnell in its natural movement from meditations on animal mortality to the transience of human life. The child speaker, coming to terms with his “mortal cat and mortal, old man” (8) and, beginning to see signs of death everywhere, starts to attribute animal terms to himself, as “When a suicidal cricket leaped into the pond” he “tried to save that armored insect – / My hand scooped and scooped / Like a pelican” (13-16), while also lightheartedly jabbing at the human tendency to misunderstand and misperceive animals through anthropomorphisms. The boy finds a way to cope with his newfound disenchantment when he and his brother play a game using the claws remaining from a rooster (only recently having been cooked for dinner) as toys:

We worked the tendons like pulleys
As the claws opened and close on things –
My laughing brother picked up pencils and erasers.
Sensitive me, I went for the box of Kleenex,
Tendons closing and tissues jerking up like ghosts. (31-35)

This child’s point of view comes from a speaker who stands in for the author at a younger age. Both boys play a game in which they have zoomorphed, their avian claw extensions transforming them into creatures part animal and part human. Although this transfiguration is merely a performance, through play and imagination, it rather seriously foreshadows the speaker’s (and poet’s) later transformation into a flesh-and-blood poet, complete with the accompanying clichés of having a strongly developed “sensitive” side (34). The poem is framed by animal-human comparisons. “Momma cat” (1), which marks the beginning of the poem with its death, bears a compound name, an animal with a human title, just like the aptly named
“Frankie,” the doomed rooster with the human name whose claws provide the means for the final scene of the poem. The final word of the poem, “ghosts,” makes the ultimate step, within a prolonged meditation on how to represent and honor dead animals, towards the question of how to represent and honor dead humans. Projecting animal and human images onto various objects, both animate and inanimate, the poem begins and ends with juxtapositions of the animal and the human.

In the 1980s we begin to see poetry from those born in the latter half of the century. Having grown up during the time when changes in animal figurations had already gathered significant momentum, such poets can move quite comfortably within the realm of animal-human comparisons in their work, and within different contexts that have grown in number since early in the century. Observing and representing animals and humans in relation to one another in very recent American poetry may not bear the dramatic dynamism of the 60s and 70s, but it brings extra versatility to the scene. Poets from about the 1980s onward can casually insert meditations on animals and humans into a number of new contexts where before they would have had to openly address, deflect, or embrace the strangeness of doing so.
Works Cited


Whitman, Walt. *Notebooks 1850s-1860s.* Notebook LC #94, Image 19 of 120.


Chapter Five: Conclusion Chapter

In attempting to produce a descriptive chronology of the development of a phenomenon within American poetry, my study adopts a century-wide scope. It is a scope that by some standards is to be considered quite wide and quite broad, but by many other standards it is in fact very narrow. After all, anthropomorphism and zoomorphism date back to ancient times: even before the existence of the fable genre, artists have found creative ways of attributing human characteristics to animals (or non-living things), and have likewise attributed animal characteristics to humans. Within a broad enough chronological view, then, the significance of my study takes on a different context. Examinations and observations of twentieth century American poetry indicate within it, around the beginning of the latter half of the century, the rise of anti-anthropocentrism, something that in the early half of the century exists to a much lesser extent and in a very different, less mature, less popular form. In what ways is this phenomenon new, and in what ways is it old? To what extent does the anti-anthropocentrism of twentieth century American poetry participate in this ancient tradition, and what unique contexts and perspectives does it bring to that tradition?

Many anti-anthropomorphic poets, for instance, pre-date the twentieth century. In Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, humans turned into animals, plants, and minerals by interactions with gods. Relatively more recently, John Wilmot, the Earl of Rochester, in his “Satyre against Reason and Mankind” of the seventeenth century, argued that animals were superior to humans because they obeyed their instincts instead of trying to exterminate them. Yet Wilmot is certainly an exception to his predominant culture at large, and Ovid is borrowing from a mythological tradition, which in turn comes out of the tradition of animalization in ancient Western mythology (which characterizes mythological traditions in cultures all over the world). More longitudinal
studies of animal and human figurations in poetry are needed for a better understanding of the broader historical context within which the anti-anthropocentrism of the twentieth century operates.

Taking a truly long historical view of my study, for instance, may give it context and alter its salience. The inextricable connections between animals and humans, and the dependence of humans and human societies on animals in order to survive and thrive, are topics that are perhaps best taken up by fields of study outside of poetry, and a study of animal and human figurations in poetry should then do well to take the ensuing conclusions into consideration.

