

**Writing ‘that animal darkness’:
Galway Kinnell, Gary Snyder, James Merrill**

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DECLARATION

This Thesis is entirely my own work and has not been submitted as an exercise for a degree at this or any other University. I agree that the Library may lend or copy this Thesis upon request, subject to normal conditions of acknowledgement.

Johanna Hoorenman

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SUMMARY

As humanity's most evident other, at once deeply similar to and fundamentally different from the human, the animal is a valuable poetical trope. This thesis examines the representation and function of animals and animality in the writings of three key late twentieth-century American poets: Galway Kinnell, Gary Snyder and James Merrill. In Chapter One I outline the historical context of the representation of animals in forms of cultural expression and the importance of animals for symbolic activity, as evidenced by the abundant prehistoric depictions of animals in underground caves and the use of animal species as totems among primitive peoples. I also provide an overview of the widely different conceptualisations of animals within world religion and the western philosophical tradition, and delineate the historical context of human-animal relations in American history. Finally, I present a brief introduction to the representation of animals in American literature as an American literary context for the discussion of Kinnell, Snyder and Merrill.

In Chapter Two I discuss Galway Kinnell's use of animal subjects and images in the context of four main themes that surface in his animal poems. I demonstrate how Kinnell's perspective on animals and animality is connected to his perspective on nature as an organic cycle of life in which life, death and rebirth are fundamentally interconnected, through discussions and close readings of among other poems, "Avenue C," "The Quick and the Dead," "To Christ Our Lord" and "Ode and Elegy." I also examine Kinnell's depictions of death and transformation in "The Bear," "The Porcupine," and "The Hen Flower." Moreover, I show how Kinnell engages with birds as images of transience and transcendence in the poems "Why Regret" and "Frog Pond," "Mount Fuji at Daybreak," "The Geese," and "The Gray Heron." The chapter concludes with a discussion of the notions of kinship and otherness that are crucial to Kinnell's animal poetry through a discussion of "Saint Francis and the Sow" and "When One Has Lived A Long Time Alone." The interplay between these two notions is the primary basis of all of Kinnell's animal poems, in which he searches for a balance between curiosity and a desire to understand the otherness of different species, and a deep-seated sense of kinship with the creatures that share the experiences of life and mortality with humans.

Chapter Three focuses on animals in the poems of Gary Snyder. The first section of the chapter traces Snyder's stylistic engagement with Pound's imagism and its origins in Asian languages and literatures, which provide him with poetic techniques that allow him to suggest or imagine the unknowable essence of animals. It also discusses Snyder's engagement with the shamanistic origins of poetry, the oral and performative elements of Native American literature and narrative plots and characters from Native American and world mythology. The chapter subsequently looks at Snyder's poetic exploration of human-animal relationships through a close reading of his poems on hunting, focusing on "*this poem is for deer*," "*this poem is for birds*," "Hunting 4," and "Hunting 13" as well as "The Hudsonian Curlew," and "Long Hair." The chapter concludes with an exploration of mythological narrative plots and characters involving animals in Snyder's poems. Through readings of "The Feathered Robe," "A Berry Feast," "The Way West, Underground," "*this poem is for bear*," "The Bear Mother," and "Right on the Trail," I explore Snyder's poetic retellings of the mythological animal marriage plot, in the forms of the Swan Maiden and Bear Wife myth. I also look at the ways in which Snyder uses the trickster animal figure of Coyote in "A Berry Feast" and "The Call of the Wild," and the ways in which Snyder employs these to present to his readers a universe of real and mythological animals and humans in which they can communicate freely and intimately.

The final chapter, on the animal poems of James Merrill, looks at the particularly metaphorical approach that Merrill takes to his poetic representations of animals. In the first section I outline the influence of Merrill's general approach to poetry on his representations

of the physical, external world. The second section discusses in detail Merrill's bird poems "The Parrot," "The Pelican," and "The Peacock," as well as "Transfigured Bird" and "Periwinkles," and the poet's complex of metaphorical connections revolving around the animals that feature in the poems. The second section looks at three poems in which Merrill depicts a moment of intense but undefined emotion invoked by an animal subject, "The Octopus," "The Locusts," and "The Black Swan," and I show how in these poems, Merrill employs the sublime as a metaphor for the unknown element of animality, to gesture towards the presence of real, physical animals behind his poems and to acknowledge their unavoidable absence within the poems.

To my father and mother, Ed and Joke Hoorenman,
with love and gratitude

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Introduction

Nothing, as a matter of fact, is more closed to us than this animal life from which we are descended. [...] the correct way to speak of it can *overtly* only be poetic, in that poetry describes nothing that does not slip toward the unknowable. [...] The animal opens before me a depth that attracts me and is familiar to me. In a sense, I know this depth: it is my own. It is also that which is farthest removed from me, that which deserves the name depth, which means precisely that which is unfathomable to me. But this too is poetry...

— George Bataille (1897–1962)

In his *Theory of Religion*, Bataille states that animal life is intrinsically closed off from human understanding as it lacks precisely that which is essential to understand it: consciousness. For Bataille, the animal is “*in the world like water in water*,” by which he seems to indicate an existence in a state of timeless continuity, a world of immanence and immediacy. He holds that since any attempt to imagine animal life, or anything else without consciousness, involves an act of consciousness (namely, consciousness of the notions of *we* and *imagining*), we can never truly imagine or understand the animal through science. Only when making a “poetic leap,” when turning oneself over to “the sticky temptation of poetry,” can one look at the animal as not simply a thing, and begin to “[extend a] glimmer into that animal darkness.” However, what can be described as animal poetry is not necessarily always poetry about animals. Quite often, animal subjects of poems, or animal images in poems, are invoked for their metaphorical potential as much as for their own sakes, and employed to express something about the human experience rather than about the animal experience. This difference in types of animal poetry should not be seen as an opposition but as a sliding scale or a continuum of metaphoricity: animals in poetry are rarely entirely observations, imaginations or representations of real, living animals on the one hand, and purely metaphorical tools on the other.

This thesis aims to examine the representation of animals in poetry all along this spectrum of metaphoricity. That examination is stimulated by two underlying convictions. First, that animals in particular (and nature in general), through their universal accessibility and their tremendously broad range of features and qualities, have been a fundamental and boundless source of metaphor and conceptual thinking for man. They may even be seen as the first metaphors, the primordial form of conceptual thinking and the first subject of symbolic activity for human beings. Moreover, specifically animals’ (versus ‘nature’s’) unique status or identity as similar to but different from humans, as active living agents that do not share the human capacity for language, makes them unique poetic subjects. We will return to this premise in the first chapter. The second is that of all forms of cultural expression, poetry is particularly suited to speak of the animal, is able to make or suggest connections and associations that other forms of literature or art cannot, is capable of edging towards the unspeakable or the unknowable essence of the animal other and is thus capable of approaching an understanding of the animal that is generally unavailable through non-literary means, through acts of imagination and suggestion.

Animals have been a consistently popular source of poetic contemplation and can be found in poetry from around the world. They form, as Bataille observes, a depth of being that attracts human attention both for its familiarity and for its otherness, and writers and audiences alike have persistently found them fascinating subjects for poetry. The 1990s, for instance, saw the publication of five different animal poetry anthologies containing poems and translations from ancient to modern times and from eastern to western poets. These anthologies of animal poetry not only testify to the large-scale

tradition of animal poetry spanning across many periods and languages, they also indicate a recent surge of interest of contemporary audiences in animal poems. Not only have animals long been popular subjects of poetry therefore, but they seem to have become even more so in the last twenty years. This study focuses on the body of work of three late twentieth-century American poets, Galway Kinnell, Gary Snyder and James Merrill. I have chosen to explore the poetry of American poets because America's unique relationship with nature and its relatively recent and fast development from a collection of hunter-gatherer societies to an urban post-modern, post-industrial civilisation provides a fascinating context for this study. In the introduction to her study of animals in American fine arts, Mary Haverstock observes:

Few countries, even in this industrialized age, can boast a more diverse and numerous animal population than the United States. Certainly no other country has allowed birds, beasts, and fish a freer access to its language, literature, commerce, politics, and art. A quick trip through any of the new dictionaries reveals the extent to which the American vernacular has been taken over by the animal kingdom: for all our advanced technology, we are still speaking of ourselves as a nation of eager beavers, culture vultures, stool pigeons, cool cats, loan sharks, cold fish, legal eagles, nags, buck privates, cat burglars, snakes in the grass, and pussycats. Furthermore, Wall Street is set aside for bulls and bears, while Madison Avenue has become a preserve for a whole menagerie of other furred and feathered emblems of the American corporate heraldry. Even our beloved automobiles and athletic teams have animal names; that cars and football should be so honored is perhaps middleclass America's greatest compliment to the animal kingdom.

As we will see in the first chapter, American human-animal relationships are defined by America's paradoxical relationship with wilderness, by its rapid industrial development as well as by the memory of its pre-colonial hunter-gatherer societies and, most importantly, by the specific animals that are native to the continent that became known as the New World. Moreover, the late twentieth- and early twenty-first centuries, show a substantial shift in thinking about animals and the cultural assumptions of human-animal relationships and models for human-animal interaction that situate this present study in a rich contextual environment. These three contemporary American poets, then, are singled out from among many major late twentieth-century American authors because they are particularly representative of the ways in which animals feature in poetry, and a close examination of their work will demonstrate the rich uses of the animal for poetry, and of poetry for the animal. It should be noted that all three poets are male, and masculinity and gender will be a theme of the analysis where relevant to the poetry. The scope of this thesis, however, does not afford the space to make questions of gender and sexuality in the depiction of animals a main concern of the study.

The study is divided into four chapters. In Chapter One I construct a contextual framework for the cultural conceptualisation and representation of animals, drawing on the history of prehistoric images of animals in underground caves, the world wide use of animals as totems for the differentiation of kinship groups as well as on the widely different conceptualisations of the nature and the position of animals in cosmologies formed within various world religions and in the western philosophical traditions. These cultural conceptualisations and assumptions inform every human's perception of animals in collective and individual ways, and larger and smaller traces of them can be found in the work of each of our three poets. I also outline a more specific cultural framework for the American geographical, historical and literary setting of this study with an overview of the history of American human-animal relationships and an introduction to the animal in American literature. Chapter Two focuses on the animal poems of Galway Kinnell, and examines his poems particularly in the context of four main themes in his poetic engagement with animals: the cycle of life; death and transformation; transience and transcendence; and kinship and otherness. In Chapter Three we turn our attention to the animal poetry of Gary Snyder. This chapter shows the influence of poetic traditions as widely different as the imagism of high modernism and the characters, narrative plots and oral tradition of Native American literature on Snyder's stylistic strategies in the

representations of animals in his poetry. The chapter also examines the two major thematic strands of hunting and mythology in Snyder's animal poems. Chapter Four focuses on the distinctly metaphorical approach of James Merrill in his poetry about birds, as well as on the role of metaphor in the experience of the sublime in Merrill's animal poems.

Ethics and aesthetics

Central throughout this work is the question of what is really represented by the animals in the poems. Whether the animal is a human projection of cultural assumptions; a poetic examination of the strange kinship of humans and animals or, conversely, of the strangely familiar otherness of the animal; a genuine attempt at the expression into language of the experience of the animal, which necessarily takes place outside of language; or an employment of perceived characteristics of the animal as a metaphorical tool for the expression of human experiences, the animal has a vital presence in the poem. Within the context of the wide body of work that is developing within the research areas of ecocriticism and Animal Studies, this invokes questions of ethics and morality. Is the exploitation of animals for human entertainment, though spiritual rather than physical in the context of cultural representation, relevant to human perceptions of animals and therefore to human treatment of animals? Are there ways of representing animals that are morally preferable to other ways of representing animals? Is the use of animals as metaphor in poetry a form of displacement of the experience of the real, physical animal and do animals perhaps constitute a type of voiceless subaltern in our society? Several scholars have attempted to form answers to these and related questions.

Steve Baker provides an excellent discussion of the animal as metaphor in visual representation in *Picturing the Beast: Animals, Identity and Representation* (1993). Animals form an inextricable part of any human language in the form of metaphor, both verbal and pictorial. One would only have to think of proverbs, political pamphlets, insults, poetry and other forms of cultural expression to be reminded of their wide-ranging presence. In a comprehensive review of political cartoons, wartime propaganda and sports symbolism as well the use of animal images by advocates and opponents of animal rights, Baker examines how Western culture pictures the non-human animal and how this may affect the perception and treatment of real animals.

He briefly explores the notion of the use of animals as metaphor in principle, questioning whether such representation does not misrepresent, distort or displace the real animal, and if there is a way of perceiving or imagining animals that is somehow neutral and objective. He points out, for instance, that it is perfectly possible and, in fact, rather common, for the meaning of an animal metaphor or symbol to have very little bearing on the characteristics of the animal in question. Drawing on the example of Mickey Mouse as a symbol of the United States, he points out that

[it] leaves little doubt that just about anything will do as a national animal symbol. The qualities deemed appropriate to such symbols evidently do not stop at dignity and steadfastness. [...] The symbolism itself is seldom very clearly defined, and it is open to manipulation: it is a rough-and-ready symbolism. It is in no way hindered by the fact that its meanings need owe *nothing* to the characteristics of the animals it employs.

This can be problematic because it renders the physical animal behind the image effectively invisible, "a mere vehicle for the transparent transmission of a symbolic meaning." What Baker seems to overlook is that the notion of Mickey Mouse as a symbol for the United States differs from, say, the notion of the bald eagle as a national symbol in two important ways. First is that as an animal symbol, Mickey Mouse signifies a cartoon character (very loosely) based on the animal rather than an actual (species of) animal. Second is that although this cartoon may be uniquely associated with the United States, it is not an officially designated national symbol of the country in the way that the bald eagle is but one formed through a very different process of association. Without going into the implications of these differences in detail here, it should be clear that when examining metaphors and symbols, these differences are relevant and should be taken into consideration. In his study,

Baker argues for a careful consideration of the broad term metaphor when speaking of animal representation, and makes a first distinction between the opposite modes of figurative expression of metaphor and metonymy, defining metaphor as a form of substitution in which “one thing is likened to another,” and metonymy as one in which “a thing is used to stand for another by reason of its being uniquely associated with it.” In either case, there is a substantial chance of stereotyping, whereby the intelligibility of such a stereotype is dependent on their conformity, “and that conformity is not (and never was) to some ‘truth’ of the animal.”

Baker convincingly argues that such blatantly unquestioning use of animal images without any regard for the reality of the physical animal behind the emblem or metaphor, especially in pictorial representation, runs the risk of significantly influencing human perception of, and subsequent treatment of physical animals. Representations are not innocent, nor is it a matter of simply advocating ‘positive’ or ‘affectionate’ images of animals over ‘negative’ or ‘denigrating’ images, because either type is still a human projection of how animals *should* be seen. Moreover, as Baker points out,

The animal is only ever knowable in mediated forms. To see animals at all is to see them *as* something – as something we have made meaningful, even if that something is only the display of our own investment in the idea of an authentic nature, a natural order of things, for which the animal is the ideal icon under the order of disnification.

Baker argues that though, or since, it is impossible to ‘know’ or represent the animal in any neutral or objective way, it is at least of importance to acknowledge the influence of types of animal representation, and to aim at representing animals in such a way as to influence human perception and thus treatment to the advantage of animals. He cites Bob Mullan and Garry Marvin in their observation in *Zoo Culture* that

Animals quite obviously cannot and do not [...] represent themselves to human viewers. It is man who defines and represents them, and he can in no sense claim to achieve a true representation of any particular animal; it merely reflects his own concerns.

I would suggest, however, that an important question when encountering animal representations is therefore: what is the human concern that is reflected, specifically? Is it a concern with or about the animal, the human, or the relationship between the two? Does this representation reflect a desire on the part of the human (or artist, for our purposes) to represent or imagine the animal as objectively or truthfully as possible; to employ the animal image to represent a human concern; to question the relationship between them; or any combination of the above?

The implications of animal representation in visual images (especially those that are designed for quick interpretation rather than elaborate questioning, such as cartoons, pamphlets or advertisements) are rather different from those in textual or verbal representations, as Baker himself suggests. The distinction, for instance, between metaphor and metonymy in textual representations, and particularly in poetry, might not be so easy to make. Certainly it is useful to examine the type of metaphor that is used, ranging from allegory to simile to symbol or emblem. In relation to representations of animals, it seems that the label of metonymy is most applicable to symbols and emblems such as one would find in visual images such as a logo, the long-time association of the American Democratic Party with a donkey and the Republican Party with an elephant, or the use of the bald eagle as an emblem of the United States. In poetry, we might well find these and many others, but they tend to be questioned, subverted, complicated, or otherwise elaborated upon. Moreover, the rhetorical resources and aims of the genre of text or image in which the representation is found are also widely different. Justin Quinn compellingly points out in *Gathered Beneath the Storm: Wallace Stevens, Nature and Community* that poetry is “a discourse distinct from politics and ideology,” and needs (and deserves) to be analysed in a way that is different from the way one would critically examine non-literary texts from areas such as propaganda, marketing and journalism. This does not mean that the use of animal metaphors in poetry is uncontroversial, however.

In *Poetic Animals and Animal Souls* for instance, Randy Malamud considers many forms of animal metaphor to form “a paradigm of imaginative exploitation.” He examines the practice of using animals in literature, suggesting that though it is based on an exploitative relation between man and animal (albeit a mental rather than a physical form of exploitation), it may also function as a “beard” or decoy for real animals, and work towards their protection if humans would be content with a purely mental rather than a physical interaction with animals. Malamud calls for a distinctly moral approach to animals in literature, illustrating his outlook with a review of two animal poems, W.B. Yeats’s “short and mean poem,” “To a Squirrel at Kyle-na-no,” and the longer “Address to the Beasts” by W.H. Auden. Both poems can be found in Paul Muldoon’s anthology of animal poetry, but I will cite “To a Squirrel at Kyle-na-no” as it is a short poem and its example will illustrate my argument about the moral questions regarding animal poetry:

Come play with me;
Why should you run
Through the shaking tree
As though I’d a gun
To strike you dead?
When all I would do
Is to scratch your head
And let you go.

Malamud’s discussion of Yeats’s poem is particularly impassioned, condemning Yeats for his playful alternation between friend and potential “tormentor” in the poem, which he describes as “a representative failure in the canon of animal poetry.”

Malamud takes offence at Yeats’s perceived attitude of “imperial mastery over animals,” arguing that Yeats represents the human-animal relationship as one in which the human (the speaker of the poem) has some sort of right to pet or kill the animal, as he pleases, simply because he can. His tone is interpreted as threatening, and Malamud states:

The writer of a poem like this may *believe* he is recounting an enlightening and equitable interaction with an animal, but this conceit is self-evidently insupportable. It may seem fairly obvious that Yeats as an animal poet is a wolf in sheep’s clothing, but he is no straw man: his poetic pervades the great majority of animal poems. Animal poetry, in the main, uncritically accepts the idea of human power over animals. It exhibits a sense of (often facile) benevolence that always inherently includes its antithesis - here manifest, though usually more quietly implicit: the option of harming the animal if the mood hits the human poet/reader/actor. The animal subject exists for our pleasure and at our pleasure. We use the animal in poetry, as we use it in industry, agriculture, science, to accomplish a specific purpose and satiate a specific desire.

I quote this at some length, because I think that this response is a crucial illustration of the complexities of a moral judgement of animal poetry. Whether the animal is a mere image or metaphor in the poem or the subject of the poem is irrelevant in this. What is important is how the poem is interpreted. All text is open to interpretation, and it would be difficult to find prose that says exactly and unequivocally what it means. One would only have to look at the language employed in legal documents such as contracts to see what efforts are necessary to make text unambiguous, and the results are rarely prosaic, poetic or literary. Literature, and poetry in particular, in fact, is generally *designed* for just that purpose: to evoke reflection and to make readers contemplate the meaning of the text. Literary texts are therefore generally subject to much discussion and debate with reference to interpretation.

Furthermore, the perceived intention of the author is by no means the only or even the most important measure of such interpretation. The words on the page, as well as the response of the reader in a specific individual, cultural or historical context are generally held to be of significance too. With reference to the example from Yeats, I would argue that the poem, short and prose-like though it is, still leaves itself open to at least one other reading. I see the poem as an expression of a (perhaps pained) desire of the speaker for contact with and trust from the squirrel. As such, it reads as a lament for the damage

wrought by generations of humans upon the trust of other animals through the regular use of violence. Moreover, the poem raises important questions of the desire of the individual human for contact with animals: what kind of connection is the speaker seeking? To receive physical comfort from something that looks soft and cuddly? To feel the warmth and heartbeat of another living creature? To be trusted and accepted by something that is autonomous and free? The poem's tone seems sad rather than threatening, and I see nothing morally wrong with an expression of desire for a connection with another animal. This is not to undermine Malamud's reading of the poem; I do not think that one reading is 'better' than the other. In fact, I firmly believe that several readings of specific poems can and should stand side by side, and that the various levels of interpretation enrich the poem. My aim, rather, is to question Malamud's call for morally 'right' poetry. The very nature of poetry is to invite contemplation and reflection, to point out ambiguities, to question morality and desire, to express contradictions, and the poetry of nature and of animals specifically is thus excellently suited to express human experiences, desires, questions and laments concerning the relationship between the human and the non-human. Moreover, morally 'right' poetry is not necessarily 'good' poetry, nor is it always interesting to read.

Malamud's example of a 'good' animal poem, Auden's "Address to the Beasts," is described as a "prominent expression and condemnation of animals' historical victimization" that "proclaims animals' moral innocence and humanity's moral shame by comparison" as a necessary "initial corrective" to the history of animal abuse. Though the poem itself is too long to examine in detail here, it is not as morally unambiguous as Malamud presents. One wonders for instance how valid and objective it is to elevate animals above humans, representing them merely on the other end of the inverted human-animal binary, where humans are now the lesser creature and animals the better. However, it is certainly a strong poem in its capacity to raise questions of morality in human and non-human animals in relation to the foreknowledge of death. Paradoxically, in his wish to set this poem as an example of animal poetry as it *should* be, Malamud points to the central flaw in his own argument: "One doesn't need to read much poetry in this vein – it makes people feel too guilty and soon becomes tedious – but it's a starting point." I see no objections to poetry that makes one feel guilty; questions of morality are stimulating topics for poetic reflection. But tedious? The risk of morally 'right' poetry lies in the fact that it discourages its readers to question, contemplate or reflect. Morally 'right' poetry seems prescriptive rather than reflective, and as such, it tends to lean more towards carefully crafted propaganda. The key to this concept, I want to emphasize, lies not in the poems themselves, but rather in the way they are read and analysed.

In his discussion of animal representation, Baker sees the human reliance on animal metaphors as a potentially constructive position. Distinguishing between the use of animals for the definition of the human self through the human-animal binary and the use of animals for metaphor, he states:

The idea that animals are metaphorically indispensable to humankind has certain attractions, because it proposes a relation between humans and animals which is not necessarily an exploitative one, nor one which necessarily works by denigrating the animals. Certainly it is anthropomorphic, attributing through carelessness or convenience all manner of human motives to the animals, but its motivations do not seem to be inherently selfish when seen alongside the self-defining oppositions discussed earlier.

I pose that the medium of poetry is overtly one of the best ways of speaking about animals, be it about real or metaphorical animals, imagined or imaginary ones. By its very nature, it questions or leads to questioning, it contemplates or leads to contemplation and as such can be a potent addition of imagination to knowledge of animals gained through the sciences of zoology, biology, and ecology. Since actual, factual knowledge of animals is necessarily limited to knowledge of their physical beings, any other understanding of animals is delegated to the realm of imagination, philosophy, or plain speculation. It is in this realm that poetry holds a unique capacity to imagine the animal.

If a distinction needs to be made, the question might just as usefully be an aesthetic one: poetry rarely uses stereotypes unquestioningly, and when it does, it is usually not very

good poetry. Poetry that would plainly enforce animal stereotypes, or unquestioningly present the human-animal binary as one that equals superiority-inferiority is like any other poetry that plainly enforces stereotypes or unquestioningly presents binary oppositions; rather superficial, and thus rarely the topic of sustained critical debate.

Metaphorical representations of animals, in my opinion, do not in principle form an unethical or immoral form of animal poetry. Rather than misrepresenting the animal through poetic displacement, they reinforce the fact that human reliance on other animals cannot be understated or invalidated, whether it be for food, shelter or clothing or for thinking, speaking and the formation of a human identity. This is not to say that the misrepresentation of animals in forms of cultural expression cannot influence human attitudes and behaviour, or that there are not actually forms of misrepresentation of animals that actively contribute negatively to the perception of animals by contemporary society. It could easily be argued (although it remains to be thoroughly investigated) that consistent negative depictions of certain animals in certain metaphors and myths may have contributed to bad treatment of actual animals. One might think of the consequences of the demonization of the snake in Christianity for real snakes, or of culturally consistent depictions of rats, bats and pigs for their treatment in real life. But these are rarely the kinds of negative depictions provided by literature. Rather, they are found in forms of culture that have (and aim to have) a more direct influence on people's behaviour, such as religion, folklore, propaganda, and marketing. I would also argue, with Baker, that this is the case in visual representation more than in textual representation, and in marketing more than in visual arts. Where advertisements or cartoons are dependent on instant recognisability and familiar stereotypes in their audience, poetry by its nature invites contemplation and critical reflection. So although the representation of animals in literature, especially in the wider historical context of contemporary human treatment of animals and the threat of widespread species extinction, inevitably brings up questions of ethics, poetry rarely contains unambiguously unethical representations of animals. As we will see, that includes poetry that celebrates animals and aims to imagine the animal experience and represent that experience in poetry, but also poetry that does not acknowledge the real, living animal as a referent to its subject matter and relies solely on the animal for its metaphorical potential, as well as poetry that openly discusses, questions and examines practices of hunting and killing animals.

The discourses of feminism, postcolonialism, orientalism or subaltern voices and displaced 'others,' may potentially form an interesting and controversial part of this discussion, but can never really be followed to its logical conclusion simply because, however much one might wish it, there is no 'voice' to recover. Animals cannot speak for themselves in our human culture because they do not share the human capacity for language and any representation of animals will be subject to that reality. The animal kingdom, if you will, is an 'empire' that cannot write back. Therefore, all literary representations of animals are necessarily subjective, projections, potential displacements or misrepresentations. Whether individual representations are genuine and sincere attempts to imagine an animal, or to depict it in as true a fashion possible, or whether they are part of a text that is simply about something else, something human, altogether, and that makes use of animal imagery or animal subjects to convey its meaning, there is no crossing that final boundary. Nor should literature be expected to do so. In *The Truth of Ecology: Nature, Culture, and Literature in America*, Dana Phillips examines the very diverse aims and methodologies of ecocriticism and holds up to the light some crucial inconsistencies and contradictions that have been a part of ecocritical rhetoric. Phillips (invoking Barthes) compellingly argues that the "ecocentrism" of literature *not* be understood to hinge on whether literature represents the natural world realistically or not. Verbal representations of nature, honestly weighted in the scales of realism, seems clumsy at best. [...] As Barthes argues, seeing realism this way "certainly does not mean that there is no responsibility of form toward reality. But this responsibility can be measured only in semiological terms. A form can be judged (since forms are on trial) only as signification, not as expression. The writer's language is not expected to *represent* reality, but to signify it."

The only real knowledge that humans can have of real animals comes through science

rather than poetry, and even then, language is a complicating factor. Phillips notes:

This is why scientists discount the importance of their own writing and prefer whenever they can to express their ideas using graphs, charts, tables, diagrams, differential equations, experiments, and new technologies. It is also why scientists actually *like* redundancy and write so “poorly”: the validity of their work doesn’t derive from the representational efficacy of their words alone.

The most that poetry can do is acknowledge the real animal, and acknowledge the divide of understanding, but I would argue that both forms of animal poetry (those that use the animal subject to refer to a material reality of the animal, and those that use the subject metaphorically) are equally interesting, and valuable. Phillips invokes both Wallace Stevens and Umberto Eco on the power and the limitations of poetry in the representation and imagination of non-human nature:

[P]oetry is a mundane endeavour, as it must be by definition if it is to help us imagine the earth, and [...] poets aren’t paragons of piety, prophesy, and perception but partisans of the imperfect, of “flawed words and stubborn sounds,” as Wallace Stevens would have it. I agree with Umberto Eco: “What the Poets are really saying to us is that we need to encounter being with gaiety (and hopefully with science too), to question it, test its resistances, grasp its openings and its hints, which are never too explicit.” To which Eco adds: “The rest is conjecture.” If Eco is right, poetry simply cannot “ground human culture” in the world; it’s much too speculative and irresolute for that. To put the point another way, poetry is more picaresque than pastoral, even if the pastoral happens to be the mode in which many poems have been written.

It is precisely this uncertain, ambiguous, exploratory quality of poetry that makes it such a powerful medium to imagine the animal and reflect on human-animal relationships, and such a valuable addition to the more factual, logical discourse of science.

The methodology that I employ in this work, then, is that of close reading of the poems with attention to underlying assumptions and cultural conventions that may lie at the basis of certain poems. Rather than divide animal poems or animal poetic subjects into categories of real or metaphorical or wild and domesticated, I will look at representation of the animal subject and the meaning and function that it has within the context of the poem. Although I focus on the animal elements of the poems, therefore, I do not single the animal subjects and images out but discuss them within the context of the entire poem. And although the subjects and issues that I examine will thus inevitably alter according to which poem is being read, some concerns persist throughout. While this discussion focuses on animals, I place each poet’s animal poems in the wider context of the poet’s poetic engagement with nature in general, and with the interpretation of human-nature and human-animal dichotomies present in their work. That places this thesis in the realms of both Animal Studies and (to a lesser extent) ecocriticism. Although these fields of criticism concern themselves with separate issues, it may be clear that there is also a significant overlap. Non-human animals are both part of and distinct from any natural environment, and an exploration of animals in any poet’s work cannot be seen as wholly separate to that poet’s poetic treatment of nature.

However, ecocriticism and Animal Studies are both defined in various ways and take various approaches to their literary subject matter. Some of these definitions concern a distinctly ethical approach to the representation of nature and animals in literature, judging good (realistic, respectful) from bad (reductive, disrespectful) representations of nature in literature. Others focus on contextualising literary representations of animals or nature within a historical and cultural framework, or on examining the forms and literary functions of nature and animals in literature. The main focus of this thesis is exposition and contextualisation rather than ethical judgement. The first chapter, specifically, aims to contextualise the representation of animals in American poetry within a wide historical framework of the representation of animals in forms of cultural expression, as well as within a wide cultural framework of human-animal interaction in American history. The subsequent chapters, then, look closely at the particular depiction and imagination of animals in the work of three individual poets. Although the aim is exposition and

contextualisation, I engage regularly in discussions of ethical questions and issues of responsible representation. This ethical consideration can, however, not be called the main focus of the thesis. I have made that choice consciously, for although I believe that the current environmental crisis and the animal rights debate are serious issues in contemporary political and ideological discourse that demand and deserve a response from the humanities as much as from the sciences, that response should be relevant to the position of literature as distinct from the discourses of politics and ideology. Literature is, among other things, an aesthetic endeavour that has a much more indirect influence on the world and on people's actions than other forms of cultural expression may have, and calls for an entirely different set of rhetorical considerations than, say, advertisements, propaganda or journalism.

I do not use this exploration of the role of animals in literature to actively argue for animal rights and protection, and I do not put myself in the role of umpire to say that this representation of animals is truthful and responsible, and this one is not. Instead, I aim to expose the variety of ways in which animals are employed in American poetry, the social and historical context for those practices, and the issues of ethics and responsibility that are at play in that practice. In short, I approach these poetic representations as poetic, as literary, with all the complexities and ambiguities of imagination, artificiality, metaphor, allegory, and symbolism that that entails. Chief amongst these is the notion of a continuum of metaphoricity on which these poems may be located, and the question of whether the animal is representing something about its own, animal experience or about a human experience, or, in other words, the actual animal's presence or absence in the poem. This in itself may be seen as a question of ethics, in the sense of ethics as invoked by J. Hillis Miller's *The Ethics of Reading: Kant, de Man, Eliot, Trollope, James, and Benjamin* and Terence Diggory's *William Carlos Williams and the Ethics of Painting*. Diggory, providing a constructive outline of Miller's argument in relation to the work of Williams, discusses the ethical question involved in the act of representation (be it visual or verbal) itself, and the potential violence that representation (or 'words') does (or do) to the subject. In Miller "the word itself" is ultimately subordinated, as he concludes that "The endpoint of my exploration of reading is the strange and difficult notion that reading is subject not to the text as its law, but to the law to which the text is subject." This "law" to which the text is subordinated is identified with "matter" or the "thing" that the text is about. Miller's notion of the "thing" in this context is a paradoxical one, derived from the philosophies of Heidegger and Derrida, as (in the words of Diggory)

something essentially nameless that nevertheless commands an effort to name it. That command is the law to which the text, and ultimately the reader, is subject. Since its paradoxical nature precludes the possibility of fulfilment, obedience to the law necessarily involves violation, abuse, or violence.

Although this thesis does not afford the space to enter into a thorough exposition of the question of the ethics of representation, this is a consideration that should be kept in mind in the thesis' concern with the wide spectrum of metaphoricity that is at play in the poetic representation of animals in the following chapters. The question of what a particular representation actually represents, to what extent it constitutes a symbol or metaphor, and whether that metaphor refers to something connected to the animal itself or to something wholly separated from it, is a recurring concern in this exploration of animal subjects in poetry. Other recurring concerns are those of anthropocentrism, anthropomorphisation, and questions of kinship and otherness. The chapters that follow consider the wide variety of ways in which these poets 'write animals' and illuminate "that animal darkness."

Chapter 1

Representing Animals

Prehistoric animal images

The earliest prehistoric figurative art is commonly held to mark or coincide with the birth of humanity or the emergence of modern man. It is striking, then, that these instances of representational images, the oldest evidence of symbolic behaviour and abstract thinking in prehistoric *Homo sapiens*, should overwhelmingly consist of depictions of animals. Animal representation in art (in the broadest definition of the term) dates back to the first images created by man and, in fact, prehistoric paintings of animals on the walls of caves or as portable sculptures are the clearest and most evocative records that we now have of the development of fully modern human behaviour in anatomically modern man.

By this is not meant that some form of human or hominid had not already been around for a long time when prehistoric cave art was made; in fact, it is believed that there were several species of humans in existence. These species probably originated in Africa and migrated across the world in two waves (this is generally referred to as the 'Out of Africa' hypothesis), the first most likely involving anatomically archaic *Homo neanderthalensis*, the second wave consisting of the anatomically modern *Homo sapiens*. Neanderthal man did not hold himself fully erect, and only shared with modern man the control of fire and the art of tool making, earning him sometimes the designation *Homo faber*. *Homo sapiens*, on the other hand, was like us in appearance, cranial capacity, and the ability to create not just tools with immediate usefulness, but objects that serve a more abstract purpose. In fact, *Homo sapiens* is believed to have gradually developed fully modern language and fully modern behavioural characteristics such as abstract thinking, in-depth planning, economic and technological innovation, and symbolic behaviour, including making representational images. Chief among the traces of this crucial development is cave art, i.e., the paintings and markings found in various underground caves in Africa, the Middle East and, most abundantly, in western Europe.

Neanderthals had lived in western Europe for 160,000 years or more when *Homo sapiens* migrated into the region from the east of Europe around 45,000 years ago. Within 10,000 years the Neanderthals had disappeared and *Homo sapiens* had the landscape to themselves. It is in the period of coexistence, which marks the transition between the Middle and Upper Paleolithic eras, that what has been termed the 'Creative Explosion' of western Europe took place. Most notable in this great flowering of art are the cave paintings in a great many underground caves in western Europe, and most distinguished among these for both its elaborate art and its excellent preservation is the cave at Lascaux, discovered in 1940 by a group of boys in the Vézère valley near the town of Montignac. The size and complexity of the cave as well as the quantity, quality and excellent preservation of images inside make it stand out among the other caves in the region. One of the most remarkable and mystifying characteristics of the proliferation of cave art in the region is the fact that the depictions found in the caves are overwhelmingly of animals. These images are not just of any animals, but of a specific, relatively fixed group of animal species including, predominantly, horses and bison, but also aurochs, cave lions, deer, woolly mammoths and ibexes. Only a very small fraction of images are of humans, or semi-humans, and even then they are most often presented in zoomorphic form. Many attempts have been made to account for this phenomenon, and many theories have been developed to explain the purpose behind these paintings and engravings, but the motivation of this early modern man to paint the walls of caves with the images of animals, rather than anything else, remains largely unexplained.

In his numerous writings on the subject, Georges Bataille marks this 'moment,' which comprises a period of tens of thousands of years, simultaneously as the *birth of art* and the *cradle of humanity*, and, crucially, as the passage of the human species from

animal to man. To be sure, Bataille's writings are philosophical inquiries that he candidly (though not unquestioningly) bases on the consensus theories of the time of writing and especially on the extensive documentation of Henri Breuil. The interpretation of the animal images in these theories generally relies on notions of sympathetic magic, hunting magic and totemism (the depiction of animal symbols of kinship groups), and the consensus ideas about cave art have changed considerably since Bataille and Breuil. The various and recent theories about prehistoric cave art are, as may be expected, far too complex and involved to go into here, and for a comprehensive overview of the developments in the field I refer the reader to David Lewis-Williams' influential work *The Mind in the Cave*, published in 2002, which makes compelling reading for anyone interested in history, art or animal representation. For our current purposes it is quite possible to continue without going into the specifics of prehistoric art, so I will limit myself to a very brief outline of the most recent and influential work at the moment, which is Lewis-Williams' theory as set out in *The Mind in the Cave*.

Lewis-Williams makes a key distinction between human intelligence and human consciousness, and argues for the key influence of fully modern human consciousness in the development of modern human behaviour, especially in the development of symbolic activity. He points out that unlike *Homo neanderthalensis*, *Homo sapiens* would have the mental capacity for the experience of the full spectrum of consciousness, including what contemporary western society now terms 'altered states of consciousness.' These range from reveries through dreams to intensified dream-like states, leading to visions and hallucinations. Lewis-Williams points out that although certain intensified states may be (and would have been) induced through diverse means of shifting consciousness such as sensory deprivation, fatigue, fasting, and the ingestion of psychotropic substances, it is in fact impossible for an anatomically modern man to avoid experiences of altered states of consciousness on the normal spectrum of consciousness, that drifts from alert, problem-solving states to somnolent states of dreaming. Although all humans experience altered states of consciousness to a smaller or larger extent, however, the way in which these humans make sense of their experiences is culturally and historically constructed. Lewis-Williams uses the term 'shamanism' in its widest sense as a human universal: "the need to make sense of shifting consciousness – and the way in which this is accomplished, especially, but not always, among hunter-gatherers." Furthermore, he relates both the location of the prehistoric images as well as their content to the types of experiences that altered states of consciousness generate, such as entopic phenomena, hallucinations of all five senses, the notion of a vortex or tunnel and the sense of physical transformation.

In hunter-gatherer societies, these experiences by either many members of a community or by a selected few, the 'seers,' will lead to the construction of a mental or spiritual realm or, more specifically, a tiered cosmology in which subterranean caves, as representative of an underground realm, are important locations for spiritual and symbolic activities. The spiritual creatures hallucinated in altered states of consciousness are then shaped according to memory, within the boundaries of an already-existing mental symbology, and eventually 'fixed' in representational images in the relevant locations of the walls, floors and ceilings of subterranean caves and shelters. Lewis-Williams observes that the images and shapes that are perceived by *Homo sapiens* in altered states of consciousness are overwhelmingly derived from memory, and thus culturally specific. He argues that the animals portrayed are not representations of 'real' animals, as the painter would have encountered them in the landscape outside the cave. Rather, these animals are 'spirit animals,' spiritual creatures or hallucinations of living beings that are interpreted as spiritual animals, with significant symbolic importance. Lewis-Williams suggests that the fixed range of animal species that is portrayed in prehistoric cave art indicates that a specific set of species must already have been culturally agreed upon as spiritually significant before they were fixed on cave walls. The imagery content of prehistoric parietal art is clearly predetermined; it includes certain animal species (such as horses and bison, aurochs, cave lions, deer, woolly mammoths and ibexes) but it also excludes several others (such as more typical game animals like small mammals, fish and birds, that would have been part of the common diet), and the bestiary remains largely the same throughout the Upper Palaeolithic. The set of significant symbolic animals must therefore have been socially agreed-on

("established, shared, spoken about, seen in visions and dreamed about") before they were interpreted from hallucinations and fixed on cave walls. The sudden flowering of symbolic activity by a human species that had already gradually and sporadically developed these skills is explained through the coexistence of the two human species of differing capacities of intelligence and consciousness and the social tension that that situation created. The emergence of representational art is thus linked to an establishment of superiority between two species, the cultivation of differences, and statements about social dominance and discrimination.

Lewis-Williams' broad theory is well received and his ideas on the importance of shamanistic practice and altered states of consciousness in the creation of prehistoric cave art have become part of the general consensus. However, he does not venture to speculate in any meaningful way on the motivation behind the content of the images, and the reason for the abundance of animal images and the choice of animal species depicted, simply because there are no clear or unequivocal clues for those answers. As I have indicated above, this is not a problem for our current project. Most important for us is purely the fact that, regardless of the hypothetical purpose for or motivation behind the multitude of animal images in subterranean cave art, the first representational images of man are overwhelmingly *of animals*, and that when man developed the skill of representational art, he chose to represent predominantly animals. These animals may or may not have been intended as representations of 'real' animals, but they were definitely given the (detailed and naturalistic) shape of animals.

In the essays "The Passage of Animal to Man and the Birth of Art" and "The Cradle of Humanity: The Vézère Valley," Bataille traces the passage of the human species from animal to man through these animal representations, and although the ideas about the development of modern man have since changed, his main premise remains valid: that it is in this great flowering of symbolic activity that we can clearly perceive the emergence of the modern human mind. This is not to say that Bataille believes that the cave art in the Vézère valley *records* the birth of art; rather, that it participates in a burst of significant activity that lasted tens of thousands of years, and that we can observe a particularly striking instance of such activity in the cave of Lascaux. Bataille rather philosophically terms the development of symbolic activity in anatomically modern man "the passage of animal to man," and although this passage is a matter of gradual development taking place over tens of thousands of years and in widely separated locations rather than a great 'Human Revolution' signified by the 'Creative Explosion' in the Transition period in western Europe, this description still holds some value. It is, after all, in the development of fully modern human behaviour that *Homo sapiens* distinguishes himself from other hominids, most notably the Neanderthals but also older ancestors such as primates, and the most evocative traces that we have of this modern behaviour are the enigmatic symbolic activities that this modern man undertook in the painting and engraving of animal images in subterranean caves in western Europe.

It is therefore not without a strong sense of significance that Bataille points out the intrinsic paradox in this phenomenon, which I will quote at some length: that the clearest and most evocative record that we have of this passage of animal to man may be found in man's rendering of representational images of the animal that he no longer is:

Nothing could have rendered the presence of this nascent humanity of long ago more tangible [than the underground frescoes]. Yet this tangible aspect also amplifies the paradox proper to all prehistoric art. The traces of their distant humanity that these men left, which reach us after tens of thousands of years, are almost completely limited to representations of animals. These men made tangible for us the fact that they were becoming men, that the limitations of animality no longer confined them, but they made this tangible by leaving us images of the very animality from which they had escaped. What these animal frescoes proclaim with a youthful vigor is not only that the man who painted them ceased being an animal by painting them, but that he stopped being an animal by giving the animal, and not himself, a poetic image that seduces us and seems sovereign.

Bataille makes clear further on in the essay that by this he does not mean that he considers contemporary humans to be superior to animals; rather, he points to the divide that is created by the human's expanding consciousness, which sets him apart from

other animals in a unique and irreversible way, and observes that this distinguishing ability for symbolic behaviour led man to make images not of himself but of other animals, thereby expressing the great importance of animals to man's symbolic universe.

I would propose that *Homo sapiens'* interpretation of images from the hallucinations from altered states of consciousness as 'spirit animals' is similar to the use of animal species for the symbolic denotation of human groups of kinship in totemism (to which I will turn in more detail in a moment): animals are, to use Lévi-Strauss' famous dictum from *Totemism*, 'good to think' not only for purposes of exogamy, but also 'good to think' for the spiritual actors in tiered cosmologies. The 'spirits' or beings perceived in hallucinations seem to manifest themselves as *living and active agents or entities* that are *similar to but different from humans*. As such, they are interpreted as and thus given the shape of spirit animals. The hallucinated spirits are given the physical shape of animals because that is the best example that prehistoric modern man had of something that is a living agent but not human.

Totemism

This employment of symbolic animals in the development of abstract thinking and symbolic behaviour is something that is not only central to widespread practices of shamanism and the creation of tiered cosmologies and spiritual realms; it is also key to the practice of totemism. The understanding of the notion of totemism is not fully and definitely established, but the discussion has been profoundly and enduringly influenced by Claude Lévi-Strauss' works *Totemism* and *The Savage Mind*. In these works, Lévi-Strauss analyses totemism in the theories of leading traditional anthropologists, and breaks through the 'problem' of the concept by convincingly arguing that the unifying, underlying practice is the employment of natural elements such as animals and plants as *symbols* of human groups of kinship, thereby focusing not on possible resemblances between the humans and the animals involved, but on the "differences, which resemble each other." Lévi-Strauss distinctly relates totemism to exogamy, or the formation of groups of kinship possessing stable rules of marriage. Animals and animal symbols, then, are used to denote groups of (primitive) people, not because the people believe they are truly descended from them, or because they have some perceived external, objective resemblance to them, but because on the one hand, animals differ from each other, and on the other hand, men also differ from each other. In Lévi-Strauss' words: "The resemblance presupposed by so-called totemic representations is *between these two systems of differences*."

Animals are not selected for this symbolic relationship merely because they are essential for the 'savage's' subsistence. In fact, quite often species are selected that are not part of the specific clan or tribe's diet. They are selected not because they are 'good to eat,' but because they are 'good to think': animals, or indeed the whole natural world, prove to contain excellent structures and frameworks for conceptual and associative thought. Animals are different from each other in species, types of animal, physical appearance, observed behaviour, mode of life, and so on, and as such, they seem to resemble different humans, who also differ from each other in that they belong to different groups of kinship, or are distributed differently among different segments of society. Lévi-Strauss summarizes: "The animal world is thus thought of in terms of the social world." It is important to remember that the apparent suitability of animals for symbols or metaphors in totemism does not depend on an objective resemblance between the vehicle and the tenor of such a metaphor. It is rather the great variety of internal relationships and characteristics within the animal world that provides its associative potential and that is employed to symbolise the variety of internal relationships within the human social context.

These two primordial forms of animal representation and animal symbolism, found in shamanism and totemism, are not only *key illustrations* of the importance of animal metaphor and symbolism for modern human abstract thinking and symbolic behaviour; they are the *first examples* of such thinking and behaviour. When fully modern man began to differentiate himself from other human and animal species, he did so by depicting representational images of animals, and when man began to distinguish between himself and other groups of modern humans, in the form of social groups or

clans, he did so by employing animal symbols. The relevance of animal representation in art and of animal metaphor for communication may be found in these earliest practices of representation and metaphor.

This view of animals and the natural world as metaphors for human conceptual thinking did not originate with Lévi-Strauss' theory of totemism. Lévi-Strauss for instance, based his ideas on the theories of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, whom he quotes in his work:

As emotions were the first motives which induced men to speak, his first utterances were tropes. Figurative language was the first to be born, proper meanings were the last to be found. Things were called by their true name only when they were seen in their true form. The first speech was all in poetry; reasoning was thought of only long afterwards.

Lévi-Strauss explores Rousseau's work in detail and states that the *Discours sur l'origine et les fondements de l'inégalité parmi les hommes* is "without doubt the first anthropological treatise in French literature." Lévi-Strauss observes that Rousseau poses the central problem of anthropology, namely the passage from nature to culture in "almost modern terms," and that in his theory of the development of language, he identifies metaphor, the role of which is elemental to totemism, as one of the fundamental modes of language rather than as a later embellishment. Rousseau's statement above comes from his *Essay on the Origins of Language* (*Essai sur l'origine des langues*, originally intended to be included in the *Discours*, but published separately in 1781 and translated into English in 1783). Its focus on the origins of language in metaphor, as a form of figurative language, as poetry, echoes Emerson's statement that "all language is fossil poetry" from "The Poet" (1844). The theories of Emerson and Rousseau (and by extension, Lévi-Strauss) are in fact strikingly similar. One of the main arguments from Emerson's *Nature* is that language is ultimately derived from nature and that "as we go back in history, language becomes more picturesque, until its infancy, when it is all poetry; or, all spiritual facts are represented by natural symbols." Although Emerson's theories of language are philosophical rather than scientific, they have had, and continue to have, significant influence on American authors (as we will see for instance in our discussion of Gary Snyder's poetry in chapter 3). Emerson's argument has some significant similarities with *Totemism* in its attention to man's natural surroundings as a source for allegory, metaphor and symbolism, and I will quote from his exposition at some length:

Words are signs of natural facts. The use of natural history is to give us aid in supernatural history. The use of the outer creation is to give us language for the beings and changes of the inward creation. Every word which is used to express a moral or intellectual fact, if traced to its root, is found to be borrowed from some material appearance. [...] It is not words only that are emblematic; it is things which are emblematic. Every natural fact is a symbol of some spiritual fact. Every appearance in nature corresponds to some state of the mind, and that state of the mind can only be described by presenting that natural appearance as its picture. An enraged man is a lion, a cunning man is a fox, a firm man is a rock, a learned man is a torch. A lamb is innocence; a snake is subtle spite; flowers express to us the delicate affections. Light and darkness are our familiar expression for knowledge and ignorance; and heat for love. [...] It is easily seen that there is nothing lucky or capricious in these analogies, but that they are constant, and pervade nature. These are not the dreams of a few poets, here and there, but man is an analogist, and studies relations in all objects.

To paraphrase Lévi-Strauss in Emersonian terms: nature is good to think with. Although Lévi-Strauss believes after Rousseau that man developed language when he evolved from a state similar to other animals to the unique state of the human, in the "passage from nature to culture," as he describes it, and Emerson sees that pre-linguistic state as the existence of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, the underlying idea remains the same: the earliest stages of the development of language have taken the form of metaphor. Specifically, metaphor derived from nature, because whatever else nature is, it has proven itself to be a boundless source of symbols, providing a unique conceptual support for thinking in language.

Emerson held that an important function of the poet was to be an interpreter

between the languages of nature and man. Most men are able to experience a wordless form of communication with nature, he states, but the majority of them are “mutes, who cannot report the conversation they have had with nature” in human language. “I know not how it is that we need an interpreter,” but “the poet is the person in whom these powers [of experience and expression] are in balance, the man without impediment, who sees and handles that which others dream of, [and] traverses the whole scale of experience.” This early American treatise on the function of the poet is significant for our present discussion because it is a function of poetry with which contemporary poets still directly or indirectly engage.

The human difference from the animal, its relationship to the animal, and the nature of the animal remain matters for investigation, debate and reflection, and as science and rational understanding (as yet) come up against clear boundaries of human knowledge of the animal, it is through poetic imagination that one form of answer or contemplation can be attempted. Though the boundaries of human knowledge are clear, poetry may at times temporarily attempt to cross them or peer across the divide, through imagination and metaphor. Any human understanding of the animal, however, will remain, to a larger or a lesser extent, a human projection of knowledge. Although living beings in their own right in the material world, animals are conceptualized throughout different cultures and societies in very different ways. Cultural cosmologies serve to offer an overarching theory of the universe, involving humans, animals, the natural environment and its movements and spiritual realms. Conceptualisations of the animal, the position of animals in society, and their relation to mankind have been formed in great variety and diversity in religious worldviews and traditions as well as in the ideas of prominent philosophers throughout history. Both individual thinkers and entire cultures have developed more or less complex theories of the nature of the animal, the (ideal) position of the animal in society and the relationship between humans and animals.

Before we look at the contemporary, American attempts at poetic representation of animals, therefore, we will first need to know a little bit about the ways in which contemporary cultures have made sense of the animal within their cosmologies. We will take a closer look at some of the major conceptualisations of the animal, the position of animals in society in terms of cosmology and ethics, and the function of animals as metaphors and symbols in narratives and teachings of a number of religious and philosophical traditions. The animal poetry that will be discussed in the following chapters of this thesis is based on conscious or unconscious, general or specific knowledge of these ideas, and filled with direct and indirect references to the religions, traditions and philosophies discussed in this first chapter. The purpose of this outline is not to provide an inclusive and comprehensive overview of *all* conceptualisations of animals and animality that are available or conceivable. Such a task would require far more space than is available here. Rather, it is intended both to familiarize the reader with the wide range of possibilities available when thinking or writing about animals, and to introduce several dominant themes and arguments as well as key notions and terms that have found their way into the poetry that will be discussed in subsequent chapters.

The Abrahamic traditions

The three main religions in the monotheistic, Abrahamic tradition – Judaism, Christianity and Islam – share the notion that one, omniscient, almighty God created the heavens and the earth, human beings and animals, and that this God gave humans dominion over all other creatures on earth. This creation is described in detail in the Judaic Tanakh, which roughly corresponds to the Christian Old Testament and opens with the Torah, the first five books of the Hebrew Bible (Pentateuch):

And God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; man and female He created them. God blessed them and God said to them, “Be fertile and increase, fill the earth and master it; and rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, and all the living things that creep on earth.”

The Old Testament states clearly that *only* humans are made in God’s image and that they have control over animals. The animals in the Garden of Eden, however, are not a

source of food, and Adam and Eve are instructed to eat herbs and the fruit of the trees (with the exception of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil). After the expulsion from Paradise and the great flood, however, animals, like plants, become resources for human nourishment and animals and humans no longer live in harmony: “The fear and the dread of you shall be upon [...] everything with which the earth is astir.” Humans are held accountable for their actions to both fellow humans and animals, but as man was made in the image of God, the shedding of human blood was considered a much more serious offence.