The cave paintings of Lascaux, for instance, over 17,000 years old, illustrate the preponderance of animal imagery in so much of the earliest recorded prehistoric human visual art. Of course hunter-gatherer societies, so dependent on animals, would imbue animal imagery with a sacredness, but it would also make sense that the ability to hunt animals and the ability to represent animals would depend on a common source: the ability to empathize with animals. The development of hunting techniques depends on an ability to predict animal behavior, which in turn depends on an understanding of an animal’s perspective, an understanding that is a prerequisite not only for advanced animal hunting but for advanced animal art. Contact with and understanding of animal nature, then, as both connected to and distinct from human nature, is not only essential to human survival but, ironically, is what provides the grounds for separation between humanity and animality. Humans evolved to hunt animals, to become their predominant predators rather than their prey, because of their ability to represent them, meditate on them, and understand them. This, then, is the ultimate, broadest context within which we can consider the dimensions of twentieth century poetic anti-anthropocentrism, and doing so raises important questions for this study. If prehistoric art indicates that prehistoric humanity saw itself
as closer to animality than modern humanity does, then is the current trend of anti-anthropomorphism a return to that prehistoric attitude in some way? Is it simply a longing for it, perhaps brought on most poignantly by the increasing dominance of technology over our daily lives? Or is the anti-anthropocentrism born in the twentieth century a truly new development, and something else altogether?

**General Deductions and Inductions**

Considering the findings of the previous four chapters, a gradual change can be observed over the course of the history of American poetry, from its very beginnings but particularly during the twentieth century, specifically with regards to the figurative language used in the presentations of animals and humans and the comparisons made between the two, whether explicitly or implicitly. This change can best be described in terms of two categories for the figurative language observed: imagery and figurations that can be categorized as anthropocentric, and imagery and figurations that cannot, which are to be categorized as either non-anthropocentric or anti-anthropocentric. As American poetry has progressed chronologically, the prevalence and frequency of the first category has decreased, while the prevalence and frequency of the second category has increased. The two main conclusions to be drawn from my study relate to these two categories.

American poetry that most naturally fits the first category, poetry based on anthropocentric imagery and figurations, has steadily eroded and lost predominance. The evidence considered over the course of the previous four chapters seems to indicate that comparisons and depictions which regard humanity, relative to animality, as of a higher status, as more central or more important or more moral or more valuable, have decreased over time in the
frequency of their occurrence in American poetry, such that each successive period of time contains less anthropocentric poetry than the previous period.

Perhaps more importantly, concurrent with this erosion, over the course of the twentieth century a dramatic growth of non-anthropocentric and/or anti-anthropocentric comparisons and figurations occurs within American poetry. Allowing for some nineteenth century precursors, these concepts see their first fully mature expressions in the early twentieth century with Jeffers’ inhumanism and in Moore’s menagerie. As the twentieth century progressed, not only did the frequency of authors who presented similar concepts in their poetry increase, but the contexts and rhetorical stances within which the concepts were presented changed. Jeffers and Moore, despite their significant popularity, were seen as eccentrics, loners, or outsiders within the developing canon of American poetry, espousing ideas and perspectives not shared by the majority of their literary peers, let alone by the American culture at large. The rhetorical stances they take in their poems, relative to their content and their audiences, with their self-conscious tones and methods of address, whether careful and guarded or antagonistic and unapologetic, reflect a deep awareness of what they saw as a need to deflect or embrace or in some other way acknowledge their statuses as misanthropes, lest their work suffer from a degree of naivety. The many poets who took up the mantle of Jeffers and Moore in later decades, when it came to animal-human images and comparisons, produce poetry that shows much less evidence of this in the middle decades of the century, and by the 70s and 80s the rhetorical context is turned on its head, as anti-anthropocentric language adopts a default tone of brazenness, or even matter-of-factness. In this way we can not only record the development and growth of a specific concept within American poetry, from its encompassment of only a minority voice into that of a majority
voice, but we can observe the creation of a subgenre of poetry, at some point in the second half of the twentieth century, that either did not exist before or existed only in a nascent form.

**Implications of the Conclusion**

What, then, is my conclusion’s significance or importance? What can be learned from it? What further implications and suggestions might be made? Perhaps the first, broadest answer to these questions comes from a line of inquiry relating to issues of authenticity and causality.

If an anti-anthropocentric attitude towards animal-human comparisons in American poetry changed so dramatically in size and prominence from the beginning of the twentieth century, then what were its causative or correlative factors? Much of my introduction chapter deals with the trend of ecocriticism, the degrees to which it is related to my focus of study, and the degrees to which it and my focus diverge. Ecocriticism as a term did not exist until William Rueckert’s use of it in his 1978 essay “Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism,” and its stance and influence cannot be said to have existed in any significant way before the 1960s. The term ecopoetry comes into use even later. This time frame, of the middle and later part of the twentieth century, coincides with the end of what I call the transition period, in American poetry, from anthropocentrism to anti-anthropocentrism. The question should be asked, then, whether or not the two developments are related, and to what extent they may share similar causes.