In Christianity, the Judaic view of human-animal relations is sustained: God created the earth, humans and animals, and gave humans dominion over animals and permission to use them as resources for food and other purposes. However, Christian doctrine also states that human beings have immortal souls and that all human life, and only human life, is sacred and destined for an eternal afterlife. This notion has created a very definite boundary between humans and animals. Various Christian thinkers, most notably Saint Augustine (354-430) and Saint Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), have advocated the doctrine that animals are placed on earth by God to be used and governed by human beings. Angus Taylor notes that in the thirteenth century, Aquinas “harmonised the philosophy of Aristotle with the teachings of the Church. Aquinas [...] says that since humans, being rational, are masters of their own actions, they are cared for by God for their own sakes. By contrast, animals are not masters of their own actions, and therefore are by nature instruments for those who *are* self-directed.” Others, however, have argued that animals are an essential element of God’s creation, and that respecting animals is part of honouring that creation. Saint Francis of Assisi (ca. 1181-1226) famously preached love and respect for animals and the environment. William French notes that

Francis and a few other Christian nature mystics were distinctive in celebrating God’s presence throughout the natural world and humanity’s kinship with the animals and the rest of nature. Francis employed chivalric and familial terms of address to animals and natural elements to emphasize the intimacy of the communal bonds between humanity and the rest of creation.

Francis of Assisi was proclaimed patron saint of ecology by Pope John Paul II in 1979 and his feast day, October 4th, is celebrated as World Animal Day.

Nevertheless, the main perspective that runs through the history of the Judeo-Christian worldview and is still prevalent today is that, since only human beings are made in the image of God, and because animals lack the faculty of reason, God has created animals essentially as resources for human beings. Islamic doctrine is equally anthropocentric. The Qu’ran states that man has dominion over animals:

And He creates cattle: you derive warmth from them, and [various other] uses; and from them you obtain food; and you find beauty in them when you drive them home in the evenings and when you take them out to pasture in the mornings.

However, this dominion does not come without responsibility; man is put on earth as a *khalīfa*, which is generally translated as “vice-regent,” and thus a type of steward of the earth. Moreover, the earth was not created for humans alone: “And the earth has He spread out for all living beings.” The Christian beliefs about the supremacy of humans over animals as ordained by God, especially, have been deeply influential in Western attitudes to the animal and to human-animal relationships.

The Dharmic religions

The religious traditions of Hinduism, Jainism and Buddhism are strongly related to each other. Hinduism and Jainism originate roughly from the same period, and are widely recognised as the oldest living religions in the world. Buddhism originated as an offshoot from Hinduism around the fifth century BCE. The three religions have influenced each other substantially throughout their history. They share the notions of *dharma* (social and religious duty or law), *karma* (the sum of a person’s actions in one of their successive states of existence, regarded as determining their fate in the next), *samsāra* (the cycle of rebirth) and *ahimsā* (the principle of non-violence, held to be the

highest *dharma*). The principle of *ahimsā* is to abstain from doing harm to living beings. This includes animals as well as human beings. The doctrine of *karma* means that actions of cruelty towards animals will result in future lives as animals, to experience such suffering and to learn from the experience. Likewise, kindness towards animals will be rewarded with kindness and harmony flowing back to you. Although all life has value, human life is valued distinctly higher than animal life. Only humans have the possibility of being released from the cycle of rebirth, and good karma is rewarded with higher rebirth. Rebirth as an animal, especially lower animals, is a punishment of bad *karma* incurred in former lives. The notion of rebirth that is connected to the evolution of *karma* also means that human beings may be or have been animals in their former or future lives, and cruelty towards, or the killing of animals may therefore imply bringing suffering upon a former relative or loved one. Buddha himself is believed to have lived several previous lives as an animal, and thus has experienced what it is like to be an animal.

Buddhist narratives and teachings are full of “actual, mythical, and magical animals.” Ivette Vargas explores the position and representation of animals in Buddhist narrative art and literature and observes that many such narratives function as teachings of Buddhist doctrine to common people, and the animals in it are transmitters of the teachings. They take the form of allegorical narratives, in which the animals represent aspects of human qualities and behaviour. These animals are often highly anthropomorphised, and the narratives reveal very little about the position and experience of animals in Buddhist society and doctrine. In Buddhist cosmology, as in all Dharmic traditions, animals are viewed as souls (*ātman*s) going through their personal stage of karma.

Although “their ability to develop useful insights into the true nature of things is limited” animals are believed to possess rationality and intentionality. For that reason, they are in a disadvantaged position with regard to rebirth: in order to attain higher rebirths, animals have to abstain from, among other things, doing harm and committing incest. Buddhist ethics concerning animals consist of a mixture of Hinduism and Jainism. The principle of *āhimsa* entails in Buddhism the absolute rejection of the animal sacrifice that was common in the Vedic tradition. However, although Buddhism “[accepts] the existence of minuscule entities, [...] the Buddha’s position was that ‘if you can’t really see them, then you can’t be said to have caused intentional harm.’” The notion of intentionality also means that it would be worse to kill an elephant than a dog, because “the degree of sustained intention must be consequently greater,” and that only *intentional* killing is wrong and karmically effective.

The Daoic traditions

The (main) Daoic traditions of Daoism and Confucianism are both based on the East Asian concepts of *Dao*, or ‘the Way’, indicating “the proper way of living, acting and governing.” The teachings of the Dao are widely held not to have “a single founder, a unified creed, exclusive criteria of lay membership, or a stable pantheon.” However, they are based on certain key aspects, such as the notion of Dao as both “the proper course of conduct,” and “the metaphysical basis of natural order itself.” The ancient Chinese recognized a great number of animals, both real and mythological: “The *Classic of Poetry* or *Shi jing* mentions at least ninety-three species, including twenty-one mammals (one mythical), thirty-five birds (one mythical, the phoenix), three reptiles (plus the mythical dragon), one amphibian, thirteen fish, and nineteen insects.” In Daoist society, animals were used for food as well as for sacrificial rituals. Among the sacrificial animals were dogs, chickens, turtles, oxen and sheep; they were sacrificed to ancestors and gods.

In addition to being viewed as resources, animals were also believed to have numinous spiritual powers. The animals with the most powerful supernatural qualities were usually mythological, such as dragons, phoenixes and unicorns, but cranes, turtles and snakes were also believed to have magical qualities. The ancient Chinese used turtles and cattle for plastronomy and scapulimancy in the Shang period and later Chinese societies continued to attribute strong numinous qualities to turtles. Anderson and Raphals note the connection between Daoism and shamanism. Similarities include the focus on meditation and inner travel, as well as myths of human-animal

transformation and a concern with sacrifices and sacrificial animals. However, whereas in shamanism animals are often sources of spiritual power, in Daoism real animals (as opposed to mythological creatures) are rarely portrayed as possessing spiritual or magic powers by themselves. In addition, shamanism often contains strong moral codes and religious taboos concerning hunting and the use of animals as resources. In Daoism, these moral codes are notably absent.

Confucianism, the philosophical tradition based on the teachings of Confucius (or Kongzi, 551 – 479 BCE) interprets Dao as a moral order rather than a natural order, as in Daoism. The tradition contains teachings on moral behaviour in specific relationships such as “king-subject, father-son, husband-wife, elder brother-younger brother, and friend-friend” and values a “restoration of the ways of the ancients, including their elaborate ritual and ceremonial codes.” Conspicuously absent from the relationships for which moral guidelines are provided, Rodney Taylor notes, are animals and other living things. Although animals are mentioned in the teachings of Confucius, their role as subjects of moral behaviour is secondary. Animals may be hunted and used as resources for food and clothing as well as for animal sacrifice, for instance, but a true *jungzi* will refrain from using unfair methods for hunting, such as aiming at roosting birds, or using nets for fishing.

Native American spiritualities

Native American spirituality and mythology provides us with a varied and historically complex source of perspectives on ecology and animals. Native American spiritualities are particularly relevant to American conceptualisations of the animal. Though they may not be of direct influence in the worldviews of Galway Kinnell and James Merrill, they have an undeniable presence even in the contemporary American consciousness in one form or another and they are central to the poetic universe of Gary Snyder. I will therefore discuss them at some length. Native American spirituality is commonly understood to be a collection of beliefs, myths and legends of a variety of peoples that are highly interconnected with nature and ecology. The great diversity of religious beliefs of various peoples from such a vast area may be too extensive to discuss in detail here. However, there are some core, underlying worldviews and patterns of belief that form the basis of indigenous hunter-gatherer cultures and that are common to different Native American religions.

Native American peoples are widely believed to descend from Palaeolithic hunters who emigrated from Asia to the North American continent via the Bering Strait some forty to sixty thousand years ago. Their belief systems and worldviews share fundamental similarities with those of indigenous northern Asian peoples, such as: “belief in a high god, Thunderbird, and Mother Earth; practices such as the bear ritual, hunting taboos, the sweat bath for ritual cleaning, and shamanic rituals; and a good many myths and tales.” The shamanistic beliefs and rituals that pervade indigenous cultures of both the northern Asian and the North American continents and many other regions, are identified by Michael Harner as “core shamanism.” Mircea Eliade suggests that “the technique of ecstasy,” also known as altered state of consciousness or trance, is central to shamanism. Shamanism is not generally the centre of a specific religion or belief system; rather it coexists with other forms of magic and religious beliefs in many cultures. Relevant for our specific purposes is the ability of the shaman to transform into animals, to communicate with animals and to perform rituals intended to invite animals as game, appease animal spirits and masters, or renew animals for hunting purposes. These shamanistic elements form a crucial aspect of the role and position of animals in Native American spiritualities.

Howard L. Harrod, in his valuable and comprehensive text *The Animals Came Dancing*, on the relationship between Indians and animals on the northern Great Plains, provides us with a comprehensive overview of origin narratives and myths of Native Americans of the Northern Plains. Although these myths vary from people to people and have developed and changed through time following fundamental social changes, they include many fundamental common elements and widely shared core images. These are, for instance, the widespread notion of a primeval sea from which ‘earth divers’ retrieve the earth by bringing up mud and presenting it to a creator figure who

then casts the soil into the four cardinal directions. This soil is generally shaped into the earth in its current form by a culture hero, a mythological supernatural being with creative powers, who has the mission of “deliver[ing] cultural institutions, including religious ceremonies, to the first human beings.”

In relation to American Indians of the Northern Plains Harrod notes that “the powerful animals that existed before the world was formed seem to be differentiated from animals that Northern Plains peoples encountered in their everyday worlds, animals that they hunted and killed for food.” There are other narratives dealing with the notion of animals as resources: “narratives that spoke more concretely about the gift of animals to human beings for food. These traditions often spoke of a powerful culture hero who brought the animals to the human beings.” Harrod explains that the traditions of the gift of animals represent a basic dilemma of Northern Plains hunting societies:

Among those groups that represented animals as having characteristics analogous to or even identical with those of humans, how were humans to understand what it meant to kill animals and consume their flesh? On the face of it, the tensions were severe: one was eating the flesh of a being like one’s self, a person with a kinship network, perhaps a wife and children, a being for whom relatives would grieve. Beliefs that individual animals possessed “souls” that were not destroyed when their bodies were taken for food helped soften the conflicts embodied in this dilemma; even so, the ambiguities were not completely resolved.

Animals, in Native American cosmology, were considered to be very similar to humans in significant ways. The ambiguity is a fascinating one: how does a culture that sees animals as equal and comparable to humans justify the use of those beings as resources for food, clothing, housing, and the like? Hunting societies were almost completely dependent on animals for the primary necessities of life yet their cosmology entailed a firm kinship with animals, both in physical shape and in spirit.

The narratives that deal with the gift of animals to the people for food may be classified into four broad types: “those that featured an animal master or mistress, those that focused on the activities of a culture hero, those that focused on kinship between humans and animals, and those that portrayed the gift of animals through the agency of anonymous, often poor, individuals.” The narratives all have in common the notion that animal masters (rulers or owners of animal species), culture heroes, or anonymous others have given the gift of animals for food to the people, and have instructed them in various hunting rituals and taboos that are to be observed in return for this gift. Native American cosmologies are constituted by these types of narratives, in which the relationship between humans and animals is formed by a complex system of various rituals and taboos intended to show respect to animals, to thank them for their gifts of food, to appease animal spirits and encourage them to renew themselves to give themselves again and to ask animal spirits for power and guidance.

In Inuit traditions, origin myths include tales of the dog as ancestor, and tells of a girl who did not want to marry, and instead has children from a dog. Her choices lead to conflicts with her human family, and the girl sends her children out into the world. Those half-dog/half-human children then become the ancestors of the humans that people the world, both the Indians and the white men. This establishes a unique bond of kinship with dogs in particular, and with animals in general. Other important origin myths involve one of the most central Inuit deities: the Sea Woman, also called Sedna, who in most Inuit myths lives at the bottom of the sea where she rules the sea animals. Interesting here is the similarity between the two origin myths: both ancestral mothers were unwilling to marry a human for a mate, choosing instead to live with an animal partner, and this deviance is punished severely, but ultimately leads to the creation of the world in its current shape. Sedna becomes mistress of the animals, and as such punishes the violations of hunting taboos by withholding the sea animals. These Inuit origin myths enforced an elaborate system of rituals and taboos, based on fear of causing offence to animals or animal masters and mistresses and subsequent punishment by withholding game.

Native American spirituality and ecology have been key subjects of the environmental movement in the United States since the 1960s, and have been a source of influence and inspiration for many romantic, New Age ideas of harmonious existence between humanity and the planet. The publication of *The Ecological Indian*:

Myth and History by Shepard Krech III in 1999 challenged popular understandings of the ecology of Native Americans. Although his research is too extensive to summarize here, Krech's study provides valuable insight into the more practical aspects of Native American perspectives on animals and human-animal interaction. In his comprehensive and detailed study of the interaction of Native American peoples with their natural environments, Krech explores the validity of the widespread iconic image of the Ecological Indian: the notion of the Native North American as ecologist and conservationist. Among other things, he concludes that, although "Native people clearly possessed vast knowledge of their environment,"

knowledge is cultural, and each group in its own way made the environment and its relationships cultural. Their ecologies were premised on theories of animal behavior and animal population dynamics unfamiliar to Western science, beginning, for some, with the belief in reincarnation. And their ecological systems embraced components like underground prairies, which were absent from the ecological systems of Western scientists.

While Native American peoples' behaviour in relation to nature and animals was based on profound knowledge and understanding of ecological systems, these systems were not the same as the ecological beliefs that have been developed by Western science and the actions of American Indians were not necessarily in keeping with current Western perspectives on conservation and preservation of the environment.

Western philosophy

In addition to the doctrines of the world's main religions or worldviews, notable philosophers and scientists from Aristotle to Singer have attempted to come to an understanding of the concept of the animal, or of animality. Aristotle (384-322 BCE) took a great interest in animals; his many surviving writings include an extensive and scientific zoology containing the works "The History of Animals," "On the Parts of Animals," "On the Generation of Animals," "On the Movement of Animals" and "On the Progression of Animals." His contribution to the science of biology is significant, and much of his work was so innovative and far ahead of its time that it was not surpassed until the nineteenth century. Aristotle's scientific research into animals demonstrates that he believed humans to be a species of animal similar (albeit superior) to any other type of animal; he consistently includes discussions of the human species in conjunction with other animals in his biological works. In addition to these scientific writings on the physical differences between human and non-human animals, Aristotle's ethical and political writings reveal his ideas on the metaphysical differences. Aristotle believed in a natural hierarchy in all life, often referred to as the 'great chain of being': plants have only life, animals are above plants in having both life and sentience, and human beings are above animals because they have not only life and sentience but also the ability to reason. Man's superiority entitles him to govern both tame and wild animals, for their own safety. Because animals rely only on their instincts and lack reason, man is free to use them as resources. This is part of Aristotle's belief that nature makes nothing incomplete, and nothing in vain; everything has a cause. The natural hierarchy is therefore both obvious and appropriate. Animals are intended as natural resources for humans, as are certain other humans, who are by nature intended to be slaves. Aristotle is well known for his observation that: "the use made of slaves and of tame animals is not very different; for both with their bodies minister to the needs of life."

In "On the Soul," (*De Anima*) we find that Aristotle believed that all animals have a soul, something which gives them life, and is the source of movement in living creatures. However, he suggests that like the senses, the soul contains several parts. Some animals possess all parts of the soul, some only a few, or one, in the same way that some animals possess all senses and others only one. This soul, or cause of movement, is not separated from the body. Thus, Aristotle did not use a distinction of the mental and the physical or of the divine and the earthly as the source of an essential divide between animals and humans. He did, however, see animals as fundamentally subordinate based on their inferior capacity for reason.

The beliefs, ideas and scientific findings of Aristotle have become the basis of Western

thinking about animals, and his influence pervades the ideas of many later philosophers. However, his predecessor Pythagoras (ca. sixth century BCE) took quite a different view. Although no writings of Pythagoras' hand survive, his many followers and biographers describe his belief in metempsychosis, or transmigration of the soul between humans, animals and plants. His beliefs led him to lead a vegetarian lifestyle, abstaining from animal flesh as well as beans and forbidding his disciples to sacrifice animals to the Gods. Pythagoras' teachings, however, have proved to be less influential in this respect than those of Aristotle, whose ideas on humans and animals have become the foundation of mainstream Western animal philosophy.

In contrast to Aristotle's notion that form is imminent in matter, and that all life has a soul that moves it, René Descartes (1596-1650) developed a dualistic perspective on the universe. He believed that the physical world, or matter, could be explained purely in mechanistic terms and is completely separated from the mind. This mechanistic interpretation of matter includes animals, which he believed to be automata, reacting only to stimuli in 'mechanically induced behaviour' without awareness. Descartes alleged that since animals lack consciousness, they have no interest or well-being that should be taken into consideration with regards to the actions of humans. Descartes' reasoning followed the *lex parsimoniae*, the principle of scientific parsimony or Ockham's Razor, which holds that "What can be done with fewer [assumptions] is done in vain with more." He believed that it was possible to explain animal behaviour in purely mechanistic terms. Human behaviour is not subject to this mechanistic theory, because humans are both capable of complex behaviour and new actions that must originate in thought, and capable of speech to convey thought. Descartes associated the notion of consciousness with the possession of a rational, immortal soul. Since animals did not have consciousness, they did not have rational souls.

Whereas Aristotle placed the difference between human and non-human beings in the non-human's lack of reason, and Descartes placed it in the lack of consciousness, Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) based the distinction on the animal's lack of autonomy; its lack of will. Kant devised a system of moral consideration in which a distinction is made between those beings that have intrinsic value, and those that have relative, or indirect value. Those that have intrinsic value are beings that have to be considered as *ends* in themselves due to their rational nature. The human ability to consider our desires rationally, and to judge which actions should and should not be taken, sets human beings apart from non-rational creatures that act merely out of desire, rather than will. This gives humans the status of persons and animals the status of things. As things, animals are free for humans to use and dispose of at their own will; they are relative ends, and may be seen as means to human ends. Humans therefore have no moral duties towards animals. That does not mean, however, that this thing-status frees humans of all considerations for animals. Kant saw their value as relative, or indirect value to human beings, in the sense that actions to animals can affect our duties towards other humans. Animals, like inanimate objects, may have value to other human beings. One may therefore no more hurt the pet companion, or the cattle of another person, as their teddy bear or car. Additionally, Kant held, the cruel or inhuman treatment of animals may compromise one's humanity, and thus enable cruelty towards fellow human beings.

In the same century, the philosopher Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) developed the ethical doctrine of utilitarianism, in which the principle of utility is the critical standard for human action. The principle of utility is determined by the sensations of pain and pleasure. Bentham's utilitarianism is the basis of Peter Singer's landmark work *Animal Liberation* (1975), which effectively started the animal rights movement, and will be discussed below. Bentham is much quoted in the animal rights movement with the following poignant lines:

What else is it that should trace the insuperable line? Is it the faculty of reason, or, perhaps, the faculty of discourse? [...] the question is not, Can they *reason*? Nor, Can they *talk*? But, Can they *suffer*?

Bentham, however, did not follow this principle through to its logical conclusion. He did not rule out the eating of animals absolutely but pleaded only for humane methods of slaughtering.

The scientific findings of Charles Darwin (1809-1882) in evolutionary biology

have radically changed modern thinking about the nature of animals and humans. His *On the Origin of Species* (1859), with its theory of the common descent of man introduced the notion that humans and apes share the same ancestors in the process of natural selection. This notion enabled and demanded a new way of thinking about the nature of animality and humanity. Darwin provided an understanding of the world without the need for a teleological perspective. Humans were no longer special creatures made by God and given dominion over the earth by Him, and neither were they so essentially or significantly apart from animals as philosophers such as Descartes or Kant had maintained. They were simply a species of animals that evolved from other animals, and not necessarily intrinsically superior to other living beings. Aristotle's scientific treatment of humans in his zoology as a type of animal to study in terms of biology has much in common with Darwin's approach.

Darwin's theories, however, did not put an end to anthropocentrism. They were rather a source for a different kind of anthropocentrism. Because humans are the only beings with high intelligence and the capacity for true language, for instance, they are quite unique among all other animals. These features still give human beings a superior, dominant position among animals. Darwin's findings also had a significant effect on ethics. Initially, the concept of evolution was seen as giving rise to a very selfish ethical system. If the only goal of life is to ensure one's own survival and successful reproduction, any ethical system based on that would be relatively limited. However, in *The Descent of Man*, published in 1871, Darwin reasoned that the principle of natural selection can also apply to a social group, rather than only to an individual, and that harmonious cooperation in the group, based on altruistic motives, furthers the survival and prosperity of the group. This altruistic behaviour, however, seems to be limited only to the social group, and does not affect individuals outside the group. It does, therefore, not apply to altruistic behaviour in interspecies relationships.

Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) is one of the few continental philosophers to have paid extensive attention in his work to a comprehensive understanding of the ontology of animality, albeit in relation to the ontology of humanity. The following section owes much to the summary and elucidation of Heidegger's theories and ideas on the relationship between human and non-human beings by Giorgio Agamben in *The Open: Man and Animal*. Heidegger held that there were three main distinctions in the entities that are part of the world: 1) The stone, a material object which is *worldless* (*weltlos*); 2) The animal, which is *poor in world* (*weltarm*); 3) Man, who is *world-forming* (*weltbildend*). This tripartition stems from the belief that humans are not only part of the world, but *have* world in a certain respect: humans have access to other objects in the world in the sense that they can perceive them as such, and contemplate them as such. Whereas a stone can come to lie in a position in which it is in the sun, an animal can purposely seek out such a position for the reason of lying in the sun. Unlike the stone, the animal has its own relation to the sun. Man, however, can not only seek a position in which to experience sunlight, he can actively perceive the sun *as* sun, and contemplate the sun in the sense of asking astrophysical questions about it. Rather than presupposing a hierarchical difference with the human, as Aristotle does, Heidegger denies such a hierarchical evaluation, attempting instead to understand the notion of animality on its own terms rather than by measure of the human.

The animal is poor in world in the sense of *being deprived* (*entbehren*) of full access to the world and all its entities. However, in comparison with both the stone and the human, animals do have a specific, distinct way of being in the world. This is characterised by the type of access animals have to other entities. They have access to the entities around them, with which they have direct contact, but can only perceive them in relation to themselves, rather than having access to them *as such* (*als solche*) in the way that humans may. Heidegger's elaborate exploration of the ontology of animality and humanity distinguishes itself from his forebears on an important point. He does not see the human as a living, animal being *plus* something extra, such as reason, will, consciousness or language. Rather, he attempts to understand human *Dasein* as something ontologically complete rather than a compound of two elements, life and something else. His partition of entities is threefold rather than twofold. Animals are not mere things, simply because they are not human. They have a separate category, and a distinct way of being in the world.

In the 1960s, at a time when much of the western world was captivated by

liberation or emancipation movements for both African Americans and women, certain people began to speak of a liberation or emancipation of sorts for what they perceived to be another group of 'individuals' oppressed in western society: non-human animals. When Peter Singer first published *Animal Liberation: A New Ethics for Our Treatment of Animals* in 1975, he was the first to draw all the arguments for an animal rights or liberation movement together into a coherent shape, among many people who believed that such a movement was a logical next step after the liberation movements of the 1960s. Although there had been many thinkers and writers before who had advocated animal rights or liberation to a greater or lesser extent, Singer's work brought to the surface the reality of the atrocities of factory farming and the use of animals in scientific research of which the greater public had previously remained ignorant. His book combines an exposé of unknown practices and a compelling argument against speciesism and for vegetarianism with a philosophical, utilitarian theory of equal consideration. The wide scope of the book, as well as its position as the touchstone for the animal liberation movement, have led to it often being referred to in popular media as the "bible of the animal liberation movement," as Singer himself notes (with some reservations) in his preface to the 1990 edition of *Animal Liberation*. Both Singer and Tom Regan have radically influenced the philosophical discussion concerning animals, in both content and intensity. Their ideas, different in reasoning but similar in objective, have formed the basis of all further thinking about the nature of animals and of human-animal interaction. Due to their fundamental position in the contemporary philosophical debate, as well as the complex and sometimes radical nature of their ideas, I will give their arguments substantial attention.

Singer follows the utilitarian argument for equal consideration of interests to its ultimate conclusion, where Bentham stopped short of vegetarianism. The principle of equal consideration of humans does not follow from specific characteristics which only humans have in common; rather, it states that all men and all women of all races and all capacities are entitled to equal consideration of their interests. This, controversially, includes those humans who are of limited capacities and can therefore be argued to have capacities on the same level as for instance mammals or birds. The boundary for consideration of interests is therefore set at the level of sentience, but the line is also drawn sharply at the species barrier. Singer argues that to set the boundary truly at sentience means logically, or rationally, to include all sentient beings. There is not one rational argument that would allow humans to prefer their own species over other species, and to do so is essentially speciesist in nature. Speciesism can be defined as allowing the interests of one's own species to override the greater interests of members of other species. This, for Singer, is similarly unacceptable and indefensible as racism or sexism. He points out that equal consideration of interests does not require equal or identical treatment. It may lead to different treatment and different rights, similar to the difference in rights for men and women on gender specific issues such as abortion. The relative value of any life, according to Singer, should rather be based on the characteristics of the living being than merely on the species barrier. Since utilitarianism "does not recognize rights outside or beyond those created and imposed by positive legislation," Singer distinguishes clearly between the phrases 'animal rights' and 'animal liberation,' thereby "indicating his doctrine of equal respect for animal interests" rather than advocating the recognition of inherent animal rights.

Regan, in contrast, does make a case for inherent moral rights for animals in his 1983 publication *The Case for Animal Rights*. He bases his case on the premise of inherent value, arguing that it exists in both 'moral agents' and 'moral patients,' and that it should be respected in both. Regan points out that utilitarianism prefers an aggregate of utility over individual experiences, and as such allows for the interests of the individual to be sacrificed for the greater aggregate of pleasures. He argues that all moral agents are, or should be viewed as, equal in inherent value, and that this value is incommensurate with the intrinsic qualities of their experiences of pleasure or pain. To explain this, Regan uses the 'cup analogy': it is the cup (the individual) that has inherent value, and this value is not the same as the total sum of valuable things that the cup contains. However, instead of limiting the notion of intrinsic worth only to moral agents, in the way that Kant had, Regan looks for a condition of intrinsic worth that is shared by both moral agents and moral patients alike. He invokes the argument from marginal cases to justify the need for such a condition. The argument from marginal

cases is based on the fact that although many theories concerning animals state that humans are essentially different from animals because they have reason, autonomy, consciousness and / or are moral agents, it is in fact the case that not *all* humans possess these characteristics. Regan argues that infants, the mentally retarded or deranged or the hopelessly senile are all considered to have rights, even though they do not match the criteria on the bases of which those rights are justified or defended.

The theories of Singer and Regan are the two main pillars on which the current debate rests, and both have sparked so much debate that the notion of the “animal” is now a subject that has gained ground as a respectable subject of mainstream philosophy. Since their efforts to create a strong theory of animality that would force the public to reconsider their ideas that are rooted in centuries-old religious, philosophical and practical traditions, many more philosophers and thinkers have applied their energy to criticize, nuance or further develop their theories. The debate has spread from general ethical or moral theories to detailed and specific considerations of the position or the nature of animals in many different disciplines and areas such as wildlife, biotechnology, hunting, zoos and entertainment, pet companions and law and activism.

I have spent a certain amount of time detailing the central position of animals in the development of modern human consciousness through shamanism and totemism and the diverse ways in which various religions and philosophies have sought to incorporate animals into their worldviews. I have done so because I strongly feel that a basic understanding of them is essential as a general context to our subsequent discussion of the representation of animals in American poems, and because they are necessary to contextualise and illustrate the following two points that are key to my subsequent treatment of animal poetry. Firstly, animals are inescapable, universal and widely accessible or available entities in the human universe and every human culture has had to come to terms with their physical, spiritual and ontological presence in one form or another. Questions concerning what animals are, how they are similar to or different from humans, how they relate to man, and how man *should* relate to them, are universally posed and answered in the cultural realms of religion, philosophy, science, and art. As a means of making sense of the universe, art, and literature specifically, is a cultural area in which these questions can be creatively explored and examined; it can also function as a form of cultural expression that wittingly or unwittingly reveals a society’s underlying assumptions about the roles of animals and human attitudes towards animals. Cultural assumptions and beliefs about animals thus inform the representations of animals in literature, whether it be through propagation, questioning or subversion of those assumptions.

Secondly, since the dawn of human consciousness, the natural world has been an essential tool for conceptual, abstract and symbolic thinking and activity, and animals, as active living agents existing in wide diversity and variety, have a unique place in that symbolic thinking. Rather than (yet another) form of contemporary human exploitation of animals as resources, albeit mental instead of physical, this human engagement with animals on a symbolical and conceptual level should be seen as a positive and elemental form of human-animal interaction. This primordial and enduring symbolic significance of the animal for the human consciousness should not be taken for granted but should be acknowledged and critically examined and explored. When it is acknowledged and critically considered, however, it may also, in my opinion, be honoured and celebrated as a form of genuine, fair, undamaging and sincere interaction and engagement between humans and animals.

After a thorough examination of the cultural and historical context of human understanding and representation of animals, then, it is now time to turn our focus to the American historical, environmental and literary setting of our discussion. The final two sections of this chapter will therefore examine human-animal relationships in the United States and the representation of animals in American literature.

American human-animal relationships

In the United States of America specifically, human-animal relationships have been conceptually determined by a group of binary oppositions that include the wild and the domesticated, the wilderness and the urban environment, the pastoral ideal and the

industrialised reality, “the garden and the machine.” Much has been written about the American geographical landscape and natural environment and their influence on an ‘American’ sense of national identity. One of the most important and influential books to deal with this theme is Leo Marx’s *The Machine in the Garden*. In this landmark study, Marx traces the development of a uniquely American consciousness incorporating the ostensibly contradictory attitudes of the American people to, on the one hand, the pastoral idea of wild nature and on the other, the political and technical quest for human ‘progress,’ advancement and civilisation. The central metaphor of this paradox is the nineteenth-century image of the “machine in the garden,” the sudden appearance of the heavy, loud and fast locomotive in the undeveloped American landscape, as it has been recorded by countless American authors, including Hawthorne, Emerson, Whitman, Faulkner, and Frost.

From the very discovery of the American continent through the stages of colonisation, with its moving frontier, the struggle for independence, and the road to modernity, the New World has been imagined and represented as a ‘virgin’ territory, a new Garden of Eden and a land of unimaginable natural wealth and abundance, as well as a hideous and desolate wilderness that was dangerous and threatening, heathen and barbaric, full of wild animals and wild people. This double idea of the undeveloped or uncivilised American continent is thus two-sided as garden of abundance versus barbaric wilderness, but in either conception, the basic dichotomy is that of wildness versus civilisation. The animals that naturally occur in that wild landscape become symbols of it: the buffalo, the eagle, the bear, the coyote, the stag; all are familiar images and tropes of American untamed wildness and freedom, ubiquitous in both ‘highbrow’ and sentimental literature as well as in other forms of cultural (and political) expression.

The relationship between the American people and the American environment is defined by the nation’s unique development from a largely wild land inhabited by nomadic hunter-gatherer and horticultural peoples via swift colonization and subsequent industrialization to a highly industrialised and cultivated territory. In *American Environmental History: an Introduction*, Carolyn Merchant carefully documents the history of the American land and its human inhabitants. Merchant traces the impact of humans on the American continent from the earliest inhabitants that settled on the continent some 13,000 years ago. These Native Americans developed varied and sophisticated ways of subsistence including gathering, fishing, hunting and horticulture as well as systems of trade, modes of tribal governance and belief systems concerning the human world and the natural worlds. European colonizers explored the continent in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries before beginning to settle the land in the seventeenth century. They brought to the New World not only their own beliefs about nature, technologies and modes of production, but also a range of diseases, European grains, weeds and “the major five” of domesticated animals: cattle, pigs, goats, oxen and horses, with often devastating consequences for the Native American population. The Europeans initially established a “coastal exporting economy” consisting of settlements along the east and south coast that focused on the export of natural resources such as furs, timber, tobacco, rice and cotton, developed by human, and especially slave, labour.

In the eighteenth century, this coastal exporting economy was transformed into an “inland subsistence economy” through revolutionary developments in transportation. The development of the railroad in particular contributed to a coast-to-coast expansion of settlement, changing the production market to textile from New England mills, wheat, coal and iron from the middle states, and cotton, rice and sugar from the South. At the same time, the Pacific coast saw the exploitation of native peoples through the extraction of hides and tallow from cattle in California, otters and seals in the Northwest and whales and fish in the Pacific seas by the Spanish, Mexicans and Russians. An “Atlantic to Pacific nation” was eventually established in the nineteenth century, which enabled massive migration to the Western coast for “gold panning, river bottom, hydraulic, and hard rock mining in California” as well as salmon fishing, redwood lumbering and ranching, causing “erosion, debris flows, stream siltation, deforestation, and wildlife decimation” in the region. The inland expansion also gave rise to the struggle to populate the Great Plains with ranchers, farmers and homesteaders, and railroad-entrepreneurs, lured by the fertile periods of rain and then challenged by the long years of drought, the dust storms, grasshoppers, blizzards and Chinook winds of the region. Cities arose in accessible and favourable locations and provided access to

national and international markets, creating their own impact on the environment in the process. Issues of “water distribution, sewage treatment, garbage collection, air and noise pollution” caused specifically urban problems, as nature was increasingly pushed out of the cities by asphalt and steel.

Although various artists, poets, writers and explorers had noted the changing landscape and lamented the depleted forests and wildlife in the eighteenth century with the advent of the railroad, the end of the frontier at the close of the nineteenth century aroused more urgent concern over the vanished wilderness and rapidly exhausted resources. President Theodore Roosevelt was one of the first to promote the concept of conservation at the White House Conference on Conservation in 1908. The conservation movement had until then consisted of various loose strands initiated by concerned elite citizens who enjoyed exploring, hiking, hunting, fishing, bird-watching or reading and writing about nature and who saw wild nature vanishing before their eyes and valuable resources wasted with careless exploitation policies. Roosevelt had been an avid bird-watcher, hunter, explorer and rancher, and during his presidency one of his primary concerns was the conservation of the West’s natural resources. He worked, for instance, on the Reclamation Act of 1902, designed to reclaim the arid Southwest for farming, and used the 1906 Antiquities Act to preserve historic landmarks such as the Grand Canyon. Roosevelt also greatly increased the volume of forest reserves and created over fifty wildlife refuges and numerous national parks. The 1908 Conference of Governors squarely put conservation on the agenda as a national cause.

In the twentieth century, then, the science of ecology began to emerge and understanding increased of the changes that had taken place in the American environment. Several schools of thought developed with differing theories on nature and the influence of humans. Rachel Carson’s 1962 landmark work *Silent Spring* inspired an environmental movement that initially gained success with Congress passing numerous laws designed to regulate resource use and environmental quality, such as the Clean Air Act of 1963, the Wilderness Act of 1964, the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act of 1968, the founding of the Environmental Protection Agency in 1970 and the Endangered Species Act of 1973. Although the 1980s saw significant setbacks for the environmental movement and a relaxation of environmental regulation, the expansion of global capitalism in the 1990s brought a more acute understanding of the increasingly global nature of environmental concerns such as global warming, population growth, and species extinction. America’s notion of the great abundance of natural wealth, as well as the notion of the barbaric wilderness filled with dangerous beasts thus led, each in their own way, to a rapid depletion of these natural resources and extinction or near-extinction of many animal species. Although there has been an increasing awareness of the destructive effects of human activities on the American environment and resources since the close of the nineteenth century, efforts to conserve and preserve, protect or repair this damage have not prevented the monumental environmental problems that America, and indeed the world, faces in the twenty-first century.

Merchant’s valuable environmental history, though indisputably thorough, is predominantly about land. Her comprehensive study details the relationship of humans to, and the effect of humans on, the American landscape, and the animal inhabitants that that environment accommodates are not much more than a side note to Merchant’s study. The study does include notable cases of individual species or specific circumstances, however, which we will briefly explore here. These cases are largely similar and related to the human attitudes to and the human effects on the American land as set out above. Frederick Jackson Turner’s treatise *The Frontier in American History* distinguishes the unequal rate of advance of the frontier and notes that the first frontier was that of the fur traders, followed by the rancher’s frontier or the miner’s frontier and the farmer’s frontier. The “Indian traders,” that is, the colonizers who traded with the Indians, mostly for furs, marked the progressive westward expansion of the colonizers: The buffalo trail became the Indian trail, and this became the trader’s ‘trace’; the trails widened into roads, and the roads into turnpikes, and these in turn were transformed into railroads.

The importance of animals in this historical development has a double presence, first in

the interaction of Indians following the trails of buffalo for the hunt, and then the “Indian traders” tracing the same trails in their hunt for pelts to trade and export. The Native American hunters believed that the animal gave itself willingly to be killed so that the hunter could survive, but this willingness was bound by strict rituals and taboos. Through unavoidable contact with the colonizers, the Native Americans found themselves pressured to “break faith” with the animals in a slow process that resulted in the disappearance of the organically based economy of the Native Americans and the breakdown of Indian spiritual relations with non-human nature.

Similarly, the development of salmon fishing in the Columbia river basin below Portland, Oregon, moved from Native American fishermen and “gillnetters” who observed various guidelines, rules and rituals in their fishing practices to an increasingly unregulated and intensive fishing industry from the 1870s onwards that included ‘fish wheels,’ ferris wheel-like contraptions that scooped fish out of the river day and night, depositing them in shoots on shore to be packed and salted. The industry operated on the assumption that the fisheries were inexhaustible, but in 1917, John C. Hobb of the U.S. Bureau of Fisheries observed that

Man is undoubtedly the greatest present menace to the perpetuation of the great salmon fisheries of the Pacific Coast. When the enormous number of fisherman engaged, and the immense quantity of great employed is considered, one sometimes wonders how any of the fish, in certain streams at least, escape.

Although increasingly strict regulations were established, another threat to the fisheries came from the construction of over three hundred dams in the Columbia Basin which severely limited the yield of Chinook salmon, or as it had initially been named, “pink gold.”

A last illustration of the interaction of humans and animals in American history and the effect of human activities on animal life can be found in the depletion of the Sierra Nevada forests. The effects of the Gold Rush in the area were, among others, that the oak woodlands were cut for fuel, building material and for the creation of pasture lands for cattle by the miners. The trees could not re-establish themselves because the oak seedlings were eaten by cattle and deer, and the woodlands were drastically diminished. The effects on the resident wildlife were profound. Merchant notes:

The grizzly bear, which had been native to the western slope, became extinct from the area in 1924. Mountain sheep, which had been common in the high Sierras, were reduced by hunting and human presence. The wolverine, fisher, and marten were trapped out, while coyotes and wildcats were killed to protect sheep. Mule deer occurred throughout the sierra, creating trails that humans also used for travelling. Cougar, the major predator on mule deer, were drastically reduced, hence deer populations increased, causing ecological damage by browsing on shrubs.

The effects of human attitudes to and activities on the American land are mirrored by their effects on American wildlife. The extensive and often wasteful use of animals as resources for subsistence and trade as well as the destruction of habitats can be directly related to the double perception of American wildlife by European settlers as on the one hand an inexhaustible cornucopia of natural wealth and on the other hand a dangerous, barbaric wilderness that needed to be conquered and tamed. Wildlife consisted either of resources to be hunted for furs, decorative feathers or sustenance; or of dangerous predators to be killed in order to protect humans and domesticated animals.

In addition to its effect on (indigenous) wildlife, however, colonisation filled the American continent with a wealth of domesticated and urban animals. European colonisers had introduced domesticated animals to the continent, and eventual urbanisation meant that not only farms, but cities were filled with a wide variety of animals that do not constitute ‘wildlife.’ In *Civilised Creatures: Urban Animals, Sentimental Culture, and American Literature* Jennifer Mason observes that the only urban animals that are mentioned in *American Environmental History* are the ones that are featured in the section on the urban environment under the header “Garbage.” Mason reminds us that the opposition of nature and culture, or wilderness and urban civilisation excludes the countless domesticated or urban animals that “were not only present in the built environment but believed to share humans’ affinities for civilized

life,” such as horses for transportation and recreation, cattle, sheep, chickens and other livestock, companion animals, and animals from zoological gardens, racetracks, travelling menageries and circuses. As an illustration of this pervasive presence of nature and especially animal life in non-wilderness settings, Mason discusses Hawthorne’s sketch “Little Annie’s Rambles” (1835, 1837), in which a narrator takes the five-year-old daughter of a friend on a spontaneous ramble through the town, in which they encounter a great variety of urban animals, including horses, a parrot, a canary-bird, a squirrel, a dog, a cat, a wheelbarrow of lobsters, a cart of fresh fish, and a menagerie exhibiting an elephant, a lion and lioness, a tiger, several monkeys, a polar bear, a trained pony, a wolf, a hyena and a black bear. Similarly, as we will see in the next chapter, Galway Kinnell’s long poem “The Avenue Bearing the Initial of Christ into the New World,” set in a decidedly urban environment, includes a great variety of urban animals and ‘urban nature.’ To speak of human-animal relationships in America, therefore, is not only to speak of America’s relationship with its own wildlife, its rapid depletion of its abundant natural wealth and its subsequent conservationist efforts, but to speak of its urban and domesticated animals as well.

The development of the American economy from a largely agricultural to an industrial society with the subsequent development of urban environments entailed a movement away from intensive direct contact with nature and animals for a great many people. Jennifer Mason discusses the connection between the rise of a market-oriented economy and the popularity of pet keeping, recreational equestrianism and movements towards the prevention of cruelty to animals, suggesting that contrary to common belief, this popularity of pets and horse riding was not purely a matter of commodification of animals such as purebred dogs or the desire of the new bourgeoisie to appropriate the behaviour of the aristocratic classes. Instead, the fascination of the middle classes with companion animals can be found in the opposition of the (moral) American home to the American market place, where, in the American home, “beings are cared for regardless of their economic value.” Keeping and caring for pets thus became an indicator of good moral character and a sign of a person’s ability to care well for others. The nineteenth century also sees the emergence of animal welfare organisations, most notably the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA), founded by Henry Bergh in New York City in 1866 and followed by numerous regional SPCA’s in other cities. These initiatives were focused mainly on issues prevalent at the time, such as cockfighting, the treatment of animals in slaughterhouses, the shooting of live pigeons, the cruel treatment of dogs used for pull-carts and dogfights, and, most importantly, the cruel treatment of horses. Among other things, the ASPCA instituted a horse ambulance for horses that were injured while at work, and initiated important developments in veterinary medicine, such as anaesthesia for horses undergoing operations, and medical knowledge of animal health care in general. Whereas the first initiatives were mainly focused on horses and livestock, in later stages its focus shifted to smaller animals. After World War II pet ownership of small animals increased greatly, mainly due to the availability of canned (animal) food and cat litter. The ASPCA and similar societies engaged with issues concerning the unlimited reproduction of small (city) animals, as well as the sheltering of lost and stray animals. The efforts of the numerous societies engaged with the protection of animals were supported by notable literary spokespersons for nature such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, who became one of the MSPCA’s (Massachusetts) honorary vice presidents and literary figures such as Henry O. Houghton of Houghton Mifflin and Company, who cofounded the American Humane Education Society and whose publishing firm “did more than any other publisher to invent and popularise the genre of nature writing.”

The consequences of the daily interaction of people with animals through increased pet ownership in the understanding of animals’ ontological status were visible in two developments. Firstly, there was an increasing awareness of the essential role played by domesticated animals in the rise of Western civilisation through theories and findings from anthropological and historical sciences. Moreover, from a position of absolute inferiority to people, animals were slowly beginning to be regarded as having qualities that are admirable and even exemplary for human beings. Although these ideas were initially focused on horses and dogs, for “the most anthropocentric of reasons,” Mason argues that “The practices valued and popularised on account of these anthropocentric notions led paradoxically to an eventual questioning of human’s

absolute ascendancy over other forms of life.” Our image of animals in America should, then, include not only America’s past and present wildlife but all of its animals, wild, domesticated, urban, pet and everything that can be found and imagined between those broad categories. After all, it is not only the occasional interaction of American people with wildlife but their regular interaction with all animals in all forms that influences and shapes their attitudes to and treatment of those animals. Moreover, it is also the interaction with and imagining of all animals in all forms that inspires and informs American writers in their creation of literary animals.

Animals in American literature

The body of American literature contains a great number of memorable, moving animal characters and subjects which are extraordinarily real, alive, and individual in temperament. Melville’s *Moby-Dick* stands out as, perhaps, the most famous and imposing example of these animals, closely followed by Jack London’s dogs Buck and White Fang from *Call of the Wild* and *White Fang*, Faulkner’s bear Old Ben and dog Lion in *Go Down, Moses* as well as Vardaman’s fish and Jewel’s horse in *As I Lay Dying*. In poetry, the animals are less illustrious as individual personalities but no less memorable, and Emily Dickinson’s birds, bees, butterflies and insects easily spring to mind, as do Marianne Moore’s exotic bestiary, Robinson Jeffers’ predatory birds, Wallace Stevens’ blackbirds, and Elizabeth Bishop’s fish, moose, sandpiper and armadillo. In her pioneering and compelling study *Animals in American Literature* (1983), Mary Allen traces the animal characters and subjects in the prose and poetry of a selection of major American authors, namely Herman Melville, Emily Dickinson, Mark Twain, Jack London, Marianne Moore, John Steinbeck, Richard Wright, William Faulkner and Ernest Hemingway.

Allen takes as her major premise that “an astonishing number of actual animals play impressive roles in American literature” and that these animals are often reflective of the general affinity in American literature for the free, the autonomous, the independent and the wild. “America’s affair with the frontier is clearly behind the appeal of untamed animals” such as the great white whale, the wolf-dogs, the bear and the wild horses, Allen argues, and she traces the similarities between these animals, solitary, male, free and celibate, and the single male American frontier hero of works by Mark Twain and James Fenimore Cooper. As she points out, “If Lassie had been an American creation, instead of a Yorkshire dog who wants nothing more than to find her way back to an English hearth, the story might be *Lassie Leaves Home*.” These similarities seem to be most prominent in the animals that are found in prose narratives, the animals that are developed as characters, with their own name, distinguishing features and personalities, such as Moby Dick, Buck and Old Ben. In the poetry of Dickinson and Moore, however, Allen finds an autonomy and independence that she equates with the same distinctly American focus on undomesticated, independent creatures that exist outside of society. In addition to this apparent American literary attraction to free and independent animals, Allen observes two other characteristics of animals that seem to be particularly admired in American literature. She relates the anti-intellectual strain in American literature (“Where the untamed reigns, the cultivation of the mind is suspect”) to the purity of animal behaviour: “One of the most appreciated qualities of animals is that they are beyond language. [...] Language cannot be trusted, even by those who use it most carefully. [...] Animals do not lie.” Moreover, she relates animals’ freedom of motion to an American admiration for movement and dynamic energy: “Locomotion is close to the heart of energy-loving America.” This particularly attractive combination of movement and silence, of energy and purity, can certainly be seen in the animal poems that will be discussed in the subsequent chapters.

Aside from the fact that we look at different authors, Allen’s work on animals in American literature differs from this present study in two crucial ways. Firstly, she looks at animals in prose as well as poetry, with a heavy inclination towards prose; of the nine authors she discusses, only two are poets. The other authors may have written (some) poetry in addition to prose, like Melville, but the animals discussed are the ones that are featured in their prose. As we will see, there are significant differences in the representation of animals in the genres of poetry and prose.

Secondly, Allen focuses distinctly on actual, real, living animals in literature

rather than both real and metaphorical animals, pointing out that, although “the metaphorical far outnumber the literal animals in literature,” American literature distinguishes itself through the overwhelming number of real animals, and that “no other national literature makes them so important.” She states that

The focus on literal animals here is meant to raise issue with the literary assumption that they must stand for something else. And they are, emphatically, distinct from mineral and plant aspects of *nature*, a term that for too long has been used in literary criticism as a general reference to the out-of-doors, as if there were no difference between a bird and the branch he sits on – between active and passive. These animals are alive.

This specific focus on real rather than metaphorical animals works well for those animals in prose narratives that are, more often than not, actual characters or almost characters in the story. In her discussions of the poetry of Emily Dickinson and Marianne Moore, however, it means that the body of work is discussed in terms of the animal *subjects* rather than in terms of specific poems. That is in itself a valuable (and, as I stated before, pioneering) critical contribution to an understanding of the representation of animals in American poetry. However, because this present study focuses on poetry rather than prose, and because I am particularly interested in the spectrum of metaphoricity that is involved in the representation of animals, our approach towards the actual work differs significantly. The representation of animal subjects or images in poetry, whether they are real or metaphorical or, most often, somewhere in between, depends on the context of the individual poem, and my study therefore offers an in-depth, close reading of a range of representative poems by these three American poets, involving the specific literary, cultural or biological context relevant to each poem, rather than a more thematic outline of the bestiary of each poet. Our studies also have one significant point in common. We both make a clear distinction between the representation of ‘nature’ in literature and the representation of animals. As I have argued above, it is the particular quality of animals that they are living agents that sets them apart from their natural environment for the human observer, and this has made them singularly attractive for symbolic representation and metaphorical activity since the development of these capacities in man, and continues to define their appeal to modern writers.

In order to set the scene for our in-depth discussion of the animal poems of Kinnell, Snyder and Merrill in the subsequent chapters, we will take a brief look at some of the major animals in American literature from prose as well as poetry. This discussion of American literary animals has to begin, as it does in Allen’s work, with *Moby-Dick*. Melville’s masterpiece is unparalleled in the space, both literally and figuratively, that it allows for its animal antagonist. Melville, through his protagonist Ishmael, provides the reader with extensive contextual information, including detailed accounts of whaling, whale-ships, whale biology and the pictorial representation of whales. The biological information on the whale, specifically, serves to bring credibility to a narrative that revolves around a creature that is so gigantic, fantastic and remote that, certainly in Melville’s day, it was subject of more rumours than knowledge. Without the chapter on “Cetology” in particular, as well as the other “plain facts” of whale hunting, *Moby-Dick* could easily have been seen as what Melville calls “a monstrous fable, or still worse and more detestable, a hideous and intolerable allegory.” Though even in his biological chapter, Melville (or Ishmael) points out the limits of both science and poetic imagination in a thorough understanding of his whale subject: “As yet, however, the sperm whale, scientific or poetic, lives not complete in any literature. Far above all other hunted whales, his is an unwritten life.” As it is, the giant white whale claims its status as a character in the story, as seen through the eyes of Ishmael, Starbuck and Ahab. He has an identity; he is not represented as any dumb or monstrous animal but as one with a name, with distinguishing features (the rare whiteness, the creased brow, the crooked jaw), and with a distinct station in life.

Moby Dick is a mature bull sperm whale, and Allen notes that though most sperm whales are “among the most highly developed social creatures on earth” with an extensive system of childcare, and the habit of travelling together, there are old bulls that travel unaccompanied by others. Young males travel in herds and protect each other if in need, older males usually move with a harem of females, but *Moby Dick* seems to be

one such unaccompanied male. The whale's strength and energy in the story, combined with his apparent preference to travel alone and free in the wide ocean, uninhibited by any sexual behaviour or interaction with females, places him for Allen in the realm of the free, male, celibate, lone American hero in the wild. Moby Dick is represented in terms of great size and great value, which work well in conjunction with regard to the whale, who, as Allen points out, "happens to be not only the biggest but the most commercially valuable creature, as well as one who is richly gifted with intelligence and highly developed mechanisms of survival." The whale's size is also joined to his immense power, especially located in the tail, which has multiple functions and allows him to 'breach,' or burst his full, massive body out of the water. This is, in fact, how the reader finally encounters the whale for the first time in the narrative:

Moby Dick bodily burst into view! For not by any calm and indolent spoutings; not by the peaceable gush of that mystic fountain in his head, did the White Whale now reveal his vicinity; but by the far more wondrous phenomenon of breaching. Rising with his utmost velocity from the furthest depths, the Sperm Whale thus booms his entire bulk into the pure element of air, and piling up a mountain of dazzling foam, shows his place to the distance of seven miles and more. In those moments, the torn, enraged waves he shakes off, seem his mane; in some cases, this breaching is his act of defiance.

The book builds significant suspense in the reader in the anticipation of the emergence of the whale, which happens so late in the story. When it finally happens, the size and the power of the whale are introduced in a way that emphasizes its autonomy and independence. His strength is not initially presented in the form of a threat or in the context of a struggle, but in an act of individuality, of defiance. Even when attacked, the whale seems disinterested in the demise of the humans and their ship, swimming away from it rather than attacking it in his turn: "'Oh! Ahab,' cried Starbuck, 'not too late is it, even now, the third day, to desist. See! Moby Dick seeks thee not. It is thou, though, that madly seekest him!'" Not until the whale is struck by the harpoon does he counter-strike, and when he does, he is described as vengeful and, ironically, as malign: "Retribution, swift vengeance, eternal malice were in his whole aspect, and spite of all that mortal men could do, the solid white buttress of his forehead smote the ship's starboard bow." However, it is significant that, in the end, Melville lets the animal live. The whale destroys the ship and disappears into the deep as Ahab is caught in the noose of the harpoon line with which he has launched a final attack on Moby Dick and perishes in his fanatical and relentless chase of the animal. The wild and free animal thus survives, and the human who aims to interfere out of vanity or pride will suffer for doing so.