It is not difficult to identify larger trends in American culture and history that coincide with the trajectory my study identifies within American poetry. The rise of environmentalism (as distinct from the conservationist, “Back-to-Nature” environmentalism of the nineteenth century) occurs in the 1960s, perhaps exemplified with the public concern aroused by the 1962
publication of Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring*, in turn leading to a number of environmental organizations coming into existence, such as Greenpeace in 1969 and the EPA in 1970. Analogous benchmarks can be identified corresponding to the animal rights movement, only about a decade afterwards, as Peter Singer’s *Animal Liberation: A New Ethics for Our Treatment of Animals* was published in 1975, and groups with corresponding philosophies cropped up almost immediately, such as the Animal Liberation Front in 1976, and PETA in 1980. Here, then, the conclusion of my study may offer value as a case study in the nature and extent of the relationship between poetry and the culture within which it is created. In this case, on the issue of how animals and humans are to be considered and represented in terms of each other, does American poetry align, both in content and in the timing of that content’s development, with American culture at large? Did the same sea change that brought about environmentalism and the animal rights movement bring about the predominance of anti-anthropocentrism within American poetry? My study indicates that affirmative answers are possible for both questions.

Accepting such an interpretation raises questions. How then, for instance, are we to explain the anti-anthropocentric poetry created before, in some cases long before, these movements gained traction within popular American culture? Poets like Marianne Moore and Robinson Jeffers might be seen as visionaries before their time, but they might also be seen as eccentric outliers, either unrelated to the movements that followed them or simply unusual extensions of the older nineteenth century manifestations of environmentalism or animal rights (and then, in a sense corresponding to poetic influence, more related to Dickinson and Whitman than to later poets). If a continuity could be identified that links Jeffers and Moore with their poetic descendants, however, it would offer a narrative of chronological development and progression, in which later anti-anthropocentric poets marched along a trail that Jeffers and
Moore had blazed. Future research may help identify and describe such a poetic lineage, if it exists in the first place. Its existence, or non-existence, would affect the broader context within which a tradition of anti-anthropocentrism in American poetry would take on meaning.

Along similar lines, even poets like Denise Levertov, and certainly Randall Jarrell (who died in 1965, before these sea changes had fully begun to register on a large scale), were writing anti-anthropocentric poetry before these movements took hold within American culture at large. Were such poets registering sentiments parallel to those that would soon create and fuel the movements of environmentalism and animal rights? Could they (and for that matter could Jeffers and Moore), by expressing concepts to be taken up within those movements, actually have been contributive factors in the movements themselves? Such questions, while important, lead us outside the parameters of a proper study of poetry and into a study of poetry’s place within the history of American culture at large.

**Sub-Conclusions and Narrower Trends**

Over the course of the execution of this study, the intent was simply to gather and examine a broad sampling of American poems written in the twentieth century that include animal-human comparisons in some way, whether through comparisons or descriptions, anthropomorphisms or zoomorphisms. The main trend observed, that of the increasing degree and frequency of anti-anthropocentrism, has already been discussed. A number of other trends, smaller but certainly significant, have also been observed. These trends have to do with secondary issues that arise with surprising frequency, and across a surprising variety of poets, related to the subject of animal-human comparisons. These secondary issues include gender, race, and war, and have already been discussed relative to specific poems and poets in various
sections of previous chapters, but a consideration of broader trends that cross chapters may prove valuable, and in fact may offer a deeper explanation of the relationship between American culture and American poetry as they relate to meditations on humanity, animality, and comparisons between the two. It seems that this pertains more so to the subject of war than to the other two issues.

**War**

A remarkable number of animal poems surveyed in this study involve war, either by reference or by overall context. Many poems written in the early half of the century by Marianne Moore and Robinson Jeffers, many of which are not included in this study, deal with animal-human comparisons yet simultaneously qualify as war poems.

Most notable of the poems by Moore that fit into this category is “The Fish,” which John Slatin considers to be “a war poem . . . wherein a ‘strange, ominously silent landscape filled with ruins’ suggests that ‘we are moving in a sea of bodies’ and recalling some terrible wartime disaster, or perhaps a tragedy symbolic of all disasters at sea” (Erickson 128), in which the fish of the poem are naval soldiers. Decades later, Moore reacted to World War II with anti-war poetry in a manner similar to the way that Jeffers did. “In Distrust of Merits,” published in 1944, includes the lines, “‘Man's / wolf to man' and we devour / ourselves. The enemy could not / have made a greater breach in our / defenses” (26-30). Here, as in so many other poems of Moore’s, the concept of the Great Chain of Being is undermined, as humanity is shown to be an imperfect form of animal rather than animals being lower forms of creation than humanity. Humanity’s propensity to wage war is Exhibit “A” in Moore’s argument that humanity has much to learn from the animal kingdom when it comes to ethics and values.
Jeffers’ poetry harmonizes with Moore’s on this issue. Jeffers wrote a plethora of anti-war poems extolling the values of his philosophy of “inhumanism,” in which humans are compared, unfavorably of course, with animals. Many are written in the 20s and 30s, but with the onset of World War II they gather in intensity. “Orca,” for instance, published in October of 1947, presents the death of sea lions by killer whales as natural and “beautiful. / Why? Because there was nothing human involved; no lies, no smirk and no malice; / All strict and decent; the will of man had nothing to do here” (20-22). When the poem turns to the topic of violence begotten by humans rather than by animals, however, “its human element / Is what darkens it. War is evil” (22-23) and “the breed of man / Has been queer from the start. It looks like a botched experiment, that has run wild, and ought to be stopped” (23-24). For Jeffers, then, his assessment of the war becomes a supporting, subordinate point to his larger argument about evaluating humans as a species, relative to those over which they are supposed to be granted dominion. These concluding lines to the poem exemplify the overlap between Jeffers’ anti-war sentiments and his “inhumanist” attitudes about animals and humans in contradistinction with each other.