The canine protagonists of Jack London's *The Call of the Wild* and *White Fang* are not as free as Melville's whale; rather, they navigate the boundaries of the domesticated and the wild, and in doing so negotiate the level of necessary interaction with humans. Employed by humans as sled-dogs in the far North, they share the society of men while travelling through the wild, and they combine domesticated dog with wild wolf ancestry or behaviour. Buck, the protagonist of *The Call of the Wild*, is the antithesis of White Fang; the one a son of a St. Bernard father and a Scotch shepherd mother who transforms from a farm dog with a leisurely life to a member of a wolf pack, the other a three-quarter wolf, one-quarter dog who becomes attached to a human master and moves from the Far North to a domesticated existence in California. Both stories are narrated by an omniscient narrator, but *The Call of the Wild*, in a unique narrative strategy, takes the perspective of the dog. Though at times somewhat forced, the strategy is largely successful in conveying the dog's consciousness and bringing to life a convincing and compelling protagonist. Like Moby Dick, London's dogs are individuals, with names, personalities, distinguishing characteristics, and even information about their ancestry. The main quality of these animals is their adaptability, either from an existence of fat living on a ranch to the harsh demands for survival in Alaska, or from an existence in the wild to the careful navigations of a domesticated existence among humans. This adaptability, so instinctual in the dogs, is something that is at times found lacking in London's human characters. A failure to treat the elements, or nature, with respect, leads to inevitable demise in an existence that is as unforgiving as the North, and most incomprehensible is the cruelty and unnecessary violence that

humans act out either on fellow humans in a region where life is so precious and vulnerable, or on the dogs on whom they depend for their survival. London's stories show a fascination with the hunt, but it is only, as Allen points out, the hunt of animal to animal that London portrays in exhilarating detail. The hunting practices of humans are rarely written about. In the one story in which human hunting practices are central, "The Story of Keesh," they are methods of intelligence rather than violence. The boy Keesh, living in an Inuit village in the polar region, believes that his widowed mother is not given the quality of meat that she deserves by the hunters of the village, and sets out to become a hunter himself. Returning with an ample supply of fresh meat, and continuing to be successful in the hunt, he raises the suspicion of witchcraft among his elders. When eventually confronted, he reveals that he practices "headcraft" rather than witchcraft: he freezes coiled pieces of whalebone into small balls of whale blubber which he leaves on the bear trail. Once eaten, the blubber melts and the coil springs open, piercing the stomach of the bear, who slowly bleeds to death. We will encounter this inventive method of hunting again in Galway Kinnell's "The Bear" in the next chapter. Though killing may be necessary for food, London portrays no pleasure in the kill, and the exhilaration of the chase is only rendered in the freedom of movement and the power of instinct of the dog and the wolf.

From London we move to William Faulkner's hunting scenes, which revolve around the rules of hunting bears and deer in "The Old People" and "The Bear," from *Go Down, Moses*. In Faulkner's work, hunting is described with more fondness, but it is also a scene of moral confusion. Though bear hunting may be seen as an initiation into manhood and a rite of passage for young Ike, Allen points out that "the annual quest for Old Ben is rather a pilgrimage in which *seeing* the great animal is the climax, not conquering him." And although Old Ben is defeated in the end, it is through a struggle with the other big, fierce and heroic animal, the dog Lion. Old Ben is killed by Boon not because Boon desired to kill the bear, but because he rose to defend his beloved dog. Both Old Ben and Lion are classic American male creatures: solitary, independent, celibate and free. Though Lion is caged and owned, he cannot be tamed. And although Old Ben is eventually killed, he is overpowered by a dog rather than by a man. Allen points out that Faulkner's animals inspire overpowering affection in his human characters. Ike's first sight of the bear remains with him until he sees the bear again, years later, and this sighting was not easy to come by, nor did it take place in the context of the hunt. In his search, he gradually relinquishes all human attributes that he carries with him: his gun, his watch, and his compass, until he is able to meet the bear on the terms of the forest. Seeing (and being seen) is more important than killing or conquering. Other animals inspire equal, or even more passion, as can be seen in Boon, who sleeps with the tremendous Lion and throws himself into the violent struggle of bear and dog. Such passion and dependence can be found also in Jewel's wordless love for his wild horse, which he had bought with money earned by working nights clearing a neighbour's land in *As I Lay Dying*. Allen points out that Vardaman's observation that Jewel's mother is "accurate only as the animal is a primary focus of affection." Jewel does not love the horse so fiercely because he is grieving for his dying mother; "the boy would have cared for that horse regardless of his mother's death." Like Jewel, Vardaman finds more connection with an animal than with human relatives, but for Vardaman, his fish *is* a dramatisation of his dying mother. Faulkner's animals are either characters in their own right, such as the named individuals Old Ben and Lion, or active creatures that evoke strong feelings of passion and connection in his human characters. Like Moby Dick, Buck and White Fang, Old Ben and Lion are memorable animal characters that play a central role in these key American narratives. In poetry, however, one finds something rather different.

The possibilities and tendencies for the representation of animals in prose and in poetry differ significantly. Whereas prose tends to revolve around a narrative, a plot, which is driven forward by active characters that may include animals, poetry is of a different nature. The genre lends itself to a liberty from reason or logic that comes with its capacity for suggestion, association and juxtaposition without the need for logical connections or grammatical syntax. An excellent example of this can be found in Wallace Stevens' enigmatic poem "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird." The poem consists of a collage of thirteen haiku-like sections (though none are actual haiku), each featuring a blackbird in a zen koan-like setting. One evident first question would

be whether we are looking at one or at thirteen different blackbirds here, but that question is superseded by the question whether there is a 'real' blackbird in the poem at all. The poem seems an exercise in perspectivism, of which the title is a clear indication. What is emphasized in this poem is not the blackbird but the way that it is perceived by the observer, in this case the artist, and the observations seem to focus on the mystery, the profound 'otherness' of the bird and its indefinite connection to the natural world. The blackbird is at once unknowable, beautiful and ominous and at times seems to invoke a sense of the sublime, as in section X, "At the sight of blackbirds / Flying in a green light, / Even the bawds of euphony / Would cry out sharply." Its inscrutability is linked to the human mind or consciousness in for instance section II,

I was of three minds,
Like a tree
In which there are three blackbirds.

and section VI,

I know noble accents
And lucid, inescapable rhythms;
But I know, too,
That the blackbird is involved
In what I know.

In these sections, the blackbird may approach a metaphor, but the effectiveness of the metaphor rests on the successful establishment of the ultimate unknowability, and thus the 'realness' of the animal. The thirteen perspectives by no means seem to be a final number and the poem as a whole is suggestive of an infinitude of ways to perceive a single animal. As such the poem underlines my argument that the animal is only (somewhat) knowable through acts of imagination and that that knowledge is defined (to a larger or a lesser extent) by the human perspective. Stevens also draws the reader's attention to the value of real animals as opposed to imagined fantastic creatures, embodied in the poem as "golden birds" (section VII) and to the concept of cosmic unity and kinship of all beings, as in section IV, "A man and a woman / Are one / A man and a woman and a blackbird / Are one." In the subsequent chapters, we will take a closer look at the possibilities that Imagist poetry offers to the representation of animals (Chapter 3) and at the depiction of animals as a source of the sublime (Chapter 4).

Even in poetry, however, American animal subjects tend towards the free and the individual, as can be seen in the dramatic expression of individuality and sovereignty in Whitman's "The Dalliance of the Eagles," which shows two eagles in the spectacular flight-display of 'cartwheeling,' an elaborate courtship ritual of the American bald eagle that sees two birds fly high up in the sky, dive at each other, lock talons and plummet down in a spinning fall until they separate at the last moment. Whitman's description is characteristically sensual, describing the birds as "a living, fierce, gyrating wheel" and "a swirling mass tight grappling," the consistent use of the present continuous and the multitude of verbs, enhancing the dramatic energy of the scene. The poem closes in a line that echoes Whitman's "I Hear America Singing" when the amorous eagles go their separate ways: "She hers, he his, pursuing." The bald eagle is a national symbol of America for its strength and boundless freedom since 1782 and Whitman's eagles represent not only this freedom and power, but also qualities of individuality and democracy. The spirited, dynamic eagles of this poem are symbols for American freedom as well as objects of admiration in their own right. They are also represented in their natural habitat; fully at home in the land that is theirs, observed but not disturbed by the poet-spectator.

From Whitman's individuality and Stevens' imagist perspectivism we move to Marianne Moore, who at one point disclaimed herself as an imagist but whose poetics are inevitably linked with important imagistic principles such as a focus on the exact word, clarity of expression and allowing things to speak for themselves through meticulous description of the thing. Moore's "The Fish," for instance, offers an idiosyncratic, almost painfully scrupulous portrayal of the inhabitants of the sea. The title forms an anacrusis to the poem proper, so that it is "The fish [who] wade / through black jade" while "of the crow-blue mussel-shells, one keeps / adjusting the ash-heaps; / opening and shutting itself like // an injured fan." Following the first enjambment, each

stanza opens with the enjambment of the previous sentence, creating a distinct sense of the scales of a fish overlapping, or a new wave overtaking each retreating wave in the surf. As the fish moves through the green-black sea, the reader follows its path past other sea animals. Each type of animal (mussels, barnacles, sea stars, jelly-fish, crabs) is described briefly but carefully, often through simile: the mussels move “like // an / injured fan,” the “pink rice-grains,” may be sea anemones but may also refer to the appearance of the sea stars, the crabs are “like green lilies, and submarine / toadstools.” The animals are small and multiple rather than individual creatures in this poem, and their habitat is violent and inhospitable (the titular fish are of course also plural, indicated by the grammar of “wade”). The water “drives a wedge / of iron through the iron edge / of the cliff” and the shore has “All / external / marks of abuse.” Yet as violent, dark and grave-like as the sea is, it is also clearly abundant with life. The greenish dark hue is reminiscent of the green light in which Stevens’ blackbirds fly (section X) and of the green lake of James Merrill’s *Black Swan* (“The Black Swan,” discussed in chapter 4), and invokes a distinct sense of mystery and dread, as a realm of life that is inhospitable or inaccessible to humans.

Moore’s poem is notoriously difficult to capture in a cohesive reading, and is, perhaps, not really about the fish as much as it is about the sea, or about the power of the water which is both destructive and life-giving, wreaking havoc on the rocks but concealing an eerily beautiful scene underneath, illuminated by the fragmented shafts of light that penetrate the surface. Its animals, then, are evidence of this life, this beauty that is concealed yet revealed, and its title animals, the fish, are the observers through whose eyes we see this scene. Enigmatic though it is, the poem does not rely on an allegorical interpretation, even if a cohesive one could be formed. Instead of employing the animal images or subjects as metaphors, the poem is a sea of metaphors, if you will, in which each thing is described in terms of another. The “crow-blue” mussels are like ash-heaps, the crabs are like green lilies or submarine toadstools, the water is like iron, but so is the cliff. Nature is not a metaphor for something else; it is an endless metaphor for itself.

The same can be observed in “The Paper Nautilus,” in which Moore describes the female nautilus, a mollusk related to the octopus, which surrounds herself with a beautiful papery shell in which she broods her eggs. The nautilus’ protection of her delicate cargo is described in terms of Hercules’ battle with the crab, and her shell is at once compared to the horn of a ram (“her glass ram’ shorn-cradled freight”), in terms of Greek dress and as the mane of a horse, as “close- / laid Ionic chiton-folds / like the lines in the mane of / a Parthenon horse.” The poem speaks of the power and danger of maternal love and protection as the nautilus shields her eggs without crushing them, and may somewhat more easily than “The Fish” be read as an allegory or metaphor, in this case for maternal love as well as for artistic mentorship (critics have invoked Moore’s artistic friendship with Elizabeth Bishop). As with “The Fish,” however, the meaning of the poem does not depend on its allegorical or metaphorical potential.

On a literal level, this poem is already a masterpiece, in which the animal is not so much the metaphor for the human, as it is described in metaphors of other animal and human images. Invoked are the ram, the horse, the wasp (“its wasp-nest flaws / of white on white”) but also elements of Greek culture and myth, of human buildings of conflict (“fortress”), and human experiences of love, devotion, loyalty and protection. The metaphorical relationship between humans and animals in Moore’s poems is an outstanding example of the reciprocal potential of animal metaphor. Although the act of comparison in poetry is exclusively human, the metaphorical relationship not only allows the animal to express something about the human, it also allows the human to express something about the animal, or one animal about another. Mary Allen examines Moore’s poetry in thematic terms and concludes that Moore’s generally obscure and exotic animal subjects display a similar tendency to independence and individual liberty that can be seen in the wider context of American literary animals. Though Moore’s creatures tend to be modest, virtuous, self-disciplined and stationary, and as such, demonstrate their individuality less actively than, say, Melville’s whale or London’s dogs, they nonetheless are free and autonomous, and thus continue to reflect the American attraction to freedom and individuality.

We briefly looked at the notion of a realm for animals that is simultaneously shared by, and not open to, humans in Moore’s underwater environment in “The Fish.” In “Come In,” Robert Frost explores the boundary of field and woods, reminiscent of

Faulkner's setting in "The Bear." Out at dusk, the speaker of "Come In" feels lured to the edge of the dark woods by the birdcalls of a thrush. The solitary song of the bird, marking the end of the day, moves the speaker to an imagined scene of shared lament: Far in the pillared dark / Thrush music went - / Almost like a call to come in / To the dark and lament." The phrase "come in," with its subsequent comment that the speaker was "out for the stars" marks the bird's territory as a home in which one can or cannot enter from 'outside.' And the speaker, recognizing that bird and man each have their rituals to mark the end of the day, "would not come in. / I meant not even if asked, / And I hadn't been." The boundary between woods and field is a marked one, and part of its distinct margin is the boundary of dark and light (or semi-light, in Frost). The woods are unfamiliar, dense or dark, and the natural habitat of the non-human, who know and are able to navigate the woods far better than the human. Though among animals, the human lives in a different world still.

This is emphasized particularly in the 'Inhumanism' of Robinson Jeffers, the notion that people need to break out of the mold of humanity in order to experience a proper relationship with the divine beauty of things, free from the constraints of human egocentrism. This "philosophical attitude," developed throughout Jeffers' early career, is given explicit expression in his preface to *The Double Axe and Other Poems* in 1948. Inhumanism entails

a shifting of emphasis and significance from man to not-man; the rejection of human solipsism and recognition of the transhuman magnificence. [...] It offers a reasonable detachment as rule of conduct, instead of love, hate and envy. It neutralizes fanaticism and wild hopes; but it provides magnificence for the religious instinct, and satisfies our need to admire greatness and rejoice in beauty.

This egocentric barrier that prevents humans from fully appreciating the terrible beauty of the world is shown, for instance in "Hurt Hawks," which Justin Quinn describes as "a poem where Jeffers's objectionable misanthropy is convincingly integrated in a poem of great pathos and beauty." In "Hurt Hawks," the hawk with the shattered wing waits in vain for a merciful death from "the wild God of the world," when the speaker tells us

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.

The "communal people" have forgotten or never had knowledge of this wild power that is nature, and throughout his poetics, Jeffers identifies and denounces a rigorous separation of 'nature' and 'civilization' that he describes as the consequence of an infantile solipsistic attitude of humans to the world comparable to an "egocentric baby." As Quinn points out, most of Jeffers's poems are contemplations of the beauty of the natural world resulting in comparisons of this natural world with humanity, in which 'nature' is always superior to humanity and civilization. So too are his poems that take animals as their subject. With great poetic preference for predator birds, the speaker of "Hurt Hawks" states that "I'd sooner, except the penalties, kill a man than a hawk." However, this hawk is hurt beyond reparation, and after being 'given' freedom, he returns to the human that tried to nurse him back to health to 'ask' for death, which is given with mercy but regret. The hawk, identified by his species as "the great redtail," is presented as an individual, a person with a character ("strong" and "arrogant"), who remembers freedom of movement and has dreams of flying that are ruined by the dawn when he wakes up to the reality of his shattered wing. It may be clear that the "communal people" that have forgotten the "wild God of the world" do not include the speaker, who is able to admire the ruthless beauty and implacable arrogance of the hawk. But this connection is one that is not attained easily, and the use of "communal" in this context suggests that isolation may be a key to a deeper connection with the non-human world. Moreover, the setting of the poem in the "oakbush" and the "foreland hill" suggests borderland spaces between human and animal habitats such as that used by Frost in "Come In," set at the edge of the woods.

The encounter between animals and humans at the boundary between their habitats is central in many of Emily Dickinson's poems, albeit without the fierce misanthropy of Jeffers. Allen notes that Dickinson's "finest subjects are those characters she meets in the garden or meadow," and that the animals that she focuses on

are remarkably small in size, most no bigger than a robin, her favourite bird-subject. These tiny creatures are not microscopic models for something else, however. Quite often they are described as independent artists whom she meets as equals, such as the spider. They are distinct individuals, and free rather than domesticated, and, like the poet, they are outsiders to society, like the “narrow Fellow in the Grass.” This snake appears and disappears suddenly and does not always show himself clearly. When the speaker was “a Boy, and Barefoot – / I more than once at Noon / Have passed, I thought, a Whip lash / unbraiding in the Sun” which, upon closer examination, was a snake which quickly moved away again. Though a stranger who abruptly appears and disappears around one’s feet, this narrow fellow is, in fact, a friend that brings delight and fright at the same time:

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 –

The cordial feelings for the snake may be inspired by a sense of being outsiders together, a recognition from one isolated individual of another. However, his charm may also derive from his rare appearances and the excitement that accompanies his abrupt visit. The “tighter breathing” and especially the idiosyncratic sensation of “Zero at the Bone,” testify to this sense of heightened emotion. The phrase is oft explained as the chilling sensation down the spine that may accompany an unexpected encounter with a snake, and the word “Zero” does suggest a certain negativity. But the combination with “a transport / of Cordiality” and its implications of rapture, of being carried away with feeling, speaks more of a terrifying delight, almost as a form of miniature sublime at the encounter. This brings us to the final poem in this incomplete and highly partial glance at animals in American literature, and American poetry in particular: Elizabeth Bishop’s “The Moose.”

The long narrative poem is a deceptively easy-paced poetic tour de force that opens with a wide birds-eye perspective of the bay and then steers the eye to a lone bus on the road, following its journey from the “narrow provinces” of Nova Scotia to Boston. It takes its title from the bus’s encounter with a female moose in the dark on the road. A marked contrast between “The Moose” and “The Fish,” an earlier narrative Bishop poem that similarly centres on a significant encounter between the speaker and an animal, is that the narrative of “The Moose” is not limited to the encounter with the animal. The journey is described from the departure of the bus from Nova Scotia and closes with the bus moving on, leaving behind the moose “on the moonlit macadam.” The animal encounter is thus contextualized in the circumstances of the journey, which, as we know from Bishop’s biographical circumstances, are from one childhood home in Nova Scotia, to another in Boston. The moose is a national symbol of Canada that is ingrained in the geography of Nova Scotia. A casual look at a map of the region reveals that on the first part of the way to Boston, the bus would already pass Moose River, Moose Island (one of the Five Islands from the poem) and Moose Brook. The moose can thus be read as part of a wider focus of the poem to record familiar and typical images such as the Bay of Fundy, the clapboard houses and churches, the sweet peas and cabbages and the fellow travellers’ accents. Bishop’s moose may be seen as a Canadian poetic animal rather than an American one, both in its general guise as a national Canadian symbol and in its particular presence in this poem, and comparative research into the animals in Canadian and American poetry would certainly yield interesting results. The moose’s individuality and independence stands out; she is not described in relation to other moose such as a mate or offspring. Though her female gender is marked in the poem, she is free, wild and independent, and as such she could easily fit within Allen’s description of American literary animals.

The actual moose in the poem is described as both familiar and alien:
Towering, antlerless,

high as a church,
homely as a house
(or, safe as houses).
A man's voice assures us
'Perfectly harmless ...'

[...]

Taking her time,
she looks the bus over,
grand, otherworldly.
Why, why do we feel
(we all feel) this sweet
sensation of joy?

On the one hand, the moose is as high, homely and safe as churches and houses. On the other hand, she "looms" up out of the "impenetrable woods", she is "grand" and "otherworldly," and of course, a rather unique sight on the road in the middle of the night. This combination of the common and the extraordinary, of the familiar and the alien, gives the animal both a strong real presence and a significant symbolic position within the poem. In its familiar guise, the moose is a metaphor for the land of Bishop's childhood, for her first 'home'. It represents a place and thus also a time when Bishop was at home in her surroundings, a feeling, it is well recorded, she found difficult to regain in most of her later life. In its otherworldliness, its encounter with the travellers on the bus is one that makes a memorable impression, the moose as curious of the humans as they are of her, and the moment of contact one that provides a "sweet / sensation of joy" that may be different from, yet similar to Dickinson's "Zero at the Bone," in its intensity.

Conclusion

The prehistoric depictions of animals made by early modern man in underground caves around the world, which continues to impress and astound contemporary viewers, alert us to the original and fundamental significance of animals for the development of human consciousness. These first instances of symbolic activity of early modern man signal not only the fascination of humans for the fellow living creatures that share their natural habitat, but also the importance of those animals for human cognitive development, in the form of abstract and conceptual thinking and symbolic behaviour. Linked by contemporary historians and anthropologists to shamanist practices and the pictorial representation of spirit creatures in the shape of animals, these images are both historical evidence for the existence and occurrence of particular species of real, living animals, and for the importance of the presence of animals to give shape to spirits perceived and experienced in altered states of consciousness. This importance of animals for conceptual thinking can also be seen in the origins of animal metaphors in totemism, the means by which primitive man associates social groups of kinship with certain clan- or totem-animals based on a perceived metaphorical relationship. Lévi-Strauss explains this role of animal in metaphor with his famous dictum: "animals are good to think [with]." In addition to their physical presence, animals form widely accessible cognitive currency for humans; they are different from but like man in so many respects, and have an infinite variety of features and characteristics among their countless species and types.

In the emergence of worldviews and cosmologies, each culture has given shape to their own ideas and beliefs about animals. The animal is thus at once a physical reality and a fluid vessel of human ideas, beliefs, projections and representations that have informed societies and shaped human assumptions of animals and human-animal relationships, including those underlying the poetry of the poets discussed in the next chapters. As we will see, Galway Kinnell invokes elements and images of Christianity in his poems about animals whereas Gary Snyder looks more to Asian and Native American cultures, and Merrill is again fascinated by the metaphorical potential between animals and Christian doctrines and icons. These three poets write from the

geographical and historical position of a twentieth-century American citizenship, and are thus inevitably influenced by the history of America's relationship with its environment and animal inhabitants. This historical perspective can easily be characterized by the dichotomy of wilderness versus civilisation, but must include not only the wild animals native to the continent, but also the domesticated animals brought from the Old World that have been instrumental in the development of American culture, and the urban and companion animals that are found in the civilised sphere. American literature is populated with a great number of animals in poetry and prose, and may be characterised by a quintessentially American fascination with freedom, individuality, independence and democracy. American prose, for instance, contains memorable animals that are fully rounded characters, such as Melville's *Moby Dick*, Faulkner's *Old Ben* and London's *Buck* and *White Fang*. American poetry, however, contains a fascinatingly wide range of animal subjects and animal representations that has, as yet, received only scant attention from a handful of scholars. Yet, as we will come to see, even within the context of a similar place and time, these poets write animals in very diverse ways and with very different outlooks, functions and meanings. To this small body of scholarship I will proceed to contribute detailed studies of the animal poems of Kinnell, Snyder, and Merrill in the following chapters.

Chapter 2

Humanity, Mortality and Animality in the Poetry of Galway Kinnell

The best poems are those in which you are not this or that person, but anyone, just a person. If you could go further, you would not be a person but an animal. If you went further still, you would be the grass, eventually a stone. If a stone could speak your poem would be its words.

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 think up to keep the world from becoming dead matter.

And that as post-Darwinians it was up to us to anthropomorphize the world less and animalise, vegetablize, and mineralise ourselves more.

—“On the Oregon Coast”

Introduction

Galway Kinnell’s poetry is profoundly concerned with the nature of humanity, and his exploration of the human experience often leads him to an exploration of mortality. For to be human, to be alive, is essentially also to be mortal, to be dying. In the examination of humanity and mortality in his poems, Kinnell frequently turns his gaze to animals. Mortality is, after all, one of the most basic qualities humans have in common with animals. Moreover, animals form a striking mirror for mankind both in their evolutionary similarity and in their fundamental difference. Animality and humanity are interconnected in Kinnell’s poetry, and the interplay of notions of ‘kinship’ and ‘otherness’ between human and non-human animals is a fundamental element of his work.

This chapter will examine the ways in which the animal, animals and animality are represented in the poetry of Kinnell. His extensive use of animals in the exploration of humanity and mortality is distinctive in American poetry in its complexity and intensity. Kinnell’s animals are, more than symbols in the service of a human experience, objects of the frank gaze of the author looking for both a mirror and a window. In numerous instances, the animal is not merely presented or employed as an object or an image, but incorporated in the imaginative act of the author: the (imagined) experience of the animal is included in its representation. The position of animal subjects in Kinnell’s poetry, and their double function as mirror to mankind and window to a world of difference, make an exploration of Kinnell’s work fundamental to an understanding of the representation of animals in contemporary American poetry.

Kinnell was born in Providence, Rhode Island, in 1927, to an Irish mother and a Scottish father. He obtained his BA from Princeton University in 1948 and his MA from the University of Rochester in 1949. Kinnell has travelled to Paris on a Fulbright Fellowship and has taught in the University of Iran in Tehran on a Fulbright Lectureship, in the University of Hawaii in Honolulu and in the University of Grenoble, France, among many other places. He has published thirteen volumes of poetry, of which the first, *What a Kingdom It Was*, was published in 1960 and the most recent one, *Strong is Your Hold*, in 2006. He has also published translations of works by Yves Bonnefoy, Yvan Goll, François Villon and Rainer Maria Rilke (in collaboration with Hannah Liebermann), as well as a novel, *Black Light* (1966), and a children’s book, *How the Alligator Missed Breakfast* (1982). Kinnell has received numerous prizes for his work, including the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award for his *Selected Poems* (1980). He was the Erich Maria

Rémarque Professor of Creative Writing at New York University for twenty-five years until his retirement in 2005, and was one of the founders of the Creative Writing Program at NYU. Kinnell is a Chancellor of the Academy of American Poets. He is now retired and lives in Vermont.

The animal subject is prevalent throughout Kinnell's poetry. Even the poems that do not take an animal as their subject but feature animal imagery convey a consistent organic vision of life, and employ animal imagery in a search for (a sense of) kinship. Several critics have placed Kinnell in the Romantic or neoromantic tradition. Lee Zimmerman traces Kinnell's relation to Wordsworth, Coleridge and Keats as well as to Whitman and Dickinson in his pursuit of "the Romantic project of finding the self in the world and the world in the self." Susan Weston poignantly remarks that:

Although Kinnell is unmistakably an American poet in the post-Romantic tradition, obsessed with death and metamorphosis, a look at his shamanistic poem "The Bear" shows how different Kinnell is in temper, tone, and vision from the Emersonian 'poet'. If Kinnell is a seer, he sees not with his mind's abstracting eye, but with his body.

Furthermore, Richard J. Calhoun, in a valuable discussion of Kinnell's poetic milieu, identifies him as a "postmodernist neoromantic," writing in a time of transition from modernism to postmodernism when the formalism of New Criticism was being questioned and abandoned in favour of free verse, beat poetry, 'confessionalism' and personalism.

Calhoun identifies in this period "a reaction to the overemphasis on poetry as a craft and the poem as linguistic artifact" (*sic*), stating that "the postmodernists of the 1960s took the view that the speaker should be perceived as the poet. The reader is no longer to presuppose that the *I* is an invented character." In addition to this more personal quality of poetry, Calhoun points out the preference for freer forms in postmodern poetry. No longer a strictly "linguistic artefact," the poem "gives the semblance of spontaneous speech." These two departures from modernist styles (the more personal voice on the one hand and the freer form on the other) are fundamental elements of Kinnell's poetics, and the concerns of his two essays on poetry: "The Poetics of the Physical World" and "Poetry, Personality and Death," both originally published in 1971.

Kinnell's development as a writer shows that he abandoned fixed form very early in his career. His first volume of poetry, *What a Kingdom It Was*, contained mostly poems in free verse, with the exception of a poem like "First Song" which contains three stanzas of six lines each, and a regular meter and rhyme scheme that bears some semblance to a sestina in its repetition of certain words or rhymes (boy, joy, small, tall, all) at the end of each of the six lines. However, this first volume also contains "The Avenue Bearing the Initial of Christ into the New World," which is an exceptional exercise in free verse and onomatopoeia, as well as "Freedom, New Hampshire," which contains autobiographical references suggesting that the author is the speaker of the poem. Charles G. Bell, Kinnell's mentor and long-time friend recalls that while he was teaching poetry at Princeton University in the winter of 1946-'47, Kinnell showed him "maybe his first" poem, which had "no modern flair." However, he recognized in Kinnell a young man who "could go beyond any poetic limits assigned." At the start of his poetic career, Kinnell may have followed the ideas of New Criticism in his poetics, but he quickly abandoned fixed form and technique and searched for a new voice. The two aforementioned essays are the only essays on poetics he has published, and they were both published relatively early in his career, in 1971.

In "Poetry of the Physical World" Kinnell argues that the need for form has become obsolete in the face of modern times, and "rhyme and meter amount to little more than mechanical aids for writing." "Fixed form tends to bring you to a place where someone has been before. Naturally, in a poem, you wish to reach a new place," Kinnell writes, and this requires wandering without being forced in certain directions by the formal demands of rhyme, meter or stanza. Rather than "play[ing] tennis with the net down," as Frost has said of free verse, Kinnell sees the poem not as a game but as a journey, in which fixed paths bring you to certain places, and free verse allows you to wander off in new directions: "you

have nowhere to go except where the inner drive of the poem takes you.” Kinnell associates the reliance on form in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century English poetry with a sense of spiritual harmony and natural order, respectively, and believes that as such, “the poem is erected against chaos,” so that “poetry also undertakes the conquest of nature.” Lee Zimmerman points out in a compelling response to that perspective that

This view – that nature is wild and that poetry shouldn’t try to tame it with formal regularity but rather should partake of its wildness – illuminates much modern poetry, especially Kinnell’s own. But it overlooks the fact that, wild as nature may be in one sense, it also contains within it nearly perfect symmetries and minutely ordered systems. Kinnell’s sense of meaning is founded on an appreciation of the natural human body, but although it dies, for a while doesn’t one side of the body usually rhyme with the other, isn’t its heartbeat metrically regular, and aren’t its internal workings astonishingly patterned? Thus, formally regular modern poems like Theodore Roethke’s “I Knew a Woman,” James Merrill’s “Samos” and W.H. Auden’s “Lullaby” partake of natural order even as they steadfastly confront ‘the thing which dies’ without smelling nostalgic.

For Kinnell, however, the original and organic quality of poetry is found in open form.

In “Poetry, Personality and Death” Kinnell addresses the position of the *I* in poetry, considering ‘confessional’ poetry, the use of a *persona*, and the presence or absence of the poet in the poem. He looks at the “extreme self-absorption” of the poetry of the century, at the trend of poetry expressing more and more personal, individual anguish and suffering, and at the “strange pride” a poet can take in his own suffering that becomes part of such poetry. He invokes Thoreau’s dictum “Be it life or death, we crave only reality” but points out the need to transcend the autobiographical in poems. However, to truly transcend personality, the poet has to go through it rather than avoid it by being absent from the poem altogether, or by using a *persona* to evade the consequences of exploring the universal self in all its facets in poetry. The *I* in poems must be real and true, but ought to transcend the merely autobiographical and move into the realm of the universal: “we move toward a poetry in which the poet seeks an inner liberation by going so deeply into himself – into the worst of himself as well as the best – that he suddenly finds he is everyone.” Kinnell refers to the poetic voice that fails to convey experience as both personal and universal as the “closed, unshared ‘I’,” and locates the source of this ‘closed I’ in the alienation of man, and thus also the poet, from his own nature and from nature in general by the conquest of nature with science and technology. Kinnell’s neo- or post-romantic poetics can be seen in precisely this concern with the ‘unnatural’ divide, the separation of humanity from the natural world, and thus from part of itself:

Our alienation is in proportion to our success in subjugating it. The more we conquer nature, the more nature becomes our enemy, and since we are, like it or not, creatures of nature, the more we make an enemy of the very life within us.

His involvement with nature, both in and outside of the human, includes an intense fascination with mortality and death as part of the natural cycle of life. Everything that lives is dying at the same time, and death is perceived both as “extinction” and as “release.” In all his poetry, but most hauntingly in *The Book of Nightmares*, Kinnell confronts both aspects of mortality in an expression of fear and desire towards this state of non-existence. Calhoun observes that rather than a religious perspective on death,

[Kinnell’s] stress is even closer to a more basic and more primitive one on death as a return to a preconscious or prehuman state. Kinnell’s version of the myth is primitive and pre-Christian, simply emphasizing the individual’s participation in a natural and universal process.

This neoromantic fascination with death and rejection of the alienation of humanity from

nature finds expression in Kinnell's use of animal subjects and animal imagery. Calhoun notes that:

Galway Kinnell is basically a nature poet who has written some of the finest contemporary poems about animals – among them a porcupine, a crow, various bears, a sow or two – producing a kind of minor bestiary. Animals are, he makes it clear, important in his poetry for revealing an unexpected kinship, suggesting, if not proposing, a mythology of the common fate of living things.

The “minor bestiary” that Calhoun refers to consists of the specific animals that Kinnell favours and that appear throughout his poems: bears, pigs, snakes, birds, flies and bugs. The bear is given a central position in “The Bear,” but also shows its face and fur in “The Stone Table,” “Under the Maud Moon” and in “Lastness.” The ‘perfect loveliness’ of pigs is celebrated in “Saint Francis and the Sow,” but also seen in “The Sow Piglet’s Escapes,” “Pulling a Nail” and “The Road between Here and There.” Snakes are featured in the poems “Everyone was in Love,” “Burning the Brush Pile,” “The Striped Snake and the Goldfinch” and in “When One Has Lived A Long Time Alone.” Birds often indicate transience in “Field Notes,” “Why Regret,” “Last Songs,” “Mount Fuji at Daybreak,” “The Geese,” “The Gray Heron” and “The Striped Snake and the Goldfinch,” but are also staged in other roles, in “Feathering,” “To Christ Our Lord,” “The Avenue Bearing the Initial of Christ into the New World,” and in the account of a hawk attacking a jay in “Ode and Elegy.” Hens live and die in “Memory of Wilmington,” and of course most notably in “The Hen Flower.” The smaller creatures of the earth buzz and creep into the poems “The Fly,” “The Frog Pond,” “The Biting Insects,” “Flies,” and enact an organic vision of the cycle of life in “The Quick and the Dead.” In addition to these recurring animals, a lone porcupine is given centre stage in “The Porcupine,” and a terrifying cat in “The Cat.” Inevitably, in light of this wealth of animal poems, this chapter cannot discuss each of these poems in detail. From a comprehensive examination of these poems, however, four main overarching themes became apparent in Kinnell’s use of animal subjects and imagery. I will discuss the poems in the context of those themes, and examine in detail those poems that are the most remarkable or the most representative of wider themes in Kinnell’s animal poetry.

This chapter then will explore Kinnell’s use of the animal subject in relation to the following four overarching themes. In section (i), *the cycle of life*, we look at Kinnell’s perspective on animals and animality in relation to his vision of nature as an organic cycle of life, in which life, death and rebirth are fundamentally interconnected. This is notable both in poems that are not specifically nature or animal poems such as “The Fundamental Project of Technology” and “The Avenue Bearing the Initial of Christ into the New World,” and even more so in the animal poems “The Quick and the Dead” and “Ode and Elegy.” Section (ii) deals with the theme of *death and transformation* in a discussion of Kinnell’s “The Porcupine” and “The Bear,” two companion pieces from *Body Rags* that revolve around the death of an animal and the speaker’s subsequent transformation into the dying animal. These poems, as well as the second part of *The Book of Nightmares*, “The Hen Flower,” form the basis for a discussion of Kinnell’s exploration of death in his animal poems. Section (iii) looks closely at the use of animal subjects and animal imagery, especially birds, in relation to the notions of *transience and transcendence*. The focus of this section will be on two poems in which the animal subject or subjects are used to convey a sense of the transient nature of life: “Why Regret” and “Frog Pond,” and on a group of poems in which a central image of birds against pink skies recurs, symbolizing transcendence: “Mount Fuji at Daybreak,” “The Geese,” “The Gray Heron,” “Daybreak” and “Last Songs.” The chapter concludes in section (iv) with a discussion of the notions of *kinship and otherness* that are so crucial to Kinnell’s animal poetry. The interplay between these two notions is the primary basis of all of Kinnell’s animal poems, in which he searches for a balance between curiosity and a desire to understand the otherness of different species, and a deep-seated sense of kinship with the creatures that share the experiences of life and mortality with humans. Kinnell examines this interplay in “Saint Francis and the Sow” and in sensitive detail in the longer poem “When One Has Lived A Long Time Alone.”

(i) **The cycle of life**

Kinnell has objected to the labels 'nature poet' and 'nature poem,' arguing that the distinction between 'nature poem' and 'urban poem' [isn't] useful any longer. The idea that we and our creations don't belong to 'nature' comes from the notion that the human is a special being created in God's image to have dominion over all else. We are becoming aware again of our connection with other beings.

His poetry reveals a deeply organic vision of nature and of humanity as part of nature, and whether he is a 'nature poet' or not, even his 'urban' or his 'political' poems are pervaded by nature. "The Fundamental Project of Technology," which addresses the terrible destruction caused by atom bombs at the end of the Second World War, deals with the consequences of a humanity disconnected from its natural context:

To de-animalize human mentality, to purge it
of obsolete characteristics, in particular of death,
which foreknowledge terrorizes the contents of skulls with,
is the fundamental project of technology

The third line, which addresses the human awareness of the notion of death, has an awkward, contorted syntax that draws special consideration to the line, demanding attention in unravelling its meaning: the "foreknowledge" of death terrorizes the contents of the skull, and "the fundamental project of technology" is to purge "human mentality" of the notion of death, an "obsolete characteristic" left over from an animal past. The odd syntax creates an active rather than a passive construction, implying aggression or agency on the part of death and the foreknowledge, rather than presenting the terrorizing quality of both as a passive consequence. Destruction of the magnitude of nuclear bombs, the poem suggests, is only possible in a society that is deeply disconnected from the value of life and knowledge about the inescapability of death. A society that ignores and discounts mortality can no longer be aware of the value of life.

"Vapor Trail Reflected in the Frog Pond" similarly addresses nature in relation to war. In its first stanza, the Strategic Air Command bomber whose trail is reflected in the pond becomes a "machine in the garden"; an invasion in a pastoral landscape and an intrusion of a personal experience of nature. Kinnell describes the event that inspired the poem in an interview with William Heyen and Gregory Fitz Gerald:

Just off the dirt road that leads up to my house there's a frog pond. [...] Often, I'd take a bath in the pond before going up home. One very beautiful day I was walking back up from the frog pond, naked, holding my clothes in one hand, my mail in the other. [...] I felt totally alive and totally existing in my body. Then I looked up and saw the vapor trail of a Strategic Air Command bomber, a terrible defilement. [...] I felt its sanctuary was destroyed.

Not only is Kinnell's sanctuary destroyed and invaded by deadly technology, however. The speaker's sighting of the bomber will have terrible consequences for another person, walking as he is, outside in the sun: "the third [stanza is] an attempt to imagine how it might be for a Vietnamese person to be walking along a road in his own country, just before the American bombers appeared in his sky." Nature is represented in the poem as a sanctuary for the body that is indefensible against destructive technology. The technology is an intrusion on the natural environment that denies the intrinsic connection between the earth and the body and discounts the value of life. These poems contain strong criticism of the disconnection of society from nature through technology, and a frustration with the (political) consequences of that disconnection, especially war. In "The Fundamental Project of Technology," the title of the poem stresses specifically its subject matter: the fundamental project is to "de-animalize human mentality," to erase death from life. Kinnell invokes the notion of "*pseudologica fantastica*," a term from psychiatry related to pathological lying or

mythomania. The actual, correct phrase from psychiatry is *pseudologia fantastica*, and the (most likely intentional) pun invokes the notion of pseudo-logic in addition to that of the pathological lie in his poetic discussion of the desire to eliminate death. For the elimination of death, the mechanisms of “pseudologica fantastica” require the elimination of the dying, “a task [that has] become conceivable,” he says, when the atom bombs were dropped. Kinnell associates a desire for “deathlessness” with both pseudo-logic and pathological lying in this poem, with as its most tragic result “a white flash [that] sparkled:” the nuclear bombs.

The criticism in “Vapor Trail Reflected in the Frog Pond” is more political still. With a heavily ironic reference to Whitman’s “I Hear America Singing,” the disconnection of American society from nature is related in the second stanza:

And I hear,
coming over the hills, America singing,
her varied carols I hear:
crack of deputies’ rifles practicing their aim on stray dogs at night,
sput of cattleprod,
TV going on about the smells of the human body
curses of the soldier as he poisons, burns, grinds, and stabs
the rice of the world,
with open mouth, crying strong, hysterical curses.

Whereas Whitman’s America sang “strong melodious songs” of carpentry, boatmanship, motherhood or masonry, honest men and women working and exultantly “singing what belongs to him or her and to none else,” Kinnell’s America is singing of animal abuse, war and violence. The poem is saturated with anger and dismay at the intrusion of technology, and the political consequences of a disconnection from the meanings of nature, life and death in the form of the Vietnam War. Both “Vapor Trail Reflected in the Frog Pond” and “The Fundamental Project of Technology” contain perspectives that correspond with the environmental theory of ‘deep ecology,’ which, as discussed in the previous chapter, holds that the dualistic separation of humanity and nature is the root of the current ecological crises and sees nature as having inherent value independent of human welfare or interests. Although Kinnell addresses mainly the consequences of the dualistic separation for humans, namely the denial and defiance of death and the diminished respect for the value of life, his organic perspective on the importance of the cycle of life is closely connected to the ideas of ‘deep ecology.’

Kinnell’s “urban” poem “The Avenue Bearing the Initial of Christ into the New World” describes in elaborate detail city life on Manhattan’s Avenue C. In spite of its urban setting, however, the poem opens with birds: “pcheek pcheek pcheek pcheek pcheek / they cry. The motherbirds thieve the air / to appease them.” Throughout the poem, the spaces of the city slum, the shops and the traffic lights, the trashcans and the pushcarts, are not only shared by their human inhabitants, the “Puerto Ricans, blacks, Jews,” but also by pigeons, cats and fish. Their cycle of life, search for food or shelter, their play and rest receives almost as much attention, ‘screen time’ as it were, as those of the “crone who sells the *News* and the *Mirror*” or the “Jew [that] rocks toward his last hour.” And the city streets are not only made up of concrete and aluminium, but also of sunlight by which “fruits and vegetables live,” the sunset that “smashes on the aluminum of it,” and the wind that “comb[s]” the “icicles over the windows and door.” Nature is not seen as separate or absent from this urban scene, it is very much interconnected with the life in this city street. However, not all human subjects of the poem experience this nature. The old Jewish man does not feel the rays of the sun, does not understand the bright sun as belonging to earth rather than to heaven. Similarly, the old lady selling the papers only comes out after dark, living by artificial light. The descriptions of the old man and woman both contain religious imagery. The man is identified as an Hasidic Jew, with all black clothes, a long beard, and children around him with “barbels flying, in skullcaps.” He smiles at the sun but does not feel its rays and does not understand its earthly function of providing warmth and light, thus enabling life. Instead, he confronts it as a “blinding signal in the sky” and sees only a religious interpretation of the sun. Kinnell seems to suggest that the human soul can

become separated from nature when one interprets natural phenomena such as the sun and the sky, warmth and light in terms of religion rather than in terms of nature. This reading is supported by Kinnell's description of the old lady:

She dwells in a flesh that is of the Lord,
And drifts out, therefore, only in darkness
Like the streetlamp outside the Luncheonette
Or the lights in the secret chamber
In the firmament, where Yahweh himself dwells.

Kinnell identifies her in terms of female figures from literature and religion: she is Magdalene, who served Christ; Pulcheria, loyal mother of murderer Raskolnikov in Dostoyevski's *Crime and Punishment*, and Alyona, the merciless pawnbroker who is Raskolnikov's intended victim. The crone's flesh is of the Lord, not of earth, and she does not live by natural light. It is religion that separates these characters from nature, Kinnell seems to suggest. In contrast, the poem features a boy flying a kite from a rooftop, surrounded by pigeons and "seeking the sky." Nature is not absent from this urban scene; it is the humans that are absent from nature.

Kinnell expounds on his organic vision of the natural cycle of life in the poem "The Quick and the Dead," in which a dead vole opens the eyes of the speaker to an elaborate organic ritual of burial, recycling and reproduction. The plump body of the vole, killed by the speaker himself to keep it out of the flower beds, was "lobbed" at the edge of a hayfield, and as the speaker returns to the dead and decomposing creature, he finds it twitching with beetles and larvae. The process of natural recycling is described in minute and morbid detail:

Now a large beetle spewing at both ends
moils across him, drouking him
in marinating juices. The reek
is heavy, swampy, undoubtedly savory,
luring from afar these several beetles
and also those freeloaders of the afterlife,
the midden flies, who arrive
just in time to drop their eggs in, too,
before the covering of the grave.

The vital and organic dynamics of nature are conveyed through the use of carefully chosen, nearly onomatopoeic verbs, sometimes rare or archaic words of Scottish and Irish origin. A selection from the first few stanzas: 'lobbed', 'jerks', 'heaves', 'shudders', 'quickness', 'prog', 'tilt', 'peer', 'twitches', 'delve', 'undergrub', 'howk', 'spewing', 'moils', 'drouking'; 'hatch', 'squirm', 'slopped', 'snipped', 'dragged', 'stoppered', 'wriggle', 'noggles', 'plouters'.

The images and activities conjured up by these verbs are again repeated in the last stanza in one sequence when Kinnell speaks of the "underdigging / and jiggling and earthing over and mating / and egg-laying and birthing forth" that is the recycling of old life into new. The heavy reliance on physical verbs and onomatopoeia contributes strongly to the actual sense of creatures crawling in and out of a corpse and of the organic movement in the body after death. Kinnell has remarked on the richness of verbs (and adjectives) in English

In this country, we have a rich tradition of evoking physical things, of giving the physical world actual presence. Our language has more physical verbs and more physical adjectives in it than most others, and so it has a peculiar capacity to bring into presence the creatures and things that the world is made up of.

Here, the use of physical language draws attention specifically to the vitality and animation of the scene. Kinnell's ancestry (an Irish mother and a Scottish father) may have influenced the range of vocabulary used in this poem, and given him access to a wide array of verbs and nouns specifically useful to the sense of earthiness he conveys. Kinnell's choice of

diction distinctively connected to his ancestry thus also carries associations with the theme of origins and the cycle of life in familial and linguistic terms.

In the poem the corpse of the vole becomes a feeding and breeding ground for a multitude of other creatures, a playground almost, for newly hatched larvae. As the speaker watches the end of the process coming nearer, the cycle nearly completed, he looks forward to the day when he “may hear in the dunch of my own blood / a distant, comforting, steady shovelling.” The human rituals of death, however, are far less organic. The human body, after death, is prepared with chemicals and oils, dressed up and “pranked up,” and sealed in a coffin and a vault. There is none of the recycling and returning to earth that the animals are granted, the human must spend his “eternity on earth” in sterility and isolation. The speaker mourns the absence of the “fellow creatures [that] can force their way in to do the underdigging / and juggling and earthing over and mating / and egg-laying and birthing forth” and the fate of human beings: “a centuries-long withering down to a gowpen of dead dust, and never the crawling of new life out of the old.” In his juxtaposition of the animal rituals of death and recycling and the human rituals of death and preservation, Kinnell exposes the separation of humanity from nature, and the lonely isolation that is continued in eternity, ensured by the human ceremonies of death.

Kinnell’s vision of the afterlife in this poem does not involve a heaven or the possibility of divine redemption. It is a return, not to dust but to life, to the essences of living, namely feeding, mating, and breeding. The body is released from individuality, and returned to communality. The same vision of death and rebirth can be seen in “Freedom, New Hampshire,” dedicated to the poet’s brother, in which he explains:

But an incarnation is in particular flesh
And the dust that is swirled into a shape
And crumbles again and is swirled again had but one shape
That was this man. When he is dead the grass
Heals what he suffered, but he remains dead,
And the few who loved him know this until they die.

In this poem the loss of individuality, of the “one shape that was this man” is grieved, distinguishing the loss of a loved one from the death of an unknown creature. Kinnell invokes the grass that is a symbol of regeneration in Whitman’s “Song of Myself”: “the smallest sprout shows there is really no death, / And if ever there was it led forward life,” but in Kinnell’s poem, regeneration offers no consolation. However, although the poem mourns the irretrievable loss of a loved one, the vision remains the same: in Kinnell’s perspective on reincarnation the particular shape is lost in death, but the flesh lives again in different shapes, different lives. When human ceremonies separate the dead from this cycle, eternity becomes a long, lonely existence in nothingness. Animals are the ‘other’ in this poem, creatures that live and die in the same way as humans, but that give themselves over to the natural cycle of life and death. They form a contrast with the human being that denies the body its natural decomposition and its ‘flowing away into the universe’ after death.

Ironically, this death and burial that is observed so closely and admired so much was caused by the speaker, who had caught the vole in a trap. The vole is referred to as ‘him’ and ‘he’ throughout the poem, rather than ‘it’. The use of the personal pronoun identifies this creature as a fellow living being, rather than as a ‘thing’ or ‘object’ to be disposed off, but the poem does not speak of remorse over the death. In other animal poems too, Kinnell displays a sense of ordinariness, normality, when references are made to the killing of animals by humans, or to the eating of meat. He fishes with his son Fergus in “Angling, a day” and they give the three yellow perch they catch to the cat Monsoon. He learns to kill a hen for food in “Memory of Wilmington” and describes eating chicken in “The Hen Flower” and meat in “Field Notes.” “The Bear” gives the account of a hunter trapping and trailing a bear, eating and drinking from its flesh and blood. The speaker in “The Bear” is further removed from the author than in the other poems mentioned above. However, both the process of hunting and the subsequent transformation and re-imagination are related without a specific reference to the question of the killing of animals or utilizing them as resources. None of these poems speak explicitly of an overarching theory of human-animal relations, and with this absence of a reference they suggest a view

of animals that accepts it as natural that man feeds himself with meat and defends his territory against animals. Kinnell's affection and respect for animals does not necessarily make him a vegetarian, rather, his references to animals in the poem suggest a way of life that follows the same cyclical, organic motion of life and death as is conveyed in "The Quick and the Dead" as well as in "Ode and Elegy," where one creature lives off another's death. Interestingly, the poem "To Christ Our Lord" actively and sensitively challenges the presupposing manner in which humans kill and consume animals, from the perspective of a child protagonist. The child has, just that afternoon, shot a bird which is now being prepared for a Christmas dinner and just as he had hesitated before shooting, the child now hesitates before eating. He did not want to shoot and now does not want to eat, but his "wicked act" is praised by "grace," and there had been (or seemed to be) "nothing to do but surrender." The poem's religious connotations, both in references to Christmas, saying grace and the cross, and in the title's reference to Gerard Manley Hopkins' "The Windhover" which is dedicated "To Christ Our Lord," seem to make the discussion a Christian one: is it right to kill and consume God's creation, celebrated so superbly in "The Windhover"? In the Old Testament, as we have seen in the first chapter, humans were only allowed to nourish themselves with flesh after the expulsion from paradise. In the divine order of creation, reflected in the Garden of Eden, only fruit and vegetables are eaten, and the prophet Isaiah foresees a return to this original state at the end of time, when the "wolf shall dwell with the lamb" and they "shall not hurt nor destroy one another." The developing awareness of the child protagonist reflects this move from an idyllic, harmonious state to a harsher reality. By choosing a child as protagonist, and having him surrender to convention in the poem, Kinnell seems to suggest that children, perhaps closer to nature or less influenced by human convention, may instinctively sense something strange or ambiguous about killing and eating animals. In later poems, however, this view is not elaborated upon, and Kinnell maintains a view of the cycle of life that includes the human in the process of nourishment in death.

Although slightly morbid, the picture of death and its elemental position in the cycle of life that "The Quick and the Dead" offers is focussed not on the death itself but on the life that is facilitated, sustained and nourished by it. The poem "Ode and Elegy" is likewise concerned with the function of death in the cycle of life, but focuses on the earlier stage in the cycle: the death itself. "Ode and Elegy" displays the strange beauty of power and struggle, rather than the charm of the rebirth and recycle of nature that is portrayed in "The Quick and the Dead." The poem is a detailed account of a hawk's attack on a jay, and the jay's subsequent struggle for life. As in "The Quick and the Dead," but in a more direct way, this attack and struggle is part of the natural cycle of life. The death of one creature is the nourishment of another. However, rather than focusing on the life that is sustained and nourished, Kinnell here focuses on the life that is lost and zooms in on the moment of dying. Both the physical power of the hawk and the intensity of the jay's defence are treated with reverence and awe in the poem.