These poems of the first half of the century provide a context for the later poetry that is simultaneously concerned with both war and issues of animality and humanity. In the mid-century chapter we see Randall Jarrell, in the aftermath of World War II, writing poems linked by their topic of the war, but also by their animal imagery, especially poem pairs like “Gunner” and “The Death of The Ball Turret Gunner,” and “Second Air Force” and “Eighth Air Force.” Animal and human qualities, and even roles, are mixed in unnatural ways both darkly comic and grimly somber, meditating on the ways that animalization can represent both the dehumanizing effects of war and, contrastingly, an enviable innocence from the indistinguishably human-
created war machine. Moving from post-war coping efforts to anti-war protests, we see the poetry written by Denise Levertov, like “Life at War,” which argues against war in general, and the Vietnam War in particular, by way of an opposition between indulgently violent human nature and homeostatic animal nature. Derek Walcott similarly compares “the violence of beast” to “upright man” who “seeks his divinity by inflicting pain” in “A Far Cry from Africa.”

Galway Kinnell weights the two subjects of war and animal-human comparisons fairly equally in *The Book of Nightmares*. Both subjects share a common thread, naturally leading to meditations on human nature, human values, and human ethics. Several other poems, like Maxine Kumin’s “Woodchucks,” published in the 1970s, and Rita Dove’s “Parsley,” published in the 1980s, extend the connections between the two subjects. So many different poets couple them in their work that animal-human comparisons deserve attention as an essential component within American war poetry of the twentieth century.

This strand of pacifist themes within anti-anthropocentric poetry, then, can be traced back to works early in the twentieth century, although its increase after World War II presages the even greater increases over the course of the latter half of the century. These harmonies and parallels in sub-themes may serve as further indications of a legitimate continuity across the various anti-anthropocentric poets grouped by chronology. Caveats must be acknowledged, however: the earlier discussion, for instance, of Randall Jarrell’s otherwise laudatory essays on many aspects of Moore’s vision of animals, includes an integral complaint against her views on war, that “if Miss Moore had read a history of the European ‘colonization’ of our planet (instead of natural histories full of the quaint animals of those colonies) she would be astonished at nothing in the last world war, or in this one, or in the next” (Jarrell “Poetry in War and Peace” 129). Yet even this caveat betrays a continuity that stretches from poets like Jeffers and Moore
to the late-century poets: Jarrell argues that her pacifism and, just as importantly, her anti-
anthropocentrism, does not go far enough. “Miss Moore thinks of the war in blindingly moral
terms,” Jarrell writes, and, in particular objection to the line in “In Distrust of Merits,” “If these
great patient / dyings – all these agonies / and woundbearings and bloodshed / can teach us how
to live, these dyings were not wasted,” he repudiates her argument with “They taught us to kill
others and to die ourselves, but never how to live. Who is ‘taught to live’ by cruelty, suffering,
stupidity, and that occupational disease of soldiers, death?” (Jarrell “Poetry in War and Peace”
129). Jarrell’s main correction of Moore’s version of pacifism is a rejection of her hope that
some good can be earned or learned through it. By registering as even more vehemently anti-
war than Moore, Jarrell, even in his objection, indicates the larger progression that, just as he and
his contemporaries and his poetic descendants would advance anti-anthropocentrism further than
the state in which Jeffers and Moore left it, they would do the same for poetic argumentation
against war.

Denise Levertov can be placed along the same line of progression. The attention and
controversy her poem “Life at War” caused, gains a measure of added significance if looked at
within the context of the anti-war poetry that preceded it. Levertov emphatically asserted the
legitimacy of politics occupying a central place in poetry, as put into action through her poetry
written in protest of the Vietnam War. The flak she took from readers, critics, and poets, for
using such direct rhetoric and such graphic imagery, harkens back to the criticism, discussed in
my second chapter, that Jeffers and Moore received for their anti-war poetry as being naïve,
unpatriotic, or seditious. Levertov in this way can be seen as taking up their cause, not only in
the sense of the anti-war cause, albeit in relation to a later war, but in the sense of a fight for the
acceptability and validity of the idea that poetry can engage directly in politics without
sacrificing artistry or artistic integrity. It should be noted that Jarrell himself participated in this same cause and that, even in his criticism of Marianne Moore’s “In Distrust of Merits,” he very clearly took her side on the broader issue of the place of politics in poetry:

But how honest and lovable – how genuinely careless about herself and caring about the rest of the world – Miss Moore seems in this poem, compared to most of our poets, who are blinder to the war than they ever were to the peace, who call the war "this great slapstick," and who write (while everyone applauds) that they are not going to be foolish enough to be "war poets." How could they be? The real war poets are always war poets, peace or any time. (Jarrell “Poetry in War and Peace” 129)

Jarrell, then, and Jeffers and Moore as well, can be imagined as applauding Levertov’s anti-war poetry, and her larger vision of it as advancing the genre for English the way Neruda’s poetry already had for Spanish with his concepts of revolutionary politics and “revolutionary love,” which, as Levertov writes, “is not merely anthropocentric” (134).