The poem opens with "A thud. Shrieks." and then "Frantic / wingbeats like a round / of soft applause" setting the tone for a sudden intensification of life. The hawk is so strong that he flips the jay over "as easily as a green wave / in heavy seas lifts a small boat / and throws it upside down," but the jay wrests free a wing, "flaps / like a flag saying *i will fight you!*" The use of the simile invokes the jay's passion for survival and ultimately stresses the physical superiority of the hawk; the use of italics and the exclamation mark focuses the reader's attention on the urgency and intensity of the jay's struggle. The use of the lower case "i" is remarkable also, and is suggestive of the powerlessness of the jay against the hawk; the inevitable weakness in his self-assertion. The birds are as close to each other "as Jesus and Judas at their kiss" when the moment of death sets in, and while in the embrace, the struggle suddenly ends when the jay's neck breaks and "his eyes / shrink into beads of taxidermists' glass." The image of Jesus and Judas is one of the most powerful images of the strange ambiguity of, for lack of a better term, intraspecies violence, on a one-to-one scale: killing between members of the same species has a stronger connotation of personal involvement than predation between members of different species, such as animal-human, or even between non-human animals of different species, and

though hawks and jays belong to different species of birds, to the (lay) human observer a bird fighting a bird may suggest a closer connection than a hawk chasing, for instance, a small mammal. Likewise, predation on a close, one-to-one scale has a strong connotation of intimacy between the predator and the prey. This strange intimacy is also conveyed in Kinnell's "The Bear," which I will discuss below. In this poem, the image of Judas' kiss invokes this same intimacy when one creature dies at the hands of another, in the embrace of the other. And although Jesus does not die at the hands of Judas directly, their kiss remains a powerful image of the intimacy between a killer and his victim. The use of the (human) image dramatizes the struggle and brings the struggle between two animals closer to the understanding of the reader. After the death of the jay, finally, the hawk flies off with his catch in an awe-inspiring image of power and control when his flight is compared to "*la décollage à l'américaine* / of the Lafayette Escadrille," a dangerous take-off manoeuvre of a World War I squadron of the French army consisting of American fighter pilots. My point here is that the struggle between the birds is presented to the reader as a dramatic, intense and indeed sensational moment in the natural cycle. Whereas "The Quick and the Dead" reveals to the reader a world in which death is calmly absorbed into the cycle on a small, almost invisible scale, "Ode and Elegy" brings to light a moment in which nature is powerful and relentless.

Kinnell uses human imagery to describe the attack and the fight between creatures, which is an unusual and intriguing reversal of the more common use of animal imagery to describe or illustrate a human scene. The moment of first impact is followed by "frantic / wingbeats *like a round / of soft applause*" (my italics), and the physical power of the hawk over the jay is illustrated in terms of the power of the ocean against humans:

as easily as a green wave
in heavy seas lifts a small boat
and throws it upside down,
still afloat but keel up, so
the hawk flips the jay,
then tears at his throat.

The jay fights for survival in the face of death. A flapping wing is compared to a "a flag saying *i will fight you!*," a human battle scene; and in the final throes of the fight, right before the death of the jay, "jay and hawk stare / at each other beak to beak, / as close as Jesus and Judas at their kiss." The use of human imagery (with Christian connotations) in this struggle between birds brings the animal experience closer to the understanding of the human reader. Rather than a scene depicting the brutality of nature separated from the civilisation of mankind, the poem contains the image of the wave and the boat that includes humans as vulnerable entities within nature, and an image of the kiss between Jesus and Judas that draws a parallel between the struggle between the birds and the conflict between humans. From an image of the force of nature against humans, through the image of conflict between humans, the poem takes us to an image of human control over nature when "As a grape harvester trampling out / the last juices of grape" the hawk treads up and down the dead body of the jay. "Ode and Elegy" is published in *Strong is Your Hold*, which derives its title from a Whitman poem, "The Last Invocation," that speaks of the strong hold of "mortal flesh," of life on the living, and this strong hold is reflected in the jay's fervent struggle for survival. Kinnell's fascination with Whitman's attitude to death in this poem will be discussed in more detail further on in this chapter.

Both "The Quick and the Dead" and "Ode and Elegy" are theriocentric in nature: they present the animal subjects not in terms of their use or meaning for human concerns, but convey the animals' (real and imagined) experiences of life and death. The animals are representational animals; their specific characteristics and habits are represented in biological detail in addition to any characteristics or habits that may have a metaphorical meaning or function in the poem. Kinnell's focus does not lie on the similarity between human and non-human animals, nor on a quest for kinship or identification in these poems. He presents his animal subjects here as fundamental parts of the natural cycle of life that includes both human and non-human animals. Animals in Kinnell's poems, whether subject of the poem or merely part of the setting, are often included in a self-evident way, as

natural presences in any scene. In “The Fundamental Project of Technology” and “Vapor Trail Reflected in the Frog Pond,” Kinnell presents his vision of civilisation as an intrinsic element of nature rather than a separate element to be opposed against nature. His view of the cycle of life is one of connectedness, in which human and non-human animals follow the same cycle of life and death and in which a rigorous separation between civilisation and nature, or humanity and nature, leads to detached perspectives on life and death. Awareness of mortality and foreknowledge of death, terrifying as they are, are essential to respect for life. Death and mortality are fundamental themes throughout Kinnell’s work, and in his poetic explorations of this theme, he turns his poetic imagination to those creatures that share the burden of mortality with humans.

(ii) Death and transformation

In a 1972 interview, Kinnell expresses his belief that

If the things and creatures that live on earth don’t possess mystery, then there isn’t any. To touch this mystery requires, I think, love of the things and creatures that surround us: the capacity to go out to them so that they enter us, so that they are transformed within us, and so that our own inner life finds expression through them.

This idea of transformation is key to a number of Kinnell’s animal poems, most notably his celebrated companion poems “The Bear” and “The Porcupine,” both published in his third volume of poetry *Body Rags* (1968), and the second part of his book-length poem *The Book of Nightmares*, “The Hen Flower.” Whereas many of Kinnell’s animal poems demonstrate a keen sense of kinship or a degree of identification, in these poems he goes one step further in his exploration of the human-animal connection and attempts to imagine the animal experience through a process of transformation. This transformational imagination of the animal is linked specifically to an exploration of death and the process of dying in the poems, as the poet attempts to come to terms with his own mortality and in that attempt looks to the creatures that share mortality with humanity but are free from the “foreknowledge of death.” “The Porcupine” and “The Bear” especially are striking exercises in this transformation. Both poems narrate the slow, painful death of an animal and subsequently re-imagine that death through the transformed body of the speaker. John Logan offers a valuable metaphorical reading of the poems in his article “The Bear in the Poet in the Bear,” focusing on the poet’s process of transformation and emptying out.

In this transformation, the bloodied secretions of the bear become “that sticky infusion, that rank flavor of blood, that poetry, by / which I lived,” and the trail of guts of the porcupine is “the rope / strung out behind me / in the fall sun / suddenly glorified with all my blood.” Logan points out the clear “visceral connection” between poetry and the excretion of a wounded animal, noting the “part of the general image of poetry which, when it is any good, comes certainly from the inner depths” and the “sexual ring of ‘sticky infusion’,” which is “predictable and right.” Both poems present the image of a poet as a dying animal, its excrement the poetry of which it is emptied. This presents the reader with an image of poetry as a physical, bodily object rather than a mental or spiritual entity. Logan’s reading carries interesting associations with Kinnell’s essay “Poetry, Personality and Death,” in which he recounts receiving a poem from a woman in the audience after a reading. Kinnell had just read “certain poems that exposed [his] own wretchedness” and the woman had composed her poem during the reading:

Galway Kinnell
Why
Are you in love with blood?
What
Dark part of your soul
Glories so
To wallow in gore?
Deep in your mind there lies

Despair, disgust, disease.

Kinnell uses this event in "Poetry, Personality and Death" to address the extent to which a poet ought to "probe into [his] own wretchedness" and "poke under the surface." The poetry by which the hunter-bear of "The Bear" has lived is a "rank flavor of blood," and the porcupine-poet of "The Porcupine" has come to himself empty with a "rope / strung out behind me / in the fall sun / suddenly glorified with all my blood." This poetry that the animal/poet has been emptied of consists of wretchedness from deep within himself. Logan notes that the bloody images associated with poetry in this poem denote "a slow destruction of the self." He argues, however, that the poet should not be seen as a masochist, and that the poetry is not a record of self-destructive experiences. "Rather," he says, "it is often a record of recovery from them. It is not the blood-soaked shit of a dying bear. Rather, it is the gold into which that stuff is turned by the magus gift of the poet." Susan Weston nuances his statement, pointing out that:

Kinnell's gift comes from his ability not to alchemize but to digest. Alchemy transmutes; digestion converts. [...] You cannot turn a base metal into gold; you can, however, simply by accepting it for what it is, convert blood-soaked excrement into something life-sustaining and life-transforming.

This process of alchemizing or digesting excrements is suggested also by James Wright's poem "Lying in a Hammock at William Duffy's Farm in Pine Island, Minnesota":

To my right,
In a field of sunlight between two pines,
The droppings of last year's horses
Blaze up into golden stones.

Wright's poem presents the horse dung as part of the earthly glory of nature, in a style reminiscent of Kinnell's affection for the earthly and the muddy as intrinsic elements of the cycle of life. Whether through alchemization or through digestion, excrements, in both Kinnell and Wright, function as fertilizer on literal and metaphorical levels, nurturing art and creativity in the poet, and new soil and fertility in the earth.

More than the metaphorical reading of "The Porcupine" and "The Bear" in terms of the process of creation and expression of poetry, I would like to emphasize the representational qualities of the animal subjects, the actual transformation of the human into the animals, and the re-imaginings of the dying creatures.

"The Porcupine" examines the position of porcupines in human societies in different ways. Widely regarded as pests by farmers because they gnaw on wood, they are often shot on sight. Kinnell contrasts this contemporary, western view of the animals with the position the porcupine is given by the ancient scriptures of Zoroastrian religion: "The Avesta / puts porcupine killers / into hell for nine generations." According to the Zend-Avesta, porcupines are perceived as similar to dogs and thus revered for their loyalty to man. Whoever kills a porcupine-dog will be punished severely.

Kinnell himself likens their character to humans in seven fairly random and ironic ways ("He uses his tail for climbing, / he chuckles softly to himself when scared"), and in the description of his transformation into the porcupine, he accounts for the transformation with motifs of identification: the speaker, too, has hurt ones near him with his quills, has crouched as a martyr, has been clubbed on the snout, has fallen from high places, run through fields frightened and, finally, has come to himself empty, his insides glorified with blood. These motifs of identification are suddenly far less ironic and random than the seven mentioned in the second stanza. More evocatively still, Kinnell identifies the porcupine as an "ultra-Rilkean angel," for its attraction to all things touched by humans. The porcupines' love for salt results in its taste for things that are regularly handled by humans; objects that will have absorbed human sweat. Kinnell explains:

I was thinking – as I seem to do often – of the Ninth Elegy, where Rilke tells how the angels are attracted by ordinary, earthly things. The porcupine eats anything with salt in it – generally things we've handled a lot, that the salt of our sweat has soaked into. So, like Rilke's angels, the porcupine loves axe handles, doors, chair arms, and so on.

The specific passage from Rilke's "Ninth Elegy" that Kinnell refers to has been translated by him (with Hannah Liebmann) as follows:

Praise this world to the angel, not the unsayable one,
you won't impress him with your glorious emotions; out there,
where he feels with more feeling, you're but a novice. Rather show him
some common thing, shaped through the generations,
that lives as ours, near to our hand and in our sight.
tell him of things. He'll stand more awed, as you did
beside the ropemaker in Rome or the potter by the Nile.
Show him how joyful, how pure, how much ours, a thing can be.

This comparison with Rilke's angels in their love for ordinary, *human* things especially, positions the porcupines in relation to humans in a unique way in this poem. Kinnell here reverses the notion of the human attempting to understand and observe the animal into an image of the animal fascinated by all things human.

Rilke's influence on Kinnell is visible throughout his work, and the *Duino Elegies* especially have remained a source of inspiration. In 1971, three years after the publication of *Body Rags*, which contains "The Porcupine," Kinnell published *The Book of Nightmares*. The volume contains a book-length poem in ten parts, and Kinnell states in an interview with Wayne Dodd and Stanley Plumly that the ten-part structure of the book is a tribute to the *Duino Elegies*. The epigraph to *The Book of Nightmares* also comes from Rilke. In 1999, Kinnell translated a selection of Rilke's poetry in collaboration with Hannah Liebmann. The selection is small, as the translations are published side by side with the original poems, but the *Duino Elegies* are included in their entirety.

Especially interesting to the subject of animal poetry is not Rilke's "Ninth Elegy," but the "Eighth Elegy," which is concerned entirely with animals. The poem contrasts the unobstructed outward gaze of the animal into the open, with the look of humans, out into a limited future, and back at a past that will never return:

With all its eyes the creature
sees the open. Our eyes alone are
as if turned back, and placed all around,
like traps, encircling its free escape.
[...]
We never, not for a single day, have
before us the pure space into which flowers
endlessly open. Always it is world,
and never nowhere without the no: that pure,
unsurveilled element one breathes and
infinitely knows, without desiring.

The foreknowledge of death in humans alters their outlook on life so dramatically that we are "forever taking our leave." The conceptualisations of the type of world that is available to animals and the one available to humans are nearly completely reversed in the ideas of Heidegger, discussed in the first chapter. Giorgio Agamben explains in *The Open: Man and Animal* that Heidegger's notion of 'the open' arose out of Rilke's "Eighth Elegy," but that in Heidegger's ideas it is the human who has access to the open, and the animal that is closed off from it. Heidegger believed, Agamben says, that his ideas were not in fact a reversal of those of Rilke, because his interpretation of the open was entirely different:

First of all, [Heidegger] writes, if we think of the open as the name of what philosophy has thought of as *alētheia*, that is, as the unconcealedness – concealedness of being, then this is not truly a reversal here, because the open evoked by Rilke and the open that Heidegger's thought seeks to give back to thought have nothing in common. "For the open meant to Rilke is not the open in the sense of the unconcealed. Rilke knows and suspects nothing of *alētheia*, no more than Nietzsche does." [...] Only man, indeed only the essential gaze of authentic thought, can see the open which names the unconcealedness of beings. The animal, on the contrary, never sees this open.

Whereas Heidegger placed the emphasis on the world that is opened to humans because of their capacity for authentic thought, Rilke focuses on the world that is closed to humans because of their foreknowledge of death, a consequence of their capacity for thought. As I have discussed above, Kinnell addresses this knowledge of death and the consequences thereof in “The Fundamental Project of Technology”: the understanding of death is necessary for humans in order to understand the value of life and a society that strives to deny death enables tragic actions that have complete disregard for the value of life. For Rilke, animals are “Free from death,” and as a consequence, they do not see demise: “where we see future, it sees everything, / and itself in everything, forever healed.”

Kinnell’s porcupine, however, is not free from death altogether. Kinnell looks at the animal not in its freedom from death, but as it is in the process of dying. The porcupine protagonist is partly described, partly imagined in human terms. The poem opens with a clear description of his diet: crabapples, bast, phloem, flowers, catkins, leaves. The scene is set at the end of the summer or beginning of the fall season, when the porcupine is still on his summer diet of twigs, roots, flowers, leaves, berries and nuts (the winter diet consists of evergreen needles and inner bark of trees). The goldenrod and roses are in bloom, indicating late summer or fall but the porcupine “drags” his last meal through mud and *ice*, suggesting early frost on the ground. The farmer shoots the creature as it dozes in a tree, which also indicates the end of the summer season or early fall, when porcupines take to climbing trees to escape pestering insects. I am pointing this out to show that a lot of biological information or experience has entered the description. This porcupine is not merely conjured up as a metaphor; rather it seems real, and observed and studied. It is a representational animal subject. Kinnell’s attention to detail, and to the nature and habits of the animal give it a sense of authenticity and significance in the poem. The porcupine’s taste for wood and salt is illustrated with a list of human, wooden objects he is attracted to: “hesitations at thresholds”; “handprints of dread at doorpost”; “ax / handles aflow with grain”; “arms / of Morris chairs” and “clothespins that have / grabbed our body rags by underarm and crotch...” The precision of the description serves to bring this porcupine to life for the reader, and makes him specific and accessible. The descriptions are interspersed with images and projections of human emotion, suggesting that the porcupine is attracted not only to the salt, but also fascinated by its origins in the human: he is not only hungry for the salt or the wood, it is the “hesitations,” the “handprints of dread,” the “saccadic / bits / of salt water that splash down / the haunted ravines of a human face,” that he “adores,” bringing him even closer to the reader.

The transformation itself seems to take place in a dream-like state, similar to the metamorphosis in “The Bear.” The speaker is in bed, rolling “this way and that [...] under the quilt” when his “sheath of the man” melts off and his “self-stabbing coil of bristles” reverses, thus suggesting a dream. The first line of the last stanza supports this sense of a dreamlike state, when the speaker says “tonight I *think* I prowl broken” (my italics). In “The Bear,” the transformation seems to be completed with the waking of the hunter/bear from his dream-state, but this is uncertain: “I awaken I think.” The porcupine that the speaker turns into is “a red-eyed, hard-toothed, arrow-stuck urchin,” an incarnation that the speaker seems to feel familiarity with: in his “time” he has experienced more similarities. I touched on these above: the speaker has crouched as a martyr, been clubbed on the snout, has fallen from high places, run through fields frightened and has come to himself empty. Contrasted with this “time” in the past, however, there is the “tonight” of the final stanza when, in the shape of the porcupine, he relives its sad, dying moments:

And tonight I think I prowl broken
skulled or vacant as a
sucked egg in the wintry meadow, softly chuckling, blank
template of myself, dragging
a starved belly through the lichflowered acres,
where burdock looses its arks of seed
and thistle holds up its lost blooms
and rosebushes in the wind scrape their dead limbs
for the forced-fire

of roses.

In the last two stanzas of the poem, the speaker goes beyond recounting or describing the nature, life or experiences of the porcupine in detail, as mentioned above. Here, he *imagines* them; he glances beyond fact or description of what appears to be the unknowable Other and acknowledges the existence of the experience of the creature. Bringing his own experiences to the situation of the animal he imagines the animal not as a human, but his human self as the animal. There is little projection of human emotions or human nature on the animal. It is not anthropomorphised or made to resemble humans. Instead, Kinnell evokes the emptiness of both the (gutted) animal and the landscape, as the meadow has turned “wintry” and the vegetation is dying in the face of the changing season: losing their “arks of seed,” holding up their “lost blooms” and scraping their “dead limbs.”

“The Bear” is similar to “The Porcupine” in two important respects: they are both concerned with an animal that suffers a slow and painful death at the hands of a human, and the speaker of the poem transforms into the animal, taking on its shape and experiences and re-living its death. They are, however, also fundamentally different poems. Unlike “The Porcupine,” “The Bear” is constructed outside of the author’s personal realm of experience, and takes a persona as its protagonist. Depicting a hunter’s pursuit of a polar bear, the poem recounts in detail a traditional Inuit bear-hunting technique: the use of a sharpened bone from a wolf, whale or seal, coiled up and frozen in seal-blubber, left on the bear track as a trap. As the bear ingests the ball of blubber, it begins to melt, setting free the sharp, coiled up bone that then pierces the bear’s stomach and causes a slow and painful death.

Kinnell narrates his story through the voice of a persona, an Inuit hunter on the tundra in late winter. His use of a persona as a poetic strategy is rare. As mentioned above, in Kinnell’s essay “Poetry, Personality and Death” he argues against the use of a persona in poetry, stating that:

A persona has its uses, and also its dangers. In theory, it would be a way to get past the self, to dissolve the barrier between poet and reader. Writing in the voice of another, the poet would open himself to that person. All that would be required would be for the reader to make the same act of sympathetic identification, and, in the *persona*, poet and reader would meet as one. Of course, for the poem to be interesting, the *persona* would have to represent a central facet of the poet’s self.

However, the use of a persona has important poetical limitations for Kinnell. To express feelings or experiences in poetry through the voice of a persona implies an evasion on the part of the poet:

The *persona* makes it unnecessary for him to confront the sources of these feelings or to explore their consequences in himself. It functions like the Freudian dream, fictionalizing what one does not want to know is real.

Kinnell does not specify in his essay if the use of a persona is allowed for a narrative that is entirely fictional or imagined. For although Kinnell may express deep personal feelings between the lines of “The Bear,” the actual, physical experience is most likely not his. It may be that the dangers of the use of a persona in poetry are only relevant for that poetry that expresses, conveys or employs the personal experiences of the author. However, poetry is a highly mediated way of telling a story, and implies a certain degree of fictionalisation. That degree can range from the highly accurate through the seriously embellished or altered to the entirely fictional, but there is no reason that fiction cannot tell the (or *a*) truth. The use of a persona in “The Bear” enables Kinnell to imagine a life in which the relation between humans and animals is radically different from his own. The hunter protagonist lives his life in close relation to his environment. He depends on his own hunting skills for survival, and needs to achieve a high degree of identification with his prey in order to be able to follow its trail. The poem describes a way of life in which man lives closer to nature and in which the use of animals as resources is part of the natural cycle of life rather than part of civilisation. This way of life is dying out, and in western societies, it is near impossible to live in such close relation to nature. The only way in

which Kinnell can write about such experiences is through the voice of a persona from another culture and another time.

Inuit spirituality is predominantly based on animistic principles:

Animals, on land and in the sea formed the basis of the Eskimo's existence and so took on a crucial importance in their religion. [...] Every single animal, every possible species of fauna, as well as mountains, streams, the sea, the air, the land under the earth, under the beach, and so on, had its inua: man, owner or lord.

The Inuit people maintain a reciprocal relationship with animals, which involves the strict observation of certain rules, rituals and taboo. Hunting rituals were crucial in this respect, in order to ensure the good will of the slaughtered animal. During the hunt, several rituals were carried out in order to please the souls of the killed animals, who would then return to their living companions and inform them that they would be treated with respect if they were caught. Many Inuit peoples believed that there would be sanctions if too many animals were killed, and thus the proper observation of hunting rituals also made sure that the balance of nature was preserved. A customary Inuit saying states that: "*The great peril of our existence lies in the fact that our diet consists entirely of souls.*"

In the poem, the metamorphosis of the hunter into the bear does not seem to be a ritual designed to appease the soul of the bear. At its death, the bear is described as having "petty eyes" and a "dismayed face" with flared nostrils "catching perhaps the first taint of me as he died." However, there is no sign of appeasement of the animal's spirit in the events that follow. Rather, they seem to be born out of the need of the weakened hunter to heal himself. He eats its raw meat, drinks its blood and takes shelter in the bear's corpse, sleeps and in his dream, re-experiences "lumbering flatfooted / over the tundra, / [...] splattering a trail behind me"

Until one day I totter and fall –
fall on this
stomach that has tried so hard to keep up,
to digest the blood as it leaked in,
to break up
and digest the bone itself

There is a suggestion of shamanistic ritual when the hunter-bear relives its death:

no matter which parabola of bear-transcendence,
which dance of solitude I attempt,
[...]
the ordinary, wretched odor of bear,

blows across
my sore, lolled tongue a song
or screech, until I think I must rise up
and dance. And I lie still.

However, the ritual is not carried out, the song not sung and the dance not danced. If there was a need for a ritual, it is not observed.

Nevertheless, the poem's associations with animistic beliefs and shamanistic rituals, as well as the process of stalking and hunting, imply a highly intimate relationship between hunter and prey. Similar to the deadly embrace of the hawk and the jay in "Ode and Elegy," the relationship between a hunter and his prey is ambiguous and intimate in nature. This intimacy between a hunter and the bear he hunts is also conveyed in William Faulkner's story "The Bear," which is part of *Go Down, Moses*. In "The Old People," the story that precedes "The Bear," young Ike McCaslin is taken on his first hunting trip with his older cousin McCaslin Edmonds, a former slave Sam Fathers, and a few other men, when he turns ten. He is initiated in the methods, techniques and rituals of hunting by Sam Fathers, who, significantly, is of mixed race: besides "negro" blood, he also has white blood and more importantly, "royal" Chickasaw blood running through his veins. Ike's first real kill,

not counting the squirrels and rabbits he shot before he was allowed to come into the “true wilderness” is a deer, and he is thirteen. Sam teaches him how to shoot, and how to slit the deer’s throat after it is shot. He dips his hand in the buck’s hot blood, and smears it across Ike’s face in a ritual of initiation. After this first kill, the boy is given another rite of passage: Sam brings him to a spot where a mysterious big buck deer reveals himself to Sam and Ike, and Sam greets him in the manner of ‘the old people,’ Sam’s Native American ancestors: “‘Oleh, Chief’, Sam said. ‘Grandfather’.”

Ike is thirteen when he first sees Old Ben, the bear he has heard the other men talk of so often: “He had already inherited then, without ever having seen it, the big old bear with one trap-ruined foot that in an area almost a hundred miles square had earned for himself a name, a definite designation like a living man.” Over the course of the story, Ike becomes determined to see the bear, having learned the significance of seeing and being seen by this bear, from Sam. His quest for a connection with the bear entails a transition from apprenticeship to independence, as he roams the wilderness and perfects his skills on his own. Old Ben is set apart from other bears and from other animals altogether in “The Bear.” This distinct identity is not caused by his size as such, there were other bears that made the same size footprints, but by his sheer invincibility. The many times he had escaped attack and his clever, unimpressed behaviour had given him a legendary status: “the old bear, solitary, indomitable, and alone.” The only way to catch this bear, according to Sam, is to have a dog that is equal to him in wildness, strength and courage, a dog that can bay and keep him in place until a man with a gun can come close enough to shoot him.

When Ike is sixteen, Sam has found and mastered the dog, an animal as singular and extraordinary as Old Ben, whom he calls Lion. The personality of both animals is described with awe and admiration, and their singularity, their special position among the other bears and dogs, revered. The key to the domination of both animals requires patience, respect, and a strange kind of humility: the respect of the animal has to be earned. The hunter needs to prove himself a worthy opponent to the beast, and dominance will only be accepted when the hunter has proven himself capable. Once Sam has mastered Lion, he leaves the care for the dog with a man lower in the ranks of leadership (as perceived by Ike), Boon, who too has Chickasaw blood in his veins, though not “royal” like that of Sam. Prevalent throughout the story are the ancient rules and codes of hunting, as Ike learns them year by year. In order to see the bear, to prove his skill in stalking to his prey, Ike has to surrender to the wilderness completely:

He had left the gun; by his own will and relinquishment he had accepted not a gambit, not a choice, but a condition in which not only the bear’s heretofore inviolable anonymity but all the ancient rules and balances of hunter and hunted had been abrogated. [...] He had already relinquished, of his will, because of his need, in humility and peace and without regret, yet apparently that had not been enough, the leaving of the gun was not enough. [...] Then he relinquished completely to it.

He leaves his watch and compass too, and enters the wilderness entirely, allowing himself to lose track of his location and follow only the trail of the bear. When he finally sees the bear, it does not emerge, but is just there, and looks at him. When the bear walks away, it does not flee into the woods, it merely gives the boy another glance, and sinks back into the wilderness. This stripping of equipment, the giving over to the wilderness, the importance of establishing a relationship of respect, equality and intimacy between the hunter and the prey, is the same intimacy of hunting, the sense of closeness of hunter and prey that is conveyed in Kinnell’s “The Bear.” It stems, in Faulkner, from Native American animistic beliefs, old remnants of hunting rituals that are passed on from Sam Fathers with royal Chickasaw blood to his young pupil, Ike. The methods and beliefs are similar to Inuit animism: a bond has to be established with the animal, respect has to be paid to it, and the hunter has to prove himself worthy of his prey.

In Kinnell, the hunter has no gun, no compass, no watch to relinquish. His bear is caught by cunning and endurance alone, as the hunter establishes a physical bond with his prey. In order to find the bear, to follow its trail, he already has to undergo a certain degree of transformation: he goes where the bear goes, rests where the bear rests, and lives off its

excrement and blood alone. The hunter literally eats, drinks and sleeps ‘bear,’ until he finds it, and completes the transformation. In Faulkner, Ike never gets to be the one that kills the bear, in spite of his understanding, humility and skill. Once the dog Lion confronts Old Ben, the dog and the bear fly at each other in a battle of Titans. Boon, the young man that was left in charge of Lion by Sam has developed such an attachment to the dog that he throws himself in the fight between Lion and Old Ben, clings his arms around the bear’s neck and, again in a mortal embrace, stabs him repeatedly until all three fall down. The legendary bear is finally felled; Lion dies three days later of his wounds.

Kinnell’s nameless hunter completes the hunt, and in his final, actual confrontation with the bear, he brings the intimacy between hunter and prey to another level: he merges with the bear. The transformation takes place in two phases. Initially, the hunter sleeps in the skin of the bear, and in his dream relives its slow death: “[I] dream / of lumbering flatfooted / over the tundra / stabbed twice from within, / splattering a trail behind me.” After he relives the bear’s death, however, the hunter-bear awakens. The world seems to come alive again:

Marshlights
reappear, geese
come trailing again up the flyway.
In her ravine under old snow the dam-bear
lies, licking
lumps of smeared fur
and drizzly eyes into shapes
with her tongue.

Dawn breaks, migratory birds return, a female bear gives birth to cubs. And with these images of new life, the hunter-bear in his new form carefully takes a few steps and finds that he has been given new life as well, with no more than a vague recollection of his past: “the rest of my days I spend / wandering: wondering / what, anyway, / was that sticky infusion, that rank flavor of blood, that poetry, by / which I lived.” The creature that has been created by the merge of hunter and bear has connotations with Inuit myths of spirits and souls, but no direct relation to a specific myth or narrative. As in “The Porcupine,” the poet here describes the animal experience of dying not in terms of human experience, portraying the animal as if it were human, but attempts to imagine the animal experience in its own right, through transformation of a human self into the animal self: theriomorphosis of the human subject rather than anthropomorphosis of the animal subject. Although the process of dying is imagined, and described vividly, neither poem explores the notion of death in depth, and the focus remains on the experience of dying rather than the notions of death or mortality.

Three years after the publication of *Body Rags*, which contained both “The Porcupine” and “The Bear,” Kinnell published what he has subsequently called “from one point of view, [...] nothing but an effort to face death and live with death,” *The Book of Nightmares*. A profound exploration of death and mortality, *The Book of Nightmares* is framed by the birth of his daughter Maud (in the opening sequence, “Under the Maud Moon”) and his son Fergus (in the closing sequence, “Lastness”). The book-length poem in ten parts is deeply indebted in structure and content to both Rilke’s *Duino Elegies* and Whitman’s “Song of Myself,” and contains an effort to come to terms with the Whitmanian “double thought of death, both fearing death and desiring it,” and the Rilkean call to tell the angels of the mortal, earthly life of humanity. In *Walking Down the Stairs*, Kinnell explains his view of the dual nature of death: “Yes, as death has two aspects – the extinction, which we fear, and the flowing away into the universe, which we desire – there is a conflict within us that I want to deal with.” He notes on Whitman’s attitude to this duality: “as he grew older he was able to transfigure both the fear and the desire into a willingness to die and an even purer wish to live” and quotes the following lines from “The Last Invocation”

Let me glide noiselessly forth;
With the key of softness unlock the locks – with a whisper,
Set ope the doors, O Soul!

Tenderly! be not impatient!
(Strong is your hold O mortal flesh!
Strong is your hold O love!)

These lines ultimately form the inspiration for the title of his 2007 volume of poetry, *Strong is Your Hold*.

Part II of *The Book of Nightmares*, “The Hen Flower,” is like “The Bear” and “The Porcupine” discussed above an exploration of the notion of death through the reflection on the life and death of an animal, in this case a hen. As a domesticated animal, however, the hen is more closely familiar to the speaker than either porcupine or bear and the distance between speaker and animal available in the former two poems seems to have allowed for more identification between speaker and animal than the hen does here. She appears known to the speaker (who identifies himself as “Kinnell”) most in her context as resource for humans, and as such, the speaker does not move as far past their relationship of owner versus domesticated livestock as he has done in his relationships of hunter versus prey, or man versus undomesticated animal in “The Bear” and “The Porcupine” respectively.

Kinnell’s familiarity and fascination with hens stems from his early childhood, and he explains in an interview with Margaret Edwards in 1976:

My family had a henhouse out behind our house until the Pawtucket city fathers zoned it away. I was very young then, perhaps six or seven, and I remember the chickens mostly through a few images. One is of my sisters plucking them. I don’t suppose they ever stuffed a pillow with these feathers, or that we ever laid our heads on the feathers of a hen we were at that moment digesting – but it seemed a possibility. And I can see my father hatcheting the hens’ heads off on the old grey log he’d set on end for the purpose, and then letting the headless creatures run about. I don’t think any of the times I’ve killed hens myself are more vivid than these memories. Though not very personable, hens have an unusual psychic dimension, due, I like to think, to the suppression of their capacity to fly. When you hold their heads under their wings they slump into a strange coma. You might think they think it is the night, except that they do the same thing if you turn them on their backs and stroke their throats. They’ll lie there for several minutes, apparently in a trance. Maybe the throat is their Achilles’ heel, emotionally speaking, and they’ve fainted from too much. But they also fall out if you face them toward infinity – if you draw a straight line in the earth and hold them down with their beaks touching it. There are doubtless other mysteries in the hen.

I quote this section from the interview in its entirety because these memories, and the emotions and fascination that they have invoked in the poet, have infused the poem in all of its facets. The notion of hen feathers filling the pillow on which one rests one’s head while digesting the flesh of the same hen surfaces in the first stanza of the poem, where the hen in the pillow is “sprawled on our faces,” and the speaker is “biting down on hen feathers” while “bits of the hen [flesh] are still stuck in the crevices” of his teeth, in an image that echoes the hunter in “The Bear” eating raw flesh and drinking blood before going to sleep in the bear’s body. The image turns into a comparison of the human desire to cling to life with the hen’s capacity to “let [...] go,” imagined in the hen’s trance invoked by tucking her head under her wing, or stroking her throat on the chopping block. “If only / we could let ourselves go / like her, throw ourselves / on the mercy of darkness, like the hen,” the poet contemplates, and the trance induced by stroking her throat is mimicked with the rhythmic repetition of the finger’s movement in the lines:

down the throat feathers,
down the throat knuckles,
down over the hum
of the wishbone tuning its high D in thin blood,
down over
the breastbone risen up

out of breast flesh, until the fatted thing
woozes off, head
thrown back
on the chopping block, longing only
to die.

The impression of surrender is obviously imagined and projected rather than based on an actual desire of the hen to die or be killed, but the image is an evocative one. The contrast between humans, clinging to life, biting down on pillows in the night filled with fear, and the hen, who in her endless unknowable mystery seems to give herself over without hesitation to trance and death alike functions here as an example. This animal is not blessed in her lack of foreknowledge of death, rather, she is portrayed as fully aware of death with a gospel of her own, for her own kind, and willing, longing even, to surrender to it when called. Called to death by humans, that is. Kinnell imagines the hen's gospel, where her version of life after death involves flying "back / into pink skies, / where geese / cross at twilight, honking / in tongues," as if her sad, earthly state of having wings that are unable to fly will be resolved after death when the hen is set free of her imperfect mortal body.

Rather than focusing on one individual animal, as he does in "The Porcupine" and "The Bear," Kinnell describes both his hen-protagonist and her death in more general terms. The speaker recounts more than one instance of witnessing the deaths of hens; at his own hand, after the hen has thrown her head back on the chopping board, he feels "hairs lifting all over me in the first ghostly breeze after death." As the hunter with his prey in "The Bear," the speaker here identifies strongly with the creature killed by him. Struck by the proximity of death, he speaks of its "wing / of my wing, / of my bones and veins, / of my flesh." This death is close to the speaker, and he is deeply involved in it. In part five of the poem a hen killed by weasels does not thrill the speaker in the same way. He does, however, relate her death again to a release from the mortal body that was unable to fly, and flings her up towards the sky where her wings crack open and she seems to fly across "the arms of the Bear," across the star constellation. Kinnell invokes the comparison between wings and arms several times in the poem, most poignantly in part three: "wing / made only to fly – unable / to write out the sorrows of being unable / to hold another in one's arms – and unable / to fly." This image is echoed from a human perspective in the first part of *The Book of Nightmares*, "Under the Maud Moon," in the description of Maud being born with "the slow / beating, featherless arms / already clutching at the emptiness." In the syntactically complex depiction of the hen seen through human eyes in "The Hen Flower," the comparison of wings and arms binds together the notions of consciously *experiencing* affection and intimacy and *expressing* emotions and thoughts, two key themes in Kinnell's poetry. These notions of expressing emotion and experiencing intimacy are also two fundamental human desires, and basic human qualities often used to distinguish humans from non-humans. Hens are imagined in this poem in human terms, with human desires and experiences, at once similar to but fundamentally different from humans with their own version of gospel, their own flaws and incapacities of their mortal bodies, their own experience of mortality. They are imagined from an anthropocentric standpoint: represented as both akin and other to that human self but not anthropomorphised beyond the expected limitations of human imagination.

"The Hen Flower" is filled with divination and magic, related to and accessible through animals. The personal gospel of hens that sees them flying in pink skies, the significance of roosters to Christian mythology in the invocation of St. Peter, the lucky wishbone under the pillow, and most evocatively the image of the Northern Lights read through a ram's spealbone as letters of the cosmos "spelling," explaining itself. These images of divination and spirituality are conjured as part of a search for meaning in this exploration of mortality, and animals are represented both as entities with their own interpretation of the world and as mediums to help humans understand their own, through divination of spealbone, wishbone, allegory (in Christianity) or example (the hen's surrender). This reminds us again of Kinnell's perception of hens quoted at the beginning of this discussion: "though not very personable, hens have an unusual psychic dimension,

due, I like to think, to the suppression of their capacity to fly.” This unusual psychic dimension is invoked elaborately and diversely in this poem about death, and explored for any sense of meaning for mortality in general, and the speaker’s mortality in particular. The lucky wishbone towards the end of the poem has been kept safe “for the future,” and now “it has come to this.”

The poem concludes, in spite of its exercises in divination, full of fear. The main image is one of empty darkness, with the body of the speaker on a layer of hen feathers, and a reflection or imprint of that body underneath it in the form of a “long shaft of darkness shaped as you,” which turns into a “tiny crucifix drifting face down at the center of the earth.” Kinnell explains this image in the interview with Margaret Edwards quoted from earlier, as follows:

I wanted to retain the Christian terminology, but to alter its reference. I wasn’t trying to say that the cross of Jesus lives at the very center of existence. I was supposing that a body that presses down on the earth creates under itself a “shaft of darkness” that gets smaller and smaller as it approaches the center of the earth, until at the body it makes a formalized shape – which here happens, due to the form of the outstretched body, to be a cross.

The image suggests an endless emptiness, a burial in the depths of the earth almost, and conveys a sense of inescapability, in which the feathers are the only earthly form of comfort between the body and the emptiness. Metaphorically, these feathers can be associated with the idea of the animal as a tool in divination, whereby the sense of meaning that is acquired through divination with animals functions as a spiritual comfort in the speaker’s struggle with mortality. Animals, then, are used to provide spiritual as well as physical comfort in dark nights. The hen or her feathers, however, fail to alleviate the intense sense of fear that pervades the last section of the poem. The speaker, “dumped alive / and dying into the old sway bed” tries to follow the (imagined) example of the hen to “let go,” and find comfort and peace on the layer of crushed feathers but ultimately, “even these feathers freed from their wings forever / are afraid.” The death of the hen, in either the close experience or the feathers that it provides, has not granted the speaker any relief from his fear of death or his struggle with mortality. Instead, that fear seems to have spread outward to the speaker’s surroundings, the room, the materials in it, and to have drenched even the hen’s feathers themselves.

Although the speaker seeks an intimate connection with the hen in this poem, she ultimately remains unknowable. All we see of the hen, or of the hens, rather, is their death by either humans or weasels, and an imagined mystique and surrender to another dimension. She is represented predominantly in her domesticated realm, as a resource for humans kept around the house, and in the function of nourishment or pillow stuffing. Kinnell here positions himself in the western tradition of dominion over animals, and his attempts at kinship take place from a position of dominance, of power over life and death. In this poem, the hen’s potential for mystical or spiritual understanding, her imagined connection to the otherworldly, her “unusual psychic dimension” is explored, but to no avail. In fact, she is represented rather disparagingly. Fooled by humans and easily led to death, unable to fly, embrace or express herself, her carcass irreverently thrown towards the sky after death; the great mystery that is the hen is treated here with significantly less veneration than the porcupine and the bear of the poems discussed above. Pity is really all she is granted. Whereas the bear in the poem of the same name functions also as a resource for food, he is hunted, and difficult to kill. The porcupine, although regarded as a pest by some, is in *its* poem an “ultra-rilkean angel” who, we learn, is highly respected in Zoroastrianism. William Virgil Davis asserts that

“The Hen Flower” is framed by sections in which the speaker, restless insomniac, sees, in his vision of the death of a hen, symbol of “the wages of dying.” The death of the bird is so real, so fully realized, that the identification between bird and man, like the identification between man and animal in “The Porcupine” and “The Bear,” merges in such a way that the man becomes the bird for the sake of his seeing.

The transformation in “The Hen Flower,” however, does not actually take place, and the identification is limited. In both “The Bear” and “The Porcupine,” the speaker identifies with the unfamiliar animal to such an extent as to transform himself into them, to dream or think himself into their dying bodies. These animals, although less familiar, less a resource to humans and more ‘wild’ and undomesticated, are poetically imagined much closer than the familiar, domesticated old hen, who remains fundamentally unknown and unknowable.

In conclusion, then, Kinnell’s search for kinship and understanding of the human struggle with mortality brings him to the creatures that share the quality of mortality with us, non-human animals. Built in the same way of flesh and bones, having but one life to live, human and non-human animals alike instinctively fight for survival, for the protection of this one life we have. The critical difference between the human and the animal in Kinnell’s poetic view surfaces at night, when the human tosses and turns, “roll[ing] this way and that in the great bed,” in his foreknowledge of death. The human is both aware of death and aware of his or her ignorance of life after death, which stretches out as an emptiness that is terrifying and fascinating at the same time. It is the knowledge of mortality and the awareness of the unknown after death, the fear of the emptiness, which haunts the human in the dark of Kinnell’s poems. This unique combination of awareness and ignorance changes everything, and emerges to be the defining characteristic of the human as opposed to the animal for Kinnell. When he looks at animals in “The Bear” and “The Porcupine” he searches for an understanding, an imagination of the experience of dying in creatures that resist death instinctively, without foreknowledge. In “The Hen Flower,” however, the speaker imagines a surrender, a willingness and submission to death and the release from the mortal body that he holds up as an example for the human attitude to death. Ultimately, he looks in vain. In these poems one can imagine and interpret animal instincts about death, but with the inevitable, essential difference of the foreknowledge of death, humans can neither live in ignorance of mortality nor die in absolute surrender to the known unknown of death.

(iii) Transience and transcendence

The animals that form part of “Why Regret” and “The Frog Pond” play far less prominent parts in the poems than those discussed in part (ii), but are nonetheless used as crucial poetical tropes giving a specific meaning to the sense of transience that is invoked in these pieces. Kinnell’s concerns with mortality and the cycle of life, discussed above, are connected in essence to the notion of transience, a central theme in his poetics. “Why Regret” and “The Frog Pond” are poems that focus on human outlooks on life and human relationships, in their examination of change as an inevitable quality of life. The animals that are featured in these poems function as minor characters in the poems’ stories or narratives.

“The Frog Pond” was originally published in 1985 as part of the collection *The Past*, which, already indicated by its title, is predominantly concerned with the passage of time. Daniel Guillory notes in his review of the volume that “Kinnell opens *The Past* with moving evocations of his life in Sheffield, Vermont some thirty years ago. But his real subject is the eerie passage of time [...]” *The Past* includes elegies to Richard Hugo and James Wright, considerations of a past connected to a place in “The Road Between Here and There,” and the title poem “The Past,” in which time brings what the waves bring to shore: “Mere comings, mere goings. Though now / there’s somewhat less coming / in the comings and more / going in the goings.” In a review of *The Past* Phoebe Pettingell notes that

Much of *The Past* was inspired by personal changes in [Kinnell’s] life: divorce, children growing up, the death of friends. Yet his consideration of these losses forms around his conviction that man is part of the animal kingdom, and “back down / to hair, flesh, blood, bone, the base metals,” to be seen for what he is.

The volume is dedicated to Inés Delgado de Torres Kinnell (from whom Kinnell divorced

in 1985) and it is suffused with references to specific times and places of the past, as well as a general sense of transience, change and loss.

“The Frog Pond,” then, similar to “The Road Between Here and There,” records a place that carries a permanent connection to the past of the speaker. The poem describes the history of the pond as it has featured in the speaker’s life, as a farm pond, before the dam eroded; a frog pond full of leeches where the speaker came down to bathe, read write or think; a beaver pond, after “the beavers arrived and the waters rose,” where a sunken rowboat surfaced and four people played; two adults, two children, and eventually, after the beavers disappeared and the water level has fallen again, the pond where the man, now older, will reminisce about times past. The tenses of the poem flow into one another as the four people playing are observed by the man that sat on the bank before it became covered with water:

[...] the four
of us would oar, pole, and bail
a few feet above the underwater green bank
where a man used to sit and think
and look up and seem to see four people
up here oaring and poling and bailing
above him [...]

The poem looks back and forward through the eyes of the younger and the older man, observing that “the man *seems* happy, / the two children laugh and splash, / a slight shadow crosses the woman’s face.” The perspective of the speaker shifts through time, and becomes more distant. Whereas the speaker identifies himself as the “I” in the early lines of the poem and as part of the “us” that play together, the later lines describe the scene from a distance that is striking. The “I” has become “a man” and “the man,” described in the third rather than the first person. The perspective moves further away as the speaker imagines the scenes from a larger distance in time, as the passing of time and changes in circumstances create a larger distance between the speaker and his younger self. In the process of remembrance, this brings the development of the narrative close to both the speaker and the reader, causing the effect of tenses flowing in and out of each other and history taking place simultaneously rather than chronologically.

The speaker foresees a time “soon,” when
[...] this pond,
and the next, and the one after that,
will flow off, leaving behind its print
in the woods, a sudden green meadow
with gleams of sky meandering through it.

The frogs, leeches, dragonflies and beavers have disappeared from this scene, and all that is left are faint traces on the earth of all the life that once teemed and writhed in and around the pond. This serene, resigned view of the inevitable future of the pond and the transience of life brings together the three stages of the speaker’s self: the young man who lies on the bank, reading and scribbling converges with the older man looking at the pond that has turned into a meadow, remembering the four people playing together in the pond “as it was then, / writhing with leeches and overflown / by the straight blue bodies of dragonflies.”

In this highly intricately wrought maze of tense and time, displaying one man and one pond in their different stages of development and life, the animals that people the pond with the speaker are symbols of continuity and transience at the same time. They are not represented as either kin or other, they are not imagined as creatures with their own intrinsic value or purpose nor portrayed as resource to humans. They are in the scene as co-habitants of the pond and its surroundings, neither ignored or left out nor playing an active part in the narrative of the poem, but simply *there*. As everything else in the poem, the man, the woman and the children, the level of the water, the boat, the pond itself, the animal inhabitants are subject to change. This is observable also in the name of the pond, which changes from frog pond to beaver pond according to its principal inhabitants and their arrival or departure: “then the beavers arrived, the waters rose, / and the frog pond became

the beaver pond. [...] Then one spring the beavers disappeared – / trapped off, or else because of gnawing down / all the edible trees.”

This matter-of-fact account of changes in the condition of the pond mirrors the unfolding development of the speaker’s circumstances. Similarly, the memory of the leeches and dragonflies that inhabited the pond “as it was then” accompanies the memories of “small children” and “true love.” However, the poem’s quiet but sad acceptance of the transient nature of life is expressed in the contrast between the foreseen disappearance of the pond, and survival of the “hard-biting deerfly,” always swatted on the head. The repetition of the deerfly in the early phase and the closing of the poem reinforce the sense of continuity underlying all change and transience, in the same way that the animals illustrate the cycle of life in “The Quick and the Dead,” discussed in part (i) of this chapter. Ultimately, change in Kinnell’s poetry is inherently part of the ceaseless cycle of life that drives life and death in close union with each other, and that works alike for human and non-human animals.

Kinnell’s most recent volume of poetry, *Strong is Your Hold*, concludes with “Why Regret,” a mid-length poem offering comfort and hope in the face of change. The poem rhetorically addresses a lover and directs the lover’s attention to a range of worldly delight and amazement, celebrating life and earth:

Didn’t you like the way the ants help
the peony globes open by eating the glue off?
Weren’t you cheered to see the ironworkers
sitting on an I-beam dangling from a cable,
in a row, like starlings, eating lunch, maybe
baloney on white with fluorescent mustard?

Human and animal behaviour alike here inspire joy and enthusiasm, but the choices are significant: these are not all images of the great, the aesthetic or the delicate things of the earth, there are pinworms and booklice, the wren and the mayfly, ironworkers and Casanova, all intended to evoke enthusiasm for life. This seemingly random selection of the wonders of the world is drawn together in the line: “What did you imagine lies in wait anyway / at the end of a world whose sub-substance / is glaim, gleet, birdlime, slime, mucus, muck?” What the speaker is asking his lover’s attention for are the beauty and the value of the natural, small, hidden wonders that generally go unobserved; the experiences that seem trivial but are significant. The poem’s final lines (“Doesn’t it outdo the pleasures of the brilliant concert / to wake in the night and find ourselves / holding hands in our sleep.”) seem slightly out of place in their sentimental tone and bring the focus back on the specifically human, more clichéd tenderness after the surprising beauty found in the sexual dissonance of booklice.

By way of introducing “Why Regret” at a reading of the poem, Kinnell has said I had in mind that the poem is addressed to all readers, including myself, reading it over to tell us to remember the pleasures and the confidence we gain from engaging ourselves with the common acts, the ordinary things, the other creatures, and to remind us in this holiday season, when we get reports every day of the most horrible killings, that nevertheless we have very much to be thankful for.

The poem certainly carries a sense of gratitude for these common acts and ordinary things that the author speaks of, but there is something more specific going on in the poem. The animals that are featured here, ants, booklice, the wren, the mayfly, pinworms and monarch butterflies, do not all have the same function in the poem. The ants, pinworms and booklice signify the beauty of creatures generally regarded as unpleasant or inconvenient by humans, stressing the sublime in the ordinary that Kinnell speaks of above. The wren, the mayfly and the monarch, however, are more specifically connected to the transience of that life:

Forget about becoming emaciated. Think of the wren
and how little flesh is needed to make a song.
Didn’t it seem somehow familiar when the nymph
split open and mayfly struggled free

and flew and perched and then its own back
broke open and the imago, the true adult,
somersaulted out and took flight, seeking
the swarm, mouth-parts vestigial,
alimentary canal come to a stop,
a day or hour left to find the desired one?

These images, then, are suddenly connected to physical deterioration, transformation, and transience. “Emaciated” is a strong term, and although this physical decline is alluded to but once, the proximity to the transformative powers of the mayfly and the subsequent reference to (not) eating with Casanova (“The perfected lover does not eat”), do clearly indicate a more specific sense of transience. The mayfly is a well-known symbol for transience with its short lifespan, and the biological detail of this transience is provided here in celebratory terms: the double transformation of the mayfly as a struggle for freedom from itself, a “true” being somersaulting out of its first manifestation, a new form in which “mouth-parts” are vestigial and the processing of food unnecessary, another chance to find “the desired one.” These triumphant expressions of renewing and renewed life bring the poem a sense of hope that contrasts starkly with the term “emaciated,” or rather, that gives the notion of emaciation positive, hopeful, celebratory connotations. These animals, the mayfly, the monarch, the wren, function as examples for human animals; they are presented here as creatures with their own freedom, song and experience that the human can identify with in various circumstances of life, or various phases of existence. Their presence in the poem in juxtaposition with references to emaciation and not eating, especially, bring the poem a strong sense of imminent physical decline or deterioration relieved with celebratory examples of transformation, renewal of life and beauty in life’s cyclical nature.

In Kinnell’s poetry, the reverence of and affection for the ordinary, earthly life tends to go hand in hand with a curiosity and a longing for the realm beyond that life. As the discussions of “The Quick and the Dead,” “Ode and Elegy,” “The Bear,” “The Porcupine” and “The Hen Flower” have shown above, Kinnell often operates on the edge of life and death. He is fascinated by the twofold attitude to life and death that he recognised in Whitman’s “The Last Invocation,” quoted above, which speaks both of the strong hold of “mortal flesh” and love, and of a longing to “glide noiselessly forth” and be released from and transcend earthly concerns. In a 1979 interview with Thomas Gardner, Kinnell explains this attitude to life and death with reference to an image that recurs in much of his animal poetry:

Q: Can you tell me why a poet is often drawn to repeat certain images throughout his work? In many of your poems we find a bird, or a group of birds, curving over the earth at twilight. In “Last Songs” you point to the “last birds / coasting down the twilight, / banking / across woods filled with darkness, their / frayed wings / curved on the world like a lover’s arms / which form, night after night, in sleep / an irremediable absence.” What hold does that image have on you?

A: It’s not always easy to know why an image attracts one. In this case, I think I responded to the fact that this bird which can fly above or transcend the earth nevertheless keeps its wings bent according to the curvature of the earth. Perhaps I responded because, like everyone, I experience the contest between wanting to transcend and wanting to belong.

In “Last Songs” as well as in the poems “The Gray Heron,” “The Geese” and “Mount Fuji at Daybreak,” the image of birds at twilight surfaces. And although “Daybreak” features starfishes rather than birds, the same notion of transcendence at twilight is central. These poems share an observational nature, and rely heavily on the actual image to convey a sense of transcendence. In “Mount Fuji at Daybreak,” for instance, the short poem opens with the image of “a crow watch[ing] Fuji rise into daybreak” from “the Fuji-view stand made of cinder block.” The view from the stand is then described, a mixed image of decaying beauty and grandeur that is “exhausted,” polluted and spoiled by the (human) activities of a tanker

truck, an electric bullhorn and trash. The poem returns to the crow, and closes with

From the cinder block Fuji-view stand the crow
flies off repeating the round vowel "ah!"
to the mountain now risen bright into daybreak,
or else, in another mood, "ha! ha! ha!"

The scene is presented plainly as contaminated by human interference, indicated by the man-made cinder block mountain-view stand that, through its marked depiction carries notions of a forged, false experience of nature, as well as by the view that is provided by this view stand: one of an exhausted valley. The bird in this poem comments on the scene wordlessly, and the image of the crow flying off against the view of the valley is left to speak for itself.

Similarly, "The Geese" relies on the conveyance of the image more than on any direct expression of transcendence in its vivid, rhythmic description of a flock of geese flying over the Connecticut Valley. The flock is vibrantly described as one unfamiliar body of life coming over the peak, shifting weight "like a snowplowing skier" as it turns. Rather than focusing on individual birds the speaker corrects himself: these are not "bodies" but "cells" that "begin to tumble." The flock has one inner equipoise and one voice that "yahonks and spirit-cries" as it turns. The distance of the birds and their mysterious unobserved communication in formation creates an image of strange wildness, a supernatural phenomenon almost, which is compounded by the ancient play of river and light as the flock "spirit-cries / toward the flow of light spelled / into the river's windings eons ago." At that point, the geese almost become individuals, each body perceived separately but in communion with the others. Still barely visible, the birds remain an inscrutable apparition, represented as fundamentally Other, remote in distance as well as in understanding or familiarity. The poem, like "Mount Fuji at Daybreak," begins in observation and ends in an image of transcendence, as observation turns into vision and the flock turns:

each body flashing white against
the white sky when the wings lift,
and black when they fall, the invisible
continuously perforating the visible –
and trembles away, to vanish, but before that
to semi-vanish, as a mirage or deepest
desire does when it gets the right
distance from us and becomes rhythmic.

As the geese change direction and move further away from the speaker, their decreasing visibility and gradual fading become a vision of transcendence, associated with a "mirage or deepest / desire" that is equally enigmatic and obscure. Both the flock of birds and the mirage or desire remain too remote to grasp or comprehend, acquire a rhythm of their own, and semi-vanish and fade away completely.

The image of a flock of geese at twilight has made poetic appearances before in "Ruins under the Stars," from the 1964 volume *Flower Herding on Mount Monadnock*, and in "The Hen Flower", discussed above. In "Ruins under the Stars," a man sits among the ruins of a plank house at night. Contemplating the movements of time and "know[ing] the homesickness of all things," he looks up, and "sometimes" sees:

The south-going Canada geese
At evening, coming down
In pink light, over the pond, in great,
Loose, always dissolving V's –
I go out into the field,
Amazed and moved, and listen
To the cold, lonely yelping
Of their tranced bodies in the sky

Here, too, the geese speak of transcendence, of time and movement that seem larger than the ordinary. The birds against pink skies become a vision of everything that is in sight but

out of range, that is observed but not understood, that is subject to the play of twilight and mirage, of illumination that is somehow reminiscent of loss and loneliness. In "The Hen Flower," the geese form part of the hen's imagined "gospel," in which 'hen-transcendence' after death would involve flying "back / into pink skies, / where geese / cross at twilight, honking / in tongues."

Sherman Hawkins, in his 1963 essay "Galway Kinnell: Moments of Transcendence" points to the movement from mimesis to vision in Kinnell's poetry, looking at, on the one hand, poems that "re-enact a moment of enlightenment in the poet's life," that are thus "mimetic," and on the other hand, poems in which "the meaning is only dimly perceived beforehand and the 'unifying light' evolves in the creative act," when "the poem itself becomes the moment of enlightenment: it is visionary." Hawkins identifies a tension between mimesis and vision in Kinnell's poetry, functioning as follows:

Kinnell's poetry is grounded in reality, but it works constantly towards such moments of illumination, often in climaxes marked by rhetorical device and heightened diction. Mimesis becomes vision as we read. In many poems this transfiguration takes the form of an ascent from the real to the ideal.

This ascent is almost literal in Kinnell's bird poems, where ascension and transcendence take on literal meanings with the images of birds flying against pink skies. However, on a metaphorical level, the poems function in a similar manner: grounded in a simple observation, the poem moves from observation to illumination, from mimesis to vision as the birds come to symbolize transcendence. The sense of transcendence is not, of course, strictly dependent on the image of birds at twilight. As "The Gray Heron" and "Daybreak" show, Kinnell reaches similar points with a lizard and with starfishes. In "The Gray Heron," the speaker encounters a heron that moves out of sight and suddenly seems to have transformed into a lizard with an eye like a mineral stone "which was watching me / to see if I would go / or change into something else." Here too, Kinnell moves from observation of a situation to a moment of illumination; from a (mimetic, Hawkins would say) description of an experience, to a poem that in the creative act becomes vision.

"Daybreak" functions around the elaborate comparison of starfishes on the beach with true stars in the sky. The poem opens with the description of "dozens of starfishes" creeping across the tidal mud just before sunset, and the comparison with actual stars slowly crossing the sky. In an act of communal communication as inscrutable as that of the flock of geese in "The Geese," the starfishes suddenly stop moving, and collectively sink into the mud "as if they had simply / increased their receptivity to gravity," and "by the time / pink of sunset broke across them / they were as invisible / as the true stars at daybreak." Robert Bly remarks on what he calls "this masterpiece" that "ascension is not for the porcupine, nor the starfish. Kinnell insists on water, mud, and descent." He remarks that

Kinnell describes the process of sinking with utter clarity. One simply sinks down into matter; there is no apparent effort. When one sinks in the psyche, one does not lose touch with the world above earth. [...] The aim then is to sink in such a way as to retain contact with the stars.

"Daybreak" contains that double movement of descent and ascension, that tension between earth and heaven, immanence and transcendence that characterizes many of Kinnell's poems in such a masterfully simple way, and that is conveyed through the recurring, almost haunting images of pink skies and mysterious animals that live in worlds so similar to ours and yet so different. With these images, Kinnell points to a mystery that can be found in nature, in a gesture that draws immanence and transcendence together in a play of affection for the earthly and desire for release.

This, then, brings us to "Last Songs." As Kinnell responded in the interview with Thomas Gardner, quoted above, the "last birds" of the poem seem to transcend the earth at twilight while embracing the curve with their wings. This embrace is compared to "lovers' arms / which form, night after night, in sleep / an irremediable absence," and thus shows itself to be an embrace which is not an embrace, a holding of emptiness, an empty shape of loneliness. The poem, opening with the image of birds at twilight, closes with a return to the unanswered question and unknown song, "what do they sing, the[se] last birds?";

“whatever it is / that keeps us from heaven, / sloth, wrath, greed, fear, / could we only reinvent it on earth / as song.” Lee Zimmerman observes Kinnell’s tendency for a double ending in *Body Rags* and states:

“Last Songs” seeks a poetics [...] based on a mysterious “it” that can be gestured toward but not precisely defined. [...] This kind of double ending – withholding but asserting, revealing our inability to know the truth but also our capacity to embody it – provides many of Kinnell’s poems in *Body Rags* with what Barbara Herrnstein Smith has termed “anti-closure” [...]. The withholding precludes strong closure while the assertion secures the sense of an ending.

It is this withholding that typifies Kinnell’s bird poems, as the observation of the birds moves off into an image of transcendence that provides the sense of an ending, conceding our inability to know truth but embodying it in a vision of birds. “Last Songs” is perhaps the most complex of these poems, in what Richard Calhoun sees as Kinnell’s attempt to respond to “Silence. Ashes in the grate.” The short poem does not answer its own question, and the birds’ song, remaining unknown and unknowable, functions as an unsatisfying example for humans. If “we” could only reinvent our human vices as song, perhaps they would no longer keep us from heaven. Three of the seven deadly sins of Christianity (“sloth, wrath, greed”) are combined with “fear” as a fourth vice or obstacle, suggesting a double interpretation of heaven as something to long for and as a state inevitably connected with death. Whereas greed, sloth and wrath might keep one from heaven in the biblical sense, it is fear, fear of death that is, that keeps one intensely attached to life, and thus also from heaven. This double interpretation of heaven echoes the double attitude to death represented by the birds’ image of transcending earth while embracing it with curved wings.

In these poems of transience and transcendence, animals remain unfamiliar and mysterious, but are not used solely as metaphor or symbol. Lorrie Goldenson observes in Kinnell’s poetry an “impersonal pleasure as the work bespeaks an order of things that modestly contains, rather than prominently features, man.” Not necessarily subjects in what would fit a narrow definition of the term “animal poem,” neither are these animals merely objects in “human” or anthropocentric poems. The “last birds” at twilight, as the geese and the crow in pink skies, are poetic animals that are represented as utterly other. There is no kinship, no close observation and identification beyond a longing for a “song.” The incomprehensible, wordless speech of the crow, the inscrutable communication of the geese and the starfishes, the unknown song of the last birds, function only to signify a mystery beyond human understanding, symbolizing transcendence of the known, ordinary, earthly towards the unknown, be it heaven, song or mirage just beyond the realm of this life, or this earth.

(iv) Kinship and otherness

As we have seen in poems like “The Quick and the Dead,” “The Bear,” “The Porcupine,” and “The Hen Flower,” Kinnell’s animal poems often operate on the binary opposition of kinship and otherness, revealing or searching for kinship predominantly in the context of mortality, life and death. As cited above, Richard Calhoun has astutely remarked that animals are important in Kinnell’s poetry for “revealing an unexpected kinship, suggesting, if not proposing, a mythology of the common fate of living things.” This common fate has shown in the poems discussed above to reside primarily in a shared mortality. As Kinnell poetically explores and tries to come to terms with the notion of mortality and the consequences of life and death, he frequently looks in the mirror that is the non-human animal. Sharing mortality with the human animal but without the foreknowledge of death that keeps the human awake at night, non-human animals in Kinnell’s poetry function as examples of how to die as well as examples of how to live.

The “mythology of the common fate of living things” is worked out in detail in the long poem “When One Has Lived a Long Time Alone,” first published in the volume of the same name in 1990 and reprinted in revised form in *A New Selected Poems* in 2001. The poem consists of ten stanzas that open and close with the title, as a refrain, and each stanza consists of one sentence running over thirteen lines. This structured, repetitive form with circular effect gives the poem strong connotations with the cycle of life, harmony, closure and wholeness, despite its (initial) bitter and tragic content. It opens with gentle images of tolerance and protection in the face of loneliness: “when one has lived a long time alone,” one is not so quick to “strike / the mosquito,” and carefully brings to safety a toad stuck in a pit or a bird trapped in a house. Behind this gentleness and protection, however, is loneliness and isolation; a great need for contact with living creatures that inspires these tender feelings: the swift that is released outside flies up like “a life line flung up at reality.” The speaker more and more forms a connection with creatures from other species as close observation leads to close identification with, for instance, the snake who clamps his forked, orange tongue between his teeth, “letting the gaudy tips show, as children do / when concentrating, and as very likely / one does oneself, without knowing it / when one has lived a long time alone.” The snake’s process of *edysis*, or moulting of the skin that is preceded by a clouding of the eyes, is compared with the “bleach[ed] corneas of blue-eyed / when they lie back at the end and look for heaven,” and the snake becomes, as the mayfly did in “Why Regret?” a symbol for transience and transcendence alike, loss and renewal that are associated with death and a suggestion of afterlife. In stanza four, the speaker first concentrates on the process of ‘othering’ the snake, and subsequently dives deep into the opposite:

When one has lived a long time alone,
 one falls to poring upon a creature,
 contrasting its eternity’s-face to one’s own
 full of hours, taking note of the differences,
 exaggerating them, making them everything,
 until the other is utterly other, and then,
 with hard effort, probably with tongue sticking out,
 going over each difference again and this time
 cancelling it, until nothing is left but likeness
 and suddenly oneness, and . . . minutes later
 one starts awake, taken aback at how unresistingly
 one drops off into the bliss of kinship,
 when one has lived a long time alone.

I quote the full stanza here to demonstrate also how each stanza opens and closes with the refrain and contains a statement that reflects the cyclical nature of the form, opening with ‘othering,’ moving through a process of recognition and identification, and returning to more distant reflection on the apparent desire for kinship.

In the original publication, the poem contained eleven stanzas, of which the fourth stanza has been taken out entirely for the revised version. This stanza looked at the snake as a metaphor for the penis in a contemplation of the “pathos of the penis” and of sexuality in isolation and loneliness. The poem in its original form contains another reference to sexuality that has been changed in revision: the bullfrog that in stanza nine of the revised version “utters the cantillations he sang in his first spring,” “repeats the sexual cantillations of his first spring” in what is stanza ten of the original version. In the context of the volume in which it was published, these allusions to sexuality are consistent with other images of sexuality and physical affection in the volume, in particular the poems “Agape,” “The Massage,” and “Divinity.” In the revised version, the allusions to sex are removed, leaving the poem to a more cerebral, spiritual consideration of loneliness and longing for connection.

This does not mean, however, that Kinnell abandons his vision of the beauty of the physical world, including the ordinary, homely, dirty or ugly. In this poem, as throughout his animal poetry, he stresses the sublime in the ordinary and the dirty of the earth. In “When One Has Lived a Long Time Alone”, he states that “one likes alike the pig [...] and the porcupine” and “one likes the worm [...] no less than the butterfly.” In fact, at this point in the poem, the speaker states that one finds “one likes / any other species better than one’s own, / which has gone amok, making one self-estranged.” The sentiment in this section begins to border on something similar to colonial alienation, where an internalised rejection of ‘the self’ and the impossibility to adopt or be adopted by ‘the other’ leads to an absence of self-esteem and of a ‘self’ altogether; to alienation from the self. Obviously, colonial alienation is related to questions of identity, self and other in terms of coloniality and post-coloniality, race and oppression. However, in this case the speaker rejects his entire species, “which has gone amok,” and has made himself “self-estranged.” This self-estrangement leads to a “self-dissolution” in stanza eight that is almost beyond his own control. The speaker is joined in his state of self-dissolution by the snake, who has stopped trying to escape back to *its* own kind, and is “slumping into [the body’s] contours, / adopting its temperature.” Dark in tone, this stanza speaks of “sour, misanthropic” “defiance”, and “abandon[ing] hope / of the sweetness of friendship or love.” Ultimately, kinship with other species proves unsatisfactory, as the loneliness and isolation caused by estrangement from one’s own species is not alleviated by companionship from snake, pig, porcupine, bird or worm. As animals call out to each other in a paradisiacal stanza nine, a scene is created that almost echoes Noah’s arc: hermit thrush (note the wordplay in “hermit”), bullfrog and snake “all live to mate with their kind.” And here one finds the other element of the “common fate of all living things”: in addition to death, this common fate is also *love*. Non-human animals, like human animals, are born, mate, and die, continuing endlessly the cycle of life, death and reproduction. Hearing the singing of the animal “kingdoms”, the speaker finds a “hard prayer inside one’s own singing” “to come back, if one can, to one’s own, / a world almost lost, in the exile that deepens.” As the poem closes with stanza ten, the journey comes full circle from isolation and detachment, through a deep sense of kinship with all other animal kingdoms, to the realization that one can ultimately only find a true connection with “one’s own,” in a world that is similar to those of other species but not the same. Kinnell closes with an image that is by now a familiar one, of birds in twilight: lovers “like birds at daybreak / blether the song that is both earth’s and heaven’s, / until the sun rises, and they stand / in the daylight of being made one: kingdom come / when one has lived a long time alone.” On the edge of earth and heaven, between life and transcendence, is where opposites meet and oneness is achieved, or at least, in the illusion of twilight, momentarily suggested.

“When One Has Lived A Long Time Alone” speaks of “consummate[ing]” “consciousness,” and states that “as the most self-conscious one among these / others uttering their seemingly compulsory cries [...] one knows one is here to hear them into shining.” This profession of purpose, of an obligation to acknowledge the existence, the value and the beauty of “these others,” is echoed in “St Francis and the Sow,” first published in *Mortal Acts, Mortal Words* in 1980. One of Kinnell’s most celebrated poems, “Saint Francis and the Sow” invokes St. Francis of Assisi who, as discussed in Chapter 1, is celebrated for his affection for animals and his belief that God can be found in all of his creation, including the natural world, rather than only in the creatures that he made in his own image. The patron saint of animals is brought into this poem as the source of the blessing of the sow, because although “everything flowers, from within, of self-blessing,” “sometimes it is necessary / to reteach a thing its loveliness.” St. Francis, through words and touch, blesses the sow until she herself remembers “the long, perfect loveliness of sow,” which is here shown to have inherent value independent of human validation. This inherent value is emphasized by the sow’s presence in the poem as a real, living animal rather than a metaphor for a human concern. The sow is both fully herself and celebrated

for her unique essence. This is echoed in “When One Has Lived” in the speaker’s assertion that humans exist to “hear [animals] into shining,” which has both passive and active connotations: for Kinnell, humans live to enjoy the beauty of the natural world, but also, by implication, to value it and to actively acknowledge that beauty. The assertion is followed by the stanza declaring equal affection for pig and porcupine, worm and butterfly alike, stressing the sublime in those creatures that are commonly regarded as attractive as well as in those that are commonly regarded as repulsive. In “Saint Francis and the Sow,” Kinnell similarly focuses on the beauty of the pig, drawing attention to the shapes and creases of her forehead, snout, fodder, tail, spine and teats, to the beauty and magnificence of her physical form. He also endows her with a sense of mystery, speaking of the “spiritual curl of the tail” and the “sheer milken dreaminess from her teats.” Kinnell’s sow has her own perfection and her own mystery, related to but not measured by our own. She is blessed by St. Francis in this poem not in an act of governance or dominance but in an act of kindness and kinship, as all things flower of “self-blessing,” but sometimes need to be reminded of their beauty and value.

Kinnell’s sow, like his other poetic animals (or animal totems) in close observation and identification (porcupine, bear, hen), may be seen to be subject to anthropomorphisation. She is portrayed as “remembering” her own loveliness, as possessing a “great broken heart”, just as the bear, even before transformation, has “petty eyes” and a “dismayed face”, the porcupine “chuckles to himself when scared” and the hen “long[s] to die” and experiences “sorrows of being unable / to hold another in one’s arms”. While this type of anthropomorphisation may be criticized for the representation of animals in human terms, or for that matter any terms other than their own, it should be clear that in a (poetic) effort to imagine another’s experience or an attempt at identification, one inevitably brings one’s own experience as conceptual framework. Moreover, in these specific instances of imagined emotion and experience, Kinnell carefully considers the implications of his words. He had changed the original wording of “broken heart” to “unbreakable heart” in the process of revision “Saint Frances and the Sow” for re-publication in the *Selected Poems* in 1982, asking himself “Can a pig really have a broken heart?” However, for the publication of the poem in *Three Books* in 1993, he returned the phrase to its original wording because

Now I think I was right in the first place, and that my earlier scruple came from the harmful and surely false idea, carefully nurtured by our kind, that there is no resonance between our emotional life and that of the other animals.

Kinnell’s probing of the boundaries of poetic imagination of animal life reveals kinship in unexpected places, in this case kinship with the broken heart of a sow who needs to be retaught her loveliness in order to flower from within. Kinnell’s invocation of St. Francis of Assisi brings to the poem St. Francis’ (Christian) beliefs that all of God’s creation is equal, and that the animals have their own voices for the celebration of life and the praise of their creator. This sense of immanence, of the touch of the divine in all of ‘creation’ or nature resonates throughout Kinnell’s poetry, although less in a specifically Christian way, in a more undefined exploration of spirituality, transcendence and immanence.

Conclusion

Kinnell’s animal poetry, like all of his poetry, centres around specific binaries that are key to his poetics: life and death, love and loneliness, transience and transcendence, and kinship and otherness. Any poem that looks at one element of a binary in Kinnell’s work automatically carries connotations of the opposite element; in the words of poet Donald Hall: in Kinnell’s poetics, “*up* always summons the implication of *down*.” In Kinnell’s work, life always carries connotations of death, and transience always also implies transcendence. There is no loneliness without longing for love, and no love without knowledge of loneliness. Calhoun notes on Kinnell’s poetics that

His poems proceed by image patterns and are organized by oppositions, which customarily means that he is effective in pairing off terms for life and death, extinction and renewal in his poetry. Various critics have used a variety of terms in identifying a kind of “pervasive binarism” in his language as well as in his themes, described as “variations on individual words,” “double meanings,” or “the resonance of words.” [...] In his paired imagery of death and life, Kinnell explores all of their variant meanings, positive and negative.

This binarism in Kinnell’s animal poems, specifically, means that he is continually looking at animals in terms of kinship and otherness both, and that he writes with subtle nuance about animals that are resources but also mirrors, familiar but also fundamentally unknown. In his explorations of mortality, love, loneliness, transience and transcendence, Kinnell consistently looks to those creatures that share the earth with humans, for guidance, identification, warning or kinship, as a multifaceted mirror to humanity. Kinnell’s animals are consistently represented as living beings in their own right, with their own world, value, language and sensibilities. The animals that are major subjects of certain poems, such as the porcupine, the bear, the hen and the sow, are represented in degrees of identification and at times transformation. However, those animals that feature in his other poetry, the poetry that is not specifically ‘about’ an animal but features animal imagery, are there because for Kinnell, they are always there. They share the world of the poem because they share the world of the author in a natural, self-evident way.

Kinnell’s perspective on animals is partly rooted in a western, Christian tradition of not dominance but governance with strong Franciscan traits. The notion of animals as a resource to humans in the natural cycle of life features in poems such as “The Hen Flower,” “Memory of Wilmington,” “The Bear,” “To Christ Our Lord” and “Feathering,” among many others. As beetles feed on a vole and a hawk on a jay, so do humans live on other animals. Animals are related to humans in various different ways in Kinnell’s poetry, with as a constant factor the fact that they are a natural, universal presence in his poetic world.

Part of Kinnell’s poetic representation of animals is also his insistence on spirituality residing everywhere in nature or ‘creation,’ rather than only in man. The presence of St. Francis in “Saint Francis and the Sow” is illustrative of Kinnell’s desire to show the sublime in the ordinary, the divine in the worldly, and, in his own words, the “mystery” of the “things and creatures that live on this earth.” At the same time, poems such as “The Fundamental Project of Technology,” “Vapor Trail Reflected in the Frog Pond” and “The Quick and the Dead” demonstrate that Kinnell’s view of the world that sees the dualistic separation of humanity from its environment, or of culture from nature, as the source of human evils such as war and mass destruction. Although on the surface this seems to indicate a rather simplistic moral binary of ‘good nature’ versus ‘bad civilisation,’ a poem such as “The Avenue Bearing the Initial of Christ into the New World” shows that Kinnell does not draw this binary in a simplistic manner. Rather, he acknowledges the pervasive presence of nature within culture argues that it is the negation of humanity’s natural, and therefore mortal, identity that causes irresponsible behaviour. Kinnell’s poetics of animals is interconnected with his view of the cycle of life, in which the understanding of mortality is essential to the understanding of the value of life. Non-human animals are presented in Kinnell’s poetry as both a mirror and a window to the human animal, deeply similar in their mortality and fundamentally different in their unawareness of that mortality.

Chapter 3

Imagism, Hunting and Mythology in the Animal Poetry of Gary Snyder

all you can know about animals as persons.
the names of trees and flowers and weeds.
the names of stars and the movements of planets
and the moon.

—“What You Should Know To Be A Poet”

Introduction

The position of the animal in Snyder’s work is highly interwoven with the position in his work of nature in general, and with mans, nature and animals altogether. Snyder’s poetic universe is characterized by a holistic perspective of earth and life that has attracted many readers from the deep ecology and environmentalist movements. His poetics of mountains and myths combined with his extensive essays on similar and related topics have made him the bard and mascot of the deep ecology movement, expressing lyrically and evocatively the basic tenets of the movement, such as ecological egalitarianism and the deeply held belief that the human species is an integral element of nature rather than something outside or above it. However, this environmentalist association with the messages and convictions in Snyder’s work, important and justified as it is, at times tends to overshadow the value and significance of questions of style, form, and poetic tradition. This chapter will be concerned with a combination of the two. We will discuss how Snyder represents animals in his work, how he positions them in the universe and how he deals with questions of real and mythological animals, nature and culture, kinship and otherness, metaphor and representation. We will also carefully explore Snyder’s stylistic treatment of animals in relation to the literary traditions of American poetry and American nature writing, and trace the formal influences of modernism, Imagism, Chinese and Japanese poetry and Native American mythology on his poetic representation of animals.

Gary Snyder was born in San Francisco, California on May 8, 1930, and grew up in Kitsap County, Washington, and Portland, Oregon, on the American Northwest coast. He studied anthropology and literature at Reed College, Portland on a scholarship, while working summers as a logger and a seaman, and obtained his BA degree in 1951. After a semester studying linguistics at graduate level at Indiana University, Snyder returned to San Francisco to study Asian culture and languages at Berkeley and the American Academy of Asian Studies. In 1956, Snyder travelled to Japan to study Zen Buddhism and until 1969 lived and worked alternately in Japan and California with intermittent periods of travelling in India and working as a seaman. He returned to the United States in 1969 and built a house in the Sierra Nevada Mountains which he called Kitkitdizze, the Wintu name for a local plant also known as bear clover.

Snyder has received numerous awards and recognitions for his work including the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry for his volume *Turtle Island* in 1975, the American Book Award for *Axe Handles* in 1983, and the 1997 Bollingen Prize for Poetry for *Mountains and Rivers Without End*. He was awarded a Guggenheim Foundation fellowship and an American Academy of Arts and Letters Award, and in 2003 Snyder was elected Chancellor of The Academy of American Poets. In 2008 Snyder was awarded the Ruth Lilly Poetry Prize, a lifetime achievement award. He is professor emeritus of English at the University of California, Davis, and still lives at Kitkitdizze in northern California. His main volumes of poetry include *Riprap and Cold Mountain Poems* (1959), *Myths and Texts* (1960), *Regarding Wave* (1970), *Turtle Island* (1974), *Axe Handles* (1983), *No Nature: New and Selected Poems* (1994), *Mountains and Rivers Without End* (1996) and *Danger On Peaks* (2004). His equally prolific prose writings have been published in *Earth House Hold* (1969), *The Old Ways* (1977), *He Who Hunted Birds in His Father’s Village* (1979, his BA thesis for Reed College), *Passage*

Through India (1984), *The Practice of the Wild* (1990) and *A Place in Space* (1995). In 1999, Counterpoint published *The Gary Snyder Reader*, bringing together an extensive selection of essays, journal entries, interviews, letters, poetry and translations.

Snyder's use of animals in his poetry is a unique blend of real and mythological animals, and includes poems devoted to individual animals ("Jackrabbit," "Sus") and poems dedicated to types of animals ("this poem is for birds," "this poem is for bear," "this poem is for deer"), as well as many poems featuring animals and animal imagery to a larger and lesser extent. Throughout Snyder's career, animals have consistently been an important part of his poetic world, from his earliest work in *Myths & Texts* to his most recent collection *Dangers on Peaks*. Both his stylistic development and his subject matter reflect the impact of studies in anthropology, linguistics, Asian languages and literatures and Buddhism, of his experiences with physical work, and of his many travels. The dualism in Snyder's work reaches deep, engaging with binary oppositions such as East and West, primitive and modern, environment and society, physical work and intellectual pursuits, in both his poetry and prose. Rather than maintaining those oppositions, however, Snyder's writing is aimed at an integration of them, and they are often presented as gradations on a scale rather than as opposites. Having said that, it is important to have a sense of the intellectual, ideological and practical dichotomies that he attempts to integrate in his poetry before proceeding to a discussion of the poems themselves, and we will look at them more closely below.

Snyder's distinctive stylistic approach to the representation of animals can be elucidated by tracing two main areas of influence that have both formed significant and lasting sources of inspiration for Snyder's poetics in terms of style, content and ideology. One has its origins in high modernism, with Ezra Pound's theories of Imagism and the ideogrammic method, and travels via Chinese languages and literature to Zen Buddhism and its origins in shamanism. The other is located in Native American culture and the contemporary use of ancient characters, stories and images that are directly related to shamanistic practices and primitive cultures. As I will argue, these two sources of inspiration are of particular relevance to Snyder's stylistic approach to the representation of both real, living animals and to his views on the role of the poet as mediator between humans, animals and nature. Furthermore, Snyder's poetic engagement with animals addresses both physical and spiritual facets of human-animal relationships through poetic explorations of hunting and mythology. The former explores and portrays hunting as a primordial and ultimate means of communing with and relating to animals, and we will look closely at the poems from the "Hunting" section of *Myths & Texts* as well as on poems from later volumes. The latter engages with world mythology as a means of knowing and understanding animals and human-animal relationships, and our discussion will pay specific attention to Snyder's engagement with animal-marriage mythology and with the Native American mythological figure Coyote.

Because the animal population of Snyder's oeuvre is too large to be able to discuss all animal poems, we will have to limit ourselves in this chapter to a discussion of the main themes in Snyder's poetic engagement with animals and the animal poems that form the best examples or the most relevant illustrations of those themes. In the light of the abundance of animals in Snyder's poems, that means that there are many poems equally valuable for in-depth discussion and close reading that are left out of this study. Omitted are for example a great many shorter poems that I can best describe as 'vignettes,' poems that form observations on a single scene containing animals undisturbed in their natural environment, such as "Hear bucks skirmishing in the night," "Steep cliff ledge, a couple of young raptors," "Ripples on the surface" "Lines on a Carp," "The Rabbit," "Jackrabbit," "Cool Clay," "Sus," "Gray Squirrels," and a number of sections of "Target Practice." These small-scale celebrations and veneration of natural life are wonderful illustrations of Snyder's personalised form of Imagism. Also omitted are poems that explore the universal, all pervading sensuality and sexuality of the natural world, such as "Song of the Taste," "Sea lion, salmon, offshore -," "Kyoto Born in Spring Song," "Seed Pods," "The Egg," and "It Was When." Although animals feature significantly in these poems, they invariably do so in the wider context of all nature, and they exemplify Snyder's holistic, erotic vision of nature in general, including the human, the animal, the vegetable and the mineral, rather than Snyder's treatment of the animal or the human-animal relationship. However, the theme of natural sexuality in Snyder's poetry will certainly merit further study of its own. Though it may at times be difficult to separate Snyder's poems into ones that deal predominantly with animals or the human-animal relationship and those that have a wider focus on nature in general, and though a poet's perspective on nature is invariably relevant to their poetic treatment of animals, for our present study we will nonetheless try to make that distinction. This chapter, then, is

divided into three main sections, in which I discuss the stylistic and thematic aspects that are key to Snyder's poetic engagement with animal subjects and images: (i) *Imagism, shamanism, and Native American culture*, (ii) *Hunting*, and (iii) *Mythology*.

(i) Imagism, shamanism, and Native American culture

This section focuses on the poetic influences of Imagism and the 'oriental' elements of high modernism as well as the influences of Native American mythology and shamanism on Snyder's animal poems. Firstly, I argue that Snyder's understanding of Imagism and his own experience with Asian languages and literatures has provided him with a methodology for conveying a sense of the unknowable, non- or extra- linguistic side of animals and nature in general in his poetry. Through an exploration of Snyder's individual poetic strategy in relation to his animal poems I will show how Snyder attempts to stretch conventional limitations of poetic representation of animals, in the imagination or the suggestion of the rationally unknowable and extra-linguistic essence of animality. Secondly, I examine how Snyder's fascination with Native American mythology and its relationship to the North American continent has provided him with numerous mythological and real animal subjects and images that populate his poems, and how this Native American influence has shaped his ideas on the role of the poet as akin to the mediating role of shamanism between human beings, their natural environment, and their animal relatives.

Imagism

When Ezra Pound took on the task of editing the manuscripts and notes of Ernest Fenollosa, an American Orientalist who had a great passion for Chinese and Japanese literature, in September 1913, he was already planning to compile an anthology of Imagist poetry that would be loosely based on the three Imagist poetic principles which he had formulated together with poets H.D. and Richard Aldington "in the spring or early summer of 1912":

1. Direct treatment of the 'thing' whether subjective or objective.
2. To use absolutely no word that does not contribute to the presentation
3. As regarding rhythm: to compose in the sequence of the musical phrase, not in sequence of a metronome.

"Upon many points of taste and of predilection we differed, but agreeing upon these three positions," Pound recalls, "we thought we had as much right to a group name" as certain other 'schools' of literature that had been proclaimed around that time. The Imagist movement had until that point been influenced mainly by Greek and French models. When Pound encountered Chinese literature via the manuscripts of Fenollosa, however, he was introduced to a way of writing poetry which he felt could be of great importance to the development of a literary revolution in the West, and his own poems in *Des Imagistes: An Anthology* reflect this new influence. Fenollosa's long essay *The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry*, edited by Pound, as well as Pound's own translations of Chinese poetry based on the notes of Fenollosa and published in *Cathay* in 1915, provided him with new perspectives on the poetics of Imagism. It was especially this influence of oriental languages and literatures on the Imagist movement that attracted the interest of Snyder when he began reading and writing poetry, and the Imagist poetics of Pound, William Carlos Williams and Kenneth Rexroth were an important influence on his early poetry in *Myths & Texts* and *Riprap*.

In *The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry*, Fenollosa argues (among other things) that the unique qualities of the Chinese language lie in the fact that its written characters contain both a pictorial and a verbal element, combining the representative effect of an image with that of a word in calling up a mental concept in the reader. Fenollosa points out the temporal nature of language, which is naturally successive in its basic structure: subject – verb – object, or rather agent – action – object. This temporal quality of language follows the movement of thought and nature, and is therefore more truthful as a reproduction than a visual image. Thus, because a picture can be more concrete in its representation than a word but lacks the temporal quality of language, the Chinese written character combines the strengths of pictorial and verbal representation:

The untruth of a painting or a photograph is that, in spite of its concreteness, it drops the element of natural succession. [...] One superiority of verbal poetry as an art rests in its betting back to the fundamental reality of time. Chinese poetry has the unique advantage

of combining both elements. It speaks at once with the vividness of painting, and with the mobility of sounds. It is, in some sense, more objective than either, more dramatic. In Chinese we do not seem to be juggling mental counters, but to be watching *things* work out their own fate.

Although the English written language lacks this visual quality, the stress on temporality and mobility of sounds and the natural succession of thought-images have influenced Pound's poetics significantly in his translations in *Cathay* as well as in his ideas about Imagism and in *The Cantos*. As we will see in our discussion of Snyder's poems, his poetry also reverberates this movement of sound and the temporal, successive qualities of language and thought. The oft-quoted phrase 'watching *things* work out their fate' brings attention to two important aspects of the Chinese written character, or ideogram, for Imagist poetry: the focus on *things*, and the activity that is always implied in the noun.

In discussions of Pound's translations, T.S. Eliot's claim that "Pound is the inventor of Chinese poetry for our time" is often quoted. With this remark, and his subsequent comments on the temporality of translations, Eliot sought to make clear that, first, Pound's translations are so excellent that they seem like "translucencies" that show us the true spirit of Chinese poetry, and, second, that this can only be a brilliant illusion and that each generation must make their own translations which will in turn become outdated:

This is as much as to say that Chinese poetry, as we know it today, is something invented by Ezra Pound. It is not to say that there is a Chinese-poetry-in-itself, waiting for some ideal translator who shall be only translator.

Although Pound's excellent translations are so clear that they seem to convey the essence of Chinese poetry to the reader, his poems say, in fact, as much about the developments of poetry in English as they do about Chinese poetry. In his groundbreaking study *Orientalism, Modernism, and the American Poem*, Robert Kern argues that because Pound's experiences with the Chinese language tapped into a mode of writing that he had already developed and worked with, they influenced his poetics far beyond his translations and his strictly Imagist phase, and he identifies Snyder's work as "arguably the premier example in post-Poundian American poetry of an orientalisized verse in the modernist tradition and of English-as-Chinese."

In a review of *Myths and Texts*, James Dickey observes that

What you see about [Snyder] immediately is his debt to the Pound of the *Cantos*: Pound's fragmented, juxtaposing method, his quotations (with and without quotations marks), and even his irritating use of the ampersand. But what you also see is that this is unmistakably the right technique for Snyder to use. The Pound style, at the same time so style-conscious and so styleless, can be very bad: disorganized, flat, pretentious, obscure, bookish, and dull. But in Mr. Snyder's work it is none of these. It is, instead, close to what Pound probably thinks it should be: sharp-edged, vivid, detached, concentrated both on the thing shown (the image) and on bringing it into a field of interpretation not explicitly given but formulated by the various quotations woven into the writing.

Kern in turn points to Snyder's extensive use of 'oriental' features that are clearly derived from Pound's imagistic or ideogrammic style: "its impersonality, its concise, monosyllabic diction, its short, end-stopped, accentual line, and its tightness of structure." Snyder himself has said about these influences that

I grew up with the poetry of twentieth-century coolness, its hard edges and resilient elitism. Ezra Pound introduced me to Chinese poetry, and I began to study classical Chinese. When it came to writing out of my own experience, most of modernism didn't fit, except for the steer toward Chinese and Japanese.

The earlier works *Riprap* and *Myths & Texts*, especially, show this influence most clearly.

Snyder's purposes in his use of Pound's English-as-Chinese and the imagistic or ideogrammic style appear to be closely related to his intended representation of the natural world. He states in his "Afterword" to the 1990 edition of *Riprap and Cold Mountain Poems*:

There are poets who claim that their poems are made to show the world through the prism of language. Their project is worthy. There is also the work of seeing the world *without* any prism of language, and to bring that seeing *into* language. The latter has been the direction of most Chinese and Japanese poetry.

This particular purpose in Snyder's poetry is closely related to his views on the function of

poetry and the role of the poet in society. These ideas are similar to the argument that Emerson makes in his essay "The Poet," when he argues that an important function of the poet is to be an interpreter between the languages of nature and man. Most men are able to experience a wordless form of communication with nature, he states, but the majority of them are "mutes, who cannot report the conversation they have had with nature" in human language. "I know not how it is that we need an interpreter," but "the poet is the person in whom these powers [of experience and expression] are in balance, the man without impediment, who sees and handles that which others dream of, [and] traverses the whole scale of experience."

Snyder, too, sees the poet as an intermediary between nature and man. His conception of the function of the poet is two-sided: on the one hand, the poet is one who gives human voice to nature, to the mountains, rivers, trees and animals that need representation in the human perception of the world, and as such, he is an interpreter. On the other hand, the poet has a shamanistic function and can (re-)connect people with their natural environment, their primitive past and their animal nature, and give expression to a way of being in the world that does not involve language. This interpretation thus goes both ways as translation of experience into, and out of, language. Snyder warns against the pitfalls of trying to translate nature into language, however, and in the preface to his collection *No Nature* he points out that what is generally presented is a human projection of nature rather than a 'true' representation of the 'nature' of nature. Snyder stresses the need for genuine representation, and, in the preface to his collection *No Nature*, warns the reader against "trap[ping]" nature in a conceptual framework that is imposed onto it:

we do not easily *know* nature, or even know ourselves. [...] There is no single or set 'nature' either as 'the natural world' or 'the nature of things.' The greatest respect we can pay to nature is not to trap it, but to acknowledge that it eludes us and that our own nature is also fluid, open, and conditional.

In essence, nature is fundamentally unknowable, and any statement about the 'nature' of nature must be an act of imagination that acknowledges the elusiveness of nature and hazards misrepresentation and a displacement of the reality of nature. Nonetheless, Snyder believes that the necessity for mediation between human and nonhuman nature warrants this risk and argues that any attempt to represent or give voice to nature must take into account its quality of elusiveness. To him, it is precisely this mediation between human and nonhuman nature that is the function of the poet and the value of poetry. This perspective on poetry as mediation between nature and the human echoes Bataille's statement from his *Theory of Religion* about "the poetic fallacy of animality," discussed in the introduction to this study: "the correct way to speak of it [the animal] can *overtly* only be poetic, in that poetry describes nothing that does not slip toward the unknowable." This view of the animal as essentially unknowable, and of poetry as the only meaningful way of speaking about this unknowable essence, that is located outside of language, is echoed in Snyder's poetic practice. Of the many ways of speaking about animals (scientifically, theologically, philosophically, legally or politically), the poetic approach is one that allows for an imaginative glance across the species boundary and for a linguistic glance across the language barrier. This entails the second function of the poet as Snyder envisages it: the expression in language of the experience of seeing the world without language.

The notion of expressing a non-linguistic experience of the world in language, in poetry, is closely related in stylistic approach to Ezra Pound's ideas about Imagism and dependent on strategies of parataxis or juxtaposition, space, ellipsis, absence of an identifiable speaker, and silence. The use of juxtaposition is derived from Pound's Ideogrammic Method, a key aspect of the development of Imagism derived from the Chinese written character. In his seminal work *Ideogram: Modern American Poetry*, Lazlo Géfin defines the ideogrammic method as follows:

The Chinese ideogrammic method, in Ernest Fenollosa's view (from which Pound built a poetic theory), relies in its juxtapositions on a close observation of natural processes. In his view the basis of the method is metaphorical: the juxtaposed 'material' images imply 'immaterial' relationships. [...] For Pound, the setting side by side, without copulas, of verbal pictures will perforce establish relationships between the units juxtaposed. Such juxtapositions he called *images*. The image is the basic form of ideogrammic composition; it is not simply a visual impression but a union of particulars transposed onto the conceptual plane.

This poetic strategy is employed by Snyder not only in his early work, which most clearly shows the influence of high modernism, but throughout his career, as he incorporates key

aspects of the ideogrammic method into his own poetics and they become part of his individual, distinctive style.

Géfin also demonstrates Snyder's own development of the ideogrammic method in his poetry, in his supplementation of modernist influences with his direct study of oriental languages and poetry as well as with his experiences of physical work, which formed the basis of his poetic rhythms in *Riprap*. The term 'riprap' refers to the work of creating "a cobble of stone laid on steep, slick rock to make a trail for horses in the mountains," and Géfin observes that "the very term 'riprap' onomatopoeically and morphologically suggests the close juxtaposition of things which are at once different and similar." He also relates Snyder's use of "elliptical juxtapositions" to his Zen Buddhist training, arguing that

elliptical juxtapositions patently dispense with logic. In Snyder's case, his studies in Zen Buddhism have strengthened his instinctive distrust of logic and abstract thinking. As exemplified by the Zen *koan*, or philosophical riddle, the mind is powerless to deal with the world through logic alone. [...] Snyder's statement that form is emptiness, is just such a *koan*.

Similarly, Jody Norton argues in "The Importance of Nothing: Absence and Its Origins in the Poetry of Gary Snyder" that

in his early wilderness poetry, Gary Snyder builds absences into the structure, imagery, and syntax of his texts in order to inscribe the essential Zen Buddhist perception of the identity of *sunyata* (emptiness) and *tathata* (suchness, objective reality) in the form of each poem.

Snyder's statement that form is emptiness is part of his "Lookout's Journal" in *Earth House Hold*, where he states in a haiku-like entry:

form – leaving things out at the right spot
ellipse, is emptiness

This emptiness is related to the non-linguistic or non-verbal reality or experience of the world that Snyder is looking to convey in his poetry. With the use of ideogrammic juxtaposition and ellipsis, this non-verbal reality is suggested or transmitted in Snyder's poems in the spaces and silences that are also part of language. As Norton argues: "[Snyder's] purpose is to use the grammatical, syntactical, and semantic spaces that permeate even language [...] to make possible a kind of immediate knowing that language is not theoretically designed to produce."

In "Silence in Prosody: The Poem as Silent Form," Kern focuses on the evolution of free verse from the modernist change of metrical regularity towards a more speech-based rhythm to a "more radical kind of tampering [...] with grammar, syntax, and the very discursive structure of language regarded as a communicative or expressive medium." Kern identifies in several poets (including Snyder) a tendency in poetry not towards the conveyance of actual speech but of

a kind of inward, unaddressed meditation, a form of thinking, that depends for its effect on indeterminate patterning and run-on or discontinuous or otherwise unordered syntax – a prosody [...] that organizes into verse both voiced speech and the silent speech of thought.

This, again, is based on a tendency in Snyder's poetry of ellipsis, space, and silence that Kern demonstrates convincingly with a close reading of "Burning the Small Dead," in which he highlights Snyder's use of "a scant, elliptical language, nevertheless convincing as a kind of colloquial mental shorthand, whose meaning, like that of most metonymic styles, depends almost entirely on external context." I will quote the whole poem here to give an indication of this elliptical, metonymic style:

Burning the small dead
branches
broke from beneath
thick spreading
whitebark pine.

a hundred summers
snowmelt rock and air

hiss in a twisted bough.

sierra granite;
mt. Ritter –
black rock twice as old.

Deneb, Altair

windy fire

The poem references almost purely natural *things* and events, the only human activity indicated by the anonymous gerund “Burning,” as the poem moves from action to contemplation in an increasingly vague reflection on the nature and origin of the wood (“a hundred summers / snowmelt rock and air”), its soil (“black rock twice as old”) and the stars above it (“Deneb, Altair”). Snyder uses this strategy for non-animate nature, but also, more significantly for our purposes, for animate nature.

In the section “Target Practice” of *Regarding Wave*, Snyder focuses on small images or scenes often featuring an animal subject, and using an elliptical style that exemplifies his own version of the ideogrammic method of Imagism. The first in the series, “Looking for Nothing” is most poignant in its theoretical or philosophical content:

Look in the eye of a hawk
The inmost ring of a log

The edge of the sheath and the
Sheath – where it leads –

River sands.
Tārā “Joy of
Starlight”
thousand-
eyed.

Opening with the double circular image of a hawk’s eye and a tree ring, the poem juxtaposes these against the mental image of the surface and hidden depth of a sheath suggesting an invisible, unknowable mystery behind the visible signs of natural wonder, which reminds us of Georges Bataille’s statement about poetry slipping towards the unknowable. The knowable here is given, the visible sense experience of looking into the eye of a hawk or the inmost ring of a log. As the unknowable cannot be stated or explained, Snyder merely suggests its existence, the existence of the sheath behind the edge; the nature of the hawk as unknowable as the nature of the wood. After that there is increasing ellipsis, and silence, the last stanza marked more by what it does not state than by what it does. “River sands” may be a reference to a Buddhist measure of quantity: as many as (there are) grains of sand in the river Ganges, indicating an unimaginable wealth of natural mystery. Tārā is a Buddhist goddess, a universal mother also known as the “Saviouress.” In the *108 Praises of Tārā*, she is called “bright, with beautiful eyes, joy of starlight.”

The overt and covert emphasis placed on eyes and knowledge in the poem moves from seeing nothing to seeing all as the style moves from syntactical and grammatical intelligibility to increased associative broken contemplation. Whereas the poem opens with a direction to an implied addressee, presumably the reader (“Look in the eye of a hawk”), the subsequent contemplation becomes an interiorised expression of thinking in progress rather than expressed thought or speech. In the words of Kern, “the poem that purports to represent thinking is freed to this extent from the ordinary demands of syntax and logic” and “need not meet the same criteria of intelligibility as public or simply voiced utterance.” As the poem on the page shows, the second stanza includes more grammatical and stylistic indications of space and silence in its use of full stops, spaces within a line, enjambment and indentation, indicating a slowing down of (performative) reading and suggesting what Norton has called the “kind of immediate knowing that language is not theoretically designed to produce” and that suggests a non-verbal reality. The hawk in the poem is there only to suggest its unknowability, its eye a gateway to mysteries that are closed off from the human gaze and can only be imagined or suggested, and even then, not in language.

Now that we have explored the influences of Modernism, Imagism and Asian languages and literature on Snyder's poetics, it is time to turn to the West, to another main source of inspiration in Snyder's work: Native American mythology, primitivism and shamanism. Snyder's fascination with Native American beliefs, narratives, characters and images has been well documented by himself as well as by his critics. Snyder's childhood in Washington State brought him into contact with a Salishan Indian man that stirred his early interest and Bert Almon notes that as a child, Snyder favoured the writings of Ernest Thompson Seton, a Canadian nature writer and student of Indian lore. Snyder's undergraduate degree in anthropology at Reed College taught him a wealth of information about Native American history and narratives and eventually led to his BA thesis examining a Haida myth in careful detail.

Snyder's interest in Native American cultures seems to be first and foremost related to a sense of place. He found the cultural and literary 'roots' of his own ancestors of European descent unsuitable for the landscape of the American North-West and the religious beliefs of the Judeo-Christian tradition wholly incongruent with his own experiences of nature. Bob Steuding tells us that Snyder, although brought up agnostic, was encouraged to attend different local church services. When he was told at one of those gatherings that animals did not have souls, Snyder reportedly concluded that the Judeo-Christian tradition was not for him.

As the descendant of relative newcomers to the continent, Snyder felt that his family's roots were located ultimately in a place that was not his own, and that he needed to look elsewhere for a sense of belonging and a sense of place. He found this to a large extent in Native American cultures and mythologies and has been deeply influenced by them on various levels of his work, ranging from form, style, subject matter and ideology to ideas about the origins and function of poetry and the role of the poet in society. Snyder's explorations of a sense of place and history can be found in poems such as "Kušiwóqǫbǫ", "For the West," "What Happened Here Before," "Control Burn," "Anasazi," "Manzanita" and especially in "For All," in which Snyder constructs an alternative version of the U.S. Pledge of Allegiance that carefully subverts the original to more authentically represent the land:

I pledge allegiance to the soil
of Turtle Island,
and to the beings who thereon dwell
one ecosystem
in diversity
under the sun
With joyful interpenetration for all.

A quick glance at the original reveals the difference in values that are represented in this pledge, most notably the substitution of "the soil of Turtle Island" for "the flag of the United States of America." Rather than featuring governments, nations and emblems imposed on an artificially demarcated territory, Snyder's focus is on the soil and its inhabitants. Significantly, also, his pledge acknowledges the history of the continent and its earliest inhabitants with its reference to the name for the continent held by various Native American peoples, Turtle Island.

In terms of form, the impact of Native American narrative on Snyder's poetry shows itself most clearly in the use of stylistic strategies based on oral, performative poetry such as the internal rhythm and rhyme that are elemental to oral literature, as well as more overt repetition. A poem such as "Prayer for the Great Family," stated to be derived from a Mohawk prayer, carries clear elements of Native American oral poetry in its repetitive structure, references to animistic beliefs and invocations of natural elements ("Gratitude to Air, bearing the soaring Swift and the silent / Owl at dawn. Breath of our song / clear spirit breeze / *in our minds so be it*"). In addition to elements of style and structure, Snyder is manifestly inspired by elements of content. Plots, characters and images from various Native American origins feature heavily in his work, the most notable instances being the trickster figure of Coyote and the myth of the Bear Wife. Some content is or seems to be directly derived from ethnological reports, such as "*the making of the horn spoon*" ("Hunting 5"), and "Now I'll also tell what food we lived on then" ("Hunting 13"). These are elements that are crucial to this project, in their diverse use of and reference to both real and mythical animals, and shamanistic treatment of man-animal relations. We will look at this in more detail in the sections on hunting and mythology that follow.

On the level of ideology and the function of poetry in society, Snyder engages with shamanism and the role of the poet in primitive cultures. He takes a global interpretation of

shamanism, following the widely held belief that shamanism was brought to the North American and South American continents with the migration of primitive shamanic peoples from Siberia to America via the Bering Strait (see also Chapter 1). In “What Happened Here Before,” Snyder outlines a history of the American continent in which 40,000 years ago “human people came” to a previously unpopulated land, “with baskets hats and nets / winter-houses underground.” Similarly, in “The Way West, Underground,” which we will discuss in more detail in the section on mythology, Snyder traces the mythological and shamanistic significance of bear (“Karhu – Bjorn – Braun – Bear”) from Oregon via North Japan and China, Tibet and Finland to cave paintings in France and Spain. In an interview with Michael Helm from 1979, Snyder explains that

shamanism relates to the most archaic of human religious practices. All of our ancestors – white, black, mongoloid, Vedah, or !Kung – were doing it for most of prehistory. It informs the fundamental lore of the planet, that is to say, all of the worldwide body of folktale that we share. The folk motifs of Native America are scattered all across Europe and Asia. We are all in the same boat, stemming from ten to thirteen thousand years back in the Pleistocene. We are all sharing the same information and the same religious disciplines.

As mentioned above, Snyder considers it an important role of the poet to (re-)connect people with their natural environment, their primitive past and their animal nature, and he sees this as a role in contemporary society that is similar, or rather directly derived from, the role of the shaman in primitive cultures:

The Shaman-poet is simply the man whose mind reaches easily out into all manners of shapes and other lives, and gives song to dreams. Poets have carried this function forward all through civilized times: poets don't sing about society, they sing about nature – even if the closest they ever get to nature is their lady's queynt.

The role of the poet as Snyder explains it, is to bring his audience closer to nature, to be an intermediary between the past and the present, between human and nonhuman nature, and this is a role the poet shares with the shaman of primitive societies. It is important to note here that this function is made quite distinct by Snyder from other shamanic roles, such as that of healer.

Snyder's use of Native American material and his references to shamanism are not without controversy. In the nineteen seventies, he was criticized by, among others, Geary Hobson and Leslie Marmon Silko for appropriation of Native American cultural material by a white author. In the article “The Rise of the White Shaman as a New Version of Cultural Imperialism,” Hobson locates the beginning of this new version of cultural imperialism in Gary Snyder, stating that

The “white shaman” fad seems to have begun inadvertently with Gary Snyder in his “Shaman Songs” sections of *Myths and Texts*, in which the poet speaks through the persona of an Indian shaman, and his words become calls to power, of a sort, which in and of itself is innocuous enough, since poetry of this kind does seek to transcend the mundane in such a way that people's lives are revived. The poems contain great vitality and are, I believe, sincere efforts on Snyder's behalf to incorporate an essential part of American Indian philosophy into his work. Importantly, nowhere does Snyder refer to himself as a “shaman.”

Hobson's criticism is directed mainly at other poets who, following Snyder, were less careful with their usage of Native American materials and the term ‘shaman.’ Silko is more critical of Snyder directly in her “Old-Time Indian Attack Conducted in Two Parts.” Part one of her attack focuses on “Imitation ‘Indian’ Poems,” whereas part two focuses specifically on Snyder's *Turtle Island*. In “The Other's Voice: Cultural Imperialism and Poetic Impersonality in Gary Snyder's *Mountains and Rivers without End*,” Tim Dean engages with this type of criticism and asserts that although “the discipline that teaches us about shamanism is inextricably bound up with the history and ideologies of colonialism, and that Western ways of knowing this material [may be said to be] irrevocably contaminated,” this form of “ethnic essentialism” takes a very limited view of literature as merely “a vehicle for self-expression” and denies the “possibility of any encounter with otherness in poetry.” Instead, Dean argues for an aesthetic impersonality that he relates back to modernist theories found in Yeats, Joyce, Pound and Eliot, among others, an impersonality

in which the author's individual or group identity is subordinated in favor of opening the self to others – and, more broadly, to realms of otherness, including nonhuman nature,

[...] rather than as a realm in which my own voice, identity, and self are fortified.