The examples provided by these poets offer data points that can be plotted according to the development and frequency of the appearances of these issues and subjects (of war, environmentalism, and human-animal comparisons) in their poetry and the poetry of many of their contemporaries, and the figurations and imagery used to express them. These data points, charted chronologically, may be interpreted as indicating a narrative of correlation, possibly even causation, between changes in American poetry and broader changes in American culture and history, with respect to these issues. Voices of anti-anthropocentrism within American poetry experience a transition, from being part of a minority voice in the earlier half of the twentieth century to gaining majority voice status at some point relatively early in the latter half of the
twentieth century. Those same poets register expressions of anti-war sentiments which are augmented by the aftermath of World War II, and again by the American involvement in the Vietnam War, a pattern which may unsurprisingly be reflected within American poetry at large, although further research would be needed to confirm this.

The events of World War II, as a whole, then, earn consideration for being seen as a catalyst, if not at least a significant contributing factor, in the change of status which anti-anthropocentrism undergoes, simultaneously in American poetry and in American culture at large. The war left America, even in the celebration of victory, with harrowing images and stories as its main legacy (beyond the reality of the Cold War, that is) of two powerful events of devastation, which became crystallized within the American imagination: the genocide of the Holocaust, and the introduction of nuclear weaponry with the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. These commanding narratives of humanity’s potential for the destruction of themselves and of their environment, and even of their own human dignity in the process, need little rhetorical explanation or embellishment in order to marshal a demoralizing blow to anthropocentric worldviews. If World War I is often discussed as an event that ended a spirit of idealism and brought about the disillusionment and mistrust with existing traditional social structures that characterized the age of literary modernism, then World War II can be said to reify and recontextualize the unreliability of a view of humanity as the bearer of a moral compass, let alone as holding a righteous prominence as the highest, most rational form of life. For many Americans, and many American poets, the events of World War II made anthropocentric perspectives no longer viable, and made the earlier expressions in Robinson Jeffers’ and Marianne Moore’s work seem much less peculiar, much more acceptable, and
certainly not as outlandish. The Second World War, then, brought many readers and writers of poetry to a place already occupied by Jeffers and Moore since the First World War.

If World War II can be recognized as the point of no return for a change from anthropocentrism to anti-anthropocentrism, why do the ensuing movements to be identified as the effects of such a change, modern environmentalism, modern animal rights movements, etc., only enter into significance as late as the 1960s, or even 1970s? American poetry seems to indicate a similar delay in effect, as it would certainly be a stretch to say that anti-anthropocentrism had gained a dominant position as early as the 1940s, or even 1950s. Perhaps the explanation for this is simple, that the seeds for these changes needed time to grow. A significant period of latency must be acknowledged, however, if World War II is to be identified as a major contributive cause to this observed change in culture and poetry. The shock that comes from a time of war may have led to an initial pause, or a phase of consolidation, recovery, or restoration. From the perspective of the world of American poetry, this can be seen in the relative scarcity of poems that dealt directly with aspects of the war like the Holocaust or the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. A general sentiment seemed to exist, exemplified by the Theodor Adorno quote (one perhaps taken out of context), that “there can be no poetry after Auschwitz,” or at least no poetry about Auschwitz. Of the many American poems about nuclear warfare, very few of them were widely published during the 40s and 50s, and those that were published often addressed the war obliquely or adopted distant rhetorical stances, such as Gregory Corso’s “Bomb,” a shaped poem (taking the form of a mushroom cloud) that tongue-in-cheekly addresses the bomb itself in the second person. American culture and its art, immediately after World War II, seems to register the marks of a time for quietly coping with the war’s legacy and post-war reality.
It would make sense, then, that the Vietnam War would reawaken and agitate these issues. The 1960s saw a rapid rise of opposition to America’s involvement in the war, simultaneous with the rise of environmentalism discussed above (and nearly simultaneous with the rise of the animal rights movement). Anti-anthropocentrism within American poetry reaches substantial maturity during the same time and, as has been presented in earlier chapters, many of the poems of the 60s and 70s that lent their voices to the anti-war movement included significant aspects of animal-human comparisons and imagery presented in anti-anthropocentric contexts. Again, as is discussed above, the question remains as to the nature of the relationships among these developments, and whether or not any of those relationships are causal, correlative, or simply coincidental. Observations indicate at the very least, however, that changes within American poetry, which may be seen reflected in American culture at large, with respect to issues of war, occurred concurrently with similar changes about the issues of humanity’s relationship to the earth and to other animals.