Dean's exploration of what he terms Snyder's "impersonalist poetics" echoes Jody Norton's comments mentioned above on the absence of the speaker in much of his poetry, which "[prevents a] suggestion of an anthropocentric, dominant/subordinate relation between man and nature," and "deemphasizes" human beings and human activity. Similarly, Snyder's use of poetical impersonality in his engagement with Native American material is not concerned with constructing selfhood and identity through incorporating, romanticizing or appropriating an 'other,' but with "a kind of self-dispossession that comes with opening the self to otherness."

It is important to note here that one of the reasons Snyder turned to Asian languages and literatures and Buddhism rather than continue his education in anthropology and Native American cultures was the fact that he had no full access to study Native American culture (in general, or one in particular) from the inside in the way that he did have access to Buddhism.

When asked why he directed his focus on "the Orient" rather than on the west, Snyder explains:

The Orient has a more enormous teaching tradition intact. There are several great wisdom traditions with teachers and schools. They also have them in North America, but unless you are born as a member of a certain Pueblo and have the right to enter a certain kiva, you can't get into these schools.

And in the "East West" interview with Peter Barry Chowka, he elaborates:

I [...] saw that American Indian spiritual practice is very remote and extremely difficult to enter, even though in one sense right next door, because it is a practice one has to be born into. Its intent is not cosmopolitan. Its content, perhaps, is universal, but you must be a Hopi to follow the Hopi way.

In spite of this, Snyder's fascination with Native American culture endured. After nearly ten years on the Asian continent, spent mainly in Japan, Snyder returns to the United States, and with his physical return comes his poetical return to elements from Native American languages and cultures.

Snyder's own response to criticism of his engagement with Native American material has consistently been to point to the universal nature of shamanic rituals in primitive cultures, be they Native American, Siberian, African or Proto-European, and to the universal nature of trickster figures, that take the form of Coyote, Raven or Hare in various Native American cultures, but are present in various shapes all over the world. He claims shamanist cultures as his ancestry simply because at some point in history, all people are derived from primitive peoples. Snyder also makes clear that he locates his roots firmly in the American continent, acknowledging his European ancestry but arguing that neither European literary history nor a sense of European geographical origins were sufficient to provide him with functional roots in American soil. In response to a remark by an audience member about his 'Indian' nature, Snyder answers:

I don't know if I'm an Indian or not. However, I do know that I'm a Native American. [...] Anyone is a Native American who chooses, consciously and deliberately, to live on this continent, this North American continent, with a full spirit for the future, and for how to live on it right, with the consciousness that says, "[...] We're not going on to some new frontier, we're here now." [...] And then you know that those continents that your ancestors came from are great places to visit, but they're not home. Home is here.

Without completely cutting ties with his European ancestry, Snyder does distance himself from a purely Anglo-American sense of place towards a more open, land-based interpretation of the notion of ancestry and roots. This includes the myths, which, he says, "belong to the place, and [...] will come to belong to those who make themselves members of this place."

Silko maintains that Snyder should look at his own ancestry rather than at Native American culture, and that unless he "comes to terms with these facts [that the U.S.A. is founded upon stolen land], and with his own personal, ancestral relation to them," his search for a "genuine American identity" will be "just another dead-end." Snyder, however, does look at the history of his own ancestors in several of his poems, and a poem like "Dusty Braces" reveals why he does not do so more often. Bitingly negative about the "stiff-necked / punchers, miners, dirt farmers, railroad-men" who "killd [*sic*] off the cougar and grizzly," Snyder is quite open about his uneasy relationship with his cultural heritage. Similarly, the first section of *Myths & Texts*, "Logging" gives a very clear sense of Snyder's roots in logging country in his laments

for the destruction of the landscape. Rather than focusing solely on negativity and lament, Snyder deals with his heritage's shortcomings and moves on to better examples for living and more suitable models to follow. The poem "Word Basket Woman" reveals Snyder's struggle to unite his European roots with his American sense of place and looks toward Native American culture for a more fitting paradigm:

Europe forgotten now, almost a dream –
but our writing
is sidewise and roman, and the language
a compote of old wars and tribes from some
place overseas. Here
at the rim of the world
where the *panaka* calls in the *chá* – the heart
words are Pomo, Miwok, Nisenan,
and the small poem word baskets
stretch to the heft of their burden.

The history embedded in the European languages contains no reflection on this land "here / at the rim of the world," Snyder argues. The "small poem word baskets" is a description of Native American languages with clear echoes of Fenollosa's ideas about the Chinese ideogram and language as "fossil poetry." These words are more than words; they are small poems, or "word baskets" that contain more than one meaning or connotation, and that are strong and flexible enough to carry even more.

We have teased out the influence of Pound's Ideogrammic Method, Imagism, and Asian languages and literatures on Snyder's stylistic strategies of parataxis and juxtaposition for the representation of animals in his poetry, which leads him to increased silence and fragmentation in the attempt to represent experiences that take place without language. Moreover, we have examined Snyder's engagement with Native American mythology and oral poetry, and explored their influence on Snyder's view of the role of the poet as a mediator between man and nature. As we will come to see, this role manifests itself in Snyder's poetic rewritings of mythical narratives about human-animal relations and a significant involvement of Native American literary material and spiritual beliefs such as the Trickster figure Coyote, animal-marriage narratives, and the use of a continuum of real and mythological animals in his poems. Having done so, we can now turn our attention fully to two key themes in Snyder's representation of animals in his poetry, hunting and mythology.

(ii) **Hunting**

There is a great truth in the relationship established by hunting: like in love and art, you must become one with the other.

The volume *Myths & Texts* is arranged in three sections, named "Logging," "Hunting," and "Burning." From the recording of a poetry reading that Snyder took part in with Allen Ginsberg at Reed College in 1956, however, we learn that while the long poem was in progress, the middle section of *Myths & Texts* was originally named "Beasts" rather than "Hunting." In his introduction to the section, Snyder explains:

The second part, about animals, derives a lot from the notion of almost all primitive people, and it's a pretty good notion, really, that animals and people are very interchangeable, and can marry and exchange roles with great facility. And also, that there is great subterranean levels of magic, operating in these relationships. [*sic*]

The section deals mostly with human-animal interaction on various levels. Not all of the poems are about animals, though, suggesting that in Snyder's poetry hunting can be a state of mind, a way of experiencing the world in addition to a method of gathering food from animal sources. The three sections were originally entitled "Groves," "Beasts," and "Changes," and the change from nouns to verbs suggests a stronger focus on human activity in the world, rather than on the world itself. It seems likely that the change in title from "Beasts" to "Hunting" reflects this focus on hunting as a human activity, or as the first or foremost human activity concerned with 'beasts.' Hunting, in this volume, is not only a human activity, it is a way of being in the world. Snyder's exploration of this hunting state of mind, this specific way of experiencing the world, is heavily dependent on interaction with nonhuman animals. This section of the chapter will look at the way in which Snyder works out this intimate relationship in his poems about hunting,

with specific attention to the continuum of real and mythological animals that feature in these poems.

In the reading at Reed College, Snyder explains the title *Myths & Texts*, which, he states, is

borrowed from the traditional anthropological name for collections of literature from primitive cultures. Myths being the traditional symbolic literature that has been handed down and received and isn't changed much, and text being the literature that they get somebody to just talk, like they get some drunk old Indian to sit down and tell about what it was like when he was a kid, they call that a text. So, considering these in a way as different styles and different types of poetry, I'd worked the two together, some of them being symbolic, literary, in a sort of fancy sense and some of them being more directly personal.

In this sense, the title refers to Snyder's reworked myths as the symbolic literature, and to his personal accounts as his own "text." In *Myths & Texts* then, Snyder combines the two versions of literature into a volume of poetry that is filled with allusions and references to various Amerindian, Inuit and Asian myths, legends and histories, and personal experiences and beliefs. In *Understanding Gary Snyder*, Patrick Murphy calls Snyder a "myth handler" and observes that he "practices mythopoeia, the adaptive retelling and creating of new myths that have guided or are needed to guide a culture." The poems already contain the characteristic mixture of Amerindian and Asian mythology combined with a focus on physical experience, nature, and work that Snyder would be working with throughout his literary career. As Murphy notes, however, the references to Hinduism and Buddhism in *Myths & Texts* are derived more from Snyder's studies in anthropology and from reading rather than from experience, and the structure of the poetry "is far more indebted to Pound and Eliot than to Asian influences." Many of the allusions are obscure and of unknown origin, given in quotations and combined together in a sort of overarching mixture of human mythology hinted at in the preface to *He Who Hunted*: "[The stories we hear as children] carry themes from the whole world and all human time in them, and though the child be Haida, she could travel the planet about [sic] and recognize parts of tales she'd heard everywhere." Snyder's *Myths & Texts*, as his later work, does just this: it resonates with myths and stories from all over the world, infused with personal experience, to form a personal as well as universal account of one way of being a human in this world.

Snyder's use of mythological animals and of mythology in thinking and writing about animals will receive our full attention in the section on mythology below, but it would be impossible to ignore the relation between mythological and actual animals that is part of this section. Our main focus in this section, however, will be on the significance and meaning attached to hunting as a way of communing with animals. The poems in *Myths and Texts*, as Dickey observed, owe much to "The Pound style," the "fragmented, juxtaposing method, his quotations (with and without quotation marks)." Although the volume as a whole is a very accomplished project, not all individual poems are equally successful. The "Hunting" section opens with a "first shaman song" in which the speaker, a beat-style traveller sits by the road "Hatching a new myth," introducing us to the theme of Snyder as a modern myth-handler who mediates between primitive cultures and contemporary society.

This myth-handling can be seen in practice in the three poems dedicated to birds, bear and deer ("Hunting 3," "Hunting 6," and "Hunting 8," respectively), that form a separate triptych in this section which is firmly rooted in its setting of North-Western America and invokes the landscape and its animal inhabitants in a celebration of place. We will look at "*this poem is for deer* (Hunting 8)" further on in this section, and "*this poem is for bear* (Hunting 6)" will be explored in relation to the myth of animal marriage in the section on mythology. In all three poems, however, the setting is central to the poem and the poem is infused with natural images that are native to the Northwest of the United States. "*this poem is for birds*," is a sequence of images of various birds and other animals in a stormy landscape in the hills of California. Dedicated to birds, the poem names eagles, hawks, ducks, vaux swifts, black swifts, and sickle-birds (long-billed curlews), all native to California, as well as marmots and mussels. The poem describes their individual behaviour in the stormy weather in a sequence of short, sparse sentences, often the length of one line:

A hawk drifts into the far sky.

A marmot whistles across huge rocks.

Rain on the California hills.

Mussels clamp to sea-boulders
 Sucking the Spring tides
 [...]

Vaux Swifts
 Flying before the storm
 Arcing close hear sharp wing-whistle
 Sickle-bird
 pale gray
 sheets of rain slowly shifting
 down from the clouds,
 Black Swifts.
 – the swifts cry
 As they shoot by, See or go blind!

These fragmented, juxtaposed images of sentence and line length create a tempestuous image of a sky full of birds, rain and wind. All observations are related seemingly directly, without interference of a noticeable speaker or narrator, and the present tense and active sentence constructions stress the stormy immediacy of the scene. The poem concludes with an edict to the reader, “See or go blind!” which again stresses the immediacy of the experience and implores the reader to open one’s eyes to the power of nature and live fully in the moment, implying that sight is worthless if not used for truly seeing.

The theme of birds is continued in the next poem, “Hunting 4,” but now, magical and mythical birds are included next to real, earthly birds and Snyder invokes several birds in this poem by their capitalized name, indicating a mythical figure rather than an animal species: Hummingbird, Catbird, Golden-eye Duck and Raven are all well-known creatures from various Amerindian mythologies. In addition, he gives several birds ‘song’:

“We pull out the seagrass, the seagrass,
 the seagrass, and it drifts away”
 –song of the geese.
 “My children
 their father was a log”
 –song of the pheasant.

The seagrass is reminiscent of the goose-wife in the Haida myth that Snyder explores in *He Who Hunted Birds in His Father’s Village*, as the food on which the mythological goose-wife lives. This mixture of real and magical birds, of experience and mythology, illustrates Snyder’s outlook on animals in his poetry in general, and the continuum that he sees between mythological figures and real animals is clearly influenced by his background in anthropology. In “The Incredible Survival of Coyote,” Snyder explains this continuum of real and mythological animals as follows:

Coyote the animal is a perfect expression of a specific set of natural relationships, as appropriate to the mountains and deserts of the West as the trickster image is appropriate to certain human needs. It’s a marvellous coming together – the meeting of trickster and coyote. Coyote is smart, quick, omnivorous, careful, playful; a good parent; opportunistic and graceful. [...]. There are specific things to be learned from each bird, plant, and animal – a natural system is a total education – and this learning is moral, as well as being useful for survival.

This statement is a modern-day illustration of the importance of animals in the thinking of man as explained by Lévi-Strauss in *Totemism*, that animals are not only important to (in Lévi-Strauss’ study, primitive) people in the form of sustenance, but also as conceptual tools for thinking. Similarly, in his discussion of *Myths & Texts*, Steuding states “[c]learly, Snyder’s poetic treatment of animals illustrates the sense of the significance that man has seen and has artistically invested in them.” The animals in Snyder’s world are part of this continuum of the real and the mythological, informed by his academic knowledge of anthropology and the theories of Lévi-Strauss as well as by his personal experience with the Native American cultures of the American Northwest. This continuum, a constant factor in Snyder’s work is notable also for its remarkable lack of anthropocentrism. Real and mythological animals exist on the same scale as humans, and their communications within myth are free and open. Snyder’s egalitarian approach to human and nonhuman animals mirrors the holistic beliefs of deep ecology, that focus on an inclusive view of nature that does not depend on man-animal dichotomies, or on

animate-inanimate nature dichotomies. Humans are not in opposition to animals in Snyder's poetic world, but among them, and together they exist, again, not in opposition to inanimate nature, but among it. These myths, then, are the direct opposites of fables in their representation of animals. Rather than an anthropocentric approach (or a specifically theriocentric approach) they take an egalitarian perspective.

"Hunting 5" makes direct use of an anthropological paper that Snyder would have encountered in his studies: "Ethnology of the Kwakiutl," by Franz Boas. Snyder's poem, with subtitle "*the making of the horn spoon*," describes the crafting of a horn spoon with the use of the horns of a mountain-goat, two cedar sticks and dried dogfish skin: "The head of the mountain-goat is in the corner / for the making of the horn spoon, / The black spoon." Snyder's lines follow Boas' description of the making of horn spoons by Kwakiutl Indians at times verbatim, albeit in an abridged form: "Now I will talk about the | making of the horn spoon, the black spoon. | When the head of the mountain-goat is taken off, it is | kept in the corner of the house for four days." Snyder keeps the jargon used for spoon-making intact, including phrases as "Hand-adze, straightknife, notch the horn-base," that again echo the description in "Ethnology": "he measures three | finger-widths beginning at the | top of the horn, and he adzes it so that it is | notched in this place." The poem ends with a line from the ethnological report in the original Kwak'wala, translated in the report as "Now the horn spoon is finished after this." Kwak'wala, the language of a group of indigenous peoples known as the Kwakiutl Indians, is part of the Wakashan language family which is located on the Northwest coast of the American continent, close in location to the Salishan, Tlingit and Haida, all Northwest Native American peoples and cultures that Snyder is most familiar with. The poem, with its careful description of the use of all parts of an animal, brings the practice of this craft close to the reader. The use of detail and the direct phrasing make it sound ordinary rather than exotic, but the last line in Kwak'wala infuses the descriptive poem with a sense of the intricacy of the language which 'others' the description, and shows the reader the sophistication of the primitive culture.

The use of a prose source of crafts of primitive peoples for this poem in only slightly modified form strongly suggests the poetry that Snyder sees in what he terms "the real work". Derived from a poem from *Turtle Island*, "The Real Work," and the title of the collection of interviews *The Real Work*, this notion of respect for the real work can be found throughout Snyder's career and poetics. In this poem, the reverence and care that are involved in the crafting of a horn spoon are already present in Boas' "Ethnology," and consciously reflected in the poem, especially in the last lines before the phrase in Kwak'wala: "It will be black and smooth, / a spoon." "*The making of the horn spoon*" is written in the present tense with active constructions. The active phrasing serves to convey actual instructions in a craft rather than a passive description of what the craft consisted of when it was still part of the tool-making necessary for subsistence of a primitive people. The phrasing in the ethnological report is in present tense, but with passive constructions, which is more consistent with a description rather than an instruction. The data for "The Ethnology of the Kwakiutl" was collected between 1900 and 1916, which sustains the use of a description in present tense by the people that have been studied: the descriptions that are provided to the anthropologist are of the habits and beliefs still practiced at the time of narration.

The deviation in style between the prose source and the poem supports Snyder's fascination with the 'poetry' of the real work and the mindfulness involved in the execution of and instruction in the craft of tool-making. The relation of this poem to the theme of hunting and contact with animals is plain; to make this tool, one is dependent on the horns of the mountain-goat and the skin of the dogfish. Hunting is a natural way of life the all pervading influence of which is evident in everything from close observation of the natural world ("See, or go blind!"), the crafting of tools, the construction of mythologies and of course the actual killing of living creatures. The poem has strong similarities to "Hunting 13," which contains a list of the animals and plants that are part of the regular diet of the speaker. "Hunting 13" opens with "Now I'll also tell what food we lived on then," and the descriptive, narrative tone suggests that this, too, is derived from an ethnological report, or is at least inspired by it. The list of foods is specific and detailed in its types of plant and animal species, and the detail would make it possible to locate the region in which the speaker lives. The descriptions of plant and animal types are more colloquial than scientific, mentioning "berries of the one-seeded juniper, / berries of the alligator-bark juniper," "slate-coloured juncoes" and "song sparrows," among many others. The list of foods and the descriptive, straightforward style of narration again suggests Snyder's fascination with primitive man's dependence on his natural environment and the intimate knowledge of plant and animal species that it occasions. The animals are mentioned by the name of the species

rather than the name given to their flesh (“wild cattle,” rather than “beef”), indicating the people’s intimate knowledge of the source of their food, in an implied contrast with contemporary consumption patterns.

The relation between the living creatures and the food that they provide is important in these poems, and they reveal an awareness and acceptance of animal death as an inevitable part of human survival. Snyder writes and talks about hunting regularly in essays and interviews throughout his career and reveals a perspective on hunting that is strongly influenced by his knowledge of anthropology and his personal experiences both in the United States and in Japan. The notion of human-animal communion through hunting might initially arouse some wonder and a sense of irony at the idea that any contact between human and nonhuman animals should consist of exploitation and be lethal to the animal in order to be successful. Snyder’s explanations, however, emphasize to us that the first and most basic contact between human and nonhuman animals originated (as most human developments) from necessity. Animals were (in some regions more than others) essential for sustenance, and this necessity led to a body of knowledge and understanding of animal behaviour and movement in order to develop successful hunting strategies. In Snyder’s poetry, hunting, when done with respect and mindfulness, is not only natural, it is also one of the most successful ways of finding a form of true understanding and connection with the animal other. The contact he speaks of is spiritual rather than physical, a way of connecting with the consciousness of the animal on a non-rational level and to understand through knowledge of its movements and behaviour the essence of the other. Many of Snyder’s hunting poems are therefore not concerned with death or nourishment, the ultimate consequences of hunting, but with the act itself and the activities and state of mind that are necessary for successful hunting. This conception of hunting shows strong similarities with Galway Kinnell’s “The Bear,” which we discussed in the previous chapter, in its focus on the intimacy between hunter and prey. In order to hunt successfully, the hunter must mimic the animal so carefully that he needs a thorough understanding of the animal’s habits and movements, which in turn enhances his knowledge for future hunts. Kinnell’s “The Bear” narrates the experiences of an Inuit hunter protagonist who stalks a wounded bear until he finds it on the verge of dying, and who subsequently transforms into the bear. The shamanic overtones of the hunting method and the deep intimacy and communication between the hunter and the animal in Kinnell’s poem echo similar concerns of human-animal interaction and hunting rituals in Snyder’s poems about hunting.

With the logic of an anthropologist, Snyder relates hunting to two forms of human behaviour that may have their roots in the necessities of hunting; meditation and miming. He observes that the still waiting, the anticipation of where and when one’s prey might be accessible and the concentration necessary for understanding the movement of animals, may have been the roots of meditation:

The necessities on identity, intuition, stillness, that go with hunting make it seem as though shamanism and yoga and meditation may have their roots in the requirements of the hunter – where a man learns to be motionless for a day, putting his mind in an open state so that his consciousness won’t spook creatures that he knows will soon be approaching.

These observations are inspired by his own experiences as a hunter for fish in the Banyan Ashram, where food supplies were low and fishing became a necessity for nourishment. Snyder and other members of the tribe became self-taught fishermen, learning to make fishing spears from one of the native islanders and after “two fruitless days in the water,” learning to “understand the habits and feelings of the different species.” Though Snyder feels it necessary to note that most of the people in the ashram would be vegetarians by choice, he points out that “this was a real case of necessity and ecology,” and that they “offered our respects and gratitude to the fish and the Sea Gods daily, and ate them with real love, admiring their extraordinarily beautiful, perfect little bodies.” Snyder describes how he, with typical dedication, “became absorbed in the life of the sea. Without a fish book I came to recognize dozens of species and gradually came to know their habits and peculiarities and territories and emotions.” Hunting, in Snyder’s experience, is not only a case of meditative stillness and waiting; another important aspect of hunting is magic, and Snyder repeatedly remarks on the practical importance of hunting rituals and habits.

As a method of acquiring, remembering, and passing on information about the nature and movement of different types of animals, an important part of hunting magic is miming: imitating animal behaviour and movement so as to better understand the best ways for hunting and stalking. In the “East West” interview with Peter Barry Chowka, Snyder explains:

in the twilight wind
from sea.
kneeling in sand

warm in the hand

Katsunori Yamazato points out that “the ‘i’ in this poem is drastically different from the dwarfed, passive ‘i’ seen, for instance, in the works of e.e. cummings,” and persuasively argues that Snyder’s “humble [...] ‘i’” is aware of his own place in the “interpenetrating web,” recognizing other beings and their “Buddha-nature.” She states that

this perhaps is a radically new “i” in modern poetry written in English. The traditional, “anthropocentric” modern “I” cannot assert its superiority in the world of this poem, and gratitude, not guilt or aggressiveness, is the central attitude in this food web of eating and being eaten.

Snyder’s “i” is a small, rather than central, entity in the poem and highly self aware of his position in the ecosystem. Yamazato’s insightful reading here corresponds to Jody Norton’s remarks on the absence of an identifiable speaker in Snyder’s poetry. In the poems in which Snyder attempts to express the experience of ‘seeing the world without language,’ he does so in a way that may open the experience up for the imagination of the reader. What he conveys, or attempts to convey, is not *his* seeing the world without language, but the possibility of the reader to experience the same. Norton argues that

the elision of a subject through whose eyes and in whose terms nature is perceived invites the imaginative entry of the reader into the poem, and at the same time prevents the suggestion of an anthropocentric, dominant/subordinate relation between man and nature.

She states that “human beings and human activities” are “deemphasized” and relates this strategy to the “Zen Buddhist perspective on the place of man in nature” as it is reflected in Snyder’s poetry. Although the role of the speaker in this poem is crucial to its content of shooting and plucking a bird, the use of the lower case in combination with the reverent tone of the scene indeed suggests a very self aware, humble attitude in the face of this intimate hunting setting. Here again, we see Snyder’s distinctly anti-anthropocentric approach to animals and the human-nonhuman relationship in his poetry, and a conscious avoidance of man-animal or man-nature dichotomies in his representation of animals and nature.

The poem continues to probe this closeness as the speaker learns to prepare the dead bird for cooking, touching carefully the outside and inside of the dead bird, naming and describing in attentive detail its separate, separated parts. The intimacy is both physical and spiritual in nature; the speaker tells us of the functions of the separate body parts for the living bird as well as their purpose for human consumption and juxtaposes the images of the living bird and the meat for consumption.

the rich body muscle that he moved by, the wing-beating
muscle
anchored to the blade-like high breast bone,
is what you eat.
[...]
dense firm flesh,
dark and rich,
gathered news of skies and seas.

This juxtaposition integrates the images rather than opposing them to each other, showing that the flesh one eats consists of the “gathered news of skies and seas,” that it is composed of the experiences of the bird and his long travels. With authoritative precision, Snyder communicates at once admiration for the beauty and distinction of the creature, responsibility in the task of handling the dead body, and mindfulness in the sacrifice of one living creature for another. His hunting is by no means sport, but neither is it a detached execution of resources. In fact, Snyder’s representation of hunting takes the tone of romance and, as such, taps into the widespread discursive practice of aligning hunting with romance, sexuality or courtship, expressing a desire for physical intimacy, love or affection for the prey, and presenting the stage of stalking or hunting as a dance in which the human proves himself capable and worthy, and the animal chooses and consents to being caught.

This view of hunting is not uncommon among primitive cultures that depend on animals

for nourishment but believe that animals have souls. This contrast, touched on in the section on Inuit spirituality and shamanism in the first chapter, is also part of the many Native American spiritualities that have influenced Snyder's perspective and his poetry, and it is no surprise that his poetry contains references to myths and ideas about the dance that hunting can be. This representation of hunting as a dance is an inversion of the more traditional courtship-as-hunt metaphor, in which the sexual relations between a male and a female agent are presented in terms of an active hunter pursuing a passive prey that does or does not consent to be caught, and it can range from the aggressive and downright violent to a more gentle play of teasing and chasing. The alignment of hunting and sexual pursuit is old and ingrained in language. The Oxford English Dictionary, for instance, provides two meanings for the word "venery": "the practice or sport of hunting beasts of game; the chase" and "the practice or pursuit of sexual pleasure; indulgence of sexual desire."

As we will see in a moment, an important element in Snyder's representation of this view of hunting is that of choice in the prey. Snyder explores the connection between song, dance and hunting most evocatively in two poems about deer: "Hunting 8: *this poem is for deer*," from *Myths and Texts*, and "Long Hair," from *Regarding Wave*. "Long Hair" is a poem in two parts, a short prose section called 'Hunting season' and a poem section called 'Deer trails.' 'Hunting season' inverts the conventional notions of hunting and catching:

Once every year, the Deer catch human beings. They do various things which irresistibly draw men near them, each one selects a certain man. The deer shoots the man, who is then compelled to skin it and carry its meat home and eat it. Then the Deer is inside the man.

As before, the use of the capital for Deer indicates mythological animals rather than real deer, and in this poem, they are given an agency and power that the actual animals lack in the hunting process. The myth is called "takeover from inside," and suggests that at some point in the future, the Deer will have occupied so many men that they can take action and change their world. This transformation is reminiscent of the transformation in Kinnell's "The Bear," where, after a long pursuit, the bear is caught by the hunter who then cuts it open and goes to sleep inside the bear's body, waking up and living on *as the bear*. Snyder's conception of this transformation is the reverse of Kinnell's: the deer come to inhabit the humans through their ingestion of deer flesh. The implication is similar, however; the hunting and killing of animals for sustenance is an activity of powerful intimacy that may affect man and animal in unexpected ways. The poem continues this theme of union with a rumination of deer trails, describing their course through hills and manzanita bushes, past roads and freeways, houses and schools, following their own paths with disregard for human trails. Snyder concludes on a celebratory tone, letting the deer trails invade the domestic sphere of civilization:

Deer spoor and crisscross dusty tracks
Are in the house: and coming out of the walls:

And deer bound through my hair.

Deer and humans no longer live in separate spheres, Snyder indicates, and here again, the poetry stresses a worldview in which man and animal are interchangeable. In imagined or mythological form, the spirits of Deer are everywhere, inspiring vitality and awareness in the poem's titular long hair. Murphy notes on the section "Long Hair" in *Regarding Wave* that the poems are associated with the hippie movement of the 1960s and with counter-cultural perspectives. In this poem, Snyder integrates the freedom and awareness of the age with the Amerindian use of mythology for awareness and inspiration. The deer function as a metaphor for an existence that is not necessarily outside of civilization, but certainly not dependent on or limited to the confines of society.

Arguably, both the inversion of power relations in the first section and the celebration of the independence of deer trails in the second section gloss over the more cruel physical reality of deer being hunted by humans and natural habitats limited and fragmented by spreading civilization. The celebration of the autonomy of deer trails barely conceals the less positive circumstances, but highlights the independent lives of animals outside of the human realm and points to the knowledge and mystery of these lives:

Deer trails lead to water,
Lead sidewise all ways
Narrowing down to one best path—
And split—

the actual sex of the prey. It is the minor power in this play of dominance, and as such aligned with the female role.

The issues of responsible and conscientious hunting with both ancient and modern rituals and precautions are detailed in other poems, like “Two Fawns that Didn’t See the Light This Spring,” and the above-mentioned “One Should Not Talk to a Skilled Hunter about What Is Forbidden by the Buddha.” Snyder’s engagement with animals in the form of hunting in these poems reflect his underlying beliefs about hunting as the primordial means of relating to animals, born from necessity and carried out with reverence and mindfulness. His exploration of the hunting rituals and taboos of both primitive and contemporary hunters in his poems narrates his increasing experience and understanding of the hunting process. The presence of the narrator is either very personal or absent altogether: he, Snyder, is the one for whom deer do not want to die, who could not hit a bear with a handful of rice, and who teaches his son about careful hunting. Alternately, the hunter is absent from the poem altogether or present only in a humble manner, a lower case “i,” in an awareness and representation of the dependence of humans on the sacrifice of animals. In his hunting poems, then, as in the poems discussed in the previous section of this chapter, Snyder also employs a specific stylistic strategy to assume a purposefully non-anthropocentric view of the relationship between human and nonhuman animals. Moreover, the animals in the hunting poems are both real, living creatures and mythological animals, pointing to the importance of mythology for conveying knowledge about animals and hunting through ritual and miming, as well as for the psychological resolution of the dilemma of killing other creatures for subsistence while believing that they are in essence equal to humans.

One might question the relevance that these hunting poems, with their re-packaging of a generalised Native American attitude to hunting rituals and mythology may have for a contemporary audience. We will come to see this in the next section of this chapter, on mythology, as well: although Snyder’s poetry is fascinating and evocative in its inclusion and re-workings of primitive hunting practices, rituals and myths, its relevance for contemporary human-animal relations should be seen as indirect at the very least. And although Snyder’s representation of hunting, killing and consuming animals may be described as romantic and certainly entails a more mindful and desirable attitude to the consumption of animals than factory-farming, its representation of deer ‘choosing’ their killer and ‘consenting’ to being killed, and modern rituals of appeasement of animal spirits in praising their bodies and thanking them for their sacrifice, is a gross misrepresentation of what we know about real, living animals. Animals tend not to consent to being killed, nor to choose their killers, and once dead, the praise and gratitude they receive for their sacrifice seems of little relevance to the individual animal. Current knowledge of zoology and ecology through scientific advancement means that modern societies simply do not generally believe in the same system of animal souls, animal spirits and reincarnation or regeneration in the way that primitive peoples did. And with a modern understanding of animals and death, the rituals in their modern form merely become an exercise in guilt appeasement for the benefit of the hunter with a level of self-consciousness that was absent in the original rituals. Snyder himself is very much aware of the limitations of poetry in the politicized realm of environmental issues such as animal rights and animal welfare, and I think that it is important to remain aware of this limitation. While these poems may be said to misrepresent animals’ experiences in the practice of hunting in a rather sentimental way, few contemporary readers will take Snyder’s representations of dancing Deer coming down to die in pity for a remorseful hunter literally. As modern imaginations of ancient beliefs and practices, they may be read as indirect sources of reflection for contemporary readers and function as reminders of alternative, primitive ways of human-animal interaction to current practices in modern industrial culture and current beliefs of modern science.

(iii) Mythology

Animal Marriage Narratives

Snyder’s fascination with mythology can be traced back to his Bachelor’s degree in anthropology, culminating in his BA thesis *He Who Hunted Birds in His Father’s Village: the Dimensions of a Haida Myth*. The myth he explores in this thesis is that of a Haida myth about a female goose who marries a human, is (inadvertently) insulted by his human family and leaves her husband. The husband then undertakes a long journey to regain his wife. This myth is a variant on a more universal animal-marriage motif found in mythology all over the world; the

motif of the Swan Maiden. Found in, to name but a few older and newer sources, Celtic mythology (*The Children of Lir*), Arthurian Romance (*The Lady of the Lake*), Germanic fairytales (the Grimm brothers' "The Frog Prince"), Tschaikovski's ballet (*The Swan Lake*), Nō drama (*Hagoromo*, which formed the inspiration of Yeats' play *At the Hawk's Well*), and a short story by Oscar Wilde ("The Fisherman and his Soul"), the myth reaches far and wide. After dealing with the Swan Maiden motif extensively and academically in his thesis on the Haida myth, Snyder revisits the theme in the poem "The Feathered Robe," a poetic incarnation of the myth which is based on the Nō play *Hagoromo*. Snyder describes Nō drama as having its roots in shamanistic chant and performance, and he has engaged with numerous Nō characters and story elements in his poetry, most notably in the long poem *Mountains and Rivers Without End*, and in "The Feathered Robe."

A retelling of *Hagoromo*, "The Feathered Robe" narrates the story of an old man walking by the seashore, who is suddenly struck by a "delicate scent" that leads him to a "splendid robe / of feathers hanging on a bough." He picks up the robe and is addressed by "a shining Lady, / naked from her swim" who cries that she needs her robe to be able to fly home, and in return for a dance, the old man gives the robe back. As the bird-maiden dances her beautiful dance, she ascends to the sky and disappears:

old man watching saw
all he dreamed in youth
the endless springtime
morning beauty
of the world

as

She, dancing, rose
Slow floating over pines
High beyond the hills
a golden speck
In blue sky haze.

Hagoromo is one of the most-performed plays of Japanese Nō theatre, and translated by Pound from the notes of Fenollosa in *'Noh' or Accomplishment: a study of the classical stage of Japan* (1916), as well as by Arthur Waley in 1922. The play, like many Nō plays, is based around the dance of a ghost or supernatural figure, such as the bird-maiden of this story.

In his comprehensive study *The Serpent and the Swan: The Animal Bride in Folklore and Literature*, Boria Sax suggests that the animal bride in animal marriage narratives is most commonly a snake or a bird. He argues that swans and other water birds are particularly attractive for this type of narrative partly because they share certain traits with humans, and partly because they have qualities and abilities that humans desire:

Swans and most other water birds are largely monogamous, and care for their young. Their families, at least viewed from a distance, seem close to the domestic idylls of the human imagination. With their ability to fly, they symbolize freedom, yet their liberty is not obtained through the sacrifice of a secure home. [...] The white color of swans suggests purity, and the softness of their plumage suggests, in many cultures at least, femininity.

Sax also relates the theory of A.T. Hatto, who

traces the origin of the swan maiden stories to attempts to domesticate migratory waterfowl, which leave as the year draws to an end. Examining the migratory paths of these birds, he finds they correspond roughly to the areas in which stories of bird wives have been recorded most often in the northern latitudes and in Central Asia. He adds, further, that many shamans in this region identify strongly with birds, and that their relations with bird spirits are often conceived of as a sort of love affair.

Both the domestic, monogamous qualities of water birds and their migratory nature make them excellent subjects of animal marriage narratives. Unfortunately, Sax does not include much anthropological research on the subject, and he limits himself only to a few minor speculations on a possible explanation for the abundance of the animal marriage motif in world myth and folklore, or the choice of particular animals in animal marriage narratives. This might very well be because such research is not (yet) available, but both theoretical conjectures and practical case studies would certainly shed some more light on the subject. For instance, the significance of

birds in Swan Maiden mythology might be tentatively explained by way of Lévi-Strauss' case study of the Nuer in *Totemism*. The Nuer, Lévi-Strauss argues, give names of terrestrial birds to twins because they are believed to be closer to their God, seen as 'above.' In their relation to this Spirit, they are closer to 'above' than other humans, who are 'of below.' In their position, they are therefore similar to birds, who are also 'of above.' Birds may also be divided according to above and below since there are certain species that fly less high and less well than other species. Human twins, although closer to God, remain essentially human, thus are also partly 'of below.' They are therefore most like terrestrial birds:

Twins 'are birds,' not because they are confused with them or because they look like them, but because twins, in relation to other men, are as 'persons of the above' to 'persons of below,' and, in relation to birds, as 'birds of below' are to 'birds of the above.' They thus occupy, as do birds, an intermediary position between the supreme spirit and human beings.

This little side-step into anthropology may shed some light on the possible prevalence of bird mythology in animal marriage narratives: in their positioning between sky and earth in human perception, at home high in the air as well as below on earth, they are ideal intermediaries between supernatural spirits and humans. Swans and other water birds, especially, could be perceived as having a unique access to the sky, the earth *and* to water, and that might account for their popularity in the Swan Maiden motif.

To return to "The Feathered Robe" and the Haida myth, then, it seems that Snyder was particularly attracted to the universal, cross-cultural qualities of the swan maiden motif in particular, and animal marriage narratives in general, found in both Native American mythology and in Japanese Nō theatre. It is also an indication of Snyder's fascination with the shamanic roots of Nō theatre, something that Ling Chung examines in "Gary Snyder's American-Asian Shamanism." Although Chung focuses mostly on Snyder's engagement with the Nō play *Yamamba* in *Mountains and Rivers Without End*, Chung relates "The Feathered Robe" to the significance of birds, flight and the bird-robe to shamans as identified by Mircea Eliade in *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*. In a speech for a symposium on "Occidental Civilization, Buddhism, and Zen" (Paris, 2002) that centres on *Mountains and Rivers Without End*, Snyder says about his engagement with ancient cultural material:

Even as Zeami (or whoever it was) [the alleged author of *Yamambo*] appropriated this bit of archaic and archetypal lore from ancient Japan and brought Mahayana Buddhist insight to bear on it, transforming it into a work of high art, so I with "some nerve" took it to the western hemisphere. I gave it a new form echoing in part the Native American lore of wild spirits and the findings of geologists.

Although he speaks in this specific instance of his engagement with the Nō play *Yamambo*, this statement naturally applies to his engagement with shamanic lore and Asian and Native American cultural material in general. This is a direct example of Snyder as a mythopoeic author, a myth handler, who adapts ancient myths to contemporary audiences and contemporary times and creates new ones to guide a culture. Snyder sees much value in myth, and in animal marriage myth in particular, for a contemporary audience in its ability to remind people of their closeness to other animals and their position in the universe alongside them:

The worldwide myths of animal-human marriage, or supernatural-human marriage, are evidence of the fascination our ancestors had for the possibility of full membership in a biotic erotic universe. I suspect that many of the problems within the human community – racism and sexism, to name two – reflect back from our confusion about our relation to nature. Ignorance and hostility toward wild human nature set us up for objectifying and exploiting fellow humans.

This fascination for a biotic erotic universe which Snyder clearly shares with our ancestors can be seen both in his gendered representation of hunting, discussed above, and in his various and recurring retellings of animal marriage myths in his work, specifically of the Swan Maiden and Bear Wife motifs. These retellings testify to his aim to show his audience the intricate interwoven relations that have existed between animals and humans in primitive cultures and its relevance for their contemporary views of the world in which they live. Snyder's mythological animal poems form part of a conscious effort of the poet to inspire his readership, and are elemental to his beliefs about the purpose and potential of poetry. However, as argued above, the 'relevance' of these myth retellings for a contemporary audience is very indirect; it would be difficult to imagine any direct relevance of animal marriage myths and primitive hunting rituals

for the contemporary reader facing contemporary issues of factory farming, vivisection, blood sports and other questions of animal rights and welfare. Instead, they are being invited to contemplate past beliefs and practices and, indirectly, to compare them to current beliefs and practices. Like the dancing Deer from the section on hunting, above, these animals cannot be read as real animals and their actions do not represent any biological reality about their behaviour. Nevertheless, though not 'real' as such, I argue that these mythological animals do not represent anything other than themselves or 'real' animals in the poems. They are not used as metaphors for human concerns; at most, the mythological animals may be seen on the metaphorical scale as metaphors for real animals, and as a source of inspiration for contemporary notions of the human-animal relationship.

In addition to the Swan Maiden motif in Snyder's BA thesis and in "The Feathered Robe," another important recurring myth in Snyder's poetry is the Bear Wife motif. His prose reworking of the Tlingit myth "The Woman Who Married A Bear" in *The Practice of the Wild* is accompanied by an exploration of a global bear cult, which provides a detailed context for poems such as "A Berry Feast" (the poem Snyder read at the now legendary Six Gallery Reading in San Francisco, 1955), "The Way West, Underground," "*this poem is for bear*" (the third part of the triptych from the "Hunting" section of *Myths & Texts*), "The Bear Mother" (from *Mountains and Rivers Without End*), "Control Burn," and "Right on the Trail." The Bear Wife myth is one that occurs in various forms in many Native American cultures, especially those on the North Western coast. The basic plot of the myth is this: a young girl, while out picking berries with her friends, repeatedly laughs at and jumps over large bear excrements in mockery of their size, even though such actions are taboo so as not to offend the bears. Shortly after, she meets a young man who takes her away and marries her. She then discovers that he is in fact a grizzly bear who has taken her in punishment for her disrespectful behaviour. The girl and the bear spend the summer together and prepare for winter picking berries and hunting gophers. During the winter she gives birth to two (or in some versions three) cubs. The girl's brothers find her while out hunting, and kill her bear-husband, their brother-in-law. Before he dies, the bear gives the girl instructions on the proper rituals on treating his corpse after death, which will form the basis of the generally observed rituals and taboos concerning bear hunting. The girl returns to her family but has difficulty fitting in since she and her children are part-bear. Her brothers tease her and make her put on bear-skins and act out her bear-life. This eventually pushes the girl over the species boundary into becoming fully animal, and, having become completely bear, she kills her family and returns to the woods alone with her bear cubs.

The story of the Bear Wife is examined in detail by Catharine McClellan in *The Girl Who Married the Bear: A Masterpiece of Indian Oral Tradition*, published in 1970. McClellan examines the story in various tellings and versions, and discusses the basic plot as well as the cultural context of the story. Snyder has selected the version as told by Maria Johns to adapt into prose, and provides careful detail of the original narrator and circumstances of narration in the section "Maria Johns and the Telling of This Story." His version is elaborate and prosaic, with emphasis on the function of the story in conveying rituals and taboos concerning human-bear interaction, and on the emotional elements of the story concerning the girl protagonist and the bear-husband and their dramatic dilemma of loyalties to their own customs and families and to each other. Snyder follows the story with an equally prosaic explanation, "On 'The Woman Who Married The Bear,'" in which he touches on several elements which a contemporary audience might find difficult to understand. Snyder's explanation, quite different in tone to McClellan's academic, anthropological study, includes references to a time when "they all got along," and when all animals, and certain humans, "could change skins, change masks." "The human beings in the original time weren't so bad," Snyder states, but eventually they drifted away, became greedy and stingy, selfish and self-centred. Snyder's account of the context of the myth is vague and rather romantic, with allusions to 'original time,' the (imagined) sensibilities of bears and their love for humans, and the intersecting worlds of animals and humans. Rather than a clear anthropomorphization of animals, however, Snyder presents his ideas of a continuum of intersecting worlds, in which "For a bear, all the beings look like bears. For a human, they all look like humans." It is common, Snyder states, to view other species of animals in the light of one's own, and it is likely that other animals view the world from their own perspective as well. In Snyder's perspective, a certain amount of anthropocentrism is simply unavoidable; humans will regard the world from a human perspective, just as bears will view the world from a bear perspective. This would be hard to avoid, and is in itself not necessarily wrong. It is, however, crucial to acknowledge one's human perspective and to keep it in mind when looking at the world. In this continuum of intersecting worlds, therefore, the girl

who married the bear continues to live in the human world as well as exist in the bear world. "We are always in both worlds," Snyder explains, "because there aren't really two."

The explanation of the story and the details of the origins of the myth are followed by a section on "Arkadia." This is a brief, fragmented overview of the etymological and geographical roots of a European bear-cult in Arkadia, the (once forested) inland of the Peloponnesus of Greece, related to Greek mythology and landscape. The last section, "At the Bear Dance" revolves around a Bear Dance ritual which took place "At Wepamkun, in Notokkoyo, Shasta, June of 40077." In several instances in his poetry and prose, Snyder uses this type of calendar notation. A likely explanation for the calendar is that he takes as a starting point, rather than the birth of Christ, the first human inhabitation of the American continent. In "What Happened Here Before," Snyder states that 40,000 years before, "human people came." The notation of years corresponds to the Common Era / Anno Domini calendar in its last two digits, so that 40077 is 1977 in CE notation. For "Mother Earth, Her Whales," for instance, the date and location are "40072, Stockholm: Summer Solstice," a reference to the United Nations conference on the human environment in Stockholm, which took place in June of 1972. Snyder thus gives his own explanation of the Tlingit story, places it in the context of its original source of narrator Maria Johns, in the geographical and historical context of a ancient bear cult in Greece and in the more contemporary context of a bear ritual in modern day America.

This contextualisation is of course highly suggestive of the historical relevance of bear mythology in general and its uses for contemporary audiences specifically, and Snyder makes his intentions known at the conclusion of the story with the following statement:

That was very long ago. After that time human beings had good relations with the bears. [...] Their story had further consequences: the bear wife was remembered by human beings as a goddess under many names, and there were many stories about her children and what they did in the world. But that period is over now. The bears are being killed, the humans are everywhere, and the green world is being unravelled and shredded and burned by the spreading of a gray world that seems to have no end. If it weren't for a few old people from the time before, we wouldn't even know this tale.

It is clear that Snyder, through re-narration of the story and making it available to larger audiences in more contemporary versions and pointing to the geographical, historical and cultural contexts, aims to bring more awareness of and respect for alternative ways of human-animal interaction to contemporary cultural ethics. In his poetic retellings, then, one can see that the story of the Bear Wife has continued to fascinate him throughout his career. The first mention of the Bear Wife in Snyder's published poems is in "A Berry Feast," which was published in *The Back Country* in 1968 but already read at the Six Gallery Reading in 1955. The poem consists of a long sequence that includes numerous references to Coyote in his various incarnations and stories as well as references to Asian literature, and addresses old and new ways of living in and with nature. Jack Kerouac, who was present at the reading, recorded the events at the reading in slightly fictionalised form in *The Dharma Bums* and mentions Snyder's (or rather, "Ryder's") "anarchistic ideas about how Americans don't know how to live, with lines about commuters being trapped in living rooms that come from poor trees felled by chainsaws." These lines are contrasted with "tender lyrical lines, like the ones about bears eating berries, showing his love of animals."

The combination of bears and berries is significant, and recurs throughout all the bear and Bear Wife poems and in the prose story. The significance seems to lie in the unique and individual part that bears play in the ecosystem with their eating and digestion of berries, which, through their excrements are returned to the ecosystem as seeds from which new berries grow. In the various poems, Snyder mentions manzanita, huckleberries, blackberries and blueberries which can be recognized (according to season) in bear excrements. This emphasis on the mutual reliance of berries and bear on each other for survival subtly suggests the importance of bear in their own habitats and the cyclical, interdependent nature of the natural ecosystem. In "The Bear Mother," this is extended to the presence of humans in the same ecosystem, partially relying on the same food as the bear:

She veils herself
to speak of eating salmon
Teases me with
"What do you know of my ways"
And kisses me through the mountain.

Through and under its layers, its

are obvious. The intimacy between stalker and prey in Kinnell's narrative poem about an Inuit hunter trailing a polar bear is precisely the kind of intimacy that Snyder seeks when he says "I think I'll go hunt bears," the immersion in the habits and realm of the bear through hunting being the closest a human can ever get to a bear outside the sphere of mythology. The reference to shamanic rituals mentioned by Kinnell (but not acted out in the poem) are given in "*this poem is for bear*" in adapted form when Snyder imagines the shamanic song the bear teaches his human wife when he is snared by her brothers.

Snyder visits the Bear Wife myth again in a new poem from *No Nature*, "Right in the Trail," a light-hearted comment on the excrements of a bear that the speaker encounters on a trail near his house. The original provocation of the girl that led the grizzly bear to take her away was the breaking of a taboo concerning bear-excrements. She jumped over it and kicked them and laughed at them, thereby insulting the sensitivities of bears. In "Right in the Trail," Snyder can see why she was tempted to break this taboo:

Here it is, near the house,
A **big** pile, fat scats,
Studded with those deep red
Smooth-skinned manzanita berries,
Such a pile! Such droppings,
Awesome. And I saw how
The young girl in the story,
Had good cause to comment
[...]
She laughed at them
Or maybe **with** them, jumped over them
(Bad luck!), and is reported
to have said "wide anus!"
To amuse or annoy the Big Brown Ones
Who are listening, of course.

Snyder shares her amusement and suggests, as he also does in his prose narration and explanation of the story, that the girl may have broken the taboos on purpose, out of curiosity for the consequences which would inevitably mean communication of sorts. Similar to Snyder's taunting of the bear in "*this poem is for bear*" the provocation is a teasing, a taunting, an invitation to respond: "Perhaps she was being naughty, but we also have to say that she was an exceptional little girl who somehow felt drawn to the wild place." McClellan identifies the strength of this particular animal-marriage narrative partly in its "good plot with considerable action and suspense." However, she suggests that

what probably grips the story-teller and the audience most strongly is the dreadful choice of loyalties that the characters have to make, as well as the pervasive underscore of the delicate and awful balance between animals and humans, which has existed since the world began.

The heart of the myth can thus be located in "the uneasy confrontation between animals and humans which permeates the entire story, just as it permeates the entire fabric of Indian life." In addition to a way of passing on and explaining hunting rituals and taboos, then, the myth forms a type of validation of the relations between humans and bears to soften the uneasiness of the hunting paradox, and a way of coping with this tenuous balance between the roles of animals as both kin and prey of humans.

Snyder's fascination with the Bear Wife motif, and with the bear cult in general, is similar to his fascination with the Swan Maiden motif in its global shamanistic perspective. "The Way West, Underground" poetically explores this notion of a global bear cult that can be traced westward along with shamanic cultures and primitive tribes:

The Bear Wife moves up the coast.

where blackberry brambles
ramble in the burns.

And around the curve of islands
foggy volcanoes
on, to North Japan.

From the “the thick fir forests” of Oregon, Snyder traces back the bear via Japan, China, Tibet, west to Finland (“Karhu – Bjorn – Braun – Bear”), where the trail seems to disappear: “Europa. ‘The West.’ / the bears are gone.” In Europe, in France and Spain, the trail has literally gone “underground:”

Bears and Bison,
Red Hands with missing fingers,
red mushroom labyrinths;
lightning-bolt mazes,
painted in caves,

underground.

The bear cult here is hidden and no longer traceable above ground. The deforested Western Europe shows no visible signs of the once pervasive presence of bears, nor of their interaction with humans, but for the primitive paintings in underground caves. This ‘Way West’ leads the reader to a European west that seems to be both the root of civilisation and the end of the bear, and as the trail goes ‘underground’ to the prehistoric caves the journey seems to have come full circle. The cave wall images of animals, discussed in the first chapter, form both the first depiction of and eventual hiding place for bears in this poem, in a culture that is now so far removed from their prehistoric beginnings that the animals they gave evidence of in the caves have been driven out of its environment. Snyder braids together traversed time and space, and myth and reality in this global trail of bears on the earth and their presence in human culture.

Coyote

In addition to Snyder’s engagement with animal marriage mythology and the prevalence of the Bear Wife character in his poetry, we will take a closer look at another character from Native American mythology and narrative that plays an important role in Snyder’s poems: Coyote Old Man, the trickster figure. Present in Snyder’s poetry as early as the Bear Wife figure, Coyote also makes an important appearance in “A Berry Feast,” read at the Six Gallery Reading in 1955. And like the Bear Wife, Coyote also continues to appear in Snyder’s poetry throughout his career.

Snyder’s engagement with Coyote is perhaps the most apparent and controversial element of his use of Native American material, and is singled out by critics such as Hobson and Silko in their comments on Snyder’s work. The figure of Coyote is explored in detail in a few poems, but makes an appearance, if only by name, in many others, most notably “A Berry Feast,” “The Call of the Wild,” “Manzanita,” “Three Deer One Coyote Running in the Snow,” “Kyoto Born in Spring Song,” “How rare to be born a human being!” “Piute Creek,” and “Wash me on home, mama.” We will focus here on two poems in which Coyote’s presence is most prominent: “A Berry Feast” and “The Call of the Wild.”

The mythological figure Coyote, or Coyote Old Man as he is sometimes called to distinguish him from coyote the animal, is a trickster figure, a mythical figure that plays tricks or otherwise bends or breaks conventional rules and behaviour. The trickster figure can be found in various cultures around the world, and has many familiar incarnations such as Brer Rabbit, Reynard the Fox, Don Juan and Leprechauns. Mark Shackleton sheds light on the importance of the trickster figure in Native American culture:

It is clear why tricksters, seen as figures of survival, are of key importance in Native writing. Tricksters tell stories of survival, and they survive by telling stories. In a culture whose values have survived by the passing down of tales, the trickster is central. The appeal of trickster tales is partly their humour, but also their boundary-breaking inventiveness. Tricksters are shape-shifters [...] Traditional binary oppositions such as male/female, good/bad, destruction/creation, mortal/immortal, animal/human and so on become irrelevant. [...] Frequently, tricksters teach by negative example. The norms of the community are established through stories in which the trickster transgresses taboos.