Race

As we have seen in earlier chapters, African-American poets of the twentieth century participate in this trend of anti-anthropomorphism, but their use of racial contexts in their poems with animal-human comparisons, a move largely unseen among most white poets (at least most white anti-anthropocentric poets), provides possible reasons for distinguishing them as embodying a tradition separate from, if connected to, the tradition of the majority of anti-anthropocentric poets. African-American folklore, for instance, includes the trickster trope, a role which is embodied by a quick-witted black person who uses cunning to devise ways of exercising control in an uncontrollable situation, but is also just as often embodied in animal form (as in perhaps the most popular variation of the form, Brer Rabbit). More often than not,
the trickster outsmarts the master, overseer, or any (white) person (or, in the case of animals, any more powerful animal opponent) who is poised to exercise authority over the trickster. The trope serves as a clear example of African-American art acrobatically combating racism and anthropocentrism simultaneously, as both ways of thinking derive from the Great Chain of Being concept and its endorsement of races (or species) having authority and power over lesser forms of life.

In her introduction to *Black Nature*, the first, and as of now the only, published anthology of African-American nature poetry, Camille Dungy aptly sums up the special historical baggage, discussed in previous chapters, African-American artists bring to the subject of animal-human comparisons, "viewed once as chattel, part of a farm's livestock or an asset in a banker's ledger, African Americans developed a complex relationship to land, animals, and vegetation in American culture" (xxii). Dungy even ties animal representations in black poetry to the larger battle against the nonempathic attitudes represented in anthropocentrism and its particular manifestations and implications:

These poems prove what true wisdom can be conveyed when he who had been deemed savage . . . takes pen and tells his tale firsthand. Pets and prey, wild and tame, animal and vegetable, birds and insects included, the empathy and commiseration implicit in poems like Kwame Alexander's 'Life,' Audre Lorde's 'The Bees,' and Alice Dunbar-Nelson's 'April Is on the Way' reveal the astonishing degree to which these African American poets and their subjects have aligned themselves with the natural world. . . . For a people who have been classified as entirely separate, as a subspecies or as a possession, the demands of empathy and the repercussions of a lack of empathy are all the more apparent. (xxii)
Dungy makes the case here for an African-American parallel to the anti-anthropocentrism movement, a variation in which the stakes are changed, even augmented. Her selection of examples here are telling, as well: one comes from the end of the nineteenth century and the other two come from the last quarter of the twentieth century (and this proportion, in fact, is representative of the two “animal” sections of the anthology, “Pests, People Too” and “Talk of the Animals,” in which more than two thirds of the selected poems are published during the 1970s or later, a proportion of recent poetry significantly higher than that of other sections).

Previous discussions of the timing of anti-anthropocentric poetry’s growth and visibility are pertinent here, and, as with a consideration of the interaction between the topics of war and anti-anthropocentrism, the topics of race and anti-anthropocentrism inform each other significantly in American poetry. The culmination of the Civil Rights Movement, the beginning of the Vietnam War protests, and the rise of environmentalism all occur within a relatively narrow period of time, one in which the movement of anti-anthropocentrism within American poetry reaches maturity. From the 1960s and 1970s on, then, the participation of African American poetry in the movement of anti-anthropocentrism merits special attention.

Henry Dumas, in “The Zebra Goes Wild Where the Sidewalk Ends,” published in 1974 but written in the late 1960s, uses animal figurations as a locus for meditations on parallel power hierarchies: human over animal, wild over domesticated, white over black. In the poem a language of urban oppression is expressed not in human terms but as coming from animal sources and against animal victims. The narrator of the poem reports that “Chains of light race over / my stricken city. / Glittering web spun by / the white widow spider.” and that “In America all zebras / are in the zoo” (17-20, 30-31). Dumas forces markers of race and nationality onto the animals in the poem, so that the animals presented in the poem must function either as direct
representations of humans or as part of an implicit comparison being made between animals and humans. Either way, the “glittering web” of chains across the city and the implied bars of the zoo evoke aspects of the system of imprisonment, poverty, and urban plight that characterize so much of the experiences for blacks in the city. Whereas the source of the web is unmistakably attributed to “the white” spider, the white orchestrator of the power structure, those suffering, the zebras, are of an indeterminate association with race, if they are to be associated with race at all. Yet the use of zebras will immediately call to mind for most readers the common riddle of whether a zebra is “white with black stripes” or “black with white stripes,” and the title of the poem itself asks the reader to imagine the zebra as a human, or at least as having human aspects, as it draws a contrast between urbanity and wildness. Issues of African heritage are invoked, using zebra imagery as its vehicle, to point up this contrast: “No wild zebras roam the American plain. / The mad dogs are running. / The African zebra is gone into the dust” (36-38). Dumas sandwiches his description of mad dogs between two statements about zebras being (or not being) in America and Africa, overlapping a concern about domestication, restriction, and lack of freedom, with concerns about insanity and the loss of racial heritage and identity. This concern is set up through the “voice in the wilderness” tone achieved in the previous lines, complete with canine descriptors, warning that “I hear the piston bark / and ibm spark: / let us program rabies. / the madness is foaming now.” (32-35), and insinuating the threat of a disease that can infect, and threaten the sanity of, animals and humans alike.

David Henderson’s poem, “Keep on Pushing” (1970), calls for its readers (or for Harlemites exclusively?) to “– Come out of your windows / dancehalls, bars and grills Monkey Dog in the street / like Martha and the Vandellas / Dog for NBC / The Daily News and The New York Times / Dog for Andrew Lyndon Johnson / and shimmy a bit / for ‘the boys upstate’ /
and the ones in Mississippi” (97-105). “Hence, Henderson re-appropriates the meaning of ‘dog’ and ‘monkey’ and re-employs them to signify upon the white intelligentsia. In his black philological redress, ‘monkey’ is ‘The Signifying Monkey,’ the quintessential trickster who one-ups the mighty lion, the king of the jungle. The toast of ‘The Signifying Monkey’ is a powerful metaphor for African Americans, who see in it potentials for subversion and indirect insult which allows them to laugh in the face of unsuspecting oppressors. Through signification, black Americans perfect the art of insult through ‘verbal indirection’ and of ‘put-downs’ (Smitherman, *Talkin’*, 118-119). Similarly, the verb ‘dog’ subverts connotations of laziness to mean, instead, to insult and to criticize through ritualized dancing. To dog, then, is to signify. In the poem, Henderson conceptualizes both verbs as vernacular put-downs which perform signification and affirm blackness. Black performers ritualize their art to claim their identity and humanity; in the process, they resist the degrading stereotypes forced on them by white racialists. Here, ‘Monkey’ and ‘Dog’ morph into cultural agencies whose ‘double-talk’ (Snellings 446) subverts stereotypes of a black leisure class” (Marcoux 95-96).

Rita Dove’s poem “Parsley,” published in 1983, ties animal-human comparisons to issues of race and of war, exploring the ways that people or institutions wielding power can justify treatment of humans as animals or as beneath animals. The poem creates a background story for the “Parsley Massacre” of 1937, in which “El General,” Rafael Trujillo, dictator of the Dominican Republic, ordered 20,000 black Haitians to be killed if they could not pronounce the letter “r” in *perejil*, the Spanish word for parsley. Trujillo’s pet parrot figures very prominently in the poem; it serves as part of his callous reasoning for viewing his victims as uncultured and subhuman. The portion of the poem presented in Trujillo’s own voice includes the disdainful, disgusted, unfavorable comparison of his Hatian victims to his pet parrot: “Even / a parrot can
The animal, capable of imitating a human voice, sordidly earns an elevated status, above that of actual humans. The parrot is given pastries “dusted with sugar on a bed of lace” (42), products of the brutal labor of the sugarcane field workers who can barely afford to live. Yet the parrot suffers indignity too, trapped in “an ivory / cage” (34-35), and the poem proffers comparisons between the parrot and Trujillo’s victims that supersede the repugnant logic of Trujillo’s own comparisons. Very early in the poem, the screams of Trujillo’s victims are compared to the shrill squawks of a parrot: “Like a parrot imitating spring, / we lie down screaming as rain punches through / and we come up green.” (6-8). The sugarcane workers, doomed to die, decompose, and fertilize the growth of the very crop that haunted them during their waking lives, take on the color, sound, and appearance of the parrot in their death. The parrot and the Haitian victims are connected as equally captive and controlled by Trujillo, both in life and in death. Yet Trujillo himself does not escape the agony of the presence of death, and the parrot serves as its vehicle. The parrot, “coy as a widow” (35), is in Trujillo’s mother’s room, although she has recently died. Near the end of the poem, the parrot, presented with the human pronoun “someone” (63) rather than “something,” “calls out his name in a voice / so like his mother’s, a startled tear / splashed the tip of his right boot” (64-66). The end of the poem then presents Trujillo as the character in the poem most without power, as contemplating the massacre only in a desperate reaction to his impotent attempts to cope with the grief he has for his dead mother. Dove crafts the symbol of the parrot, and the myriad comparisons involving it, as the locus of the poem’s essential meditation on the dignity of life and protest of war’s affront to it.

One of the most active and activist of poets during the latter third of the twentieth century, poet June Jordan is not known for her treatment of animals in her poetry. Yet, during
one of the last public speaking engagements before her death, she read from the title poem of her final collection, *Some of Us Did Not Die* (2002). The poem strikes a significant parallel to Robinson Jeffers’ “Vulture” and Robert Hayden’s “Bone-Flower Elegy”: it describes a predatory bird swooping over her dying body: “He makes that dive / to savage / me / and inches / from the blood flood / lusty / beak / I roll away / I speak / I laugh out loud / Not yet / big bird of prey / not yet.” Even while it is characterized by tension and opposition, Jordan, like Jeffers and Hayden before her, enacts a personal vision of death in terms of merging with an animal.