Although many, if not all, Native American cultures have a trickster figure, the trickster takes various forms in different cultures, and Coyote is only typical of Native peoples west of the plains. Shackleton observes that one reason for the attractiveness of Coyote, especially, for non-Native writers is that “unlike tricksters such as Wakjanga (Winnebago) or Glooscap (Algonquian), Coyote can be immediately visualized.” Coyote, as an animal that is native to

large parts of America, is a familiar animal with clearly identifiable traits that make him an excellent trickster-figure: “sly scavenger on the fringes of civilization, desert loner, survivor against the odds, and so on.” In this clearly identifiable incarnation, well known among non-Native and Native audiences alike, the figure of Coyote can stand for (and easily invoke) what Shackleton calls “a sense of the ‘other,’ be it the West, the psychic or geographical frontier, or the Indian.” Snyder confirms the particular effectiveness of the image of the animal coyote as the trickster Coyote: “coyote the animal is a perfect expression of a specific set of natural relationships, as appropriate to the mountains and deserts of the West as the trickster image is appropriate to certain human needs.” The trickster figure in all its incarnation remains a potent figure in the imagination, and a powerful literary trope in contemporary poetry. Stephen Matterson for instance provides a compelling reading of John Berryman’s *Dream Songs* and their engagement with trickster elements. Matterson points to the relevance of the trickster figure in “post-modernist texts that question the validity of grand narratives and which endorse and embrace the apparently contradictory as a form of multiplicity and which suggest that the concept of a coherent identity is a fiction that should be discarded.”

Snyder explains his poetic involvement with Coyote in his treatise “The Incredible Survival of Coyote,” first presented at the 1974 Western Writers Conference and subsequently published in *The Old Ways* and *A Place in Space*. Snyder examines the figure of Coyote and his relevance for a contemporary audience in much the same way as his explanation of the story “The Woman who Married the Bear” in *The Practice of the Wild*, discussed above:

Old Man Coyote lived in myth time, the dream time – and lots of things happened then. [...] He’s always traveling, he’s really stupid, he’s kind of bad – in fact, he’s really awful, he’s outrageous. But he’s done some good things too: he got fire for people.

Snyder clearly explains the figure of Coyote to a non-Native audience here, mentioning a few different stories from a few different sources to give the reader a glimpse of the meaning of Coyote and some insight into the nature of the character. As in his explanation of the Bear Wife myth, Snyder’s treatment of the mythological character has the character of playful and informal instruction and the tone is similarly colloquial, romantic, and vague. He also informs the reader, within parentheses, of the limitations of his engagement with Coyote:

(Of course, I’m only reading Coyote as I can, namely as a twentieth-century, West Coast white American. How the Native American people themselves actually saw Coyote is another question.)

Snyder’s awareness of the limitations here is expressed as a mere side-note and, paradoxically, combined with the questionable use of past tense for Native American engagement with Coyote. Native American authors do also engage with Coyote in contemporary writing, and Hobson singles Snyder’s essay out in his critical essay on the rise of white shamanism. He criticizes Snyder for “totally ignore[ing] what modern Indian writers such as Simon Ortiz, Leslie Silko, and Scott Momaday have done with Coyote in their works, and instead prais[ing] certain “white shamans” who have suddenly discovered Coyote.” Snyder indeed singles out non-Native American poets like Will Staple, Barry Gifford, Ed Dorn, Enrique LaMadrid, Margo St. James, James White and James Koller, but indicates that he is “dubious” about work that was inspired to some extent (he suggests eighty percent) at the library and less so by direct experience. That direct experience, however, he sees as available to all those who are open to it. In true democratic fashion, Snyder quotes contemporary Coyote poetry by both the non-Native American Lewis MacAdams and the Native American Peter Blue Cloud. We will return to this critical note after a closer look at Snyder’s actual engagement with Coyote in his poems.

“A Berry Feast,” discussed briefly in relation to the Bear Wife motif above, brings together various references to Coyote stories with criticism of mainstream American culture and its consumptive patterns. The poem positions Coyote as a humorous, naughty and irreverent hero of counter-culture while providing glimpses of alternative, less materialistic ways of living in a tone of exuberant rebellion:

Fur the color of mud, the smooth looper
Crapulous old man, a drifter
Praises! of Coyote the Nasty, the fat
Puppy that abused himself, the ugly gambler
Bringer of goodies.
[...]

The Chainsaw falls for boards of pine,

Suburban bedrooms, block on block
Will waver with this grain and knot,
The maddening shapes will start and fade
Each morning when commuters wake –
Joined boards hung on frames,
a box to catch the biped in.

Patrick Murphy's insightful close reading of the poem in *A Place for Wayfaring* notes the emphasis on "fecundity and sexuality, as well as trickster subversion and the blurring of boundaries established by categories that separate the human from the rest of nature." This occurs especially through the "interweaving of bear and coyote myths with human stories." In addition to this use of animal mythology to blur artificial boundaries separating mankind from his animal origins, Coyote here functions as a "stand-in for the Beat generation." Shackleton also remarks on this counter-cultural role of Coyote in this and other Snyder poems, stating that "In a number of poems from the 1950s Snyder places Coyote within the context of Buddhist thought, so that Coyote becomes a kind of Bodhisattva or Beat figure." Although Snyder does not bring Buddhism into "A Berry Feast," Coyote is brought in as a hero of beat rebellion.

"You can't be killers all your life
"the people are coming –
– and when Magpie
Revived him, limp rag of fur in the river
Drowning and drifting, fish-food in the shallows,
"Fuck you!" sang Coyote
and ran.

In this fragment inspired by a Native American Coyote story, Coyote is a drifter, a survivor and a rebel at the same time. Kerouac records his response to the reading in *The Dharma Bums* as follows:

'Fuck you! sang Coyote, and ran away!' read Japhy to the distinguished audience,
making them all howl with joy, it was so pure, fuck being a dirty word that comes out
clean.

Although a fictional account and therefore automatically a mediated response, Kerouac's enthusiasm at this mysterious figure Coyote as an example of beat-style rebellion is telling. The poem concludes with a post-apocalyptic view of the landscape in which

Coyote yaps, a knife!
Sunrise on yellow rocks.
People gone, death no disaster,
Clear sun in the scrubbed sky
empty and bright
Lizards scurry from darkness
We lizards sun on yellow rocks.

Coyote rules this desert landscape in which people are absent and the true inhabitants, whether originally human or not, are "we lizards" who sun themselves on the rocks.

A less optimistic and rambunctious view of Coyote is provided in "The Call of the Wild," a poem in which Coyote again forms a contrast against mainstream America. Suffused with concern over the Vietnam War, the poem speaks of

All these Americans up in special cities in the sky
Dumping poisons and explosives
Across Asia first,
And next North America

A war against earth.
When it's done there'll be
no place

A Coyote could hide.

Coyote, in this poem, is as much an animal as a mythical figure as Snyder invokes a scene of a "heavy old man in his bed at night" who "hears the Coyote singing" and will call the "Government / Trapper / who uses iron leg-traps on Coyotes." The enjambment between

“Government” and “Trapper” gives the phrase an ambiguous meaning of ‘government’ itself as ‘trapper’ of the wild. Shackleton aptly observes that the destruction of these coyotes with capital “C” suggests “not only the destruction of a species, but the obliteration of the Native American people and their way of life.” The mythical Coyote, born out of a deep connection of Native American peoples with a familiar figure in their natural environment, will lose his meaning and relevance when the animal coyote is no longer visible (or audible). And Snyder laments that looming loss for his sons, who will “lose this / Music they have just started / To love,” which is the coyote howling, the call of the wild.

The poem pokes fun at young American urban hippies who come to the woods to commune with nature but sell their trees because a logger told them “trees are full of bugs.” The tone is one of melancholic irony, when Snyder states that “And the Coyote singing / is shut away / for they fear / the call / of the wild.” The short, enjambed lines give the stanza a staccato reading that highlights the irony of this fear of bugs and howling coyotes. The title “The Call of the Wild,” and the use of the phrase within the poem, are of course a clear reference to Jack London’s novel, discussed in the first chapter, about a domesticated dog who regains his primitive instincts and eventually returns to the wild as the alpha male of a wolf pack. The reference locates the poem firmly in the American tradition, aligning the call of the wild of the American Far North at the start of the twentieth century with the nearly vanished wild of the Californian territory at the close of the twentieth century. The call of the wild in this poem is the “singing” of coyotes, and as man is increasingly separated from nature, he will no longer hear its call reminding him of the connection. Snyder’s pairing of man’s disconnection from his natural origins with the violence of war and disregard for life, be it human or animal or vegetable, echoes Galway Kinnell’s poem “The Fundamental Project of Technology,” which we discussed in the previous chapter. The threat of the “war against earth” is frightening, and Snyder’s envoy to the poem is decidedly pessimistic. Where Coyote emerges as the ruler of the post-apocalyptic desert in “A Berry Feast,” in this poem, there will be no place where he can hide from human violence. And with the extinction of coyote the animal will come the extinction of Coyote the myth figure:

I would like to say
Coyote is forever
Inside you.

But it’s not true.

Coyote’s “call of the wild” is a wake-up call for humans, a call that should be heard forever to remind humans of their position in their natural environment and their relation to other animal species. When this call is silenced, Snyder suggests, the loss of coyote the animal will ultimately mean the loss of Coyote the trickster, and the loss of the Native American cultures that gave birth to him.

Coyote is, then, not only a figure of rebellion and counter culture in Snyder’s poetry, but also an important link for Americans to the myths that were brought forth from the American landscape. These myths, originating in primitive people who have inhabited the land for thousands of years, will be able to continue to provide contemporary Americans with a sense of their environment and a connection to their soil. Snyder’s engagement with Coyote, whether given centre stage in poems such as “A Berry Feast” or “A Call of the Wild” or brief appearances in poems like “three deer, one coyote running through the snow,” Piute Creek,” or “Manzanita,” is primarily concerned with a sense of grounding, of belonging and recognition. This creature, recognized in myths from his presence in the woods and recognized in the woods from his role in the myths, provides Snyder with a sense of roots in American soil and its history that stretches to long before the Anglos were there.

Snyder’s use of the figure of Coyote in his poetry, however, is more fragmented and disjointed than his engagement with the Bear Wife myth, which consists of various retellings of one myth, of which the context and origins are provided not in the poems themselves, but at least in a clear prose exploration. Coyote is an ambiguous mythical figure who plays many roles in many myths, a shape-shifter who is difficult to grasp in one story alone, let alone in the many stories from the various cultures in which he plays a part. Shackleton compares Snyder’s use of Coyote with that of Simon J. Ortiz and remarks that in several instances, Snyder’s mere mention of Coyote is “intended to imply a great deal, but the average reader, deeply versed in neither Buddhist thought nor Native American myth, will have to go to secondary sources for clarification.” Although Shackleton concludes that he does not believe that “one culture should

be denied the right to explore another culture's materials," he argues that "if Coyote is superficially adopted by mainstream writers then his significance as an expression of a Native worldview will be distorted." For a culture that relies on myths and legends being used to pass down cultural values and codes through the centuries, this is a real threat to the Native way of life. With this warning, he refers back to Snyder's caution in "The Incredible Survival of Coyote" in which Snyder informs the reader of his awareness of the responsibility in handling a mythical figure like Coyote: "The spirit of Coyote, [Snyder] says in 'The Incredible Survival', is not just a humorous literary conceit but also a potentially malicious force: '...the always-traveling, always lustful, breaker-of-limits side of the Trickster could destroy any human poet who got locked into it.'" Despite his own warning, however, Snyder makes his intentions clear: "poetry has always [evoked stories of the "worldwide myth, tale, and motif storehouse"] – drawing out, re-creating, subtly altering for each time and place the fundamental images." Although I believe that Snyder at times toes the line of what may be deemed responsible use of cultural material and what might be denounced as colonial cultural appropriation in his more fragmented use of the Coyote character, I agree with Shackleton that one culture should be allowed to explore another culture's materials. To deny this would not only be impossible, it would also be an undesirable denial of history and geography. Snyder clearly identifies himself as an American poet, interested in the cultural history of the North-American continent, and his poetic use of Native American cultural material first and foremost acknowledges the significance of Native American culture for the cultural history of that geographical location. For a committed poet of place and regionalism, it might very well be deemed irresponsible not to incorporate Native American cultural material. Though Snyder's use of Coyote, especially, runs the risk of distorting the mythical figure, it also makes contemporary readers aware of the culture hero/trickster figure and its place in American history and geography. Snyder's contemporary, non-Native engagement with Coyote, like his engagement with the Bear Wife and the Swan Maiden stories, testifies to his strategies to re-narrate and revive ancient myths for contemporary audiences, reminding readers of ways of life in which animals and humans lived in closer relation to each other, and making them aware of the necessity to respect and embrace their dependence on their natural surroundings and their relation to other species. Although the inspirational potential of these poems is indirect, it ultimately explores the consequences of breaking behavioural taboos and might encourage contemporary readers to bring their practices in agreement with their beliefs.

Conclusion

Through an exploration of Snyder's stylistic strategies and thematic engagements with hunting and mythology in his animal poems, we have seen that Snyder very much writes about both real, living animals as well as mythological animals, and rarely, if ever, employs his animal subjects and images as metaphors for anything but themselves. He makes a conscious effort to portray only real animals, that is, only animals that he has actually seen. His animals are not used to convey anything about the human experience in his poems, unless it is the human experience of encounters with those animals and of their relation to them. Snyder attempts to show the reader the experience of seeing the world, and especially seeing animals, without language, and to bring that seeing into poetry using a range of stylistic strategies accumulated from influences as widely apart as high modernism and shamanism. In his portrayal of animals, he searches for ways to provide the reader with glimpses of their essentially unknowable nature, often through juxtaposition, ellipsis, space, and silence. Snyder consciously and carefully avoids anthropocentrism where possible, and acknowledges it where unavoidable, as he breaks down the traditional, conservative man-animal or man-nature dichotomies. Human and nonhuman animals are equal participants in the same natural environment, with each their own perspective on the other.

In order to reconnect contemporary readers with their primitive roots in the world and their original relationships with other animals, Snyder invokes a wide range of mythological narratives and characters from the "worldwide myth, tale, and motif storehouse" in his poems. He uses mythologies of primitive peoples, especially those related to hunting practices and to animal marriage and trickster motifs to explore ways in which humans can commune with animals. In his engagement with primitive cultures, Snyder attempts to bridge the contemporary gap between nature and civilization and to remind readers of their once intimate relationships with animals and their position among, rather than above, their natural surroundings and their animal relatives.

Chapter 4

James Merrill and the Animal Sublime

Introduction

In a letter to Judith Moffett from 1976, James Merrill writes:

Whether I truly liked nature or not, or liked her best when she most resembled artifice, I understood – especially as I approached maturity – that she provides images invaluable through being common currency. Anything in nature could not be wholly private or subjective. The most peculiar thoughts or feelings were “safe” [i.e. not expressions of one eccentric personality] the moment they touched the base of whatever natural object or process one might choose in order to describe them.

Like Emerson, Merrill perceives nature as language through which to communicate, suggesting that personal thoughts and feelings, once attached to universal images, become accessible to other individual minds. Nature functions first and foremost as language, as metaphor, before it is represented (if at all) as an entity with a reality in its own right. This view is central to Merrill’s experience of nature, which is that of an ever changeable entity, subject to the unending flux of the external world as well as to the continuous flux of the internal realm of the mind. This changeability of the external world is often presented as something negative, treacherous almost, as the “grim law” of constant growth. If there is any physical reality at all, therefore, it can never be accurately represented since it is ever-changing and wholly subjective. Universal currency though nature may be, its most useful quality for Merrill may lie in its malleability to represent the impressions and associations of the individual.

Merrill’s perspective on animals, when taken as distinct from nature in general, is largely similar. Although abundant especially in his earlier poetry, animal subjects are rarely represented as *things* in themselves, but employed as rich metaphoric vehicles for a wide range of topics, from artistry itself to love and transformation. Uniquely useful in their availability for personification, Merrill’s animals provide him with a mental palette with which to explore his artistic self, his role in relationships and his experiences with the unpredictability of the external world. This chapter will look at the ways in which Merrill uses and represents animals in his poetry. We will examine which animals Merrill chooses to work with, and in what way they are employed as metaphors. We will also look carefully at to what extent, if at all, the animal subject retains a presence in and of itself, or, if not, how and where that presence is displaced. Merrill’s poetic outlook on the world and his engagement with his external environment in his work is distinctly metaphorical, and a detailed exploration of Merrill’s poetic treatment of animal subjects will be very valuable to a clear understanding of this fundamental quality of Merrill’s poetics.

James Ingram Merrill was born in 1926, into the wealthy family of Charles E. Merrill, one of the founders of Merrill Lynch & Co, and his second wife Hellen Ingram. His parents divorced in 1939. Merrill was raised in Manhattan and Southampton, Long Island, where his parents had a country home. He was educated at Lawrenceville preparatory school and Amherst College, taking a year out to serve in the army, and graduated *summa cum laude* in 1947. Merrill travelled extensively throughout his lifetime, and lived in Stonington, Connecticut, in Athens, Greece and in Key West, Florida, with his long-time partner David Jackson. He died in Tucson, Arizona in 1995. After two false starts at publishing poetry (*Jim’s Book* was assembled from poems printed in the *Lawrenceville’s Literary Magazine* and privately printed by his father as a sixteenth-birthday gift, *The Black Swan* was privately published by Merrill’s Amherst Professor and sometime lover Kimon Friar in Athens, Greece in

1946), Merrill's first trade book of poems, *First Poems*, was published in 1951, and he would go on to publish another thirteen volumes of poetry, two novels, three plays and a memoir during his prolific and celebrated career.

Merrill has been awarded numerous prizes for his work, including the National Book Award for his collection of poetry *Nights and Days* in 1966, the Bollingen Prize for Poetry for *Braving the Elements* in 1972, and the Pulitzer Prize for *Divine Comedies* in 1976. *Divine Comedies* contained the first part of what would become a trilogy of epic poetry based on Merrill and Jackson's sessions with a Ouija board, "The Book of Ephraim." The second part of that trilogy, *Mirabell: Books of Number*, won the National Book Award for Poetry in 1978, and together with the third part, *Scripts for the Pageant* and "Coda: The Higher Keys," these works were collected in *The Changing Light at Sandover*, which was awarded the National Book Critics Circle Award in 1982. *The Inner Room*, published in 1988, received the Bobbit National Prize for Poetry, awarded by the Library of Congress. Merrill's last volume of poems, *A Scattering of Salts*, was published posthumously in 1995.

In 2001, Alfred A. Knopf published James Merrill's *Collected Poems*, edited by J.D. McClatchy and Stephen Yenser. This collection was followed by a *Collected Novels and Plays* in 2002, *Collected Prose* in 2004, and a new edition of *The Changing Light at Sandover*, which includes the stage adaptation "Voices from Sandover," in 2006. These four substantial collections of work are testament to the wide range and sheer volume of Merrill's oeuvre. If his poetic career has at some point been, perhaps, slightly overshadowed by his strange and controversial epic trilogy based on communications with the Other World, Merrill's *Collected Poems* demonstrates that, both before and after *Sandover*, he has produced a great amount of excellent verse inspired by *this* world. Merrill's use of the natural world in imagery and subject matter is radically different from that of Kinnell and Snyder. Highly metaphorical and often manifestly anthropocentric, Merrill's nature imagery is domestic, ornamental, emblematic, and generally set in the private sphere, the interior, rather than the public sphere or the outdoors.

In this chapter, like in the earlier chapters, we look at a selection of Merrill's animal poems, rather than at all of them. Merrill's animal poetry is not divided evenly across his oeuvre, partly because the main project of the later stages of Merrill's career, the *Sandover* project, involved very few animal subjects. Even allowing for that variable, however, animal poems feature more heavily in Merrill's early works. *First Poems*, especially, contains an extraordinary amount of animal poetry when compared to later volumes. Where *First Poems* includes "The Black Swan," "The Parrot," "The Pelican," "The Parrot," "Transfigured Bird," "Periwinkles," "Accumulations of the Sea" and "Variations and Elegy: White Stag, Black Bear," and *The Country of a Thousand Years of Peace* has "The Octopus," "Laboratory Poem," "At the Bullfight," "About the Phoenix," and "The Locust," all of the later volumes have only one or two animal poems apiece, such as "To a Butterfly" and "The Parrot Fish" from *Water Street*, "Maisie" from *Nights and Days*, "The Envoys" and "Remora" from *The Fire Screen*, "The Housefly" from *Late Settings* and "My Father's Irish Setters" and "Cosmo" from *A Scattering of Salts*. (This list is, of course, far from exhaustive). Moffett argues that

Merrill's later uses of nature imagery and emblems abandon the static, polished swans and pelicans of *First Poems* for increasingly supple, whimsical, interesting, and charming figures. But the other dimensions of a setting, especially a natural setting, have continued to be more important than its literal one, which masks or mirrors – often intriguingly – the real life of a poem: its emotion.

And indeed, the animal poems from *Country* are already different in tone from those of *First Poems*. The animal subjects largely remain metaphorical tools or mirrors that reflect a certain emotion or mood, but the emotions or moods that are reflected become somewhat more intricate, nuanced and involved.

In the later stages of Merrill's career, several of these emotions or moods revolve around questions of love. Merrill's memoir *A Different Person* indicates that in the early stages of his writing, he considered himself to be inexperienced in matters of the heart, and the memoir details his explorative attitude to his homosexuality and his early relationships. Later in life, Merrill would write about his experiences with love and relationships in captivating animal poems such as "Remora," in which a parasitic

sea creature attaches itself to a defenceless, “pea-brained” shark only to abandon it ruthlessly in the face of danger. Or “The Housefly,” in which, in an elaborate conceit, the lonely speaker is inspired by the presence of a fly to reminisce about its “ancestress” who once rested on the bare chest of a sleeping lover who is now long gone. Merrill’s complex relationship with his parents’ marriage and divorce finds expression in “My Father’s Irish Setters” and in “Variations and Elegy; White Stag, Black Bear,” which revolves around six variations and an elegy inspired by his father’s cameo ring of a white stag and a black bear in mortal combat that turn into images both of the mythical lovers Psyche and Eros and his mother and father.

Of Merrill’s animal poems, however, the most interesting ones are not the poems that concern love and relationships, but the poems that examine questions of artistic identity and poetic transformation, as well as the poems that invoke the sublime when they look closely at their animal subject. Both themes, as we will come to see, are closely related to Merrill’s poetics of metaphoricity, and both themes question the presence of the animal entity within the abstract realm of the poem. As such, they are profoundly different from the animal poems of Kinnell and Snyder. Though Kinnell’s animal poems revolve around human questions concerning life and death, their poetic exploration through animal subjects is not entirely metaphorical. Instead of looking at animals through allegory, Kinnell explores the boundaries of kinship and otherness and involves a strong sense of real, living animals in his poems. Alternatively, Snyder makes very direct attempts to convey in poetry the essence of the animal, and writes about both spiritual (through myth) and physical (through hunting) engagements with the animal. For most of the poems by these poets, the ‘realness’ of the animals in the poems is of direct relevance to the meaning or purpose of the poem. Merrill’s animal poetry is much more conservative in this respect and may be described as ‘rear-garde.’ If we see Kinnell and Snyder’s engagement with real animals as in keeping with the changing views of society towards animals during their career, we may read Merrill’s animal poems as more consistent with traditional lyrical treatments of the animal. This is not to say that there have not always been poets who were interested in portraying real, living animals in their poetry, even as they invoked them as metaphors too. But Snyder’s poetry actively engages with a (at the time) newly developing awareness of nature and environmental concerns, and Kinnell’s poetry, though less directly ecocentric, similarly engages with real, living animals, questioning and subverting the conceptual boundaries between animals and humans. As we will see in our examination of Merrill’s animal poems, Merrill generally employs the animal subject or image as a metaphor or symbol and either ignores or displaces any sense of the actual animal or mystifies it and distances it from the human. In certain later animal poems, Merrill seems to address this absence, by invoking them as a source of the sublime. As I will argue, this sublime functions as a metaphor for the unknowable animal, and thus as a substitute for the animal presence as an acknowledged absence.

This chapter, then, is divided into three sections. Section i) *The Beholder’s Eye* looks at the development of Merrill’s poetics, especially regarding his early and significant involvement with metaphor as a poetic device, as apparent in his early poems “The Cosmological Eye,” “The Green Eye,” and in the later poem “In Nine Sleep Valley.” Section ii) *Birds and shells*, will look at the selection of bird poems from *First Poems* “The Parrot,” “The Pelican,” and “The Peacock,” as well as “Transfigured Bird” and “Periwinkles” from the same collection. Section iii) *The Animal Sublime* will take a close look at Merrill’s evocation of a sense of the sublime in animal poems that focus on the terrifying beauty and overwhelming mystery of their animal subjects, “Octopus,” “The Locusts” and “The Black Swan.”

i) **The Beholder’s Eye**

As stated above, Merrill’s poetic perspective on the world is distinctly metaphorical, and he has commented on this perspective in an interview with Thomas Bolt in 1991 in response to a question that Bolt asked about Proust and Cavafy, inquiring who has been the greater influence on Merrill’s work. Merrill’s answer is Proust, since, although he loves Cavafy, that poet has not “shaped [his] way of seeing to the degree that Proust has,” mainly because (unlike Proust) Cavafy “writes without metaphor.” When Bolt

asks Merrill how important metaphor is to poetry, he gives the following answer:

A lot of metaphor must be in the beholder's eye. My kind of mind is so used to "seeing double" that it finds unwelcome subtexts in an instruction manual. To put it too bluntly, I think metaphor *is* poetry; and if I open to a poem without any, I can't help trying to see what's there in a faintly metaphorical or symbolic light. It's the way I'd look at a photograph, if it comes to that. How else could a picture be worth a thousand words? A psychiatrist friend calls the creative temperament Janusian – after Janus, whose nature is to look both ways. I thought everybody was like that but he said no, that for him, the implications of phrases like a 'dark white' or a 'burning cold' – which are mother's milk to me – left him feeling, you know, seasick.

The comment is telling, and points up the absolute significance of metaphor in Merrill's poetics: "metaphor *is* poetry." Merrill has commented in more interviews, and in different contexts, on "seeing double," on a basic duality of perspective and on being "of two minds" about everything. With reference to metaphor, however, and especially metaphor in nature imagery, Merrill's double vision is not made up of equal parts. Far more importance is given to the metaphorical element, to the commentary on the human condition that the natural images provide, than is given to the natural images themselves. And often in Merrill's poems they remain just that; images, which, if ever really seen, are never represented as entities in their own right. Where Kinnell attains a rather balanced duality in his poetic vision, presenting to the reader the natural subject *and* its metaphorical possibilities, and where Snyder veers in the direction of pure Imagism, presenting not only the *thing* in its own right, but also attempting to represent or at least suggest the unknowable qualities, the invisible or unspeakable *essence* of the thing, Merrill looks in the other direction entirely, and brings to the reader all that the thing evokes; all, really, but the thing itself.

This metaphorical eye, this distinctly figurative way of seeing (or looking), is the subject of two early Merrill poems, "The Cosmological Eye," from the limited edition volume *The Black Swan*, and "The Green Eye," from *First Poems*. Both are early poems, and as such they may be read as early explorations of a distinct poetics. Both poems also focus on the act of looking as the more important part of perception, and put the external world in a decidedly less important position to the internal impression. The protagonist of "The Cosmological Eye" is a myopic male looking at the reflection of his surroundings in a mirror and comparing the value of his (compromised) eyesight to that of his mind's eye, or imagination. The reflection shows a blurred blue of both sea and sky "prismed" in the mirror, and as he considers the presence of the view and his lack of access to it, he questions why it should be so that he never knew "the sharp elegance / That is birds flying." The word "prismed" carries echoes of 'imprisoned,' as if the sea and sunlight are imprisoned in the mirror, inaccessible to his eyes.

After two stanzas, however, the tone of the poem changes and, as if overcompensating for his imperfect sight, the protagonist decides that he is actually happier with the "flawless," "happily blurred blue" that he is able to make out than he would be with the details, the "birds, foam, subtleties of blue, / smoke, bone, a sail, blue shells" that the "keen-eyed" are able to see. The sky, he argues, is in fact the best of images for the myopic since it is "realest" in reflection and dream, or, since it cannot be touched, at least as real in reflection and dream as in reality. The poem contains an ambiguous tone of pride and self-satisfaction, smugness almost, in its insistence on the equality of the views:

The rare *azur*

Is flawless; happily blurred blue is no whit
Less exquisite than blue unblurred. And what
He misses he would never know was there.

The mirror and the rare *azur* alas
Are not the same. The keen-eyed have seen this
And tell of birds, foam, subtleties of blue,
Smoke, bone, a sail, blue shells that are of less
Being to him than ideal blues. It is
His proud despair that he will never, now

Turn to the broad, unbleached experience.

This imperfection, this flaw, is a happy one, really, the protagonist seems to say. The imperfection of his eyesight forces him to develop his imagination, his mind's eye. The poem closes with the assertion that it is not the mirror that numbs him, not the fact that he looks at any scene indirectly that compromises his vision. Instead, it is "his ultimate eye" that does so, his imagination, or his mind's eye, that creates his unique perspective, and "numbs" him to reality. The poem, which starts ambiguously, thus ends in a triumph denoted by the word "ultimate". Whereas the blue bewilderment was initially "prismed"/imprisoned in the mirror, this prison or prism now becomes a tool for the liberation of the mind's eye from the details of reality. Although the use of the verb "numb" in the last sentence ("Nor is it / the mirror that numbs him. It is his ultimate eye") is not necessarily a positive term, the protagonist seems determined to celebrate his unique perspective, his "ultimate eye."

It is, of course, well known that Merrill himself was myopic. In her memoir *Familiar Spirits*, Alison Lurie describes him as "shortsighted, with thick black-rimmed spectacles" at the time of their first meeting, when Merrill was twenty-four years old. Moffett also mentions Merrill's eyesight, in (cautious) relation to his poetic perspective on nature:

The eyes Merrill simply cannot believe – very shortsighted eyes from a very early age, a fact which (as in James Joyce's case) may or may not be relevant – keep transforming, domesticating nature in the act and moment of viewing, and the effect is to disarm: wild things become little people amusingly disguised as fish or fly or bird, or even a grizzly who "Dies for pressing people to his heart." Galway Kinnell's great bleeding bear would shamble through that silvery snare as if it were a cobweb; Merrill, who relates to nature less directly, has made that limitation serve a different purpose.

Moffett's comparison of Merrill's bear subject from "In Nine Sleep Valley" to Kinnell's hunted bear in "The Bear" is telling, especially in the context of this exploration of the animal poems of three very diverse poets, and we will take a closer look at how Merrill's representation of bears relates to the bear poems by Kinnell and Snyder below. Moffett is careful to point out that one cannot make too much of Merrill's myopia in terms of his poetics. "The Cosmological Eye," however, does certainly suggest that Merrill, in the early stages of his poetic career, considered a relationship between the quality of his eyesight and his poetic perspective.

The poet's manifestly metaphorical perspective on (especially) the natural world is also the topic of "The Green Eye," in which the focus has shifted from the *azur* blue of sky and sea in "The Cosmological Eye" to the various shades of green that may inspire the mind contemplating nature. Again, the topic is the way of seeing rather than the sight itself:

Come, child, and with your sunbeam gaze assign
Green to the orchard as a metaphor
For contemplation, seeking to declare
Whether by green you specify the green
Of orchard sunlight, blossom, bark, or leaf,
Or green of an imaginary life.

As Moffett points out: "Green is not here a quality of the orchard beheld but a color in the eye of the beholder, elaborated and qualified by greens remembered or imagined." This echoes Merrill's own statement that "A lot of metaphor must be in the beholder's eye," quoted above. The poem firmly places all possible visual qualities of the orchard in the mind's eye rather than in the orchard itself. Since the world is too disposed to change, there can never be a reality stable from one moment to the next. Moreover, since the person looking does so from a different mental perspective from one moment to the next, even if reality were to remain stable, the perception never can. The green of the orchard, or rather, all the greens of the orchard, are therefore only metaphors for the orchards of the mind.

Merrill presents the green not as one colour, but as a "mosaic of all possible greens" that functions as a "premise in your eye," a starting point for reasoning or

imagining. This assigns the actual colour, the orchard or natural *thing*, much less importance than the associations that it inspires. Nature here contributes to a 'premise,' a collection of sensory impressions rather than a catalogue of individual 'things' with merit of their own, to be described or captured precisely as "the green of orchard sunlight, blossom, bark, or leaf." Merrill creates a poetics in which none of these are more important than a "green of an imaginary life." There is a suggestion in this poem, too, of details that cannot be quite made out by the eye, of images that are only half-seen, or seen in dreams or reflections, as the sky in "The Cosmological Eye" is seen in the mirror: limes are green "...as limes faintly by midnight known, / as foliage in a thunderstorm, as dreams / of fruit in barren countries..." Faint images, dreams, darkness of midnight and thunderstorm obscure the vision, or create an ambiguity that defies precise description in ways that are similar to the blurred vision of the sky seen in a mirror. And where eyes cannot be trusted, the mind offers something infinitely enhanced: "a new, impersonal green" that "is metaphor for more incredible things, / things you shall live among, things seen, things known." Whereas vision is imprecise or changeable, in short, the mind's eye has a mosaic that forms the palette for precision of impression, rather than realism.

In his undergraduate thesis on Proust, Merrill comments on the possibilities of art capturing reality in all its changeability. Both Moffett and Labrie discuss this (unpublished) essay on metaphor in the work of Proust, in which Merrill regards Proust essentially as an Impressionist. Moffett points out that the premise of the Impressionist movement in visual arts, as Merrill describes it, is very similar to his own artistic aim of capturing the changeability of the external world. She quotes from Merrill's thesis:

[The Impressionists] came to realize that the sensuous experience of an object was infinitely variable, depending upon the light in which it was seen and other objects around it. And despite their desertion of the studio in favour of the open countryside, they discovered more and more that, in practice, no objective reality in the world about them could be revealed.

Labrie makes a similar point in his 1982 book length study of Merrill's work:

The Impressionist begins either in painting or writing, Merrill wrote, with the assumption that the true existence of an individual lies in his mental processes rather than in the external incidents of his life. Merrill concedes the indissoluble mystery of the external objects stressing that objects can only be known through a tentative grasp of shifting sensations. Thus, Impressionist art necessarily mirrors the individual temperament of the artist, who attempts to fix sensations in a momentary illusion of stability and order while inwardly conceding that reality is an endless state of flux whose complexity surpasses the mind's power to deal definitively with it.

These similarities between the Impressionist movement in visual arts and Merrill's own aim to capture the transient beauty of the external world in recording the impressions that they make on the mind are evident in "The Cosmological Eye" and "The Green Eye." What influences an image, Merrill suggests in "The Green Eye," is not only the infinite variability of the view itself, depending on light, perspective, surrounding objects and so forth, but also the sense impression an image makes on the mind, based on what the spectator is feeling or thinking at the time of looking. Merrill has re-stated this in interviews: "I think that objects are very subtle reflectors. When you are in an emotional state, whatever your eye lights on takes on something of the quality of a state of mind." Merrill seems to find his metaphorical perspective on the world and the associative tendencies of his mind quite inevitable and at times tiresome, as attested to in "To A Butterfly," from his third volume *Water Street* (1962):

Goodness, how tired one grows
Just looking through a prism:
Allegory, symbolism.
I've tried, Lord knows,

To keep from seeing double.....

In his poetry, however, Merrill seems to have embraced his talent for metaphor and his

associative mind's eye.

This mind's eye, or "ultimate eye" as it is called in "The Cosmological Eye," is one that contrasts against the 'famous eye' or 'transparent eye' of Elizabeth Bishop. A close friend of Merrill for decades, and one of his main poetic role models, Bishop was known for her keen capacity for observation, for getting the details and the tone of a description just right. The phrase 'famous eye' was conceived by her friend and contemporary Robert Lowell in admiration of Bishop's eye for detail and accuracy or truthfulness of vision. In an essay on the publication of Bishop's *Collected Poems*, Merrill writes about her poetic vision:

Robert Lowell, among many, praised her "famous," farsighted eye. In her elegy for him, she acknowledges it herself:

*I can make out the rigging of a schooner
A mile off; I can count
The new cones on the spruce.*

But the marvels that appear on every page are as much acts of imagining as of seeing. Here is fog in Nova Scotia:

*Its cold, round crystals
Form and slide and settle
In the white hens' feathers,
In gray glazed cabbages,
On the cabbage roses
And lupins like apostles.*

The essay is titled "The Transparent Eye," and Merrill plays on the I / eye dichotomy, arguing that although Bishop's voice may be idiosyncratic in certain poems, she, as the author of the poems, maintains "a purified, transparent 'I,' which readers may take as their virtual own."

This transparent eye that Merrill admires is something radically different from the ultimate eye that is described in "The Cosmological Eye." An obvious contrast can of course be observed in Bishop's farsighted vision versus Merrill's shortsightedness, but the more significant, underlying difference is the focus of the description. Whereas Merrill argues that Bishop's descriptions, the representations of her poetic objects, are "as much acts of imagining as of seeing," Bishop's focus lies squarely on the object, and the imagination provides a way of describing the object as truthfully and accurately as possible. This is based on the assumption that there is a truth to represent, that there is a possibility for accuracy and inaccuracy, even in an ever-changing external world, even when perceived from an ever-changing internal self. Bishop's description, Merrill seems to argue, bypasses this internal self, or is filtered through as thin an ego-veil as possible, attaining the purified transparency of her I / eye. This is a fundamentally different poetic eye from Merrill's Impressionism, whereby the focus lies not on the external object but on the internal impression.

Bishop's transparent poetic 'eye' may be similar (in Merrill's account of her poetics) to Emerson's "transparent eye-ball" in the woods, where "all mean egotism vanishes. [...] I am nothing. I see all" (as discussed in the previous chapter in relation to Snyder). Although Merrill's poetic 'eye' is clearly different, and although his ideas about (the possibilities of) conveying the external world in any kind of truthful or real way are very different from this Emersonian notion of transparency, Merrill's conception of nature as a metaphor is actually strikingly similar to that of Emerson. As we saw in the previous chapter, Emerson's conception of nature is as a language, or a book that can be read in order to understand human life in all its abstraction:

Words are signs of natural facts. The use of natural history is to give us aid in supernatural history. The use of the outer creation is to give us language for the beings and changes of the inward creation. [...] It is not words only that are emblematic; it is things which are emblematic. Every natural fact is a symbol of some spiritual fact. Every appearance in nature corresponds to some state of the mind, and that state of the mind can only be described by presenting that natural appearance as its picture.

Merrill treats nature in a similar way in his poetry. Animals, plants, landscapes, minerals are employed as emblems that convey whatever is projected onto them, that reflect or refract the mood, the thoughts and feelings of the artist who describes them. "In Nine Sleep Valley," for instance, opens as follows:

Trying to read in Nature's book
The pages (canyon forest landslide lake)
Turn as the road does, the stock characters
Come and (marmot mallard moose)

Go too quickly to believe in. Look,
I'm told, but many of the words have wings
Or run to type on small fleet herds
No question of retaining – what's the use!

Coming meanwhile to believe in you,
Fluent and native. Only read aloud
Do the words stay with me, through
Whose roots those flat clear vowels flow

To mirror, surfacing, the things they mean:
Blue heron, mountain, antelope, spruce, cloud.

The long and complex poem, from the 1972 collection *Braving the Elements*, chronicles a nine-day ("nine sleep") journey of two people through a valley in New Mexico in nine parts. The first section, quoted above, presents nature as a book that can be read, with the varying landscapes compared to pages, and the animal inhabitants as characters. The capitalisation of "Nature" suggests a view of nature as an external entity that the speaker visits, but is not an integral part of, and this is reflected also in the 'reading' of the book of nature. The landscapes and animals are given within parenthesis, mid-sentence, and listed without punctuation; the animals are described as stock characters, caricatures that represent a type, rather than as individual creatures or even separate species. Both go by "too quickly to believe in," and the description of the scenery is so focussed on the perception of the spectator that the land is not portrayed as a static landscape through which the spectator moves, but rather shown to "Turn as the road does."

Both the landscapes and the animals are typically American: canyon, forest, landslide, lake, marmot, mallard, moose, and in the last line: blue heron, mountain, antelope, spruce, cloud; all evoke an American image of 'the wild.' Aside from this general 'American' identification, however, the names are brought in to speak for themselves, and no more information is given. The speaker cannot 'believe' in these, and does not see the point of 'retaining' the words that denote them, but he does come to believe in 'you,' the lover, who is 'fluent and native' in these words. This 'you' seems more at home in, or a part of, the nature that is described, he has 'roots' in which the specific regional sound of the words denoting this nature are familiar. This lover becomes a translator of the landscape that is so wholly other and unfamiliar to the speaker, and through his voice, the words come to "mirror" the things they stand for, in his words, their meaning "surfac[es]." The speaker is at a tremendously far remove from his natural environment, even as he hikes through it, and is unable to engage with it. Only through his lover is he capable of grasping their existence, but there is nothing beyond that. "The things they mean" refers merely to the relationship between the words, spoken by another, and the physical entities they denote.

Throughout the nine sections of the poem, the landscape continually reflects the feelings and the mood of the speaker and the nature of his relationship with his lover. Section 2 opens with a stanza on the 'American Beauty' rose, followed by a stanza on the funerals of Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King, so that when, in the third stanza, the speaker refers to the "fading beauty" that he wishes to preserve in the poem, he may refer to either the rose of the first stanza, itself potentially symbolic for a cooling love affair that was "crimson and sweet all night in the city" but "limp now," or to the fading beauty of the "botched country" (section 9) that has just lost Robert Kennedy and Dr. King to assassinations (placing the poem firmly in the America of 1968), so that the section as a whole may be read as a lament for a cooling passion as well as for a troubled nation. "The beauty I mean to press fading / Between these lines is yours," the

poem states, and the “yours” is ambiguous in its reference, to be taken to refer to either the lover, the affair or the country. But what it does *not* refer to, not in any meaningful way, is the actual flower. In intricate metaphors and drawn out circumstantial descriptions, the young swallows, the hot springs, the bare peaks rising above the tree-line, the little cabins, even the geode mineral stones in the rock shop, all reflect images back of love and potential loss, of contact and isolation, of communication and inscrutability. “Look, is all,” the speaker entreats (himself? his lover? the reader?) “Look. The river” (section 5). But what we see, what he sees, is not the river.

The closing section of the poem contains references to the eagle and the grizzly bear, unusual for Merrill, who focuses more on tame and ornamental animals than on wild animals that are characteristically native to the United States:

Master of the ruined watercolor,
Citizen no less of botched country
Where shots attain the eagle, and the grizzly
Dies for pressing people to his heart

The poet seems to be addressing the reader directly here, as the master of the ruined painting that is America, as citizen of the botched country that is America, lines that refer back to the limp American Beauty rose and the funerals of Kennedy and King. Merrill’s dismay with his country is not only political, however. In this stanza, the watercolor that is the landscape is ruined because shots reach high enough to “attain” the eagle, and the grizzly is killed for what seems an act of affection. The relevant characteristic of the eagle seems to be its unattainability, its freedom, which is now coming under threat from the shots. The bear, on the other hand, is represented as a loving, affectionate creature, and its deadly, crushing embrace as a sign of love. These two images of American animals, that of the free eagle and of the loving, smothering grizzly, are unusual images for Merrill but befitting of the equally unusual setting of the outdoor wilderness in this poem. The bear is, as Moffett pointed out, far more cuddly than Kinnell’s grunting, bleeding antagonist animal, but seems not all that different from Snyder’s husband-bears.

Bears are shown in a different light in the early poem “Variations and Elegy: White Stag, Black Bear,” from *First Poems*. Dedicated to Merrill’s father, and inspired by his father’s cameo ring that shows the figures of a black bear and a white stag in mortal conflict, this poem portrays two animals that are featured heavily in Snyder’s bestiary, as we have seen in the previous chapter, but are rare creatures in Merrill’s poems. The animals are here shown as carnal, sensual and powerful creatures in constant chase and conflict, caught in an embrace that is lustful as well as violent. It is important to point out that both animals are described as male, whereas other parts of the poem that focus on love, most notably the mythical affair of Psyche and Cupid, do centre on a male/female relationship. As in most of Merrill’s animal poems, the real animals are quite absent, and what is described instead is a mixture of myth and metaphor, of cultural representations and personal imagination:

Could we have wondered at the mere
Animal, then the honey in his maw,
All brute, wet tongue, all body, shaggy claw,
Would have been sensual and clear.

But spirit loomed where most we saw
Body: wonderful shapes in the white air
Transfigured Bruin; by the time our ear
Froze to his growl, the growl had ceased.

We called the autumn night his lair,
Yet know it ours, who long ago released
Movements of such persuasiveness in the beast
That seven stars became a bear.

Spirit takes over any attempted perception of the animal’s body, his physical reality, and the bear, who could have been a source of wonder for his “mere” physical existence, becomes an amalgamation of Bruin, from the fables of La Fontaine, and the astronomical constellation *Ursus major*, and Merrill explains this by pointing, once

more, to the changeable nature of the external world, and his inability to form a precise image of an external reality without multiple metaphorical and symbolic associations: “by the time our ear / froze to his growl, the growl had ceased.”

The White Stag, on the other hand, receives an alternative treatment. As he “prances, unicorn-rare” in front of the hunters that chase him, he is portrayed as an enchanting, enthralling figure that is almost supernatural. A “shining puzzle” that is constantly disappearing, they fear that he might “too blissfully amaze” them, and when the hunters finally catch up with the stag, in the *Elegy*, he remains indescribable and somewhat unreal and, it is suggested, ultimately beyond their reach:

There, where a tree is scarred, the pause,
Hunters, burning in the vast autumn:
Which beast they chased they were hard put to say.
When at last it hesitated among red leaves,
White as the underside of summer leaves,
Its eyes like split pods and two rising
Branches of ice from these,
They know, and to this day,
Speak of its capture as a man who has never been ill
Tells everywhere of disease.

Though the themes of a sensual bear-lover and a stag chased by hunters have something in common with Snyder’s poetry of hunting and of animal marriage, the results are different in one significant way. Merrill’s animals never really become animals of the flesh. The white stag is not captured, let alone slaughtered, as Snyder’s buck is, and it might not even have been a real animal in the first place. This possibly supernatural, but certainly metaphorical animal is more an absence than a presence, and this absence is acknowledged in the poem through its representation as a source of the sublime that overwhelms and confuses the hunters and eventually renders them incapable of killing the white stag. The animals in this poem, then, are not entities in themselves. Their meaning is generated in the context of the poem, through the association with related images from the wide web of cultural expressions that include animal fables and star constellations.

In an interview with David Kalstone, Merrill repeats his views on the relationship between poetic perception and the material world: “You hardly ever need to *state* your feelings. The point is to feel and keep the eyes open. Then what you feel is expressed, is mimed back at you by the scene. A room, a landscape. I’d go a step further. We don’t know what we feel until we see it distanced by this kind of translation.” Moffett remarks about this view that often the room or landscape has no more intrinsic value than a movie screen, and I think that this is true not only of many settings in Merrill’s poetry, but of individual objects as well. Especially, and most relevant to our project, of animal subjects.

The animal subject in Merrill’s poems is not invested with a personal subjectivity, consciousness, or value, and no (or very little) attempt is made to look for it, or speculate about it. Whatever the animal is, is projected onto it in the most reflective sense. The animal subject that in Snyder’s poetry is like a window, offering a glimpse on what is essentially an unknowable experience, is here solely a mirror or a screen that reflects whatever is projected onto it and that in doing so reveals something hitherto unseen. Snyder, also, is keen to explore in poetry what cannot be known, or, if experienced, can at least not be conveyed in language. Rather than attempting to modify an experience of the ever-changing, essentially unknowable external world into something that can be conveyed in language (and in beautiful, fluent, playful language at that), Snyder is more likely to attempt to stretch the limits and possibilities of language to suit the changeability and language-defying qualities of experience. In contrast, as we will come to see below, in the poems in which Merrill includes the notion of an animal consciousness, he locates this essentially unknowable consciousness specifically in the sublime. As a conceptual gesture towards that which is incomprehensible to the imagination, the Sublime in Merrill’s animal poems functions as a metaphor of the transcendent effect that the physical reality has on the mind of the spectator.

The radical contrast in artistic approach here may be seen as a contrast between the Impressionism of Merrill, and Imagism, featuring strongly in Snyder’s poetics. In a

review of the work of French author Francis Ponge, Merrill has commented on the famous W.C. Williams phrase that lies at the basis of Imagism:

No thoughts, then, but in things? True enough, so long as the notorious phrase argues not for the suppression of thought but for its oneness with whatever in the world – pinewoods, spider, cigarette – give rise to it. Turn the phrase around, you arrive no less at truth: no things but in thoughts.

As in his own characterization of Impressionism, Merrill's poetry is focused more on "the actual impressions which objects make upon [the artist's] vision" than on any qualities inherent in the objects themselves. Moffett points out that although "*First Poems* especially is full of writing as visually focussed as many Imagist poems," there is an important difference between Merrill's visual style and Imagism:

while the Imagists may cherish the natural, physical thing-in-itself – Williams's red wheelbarrow and cold sweet plums – Merrill petrifies or freezes it and looks past it fixedly. His apparent subject, cameo or peacock or whatever, much too rigidly stands in for the real subject, a feeling or thought that must be armor-plated before it can be expressed.

These petrified subjects, these stand-ins reflecting a feeling or thought can be seen most clearly in Merrill's early animal poems.

ii) Birds and shells

First Poems contains a remarkable array of animal poems. Moreover, many of the animal subjects of the poems are birds, most famously "The Black Swan," the title poem of Merrill's privately printed volume of poems, reprinted as the first poem in *First Poems*. In addition to "The Black Swan," the volume includes the triptych "The Parrot," "The Pelican," and "The Peacock," as well as the longer poem "Transfigured Bird," "Periwinkles," and "Variations and Elegy: White Stag, Black Bear." Although definitely a 'bird poem,' we will look more closely "The Black Swan" at a later stage in this chapter, in the section on 'the animal sublime.' This section, then, will have a double focus. First, it will explore the representation of birds in Merrill's parrot-pelican-peacock triptych of bird poems. After that, it will move from the bird theme towards an exploration of the image of shells and their inhabitants in a discussion of "Transfigured Bird" and "Periwinkles."

The poems "The Parrot," "The Pelican," and "The Peacock" follow one another in *First Poems*, and are constructed along the same formal structure. The poems are written in the stanza form that Merrill first devised for "The Black Swan," and which consists of seven lines in pentameter, tetrameter and trimeter, loosely rhymed $A_5A_3B_5C_5A_5B_3C_4$. In an interview with Jordan Pecile in 1987, Merrill states that "as far as I know I've invented only one stanza, which I used first when I was nineteen (in "The Black Swan") and again most recently at various key points in *Sandover*." Elsewhere, he comments that "Yes, I liked that 'Peacock' stanza – I used it four times. I'm no less formal now, but I no longer dote on elaborate stanzas." The four times that he has used the stanza (outside of the *Sandover* trilogy) are for the four bird poems of *First Poems*. Although this original stanza form in combination with the bird theme draws these four poems together, there remains a distance between "The Black Swan" and the trio of birds, and we will look at them separately.

Birds

The three bird poems all centre on the theme of appearance. The first in the triptych, "The Parrot" examines the "myth" of masks in a scene describing the bond between an old "spinster" and her parrot:

I am impatient of the myth that numbs
A spinster as she hums
Sweet nothings to her parrot in its cage.
The haggard eye set in white crinkled paint
Meeting her eye over the cracker crumbs
Tells much about old age

Beyond what is serene or quaint.

The bird's appearance already suggests a mask: "The haggard eye set in white crinkled paint," and it mimics speaking and interaction, but since its words are mere repetitions of sound rather than words with meaning, its appearance and voice are no more than masks without faces. Through its repetition of sounds, the bird "mask[s]" the words his caretaker speaks in moments of heightened emotion, and with this, it "destroys the personal." The parrot is represented as something almost malicious or uncanny here, a "frail and talkative ghost" with a "haggard eye" and a "gray tongue." This image echoes the empty, eerie cry "nevermore" of the bird in Edgar Allan Poe's "The Raven" in its representation of an uncanny bird, uttering familiar words with uncertain levels of meaning.

On the other hand, the spinster has been hindered all her life by the very human habit of carrying a metaphorical mask over one's individual face, and has longed for the moment in life when the mask could be discarded and the face could be allowed to express what it knew or felt. In an inversion of meaning, the final stanza suggests that it may be the human voices that are fake, that are "... pretense / Of gentleness and sense," against which the ancient cry of the bird may be contrasted. In this sense, the human sounds almost corrupt the animal who is mimicking fake words without meaning instead of calling out its own "ancient cry," and it is the human who may be momentarily saved from masks and pretence by the bird that "awoke / Jungles within her, sunsets of its flight." This ancient cry that evokes something wild and unknown now echoes the ambiguous cry of the peacocks in Wallace Stevens' "Domination of Black."

I heard them cry – the peacocks.
Was it a cry against the twilight
Or against the leaves themselves
[...]
I felt afraid.
And I remembered the cry of the peacocks.

As uncanny as Poe's Raven, the cry of the bird is now eerie for its unfamiliarity instead of for its strange familiarity. Both contain a fear of the unknown, either for its presentation through the mask of humanity or for its undeniable inhumanity. In Merrill's poem, the parrot's utterances, ghostly and impersonal as they may be, seem to expose the pretence of the human voice. Its non-human cry is the sound that finally seems to bring its mistress the longed for moment when she can drop her mask.

In the opening lines of the poem, the speaker expresses "impatien[ce]" with the myth of human masks that may be dropped in old age, and the content of the poem seems to suggest a similar dissatisfaction with the human habit of masking the true self. The true self, the face that tells what it knows (or *more* than it knows, even) of private riches, forms the source of "the enchanted / Eye, the enchanting syllable." These inverted lines, the most memorable lines of the poem, hark back to Merrill's fascination with the Eye/I dichotomy and its questions of perception, impression and representation that we looked at in the introduction to this chapter. Paradoxically, the poem's convoluted message seems to argue for more honesty and sincerity and less pretence. Hesitantly, it warns against the sad irrelevance of dropping a mask after a lifetime of hiding, and through the metaphor of a masked ball, it celebrates the moment at the climax of the ball when "each dancer seeks his partner to embrace" and the masks are removed. Paradoxically, I say, because this message itself is wrapped in the most mediated of human voices, the highly formal poem, the ultimate pretence "of gentleness and sense."