**Indigenous Peoples of the Americas**

One last development during the 60s and 70s, relevant to the trajectory of anti-anthropocentrism in American poetry, should be noted at least briefly. The rise of environmentalism and animal rights, etc., also seems to be contemporary with a rise within American culture of the rediscovery and appreciation of the culture of Native Americans. The concepts of living in closer harmony with animals and the earth, taking animal names, the idea of “spirit animals,” etc., certainly take up prominent places in the poetry of those like Gary Snyder and John Haines, and bear great significance to the movements of ecocriticism and ecopoetics. This adds one more link to the chain of changes within American culture concurrent with the rise of anti-anthropocentrism in American poetry.

**Other Genres, Other Places, Other Times**

**Genres**

The scope of my study is limited primarily to American poetry written in the twentieth century, and its purpose is to answer the question of how comparisons between animals and humans have changed over that time period in American poetry. The central question of my
study, then, may lead to significant findings if applied with different parameters. Would the results be significantly different or similar for a study of comparisons between animals and humans in American drama, for instance, or in American fiction? Many examples in American drama, for instance, include animal-human comparisons with streaks of anti-anthropocentrism to them. Some prominent examples include Eugene O’Neill’s *The Hairy Ape* (1922) and *The Last Will and Testament of an Extremely Distinguished Dog* (1940), Tennessee Williams’ *The Glass Menagerie* (1944), *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955), Edward Albee’s *The Zoo Story* (1958) and *The Goat, or Who Is Sylvia?* (2002), and others. Future research may help connect the bodies of literary criticism for American drama and for American poetry on this issue, not to mention American fiction, and begin work on multi-genre studies of animal-human comparisons in American literature at large.

**Places**

Applying the central question of my study to literature with the same parameters of genre and time, but of different places of origin, may also yield valuable information. How do comparisons between animals and humans in British poetry, for instance, rather than American poetry, change over time? An observation of any significant differences may shed light on the questions of causality and correlation mentioned earlier, as the United States and the United Kingdom share many parallels but also a number of significant differences in experience of factors such as the wars of the twentieth century, and the developments of environmentalism and animal rights, etc.

**Times**
Some of my study’s possible implications for further research on different, possibly broader, chronological studies of animal and human figurations in poetry have been discussed above, in the introduction to this chapter.

**Epilogue**

The very recent poetry, published after the year 2000, that includes animal and human figurations shows interesting extensions to the development of poetic anti-anthropocentrism in the last part of the twentieth century. In this poetry, reflections and variations on the aspects of the movement appear and, while the major attitudes, sentiments, and ethoi persist, the poems can often adopt doubtful tones rather than confident ones, and they can present caveats and questions for a philosophy of anti-anthropocentrism. The poems are characterized by explicit self-awareness, an acknowledgment of the impediments to and limitations of authentically representing animality in poetry, and even a mistrust of the possibility for genuine human empathy for animals. Occasionally metadramatic “winks” are made to the reader that the poet can at best only interact with an imagination of animality, rather than an authentic representation, making anthropomorphism and zoomorphism, acts that may seem on the surface to be actions of empathy, into self-conscious actions of self-analysis and self-meditation.

In Greg Williamson’s “The Life and Times of Wile E. Coyote, Super Genius,” for instance, mentioned in the previous chapter, the speaker of the poem praises and toasts the Sisyphean cartoon coyote but ends with a direct commiseration, even using the plural to express it: “The better life, your failure – like my own. / Wile E. Everyman. Come, Trickster, let us / Feast on our clay chicken, our tin can” (22-24). The poem may invoke the comic, but its conclusion here earnestly equates the foibles, frustrations, and fruitless struggles with those of
humans, not only individually and personally (“like my own”), but collectively (“Wile E. Everyman”). Still, the poem foregrounds the cartoonish nature of the character from start to finish. It knowingly calls attention to the problems within its particular action of a human associating with an animal: the speaker is connecting with and meditating upon an obviously human creation, and an incongruously ridiculous anthropomorphism at that. The poem then becomes a shamelessly self-aware act of navel-gazing. Only thinly disguised as an authentic human association with the image of an animal, it concedes its own nature as a reflection on the product of the human imagination, whether emanating from an individual or from the larger popular culture. Williamson’s creation harkens back to Dickinson’s brief “To make a prairie,” mentioned in my first chapter:

To make a prairie it takes a clover and one bee,

One clover, and a bee.

And revery.

The revery alone will do,

If bees are few. (1-5)

If you don’t have nature, and if you don’t have animals, then your imagination will suffice. Postmodern American poetry may add to this the Gorgian caveat that humans would be rash to assume they can authentically apprehend or connect with animals and nature in the first place, and that perhaps all they have to express are their interactions with their own imagination. The movement of anti-anthropocentrism in American poetry shows a tender awareness of its anthropocentric roots.
Works Cited


Print.


Print.