Moffett points out that the poem's 'message' is muddled – clarity of statement being a lesser priority than getting the stanza-units right – and the stiffness of the writing is only slightly relieved by a few inverted feet at the beginnings of lines and a few slant rhymes at their ends. It is just this sense of having enough control over a demanding form to fill it accurately, but not enough to play it flexibly and freely, that gives the 'precocious' feel to many of the *First Poems*.

If 'masking' is the theme of "The Parrot," 'posing' may be seen as the theme of

“The Pelican.” Equally concerned with appearances, the true self is here not hidden behind a mask but inside a caricature. The “ingenious fisherman” is “Quick to show off unguessed / Capacities: few things do that,” the speaker tells us with a tone of approval. Unlike the parrot, this pelican does not hide or mask himself. Approval quickly turns to mild mockery, however, when the posture of the pelican is compared to “Empire furniture”: “always [...] foolish yet severe.” This posture is a public persona: like certain artists, this pelican enjoys being “a caricature / The world may recognize / And still be free to overlook.” His persona is in part a “myth or work of art” that allows him to take himself seriously while absolving others from having to do the same. The pose is therefore yet another mask, but one that allows the person wearing it a certain measure of freedom. The comparison with artists and “great men” is drawn by the speaker, and it is not too difficult to see the metaphor; the pelican’s physical characteristics make it an apt metaphor for this type of posture, or pose. The long neck and large bill seem out of proportion to the short legs, and when inflated, the throat pouch is reminiscent of the overblown chest of a pompous or portentous human.

But this pose is not merely supercilious or ridiculous, and it remains a public one rather than a personal stance or an internalised self-image. While standing out, it allows the *poseur* to blend in, to integrate in a way that would otherwise be impossible: it “Spar[es] the watcher as it spares itself / By an apt gaiety, gay ineptitude.” The gaiety is appropriate, the ineptitude is cheerful. He fits in by acknowledging that he stands out, and he is allowed to take himself seriously because others do not have to. Should he expect others to take him as seriously as he takes himself he would be open to more malicious ridicule, but as the artist cheerfully caricatures himself he escapes malice. Inoffensive in his superiority, then, the artist’s true face only has to hide itself in his caricature. However, the tone of the poem changes after the first three stanzas, as, through the pelican-metaphor, it explores more complicated forms of interaction between the artist-*poseur*-pelican and its external surroundings. Aiming for the same prey as the human fishermen in “the pleasure-boat,” the pelican catches sight of the bait that is used and goes after it, crashing and losing face over its unmasked desire for food. Its “crude” desire reveals the crudeness of the fishermen’s desire, and suddenly there is no comfortable distance between them anymore. In his discussion of “The Pelican,” Yenser remarks that “If the young poet caricatures himself in the form of the pelican” his caricature show his “good manners, however awkward or stiff,” and indeed, this poem is eminently concerned with etiquette surrounding pride and embarrassment, courtesy and ridicule, demonstrating the young Merrill’s concerns with proper form.

The final stanza invokes the myth of the Vulning Pelican. In medieval Europe, the pelican was believed to feed its own blood to its young in times of food scarcity by stabbing itself in the chest with its bill. The bird became a symbol of charity and self-sacrifice, and in Christianity specifically, a symbol for the Passion of the Christ and the Eucharist. In various medieval bestiaries, the pelican is described as a most attentive parent to its young who nevertheless kills them when they are ungrateful and abusive to their parents. After three days of sorrow and grieving the pelican pierces its own side and with its blood brings its young back to life. The bestiaries differ in the account on whether it is the mother or the father who kills and revives its young, but the analogy with Christ is obvious. The story, however, is not based in reality. Various possible sources for the myth have been identified, among others that the pelican tends to press their bill into their chest to fully empty their pouch; that certain types of pelican get a blood-red pouch or a red crest during breeding season, and that pelicans, like some other birds, sometimes disgorge or regurgitate food to feed their young.

In the poem, this myth of charity and self-sacrifice serves to alleviate any embarrassment over the pelican’s “greed” for food. When the pelican finds no nourishment for his offspring, after all, he is forced to feed them his own flesh and blood. In Merrill’s version of the myth, the sacrifice is even greater. The pelican dies for his young, and is “Himself his own last supper,” his nourishment consisting of seeing “how they thrive” upon his sacrifice. Seeing this ultimate sacrifice, which feeds the young but also benefits the parent, “Almost one fancies charity is not greed,” that good deeds really are selfless. “Almost,” however, and therefore not entirely. In this convoluted, extended metaphor, the pelican becomes the artist that momentarily abandons his posture to hunt for artistic material, to the embarrassment of those (in the

“pleasure-boat,” people of leisure?) around him. Lacking this external material, the artist would be forced to bleed himself dry for his artistic offspring, and die, “fattened” upon the success of the result. This dedication, this willingness to suffer for art, could almost be perceived as noble, were it not for the satisfaction that the artist himself gains from the transformation of his misery into art. In this particular reading of the poem, the last lines carry a sad implication as one sees “the pelican / From air to emptier water dive.” When no artistic material or inspiration can be found in either air or water, the artist has no choice but to create suffering for himself and feed off that. This theme, buried in intricate metaphor though it may be, is one that is central to Merrill’s early poetry. In *A Different Person*, Merrill relates his early experiences in love and suggests that his early attachments were in fact more projections than actual affairs, which “tended not to be consummated in any usual sense of the term. Rather, they gave rise to *poems* about love.” Merrill compares the subjects of his affection to “postage stamps” that he collects, or engravings for him to draw, and he speaks of “intimacies scrawled on lost pages addressed hardly ever to a person I knew.”

Whether, and to what extent, drama and suffering were purposely created for poetry or simply unavoidable, the transformation of pain into art clearly fascinated Merrill in the early stages of his career. This transformation is a subject of several of Merrill’s poems, most notably through metaphors of the transfiguration of Christ. Themes and imagery connected to transfiguration and transformation can be found particularly in “Transfigured Bird” and “Variations and Elegy; White Stag, Black Bear,” as we will see later in this chapter. Here, however covert the image, the artist transforms his own suffering into art through the metaphor of the vulning pelican feeding his blood to his young, who is himself a symbol of the Passion of Christ and of the Eucharist and the transubstantiation of Christ.

The theme of suffering for art surfaces again in “The Peacock,” the third of our bird poems about appearances. After the masking of “The Parrot” and the posing of “The Pelican,” we now turn to the pride of “The Peacock.” Its memorable opening stanza introduces us to a surprising take on this bird:

I speak to the unbeautiful of this bird
 That, celestially bored,
 On feet too little under willows trails
 Too much of itself, like Proust, a long brocade
 Along, not seen but felt; that’s never spared,
 Most mortal of its trials,
 Lifting this burden up in pride.

The poem echoes Marianne Moore in its genteel but irreverent tone as it carefully examines the nature of the peacock and the burden of its beauty. The first stanza exemplifies the syntactical complexity and playfulness of the poem. The comparison with Proust “in full-dress syntax” prepares the reader for the underlying extended metaphor of the poem, the bird representing the artist who trails along his heavy burden and occasionally lifts it up in pride, only to demonstrate

[...] black, green and gold, that zodiac
 Of eyes – not these so much
 As idiot mouths repeating: I.

The intense beauty of the plumage is suddenly diminished, by what? The bird’s vanity, or pride, perhaps, perceived in the Eye/I dichotomy that is evoked by the peacock tail’s fake eyes, designed to trick and scare off potential predators.

In addition to the ornamental feathers, the speaker draws the reader’s attention to the “strenuous midribs [that] make the plumage stretch” and to the weight of the tail, either on full display or dragged along. The bird seems to be admired, pitied and mocked all at once for its boredom and lack of purpose. It is “celestially bored,” and “Tense with idlesse,” as the speaker compares it to other birds: the “murderous” swan, the extinct dodo, the “appalling” dove, the “petulant sisterhood” of hens. More alive than the dodo, more peaceful than the swan, more attractive than the dove, and more well-mannered and independent than the hens, the peacock is also more tedious than all of the above and seems to exist only as an emblem, “graven on a coat of arms.” The peacock is, in fact, the symbol on the Merrill family crest, and Merrill makes

(emblematic) use of it in other poems as well, most notably in *Mirabell: Books of Number*, in which the main communicant-character, Mirabell, transforms from a bat into a peacock.

As in “The Parrot” and “The Pelican,” the final two stanzas of the poem move from description to deeper consideration, as the speaker laments the peacock’s fate of being beautiful but uninteresting. Others may “think blest any creature / this short of beautiful,” but the speaker cannot but feel “A lessening” in the bird. Something is missing, for as beautiful as the peacock is, it is “poor in spirit,” and the speaker grieves “for diminution” of any kind, whether it is “by want of shape they fail, / Of song, or will to live, or something else.” The comfort of beauty when substance is lacking is known as “false” to “some,” here including the speaker. The obscurity and ambiguity of the stanzas is reflected in the many uncertainties it contains. Suggesting much but explaining little, what is the peacock in fact lacking? Who believes that beauty is a comfort, and who knows such comforts to be false? Unlike the unidentified “some,” the speaker only states clearly that he grieves for diminution, where others “know merit / In body, word and deed.” These three, body, word, and deed, are identified as the “lone angels round each human grave,” the few things that really matter for each human.

The word “human” of course indicates that we have drifted far away from the subject of the peacock towards what it represents in this poem. The poem, opening with the metaphor of the peacock’s heavy tail as the burden of the artist, then moves to an image of the beauty of the tail as a false comfort for a tedious bird. This image, in all its obscurity, seems to suggest that the artist, although he takes pride in his art, feels that it is somehow not enough to make him interesting. The metaphor is ambiguous; if we align the artist with the peacock and his art with its tail, the metaphor suggests that the artist’s beautiful work does not fully compensate for his lack of spirit, or personality. If we look at the entire peacock as a vehicle for art, it would suggest that however beautiful it seems, the art itself lacks substance. Of course, these readings of the peacock metaphor do not need to contradict or negate each other. Both visions carry resonances of the author: the first as an impression conveyed strongly in Merrill’s memoir *A Different Person*, in which the young poet is travelling through Europe in the hope of carving out for himself some sort of identity as a man and a poet. The second echoes a common critique of Merrill’s early poetry as showing “talent and intelligence” but being “bloodlessly artificial and superficially decorative.”

Stephen Yenser observes that “the *rara avis* that these poems try again and again to name is the Poet, who obviously shares qualities with [these birds].” And indeed, these three bird poems, in their focus on masks, poses and appearances, all employ their bird subject as a metaphor for the artist, his work, and his relationship to the rest of the world. As early Merrill poems, they explore the author’s poetics in a way that is similar to “The Green Eye” and “The Cosmological Eye,” through a consideration of the relationship between the artist and his environment. Whereas “The Green Eye” and “The Cosmological Eye” examined ways of seeing and the relationship between the tenor and the vehicle of a metaphor, these poems have already accepted the function of the metaphor as each poem engages one subject in an intricate and extended metaphor and explores the extent of its metaphorical capacity. A close reading of these poems lays bare Merrill’s concerns for his poetry at this stage in his career. The intricacy of the metaphors allows for a variety of readings and interpretations, and all three poems work well on several levels. On the surface, they are successful studies of birds that touch on general themes of loneliness, isolation, pride and vanity. On a more covert plane, however, each of them also looks at Merrill’s concerns over his position as an artist and the validity of his work. Whether it is in the form of a parrot exposing the pretence and falsity of the human voice and the irrelevance of masking one’s true face, in the form of a pelican who unexpectedly and to his own embarrassment drops his self-deprecating pose to display the earnestness of his desire, or in the form of a peacock who in his boredom drags along a beautiful tail that, when proudly displayed, only barely disguises a tedious creature that lacks purpose or spirit, these poems are self-referential finger exercises in form and metaphor. As such, none of the bird subjects are presented as more than the vehicle of a metaphor.

On the surface level of the poems, of course, these animals are presented as actual animals, but this depiction is pushed to the background once one begins to look for the heart of the poem. After many levels of abstraction, there is in fact very little of

any real conception of the birds left, as their absence is replaced by the mental palette of birds that the imagination has formed. The parrot, in an amicable relationship with its mistress, is depicted as an originally wild creature that loses part of its bestiality or animality and becomes somewhat ghost-like in a domesticated setting. The pelican seems ambiguous in his position, either “grinning or aghast” about the enormity of his habitat, the sea, and he floats both with “no evident concern at heart” and “ponderous” in the air. The richly ambiguous designation “squatter on water” denotes either his physical position, the spluttering or spattering sounds he makes in the water or his status as an unauthorized settler in that area, or, of course, all of the above. Whatever his status, however, he seems suddenly strangely out of place when he encounters human fishermen in a pleasure-boat out fishing in the same territory, and as a metaphor of the bird and a metaphor of a myth of the bird, any sense of the real animal is displaced entirely. The peacock bears his burden patiently and proudly, “poor in spirit” and “celestially bored”, but is seemingly unaware of its own diminution, of suffering from the “common wound of nature.” These animals are ambiguous about their existence, ambiguous in their setting, and not fully at ease in their environment. The highly metaphorical treatment they get in these poems makes them somewhat anthropomorphised, but not as much as one would expect. They remain loners or outsiders, and as such, they are not manifestly endowed with human characteristics.

The triptych of bird poems shares a remarkable resemblance to Elizabeth Bishop’s “Sandpiper.” In a similar formal structure (five stanzas of four lines each, with a loose *abab* rhyme scheme), Bishop’s poem is a close observation of a sandpiper feverishly foraging the beach, presumably for food. Single-mindedly, the bird runs along the surf where

The beach hisses like fat. On his left, a sheet
of interrupting water comes and goes
and glazes over his dark and brittle feet.
He runs, he runs straight through it, watching his toes.

Whereas this foraging behaviour is quite common in sandpipers, Bishop zooms in on it, and holds it up to the reader as something remarkable and significant. Moreover, she leaves open to the reader’s imagination what exactly the bird is so ardently searching the beach for. Bishop’s sandpiper is a perfectionist, a disciplined hunter for detail who refuses to be distracted by the shaking of the earth, the “roaring alongside,” the clarity of the sky or the level of the tide. His focus is on the sand and what he may find in it, and in his focus on such detail, he can distinguish in the sand “the millions of grains” which are “black, white, tan, and gray, / mixed with quartz grains, rose and amethyst.” While lamenting her subject’s obsession and seemingly endless search for “something, something, something,” Bishop also shows the reward of such obsession in the sandpiper’s clear observation of beautiful details that to anyone else would simply be ordinary grains of sand.

Like Merrill’s parrot, pelican and peacock, the actual bird behind Bishop’s sandpiper subject is somewhat pushed to the background. Significant in her study is not the context of food-foraging and natural habitat, but the theme of an ardently searching subject who has no interest in the big picture but who, in his obsession, is witness to the beauties hidden in ordinary grains of sand, and the metaphorical possibilities that that theme offers. Bishop’s “Sandpiper,” though in itself already a beautiful and successful glimpse at the extraordinariness of an ordinary bird looking for his food, can also easily be read as a metaphor for the artist, who, through intense and fervent observation can see (and expose to the world) the beauties that may be found in ordinary things. Like Merrill’s reference to Proust in the first stanza of “The Peacock,” Bishop’s reference to Blake in the first stanza of “Sandpiper” prepares the reader for a metaphor of an artist’s perception. Blake, who once wrote “To Generalize is to be an Idiot; To Particularize is the Alone Distinction of Merit” in the margins of his copy of Joshua Reynolds’s *Discourses* in response to Reynolds’ remarks on the glory of generalization, seems to be a fitting role-model of the sandpiper’s quest for the beauty of the particular in contrast to the bigger picture. Bishop’s metaphor of the “finical” sandpiper also forms an interesting contrast to Merrill’s myopic speaker of “The Cosmological Eye.” Whereas the myopic subject of the latter poem prefers, albeit from necessity, the smooth beauty of the blue sky and sea over the details of birds, foam,

bone, sails and shells, the preoccupied sandpiper ignores the tides of the sea or the clarity of the sky for the details that can be found in the grains of sand between his toes.

Remarkable in both Merrill's triptych and Bishop's poem is the choice of a bird for the metaphor. To some extent, Merrill's choice may be illuminated by his fascination for 'artefact' birds, birds known or kept for their ornamental qualities such as the parrot and the peacock, or well known as a Christian icon such as the pelican. In *A Different Person*, Merrill recounts being given two cage birds by his lover as a gift, although they do not remain with him long. Ornamental birds feature in more of Merrill's poems, and the contrast between his choice of decorative, emblematic birds and Bishop's preference for the common sandpiper is noteworthy. Throughout her career, Bishop has focused on ordinary, common, or plain animals in her poetry, from the old, battered fish in "The Fish," the homely moose in "The Moose," the armadillo in the poem of the same name, the scruffy stray dog in "Pink Dog," the three grotesque, displaced creatures in "Rainy Season; Sub-Tropics," to this common sandpiper. Although judgements or labels such as ornamental and ordinary, decorative and common, artefact or plain are highly subjective, the contrast is clear: Bishop found inspiration in animals that she at least perceived as ordinary, or common, and in whom she found extraordinary and uncommon qualities and features to portray. Merrill's birds contrast with Bishop's sandpiper in their extraordinariness, in their readiness to be employed as an emblem, a symbol or a metaphor. Similarly, Merrill's artefact birds can be contrasted against Snyder's interplay of real and mythological birds, against Kinnell's birds of transience, or for instance, the wild birds of prey of Robinson Jeffers. Even in "The Pelican," which is, after all, a bird of prey, Merrill places the focus of the poem on the pelican's symbolic qualities, its position as a Christian icon of charity. In fact, the moment in which the pelican reveals its nature as a bird of prey, he is "hurt and embarrassed" at being seen as a creature of such "crude" desire.

As indicated above, Merrill's fascination for ornamental birds can be observed in other poems. "The Black Swan" is an obvious example; the poem centres on a rare, exotic species of a bird that is in various cultures an important symbol of beauty, love, fidelity and death, among other things. Likewise in "About the Phoenix," an elegy for Dutch poet Hans Lodeizen, Merrill questions the meaning of the mythical phoenix as a symbol of resurrection, and in "Transfigured Bird," he evokes a range of birds from the medieval cockatrice and the fabled Chanticleer to the little automaton rooster in a Fabergé egg, as well as Yeats' mechanic nightingale from "Sailing to Byzantium." These references to fictitious or fake birds in "Transfigured Bird" are interspersed with questions of the miraculous transformation (or rather, transfiguration) of egg yolk into bird.

Shells

"Transfigured Bird," generally regarded as one of the more successful poems in *First Poems*, comprises what Moffett describes as "a set of four variations on a theme designated by yolks or birds in delicate eggshells – a much more communicative metaphor for what appearances conceal." A more communicative metaphor, that is, to the purposely convoluted metaphors about appearances of the bird poems discussed above. The poem is a "sustained display" of terza rima, but its formal structure does not dominate the poem quite so much as in the preceding poems. The first section opens with the image of a young boy finding the empty shell of a bird's egg:

That day the eggshell of appearance split
And weak of its own translucence lay in the dew
A child fond of natural things discovered it.

The delicate, translucent beauty of the shell, "very blue" on the outside and "pearly within," makes it an excellent addition to the boy's collection of natural treasures, kept carefully "lest / The world be part forgotten if part unseen." The child is full of innocent wonder in his admiration of the little beauties of his natural environment. This youthful innocence is irrevocably lost when, in section four, the child chances on another potential treasure only to find that this egg is not only not empty but that, having fallen out of its nest, it contains a little dead bird. A sharp distinction is made between on the one hand the eggs that the child "blow[s] clean" with "a pin and a puff," the "spread"

moths and the “once green” bullfrog, and this traumatic encounter with a death that seems infinitely more sinister and haunting to the child. These two mirrored discoveries, each featuring a “child fond of natural things” (the phrase is repeated) and a blue egg, form a frame for the two inner sections of the poem. Of the two inner sections, section 2 obliquely explores the metaphorical relationship between the transformation of a fertile yolk into a living bird and the Transfiguration of Christ, when the speaker relates:

As one who watches two days in some hope
A fertile yolk, until there throbs at last
The point of blood beneath his microscope

Then rises rinsed with the thought of what has passed,
I watched the big yolk of remembrance swallowed
By the throbbing legend there, that broke its fast,

Grew into shape, now to be hatched and hallowed
Whether a bugling bird or cockatrice;
And when the wild wings rose, on foot I followed

And much was legend long days after this.
I mean that much was read and read aright.
Where the bird went gold plumes fell, which were his.

The image of the pulsing egg is described in *A Different Person*, where Merrill relates being educated in new experiences by his friend and love interest Hans Lodeizen: “In the biology lab he showed me the scarlet pulse of a fertilized egg.” The experience was clearly meaningful and memorable, as the images of yolks, eggs, shells and birds converge in the poet’s mind and continued to inspire him. The transformation of yolk into bird, of remembrance into legend, echoes the Transfiguration of Christ from a man into the son of God. The scene as described in the gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke takes place on a mountain where Jesus has gone to pray, accompanied by Peter, James and John. While there, they suddenly see Jesus bathing in a strong white light, witness the appearance of Elijah and Moses before him, and hear the voice of God from a cloud declare “This is my son, whom I love, listen to him.” The image of the Transfiguration of Christ, suggested by the poem’s title, invokes the moment in which an ordinary event is transformed into narrative, into a legend. The metaphor, like those of the other bird poems, contains many layers that interact with each other in the suggestion of meaning. The egg yolk turning into life, into a bird, is compared to the transformation of event into narrative (“remembrance” into “legend”). The outcome of the transformation may be either “a bugling bird or cockatrice,” suggesting that it may become either a prophet or a dangerous, supernatural creature that is larger than life, a legend indeed.

Regardless of the details and intricacies of the metaphor, the theme of the Transfiguration of Christ, and of transformation of memory into legend in general, may, as in “The Pelican” discussed above, be related to Merrill’s interest in the capacities of art to transform experience and memory (and particularly painful experiences and memories) into poetry. The mediation of the artistic form transforms, transubstantiates or transfigures the experience in a way that Merrill associates closely with allegories of Christ in his poems. In “Transfigured Bird,” the poem transforms both pleasant and disturbing childhood experiences such as the discovery of the beautiful empty shell, and the subsequent discovery of the haunting broken egg holding a dead bird, into a coherent work of art on the theme of eggs, yolks, birds and shells.

The third section of the poem engages in similar play of memory, metaphor and allegory in a scene engaging a young woman or girl, Philippa, in her room at night time, combing her hair, dreaming about the characters from Aesop’s fables and nursery rhymes (“Reynard, Cock Robin, Bruin and Chanticleer”), demonstrating her marvellous collection of Fabergé eggs, and listening to the birdsong coming from outside her window. The speaker of the poem, describing the scene to the reader, first listens to the birdsong while the girl sleeps, then comes to inhabit the bird singing, then again turns into the boy who blows a bird’s egg clean, puffing away the entire scene as if the scene itself were a miniature from a Fabergé egg. The final stanza of the section shows the empty egg in all its sterile glory, “void of all but pearl-on-pearl / Reflections and their

gay meanderings,” and eventually the shattered shell with whirling fragments. The destruction of this scene, blown away as egg-yolk and shattered as a shell, suggests the boredom of a spoiled child who, having played so indulgently at his narrative, tires of the game and throws away the dolls. Timothy Materer observes that

“Transfigured Bird” suggests that the discovery of death in the aborted egg is also the necessary condition of the persona’s artistic power.[...] *First Poems* belongs to what Merrill once referred to as his “aesthetic” phase. Like Joyce’s Stephen Dedalus, Merrill’s persona wants to believe that the artist can control the world’s horrors through artifice. Yet “Transfigured Bird” ends with a vision of an aborted rather than a transfigured bird, and its tone already darkens in section three.

And indeed, although the theme of transfiguration in the poem points to the transformative powers of art as a redemption for sad or painful life experiences, the transfiguration works on various levels in the poem.

Change seems to be everywhere, and there is an air of uncertainty about these changes that might momentarily be controlled by the collection of dead or lifeless natural treasures, but is ultimately inescapable. The third section already contains an element of fear or dread when, as the God of this little universe, the little boy blows “the thing within”

Away, before it waste, or hatching fly
Out of his reach in noisy solitude
Or kill him with the oracle in its eye;

The phrase “the thing within” carries eerie undertones of the unknown or unpredictable, as its indistinctness contrasts so starkly against the dreamlike scene just portrayed, and the following stanza (quoted above) seems to suggest that its threat lies in the possibility for either abandonment or rejection. The potential threat of the contents of the egg also echoes the myth of the monstrous cockatrice, hatched from a misshapen, yolkless egg, from section two. The barrenness of the emptied egg with its pearl-on-pearl sheen prepares the reader for the final section, in which the child’s curiosity for small natural wonders brings him the tainted treasure of the “cold shell” with “the claw of the dead bird, clutching air” sticking out. The poem seems to suggest that rather than the possibility of abandonment, rejection or disappointment that can be found in the changeability of live, fertile yolks and eggs, the child learns to prefer clean, barren, void objects and their translucent sheen. In their manifold incarnations, these related images of birds, eggs, yolks and shells offer a wide realm of metaphorical and allegorical possibility, and this poem, these four variations on the theme, moves through that realm in labyrinthine movements, evoking a reflection on life and death, memory and narrative, innocence and experience that both considers and exerts the transforming powers of poetry.

Merrill’s exploration of shells in “Transfigured Bird” and his fascination with the inner and outer spaces of a delicate vessel containing an even more fragile creature, is continued in “Periwinkles.” A meditation on time and ageing, “Periwinkles” focuses on the “archaic periwinkle” as an emblem of the passing of time. Set at the seashore, the poem invokes an image of bright light among the rocks at low tide, when “everything around you sparkles, or / is made to when you think of what went before.” This sparkling is partly to do with the reflection of bright sunlight on the water of the sea, but, the poet argues:

Much of this blaze, that’s mental, seems to come
From a pool among the creviced rocks, a slum
For the archaic periwinkle. Some

Are twisting, some are sleeping there, and all
(For sun is pulse, and shade historical)
Cling in blotched spirals to the shadiest wall.

The contrast between the bright light and the darkness of the slum-like crevices not only heightens the sense of a vision affected by bright sunlight and its reflections, it also accentuates the distinction between the “blotched” periwinkles and the mental impression that they create in the speaker’s mind. Much of the image is, in fact, a consequence of the mental impression. This impression, based on a contemplation of

“what went before,” endows the tiny, brownish periwinkle with an unexpected magnitude. The next stanza underlines this with a reference to the periwinkle’s “cousins” who “shingled by the finding tide, / Purpled the cloths of kings.” The heavy internal rhyme draws extra attention to these lines, which align the periwinkle with the spiny dye-murex, a mollusc whose shell was used to create the Tyrian purple dye. (The expensive dye was restricted to the colouring of silks for imperial use only by the Byzantine court.)

The periwinkle, now uplifted from its “blotched,” shady status, is picked up and held in the speaker’s hand as he describes its “crazy trustfulness” when it feels around, decides it is safe to turn over, and settles on the human hand. “You shiver,” the speaker tells us,

Touched by the fecund past, a creature curled
In a flaky cone which inside is all pearled
With nourishment sucked out from the pulsing world

The “fecund past” presents the reader with an interesting paradox, in this small, shy mollusc that seems to unite both the fertility of life, and the shade of the past. Shell and inhabitant are one, but seem to represent opposite concepts, as the periwinkle becomes an emblem of the paradox of ageing, of living towards death or demise. Merrill’s description of the “pearled” shell echoes the pearly shell of “Transfigured Bird” and here, too, the distinction is made between the fertile content and the delicate enclosure. Evans Lansing Smith groups “Periwinkles” together with “Willow” and “House” and remarks that each of these “remarkably beautiful emblem poems” “explore[s] a different kind of sacred space.” However, although the periwinkle’s shell is presented as a sacred interior, a safe retreat whose outside “blotched spirals” and “flaky cone” hide the hidden pearliness, Merrill focuses more on the creature rather than its house in the final three stanzas.

The poem follows the by now familiar pattern of the bird poems, opening with a description of the setting and the emblem animal and spiralling into an increasingly convoluted metaphor in the final stanzas. The periwinkle’s soft, sucking hold on the human palm, while it is hidden from the “pulsing world” inside its shell, makes it seem as if the creature only exists to the human that feels its presence (“for having crept within, where there was none / To feel it but yourself”). The human, in turn, is “caught by the crazy trustfulness of the past” and is reminded by “Its gentle sucking” of his “old nurse.” The image is inverted: it is not the child sucking at the breast of the nurse, but the old, demented nurse, crooning “to revery at our breast.” The word “revery” carries connotations of reverence as well as of reverie, derived from the French *rever*, to dream or muse, or be in a state of joy and delight. In the progression of time, the child has become adult, the nurse has become senile and childlike again, and the adult imagines telling her fairytales as she once told stories to him. “Then we grow old;” the poem concludes, “her lunacy prevails.” In this endless progression of time, the poem suggests, everyone will eventually succumb to degeneration and senility. While the periwinkle shell as an image of the past is not necessarily a bad one (the terms “archaic,” “historical,” “ancient,” and even the invocation of the old nurse suggest some level of reverence or veneration), what is historical is the shade, the dark, the blotchy spiral, the “liveliness undone.” As such it stands in stark contrast to the mental “blaze,” the sparkling, the sun, the “pulsing world” that seems lost inside the spiralled shell of time.

Moffet remarks on “Periwinkles” that, like “The Green Eye,” it locates the essence of the image in the impression that it makes on the mind of the spectator, and as such, this animal, too, is a metaphor before it is anything else. Like the pelican and the peacock, the periwinkle is subject to a certain amount of anthropomorphisation as the metaphor is developed. It is the embarrassment of the pelican, the boredom of the peacock and the trustfulness of the periwinkle that bring them close to the reader as a subject. The parrot is the only animal that seems to escape anthropomorphisation. Although addressed as “pretty Poll” by its mistress, the parrot remains an animal that is ultimately ‘other,’ a creature that is unknowable as its mock-human utterances fail to make it human and its ancient cry places it firmly in the bestial sphere. None of these animals, however, are presented as entities in their own right. They are firmly placed in the poem as emblems of a theme, as subjects of an extended and complex metaphor

whose meaning is wholly dependent not on the subject itself but on the impression it makes on the mind of the spectator/poet.

The setting of the poem, its shoreline location and the pervasive image of bright light and its reflections, blue sea and bluer sky, the pulsing of the sun and the warm beach, is a familiar setting in *First Poems*. We have seen it in “The Cosmological Eye,” in “The Pelican” to a certain extent, in “Periwinkles,” and it is also the setting of “The Parrot Fish” and “Accumulations of the Sea,” another meditation on the passage of time. The use of light, colour, pulsation, and sound (in “The Parrot Fish” and “Accumulations of the Sea”) create a scene in which nothing is quite what it seems, or not for long, anyway. Labrie remarks on Merrill’s use of colour and light that

Merrill believes that the generation of an atmosphere that momentarily stabilizes shifting sensations is accomplished particularly through attention to light and color, light being the medium through which color is revealed.

These shoreline poems both capture a moment of stability and expose how fleeting that moment is, as well as drawing attention to the importance of the mind in the observation of a scene or an object. What is recorded in these poems is the impression that the scene makes on the mind of the spectator.

The setting in a liminal space, between solid ground and endless sea, seems to be an especially fertile setting for Merrill’s early poems, and it might be seen in relation to his fascination with transformation. On the threshold of a new life, these poems are written and published around the phase in his life that Merrill describes in *A Different Person*, a phase in which he seeks to distance himself from his childhood and the expectations of his family and environment, and ‘find himself,’ both as a man and as an artist. The poems outlining his decidedly metaphorical poetics, the bird poems focusing on the masks and identity of an artist as well as the capacity of art to transform experience, and the meditations on the passing of time and the abandonment of a childhood are all early, exploratory poems. Although formally already a mature and accomplished collection, the contents of the poems are those of a young poet seeking, if not his voice, at least his topic of conversation.

iii) The Animal Sublime

“Poetry is a search for the inexplicable”

— Wallace Stevens

An American Sublime

In the introduction to the collection of essays *The American Sublime*, Mary Arensberg identifies the search for the sublime, or for an expression of the sublime, as “a way of knowing beyond the human threshold.” “*Limen*,” she points out, “boundary or threshold from the Latin, is both the etymological and philosophical root of the sublime. Poems get written, then, because that threshold has never been crossed or articulated; for to transgress that boundary, to speak with the tongue of a god would be to achieve the sublime and also silence.” This echoes Bataille’s comment, which has by now surfaced several times in this study, that “poetry describes nothing that does not slip toward the unknowable.” The (attempted) expression (or impression) in poetry of the unknowable, the inexplicable, the mysterious or the incomprehensible, may sometimes take the form of the sublime. In this section, we will take a close look at three of Merrill’s animal poems that invoke the sublime, most notably “The Octopus,” “The Locusts” and “The Black Swan,” and relate to them the Stevensian notion that the sublime in poetry functions as a metaphor for that which cannot be expressed. Before we begin a discussion of the poems, however, it will be useful to have a working definition of the sublime, as well as a brief summary of the various interpretations and theories of the sublime as a philosophical, psychological and literary phenomenon.

Thomas Weiskel provides an excellent starting point for this exploration in the opening lines of *The Romantic Sublime: Studies in the Structure and Psychology of*

Transcendence:

The essential claim of the sublime is that man can, in feeling and in speech, transcend the human. What, if anything, lies beyond the human – God or the gods, the daemon or Nature – is matter for great disagreement. What, if anything, defines the range of the human is scarcely less sure.

This definition is especially useful for our exploration of the sublime in animal poetry, since like Arensberg, who speaks of “a way of knowing beyond the human threshold,” Weiskel emphasizes the location of the sublime, or rather, the source and effect of the sublime “beyond the human.” Although transcendence might indicate ‘above,’ with its implications of divinity, it can easily be applied to notions of ‘outside.’ As I will argue, this ‘beyond’ or ‘outside’ the human can be found in notions of animality. The specific nature of the sublime as a rhetorical effect, a religious experience, a psychological process, or a natural phenomenon is much theorized and contested.

In *Poetry and Repression: Revisionism from Blake to Stevens*, Harold Bloom develops a theory of poetry and the sublime that, as Robert Pinsky sums up, “proposes that poetry, particularly the Sublime in poetry, is not an effect of sublimation, but a phenomenon of repression, repressing not only the precursor, but the poet’s understanding of the instruction that he took.” Bloom’s reading of the sublime in poetry is heavily dependent on the notion that the sublime is a rhetorical phenomenon or device that is related to the poet’s anxiety of influence and his repression thereof. It both depends on and opposes Freudian and Nietzschean theory, among many other theoretical influences. Bloom’s work is too large and complicated to fully engage with here, so I will limit myself to point to his theories of the American sublime as developed by Emerson and Whitman, and, markedly, Wallace Stevens. Stevens has been identified by various critics as a key poet in the American Sublime. In a revisionist re-reading of his work, Bloom explores the ‘transcendental strain’ in Stevens and concludes that

Like Emerson and Whitman before him, Stevens persuades himself by his own rhetoric that momentarily, in his poem, his ontological self and his empirical self have come together. [...] The Transcendental strain in Stevens is the native strain in our poetry, and it exacted of Stevens a rich philosophical confusion upon which everything that is strongest in American poetic tradition is founded. (Bloom, 292)

Bloom firmly places Stevens at the zenith of the American sublime in his exploration of the self and the void beyond the self. Arensberg notes in her introduction to *The American Sublime* that, in the development of the American sublime, “emphasis has shifted from Adamic models of American romanticism with their virgin landscapes and notions of prelapsarian, unmediated vision to a dramatic scenario of an American counter-sublime.” With reference to Bloom, she observes that

In the American brand of sublimity, the imagination finds itself the inhabitant of a place that is not its own, a vortex of atheism, which Wallace Stevens later called “the empty spirit / In vacant space.” Excluded from its own nature and shrinking from the white depths of nature’s abyss, the American self is the “dumb blankness,” the deconstructed self. This nothingness of the American self may be traced from Emerson’s trope, “the transparent eyeball” (“I am nothing; I see all”) up through Stevens’ “snow man” who, “nothing himself, beholds nothing that is not there, and the nothing there is.”

As we will come to see, this American sublime, this abyss of the deconstructed American self surfaces in Merrill’s animal poems. Stevens more elaborately discusses what he terms the irrational, and what Michael T. Beehler identifies as the sublime, in his 1937 essay “The Irrational Element in Poetry.” In a careful reading of his prose and poetry, Beehler relates Stevens’ concept of the irrational, the inexplicable, to Immanuel Kant’s “Analytic of the Sublime” and argues that whereas Stevens’ theory of the irrational in poetry follows Kant’s “*via negativa* of the sublime moment,” but instead of describing the third stage as an ‘intervention of reason’ he argues that the sublime itself becomes the metaphor. We will return to this Stevensian notion of the sublime as metaphor in a discussion of the sublime in Merrill’s animal poetry, below.

The Animal Sublime

The animal poems that we will look at, “The Octopus,” “The Locusts,” and “The Black Swan,” each invoke the sublime in their own, specific way, as an indication or suggestion of the abyss, the unknown, the unknowable, that is the animal. The representation of the animal in poetry as a cause for the sublime is not new to Merrill, of course. Although the quintessential examples of the natural sublime in many theories are generally instances of natural vastness or grandeur such as mountains, deserts, oceans and storms, many theorists, and Burke especially, have paid attention to the animal as a cause for the sublime. Burke sees the sublime as located in the impression that the external reality makes on the mind, and as such, his theory of the sublime is very close to Merrill’s theory of literary metaphor. Burke includes extensive lists and categories of objects in his essay but emphasizes that although these objects may be a source of the sublime, the sublime itself is subjective, and takes place inside rather than outside the mind. In his explanation, he uses our impressions of various animals as example:

Let us look at another strong animal, in the two distinct lights in which we may consider him. The horse in the light of an useful beast, fit for the plough, the road, the draft; in every social useful light, the horse has nothing sublime; but it is thus that we are affected with him, *whose neck is clothed with thunder, the glory of whose nostrils is terrible, who swalloweth the ground with fierceness and rage, neither believeth that it is the sound of the trumpet?* In this description, the useful character of the horse entirely disappears, and the terrible and sublime blaze out together. We have continually about us animals of a strength that is considerable, but not pernicious. Amongst these we never look for the sublime; it comes upon us in the gloomy forest, and in the howling wilderness, in the form of the lion, the tiger, the panther, or rhinoceros. [...] In short, wheresoever we find strength, and in what light soever we look upon power, we shall all along observe the sublime the concomitant of terror, and contempt the attendant on a strength that is subservient and innoxious.

The conditions of the sublime are multifaceted but clear: there is, in the example above for instance, to be an element of great strength or power, but in such a way as to be potentially dangerous for the observer rather than subservient. This power may be enhanced by obscurity (like in a “gloomy forest”) or by the unfamiliar and yet fully intelligible cries of angry animals (like in the “howling wilderness”).

Most importantly, the sublime lies not in the object itself, but in the impression it makes on the mind. Burke’s examination of the horse as a source of the sublime is particularly notable in this respect. The horse in itself is not sublime; it may be a plain subservient plough horse. However, once it is perceived in the context of a particularly poetic depiction of a powerful, dangerous, terrible horse that might form a potential threat to the physical self of the observer, the horse becomes a source for the sublime. I would argue that the significant difference in perception of sublime animals lies not, or not only, in their wildness or even in their physical power. Rather, it lies in their unknowability, their obscurity and unreadability, and thus their *potential* for malevolence. As seen above, theoretical attention on animals as a source of the sublime focuses mostly on the terrifying, dangerous aspects of animal strength or power, as in tigers or lions, bulls or wild horses. A sweeping survey of animal poems from assorted animal poetry anthologies indicates, however, that the representation of animals in poetry (as distinct from theory) as an inspiration of sublime experience focuses more often on two other elements of animality. These two elements are *design* and what I shall call here *the animal abyss*, the element of unknowability of the animal, or rather, from the human perspective, the incapacity of the imagination to fully comprehend the animal. The element of design in the animal sublime can be illustrated with reference to Robert Frost’s “Design” and William Blake’s “The Tyger.”

“Design,” consisting of two stanzas, details in the first stanza an intricate, delicate scene of a “fat and white” spider on a white flower, holding captive a white moth. The poem continues with reverence and wonder at the elusive and coincidental convergence of these three objects to such an astonishing effect:

What had that flower to do with being white,
The wayside blue and innocent heal-all?

What brought the kindred spider to that height,
Then steered the white moth thither in the night?
What but design of darkness to appall?--
If design govern in a thing so small.

The questions that Frost asks with this poem are questions of “design,” of the possibility of an organising principle or power behind the structure and chaos of nature. There are elements of moral ambivalence as the poem questions the unexpected whiteness of a naturally blue flower, possibly attracting the white spider as it may provide camouflage, and the moth because it may have looked like a light spot in the dark night. The whiteness here may be seen as somewhat treacherous as it is the site of death, and the scene is associated with witchery as the bright scene of illuminated whiteness contrasts with terrifying images of death, treachery and (potential) evil. The use of the word ‘kindred’ for the spider, however, is indicative not only of the shared whiteness of spider, flower and moth, but of their kinship in the larger structure of nature, as different parts of the same design. The poem’s ambivalence especially contributes to the invocation of a sense of the sublime, as the mind ponders but realises that it cannot fully comprehend these questions of design and morality.

This convergence of design and terror can also be seen in William Blake’s “The Tyger.” Invoking images of fire and forging, “The Tyger” conflates the burning, yellow eyes of the tiger with a blacksmiths forge and anvil as the author asks questions of creation and religion, of terror and innocence, while drawing attention to the design, the symmetry of the tiger’s body and being:

Tyger, tyger, burning bright
In the forests of the night,
What immortal hand or eye
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?

Other key examples are Gerard Manley Hopkins’ “The Windhover” and “Pied Beauty,” and Walt Whitman’s “The Dalliance of the Eagles.” Whereas this element of ‘design’ in the animal sublime opens up questions of power and strength, beauty and terror as well as issues of God and religion that would be fascinating to look at in their own right, it is the ‘abyss of the animal’ that I want to focus on here, as it offers us a unique insight into Merrill’s representation of animal subjects.

“The Octopus,” from Merrill’s second book *The Country of A Thousand Years of Peace*, although still an emblem poem reminiscent of the bird poems discussed above, shows a development from the firmly metaphorical to something more aware of the realm beyond the poetic mind. Judith Moffett argues that “The Octopus” “measures the distance travelled from “The Parrot” and its kind,” and J.D. McClatchy identifies in *Country* as a whole “new, more varied and specific settings” that are “a recognition of a world outside the boundaries of verse and the self, and of the poet’s ability to explore it.” The poem, on a literal level a meditation on an octopus behind the glass of an aquarium tank observed by a dreamy child, provides a setting of ideal circumstances for the sublime: A “monster” restrained by (and observed through) “a glassen surface,” that, alive but not human, moves in impenetrable ways. This creature, at once physically translucent and mentally obscure, is far removed from any human likeness save that of the Hindu god Shiva (he of the four arms, associated with destruction and transformation). The object of the sublime may be clear: the octopus is described in exquisite terms of translucence, jewels and diamonds, as well as in terms and images that indicate terror and danger: “monsters” and “restrains,” “sinister,” “gloom,” and “wrath”; “unloose” carries undertones of ‘unleash,’ and the “fragile reeling” could not be “quell[ed]” by “a hundred blows of a boot-heel.” The sudden violence of this last phrase in the midst of the dreamy, if chilling, description of this strange creature emphasizes the constantly looming threat that the entrancing scene might suddenly pose.

If the octopus is represented as an object of the sublime, however, who is the subject of this experience? As we have seen above, the sublime is not attached to any object but is something that, by most accounts, occurs in the mind of the spectator. Here, the spectator most clearly present in the poem is the “fair” child, “dreaming near the glass.” The child certainly seems entranced: although it is seen as a “dreamer” when the poem opens, at the close proximity and movements of the octopus it is “chilled,”

then “wakes and hungers.” The child is simultaneously astonished, attracted and repelled. Alternatively, one might argue, there is another potential subject of the sublime in this poem: the speaker. The child is part of this scene, and as this scene is conveyed to the reader not by the child but by another persona, it is *this* spectator who is conveying *his* perception of the scene. We do not know for certain what the child experiences; instead, we receive the account of the unidentified speaker-spectator. As the sublime is located in the impression that an object or scene makes on the mind of a spectator, it is this perception that might be most significant.

The sense of the sublime that this poem contains may easily be described in Burkean terms. There is terror and (potential) pain as well as overwhelming pleasure, there is obscurity of vision, enhanced by the play of light-reflections of translucence, diamonds and glass, there is divinity, there is astonishment, attraction and repulsion. Moreover, I would argue, there is ignorance: ignorance of the nature of the animal. This obscurity is not a play of physical light and dark but of mental inaccessibility, as the octopus is depicted as something otherworldly. “Conventional / gestures” are made “clumsily” with arms that are “fleshlike” but not flesh. Most importantly, the only entity that this animal can possibly be compared to is an exotically presented Hindu god in feverish motion. Animal hardly seems the right word here, and it is not used in the poem; instead, this octopus is categorised as a monster. The animal presence in this poem, then, is an abyss, an absence, something for which there are no images save that of the sublime. Its exterior is presented in the images described above, but the threat, the terror comes from that which is withheld, from the unknown and unknowable force behind its volutions. The sublime here may be argued to be closer to Kant’s conception of the mathematical sublime, not in terms of size or number but in terms of incomprehensibility. The imagination is overwhelmed by its failure to comprehend, and there is no faculty of reason present in the poem to intervene. Instead of an intervention of reason, the sublime effect here may be seen as a metaphor, a conceptual tool that stands in place of that for which there are no metaphors. We will return to this conceptualisation of the sublime as metaphor, which is derived from Wallace Stevens, below.

One last and important point to make about the octopus as source of the sublime also revolves around metaphor. The octopus as an object of the sublime may be a gesture towards the unattainable realm of animality, but, never far away from metaphoricity, Merrill also makes it into a metaphor of sublimity itself. Eric Ormsby notes that “The Octopus” “is a poem of terror, both of what the eye may see beyond the surface, of that which is confined within, and of something divine as well.” Whereas the word “both” here might indicate two elements (that which is confined within the tank beyond the surface of the glass, on the one hand, and “something divine” on the other), I would argue that these are in fact three different things: What the eye may see beyond the surface of the glass, that which is confined within the eye, and the “something divine.” The octopus is not only a fantastic animal invoking wonder, it is also a metaphor: “none more sinister / Than vision asleep in the eye’s translucence.” Moffett remarks that

It may be useful to remember that *light* in this work has been the elemental power that *dispels* ignorance and kindly illusion, and drives knowledge, however unwelcome, home. When we say “I see” we mean “I understand.” Early in *The Country of A Thousand Years of Peace*, the octopus drowsing in its tank is a startling metaphor for seeing: “There are many monsters that a glassen surface/ Restrains. And none more sinister/ Than vision. . .”

I purposely include Moffett’s own partial citation of the poem, because the point where she ends the quote is crucial: on a literal level, the image of the octopus is that of its eyes, “asleep” in its translucent body. The octopus here seems to consist only of eyes, surrounded by indefinite body mass. The metaphor, however, equates this “monster” with a vision that is confined in the translucent mass of the human eye, itself reminiscent of the tissue of the octopus. “Vision,” knowledge, or understanding is a monster, often asleep in the drab prison of “mortal tissue” but occasionally awakened by extraordinary “lusters,” such as the sublime figure of the literal octopus, much as the dreamy child is awakened by it, and hungers after it. Both octopus and child, here, in addition to being an object and subject of the sublime, are also joined in a metaphor for

the “sinister” experience of the sublime: awakened “vision.”

J.D. McClatchy notes the “fine interplay in the poem between perception and creation, between reflecting surfaces and reflected depths, narcissistic attractions and visionary possession.” He argues that “the *monstre sacré* here is what rises to the surface: at one level an observer’s dream of convulsive divinity, at another level the image of the octopus that the poet coaxes out by the “lusters” of his poem’s associations and he cites Hugo’s remark that “language itself is *Tantôt comme un passant mystérieux de l’ame, tantôt comme un polype noir de l’ocean pensé.*” Merrill’s sublime in this poem glances back at the function of language, and especially poetic (associative, metaphorical) language, in the experience of the sublime, as the octopus becomes not only a source but also a metaphor for sublimity.

A wholly different experience of the sublime is conveyed to us by the speaker of “The Locusts.” Addressing the reader directly, this speaker seeks to share his experience in a more straightforward manner, leaving little room for ambiguity:

You think first: This is no rain
Of locusts, rather my own brain
At work, whose preconceptions dye
The whole world drab. Or bluntly: I
Am dreaming, or insane.

The next day dawns upon no dream.
There is wide evidence of Them,
Such as the myriad dead or maimed
In furrows, in yet unnamed
Trickle of corpses, once a stream.

The choice of pronoun, consistent throughout the ten-stanza poem seems intended to convey the experience as if it were happening to the reader him or herself, yet the speaker brings this experience to the reader in an oddly detached tone. His mind failing to fully comprehend the scene (“I / Am dreaming, or insane”), he is curious and mildly interested, but unable to relate and eager to depart the scene: “You feel nothing. It is time you went / Back to where everything was clear.” This experience of the animal world, far more overwhelming, muddled and wild than Merrill’s usual depictions of nature, does not please him much; he prefers more “Mirrorscopic, green, wet” elements that are “All echo, orchid, and egret.” More calm and refined, delicate and clear forms of nature, that is. The words “mirrorscopic” and “echo” especially are evocative of the type of nature poetry that Merrill is usually drawn to, denoting projection, reflection, fragmentation and distortion. McClatchy, in a discussion of the motif of mirrors and reflective surfaces in *The Country of a Thousand Years of Peace*, notes that

On the other side of the looking-glass, then, the life beneath the life is deeply ambivalent and to that extent disturbing. As in “The Locusts” it can be vacantly pastoral, the imagination’s paradise. [...] Or, [...] it can be a threatening source of psychological and emotional engulfment.

The lines from “The Locusts” that McClatchy quotes, however, are those that, as explained above, describe the type of nature that Merrill prefers to the scene of “The Locusts”: “the imagination’s paradise,” “Where trouble was a limpid source to peer / Deep into, heaven-sent // Mirrorscopic, green, wet, / All echo, orchid, and egret / In pure transports recalling you.” Merrill sets this natural paradise for the imagination off against the scene of the sublime, of the experience that frustrates imagination and terrorizes its capacity.

The locusts, then, by their sheer number and force, astonish the speaker’s mind to such an extent that it is not until he is far removed that he can make “a kind / Of weird sense” of the experience, and is able to find closure in the cleansing downpour of rain that will wash away the destruction of the deluge of the locusts. There is no distinct sense of dread or terror here, nor of great beauty or pleasure in the Burkean sense of the sublime. The animals themselves make little impression on the speaker, like the octopus, they are mysterious and unknown. Their “opaque goggles” give rise to speculation about “a vestigial inner life.” The eyes, so crucial to human communication that they are called ‘windows to the soul’ are here inaccessible, which is presented as an indication

of the lack or atrophy of any soul or inner life in this animal. That leaves an absence, a conceptual abyss for which the imagination has no image of comparison, and it is this absence that seems to pose a threat to the self. Although confronted with a scene of devastation, with “myriad dead or maimed” and the sad anticipation of the “foredoomed” future of “anything that may have bloomed” after this deluge, the self in the poem is not shaken by this so much as by the surrealism of a deluge of locusts falling from the sky, and by the unfathomable nature of the locusts themselves. The sublime experience in “The Locusts”, although perhaps not as strong or intense as that of “The Octopus” or that of “The Black Swan,” as we will come to see, overwhelms the mind, imagination or self of the speaker in a similar way. In addition to what may be described as the mathematical sublime, there is an element of the self that is threatened by the abyss of the unknowable animal.

The stylistic tour-de-force that is one of Merrill’s most famous poems, “The Black Swan” is generally celebrated for its formal brilliance and originality as well as criticized for its purposeful obscurity, held to be obscuring a lack of depth more than anything else. Helen Vendler remarks that

the confusing thing about these ‘objective’ poems was the cloudy weight of displaced feeling they bore, all out of proportion to their ostensible subjects [...] and the intellectuality for which the poems were sometimes praised was more a matter of labyrinthine syntax than of penetrating thought.

Similarly, Richard Howard points out that “the problem this poet rather languidly wrestles with and does not always resolve in these *First Poems* is how to get the reader through this poem to its end (always, in such instances, something elegiac and anguished, something decorative and heartbreaking).” Mark Bauer cites Kimon Friar in “On Amherst Days,” his contribution to a festschrift honouring Merrill on his sixtieth birthday:

I have never before or since worked with a poet with so much excitement and profound satisfaction. I would ask Merrill, for instance, to write a poem about the swan, using the imagery of the lake, in a seven-line stanza form intermingling pentameters, tetrameters, and trimeters, using approximate rhyme. He brought me “The Black Swan.”

According to this account, then, “The Black Swan” was initially conceived as an advanced finger exercise in poetry.

The poem itself is indeed a highly successful formal exercise in what would become a fertile stanza form ($A_5A_3B_5C_5A_5B_3C_4$) for Merrill, used for the bird poems discussed above as well as resurfacing in sections of *Sandover*. Describing the encounter between a blond child and a mysterious, surreal creature that invokes strong and paradoxical feelings, it has much in common with the “fair” child and the “sinister” octopus. In “The Black Swan,” like in “The Octopus,” the child is referred to only twice, but here the reader learns more of the child’s response to the animal. The enigmatic swan, in itself already an often mythologized animal and a universal image of power, beauty, love and death, is in its black form an even stronger figure. Combining rarity with the darkness that Burke associates with the sublime, the bird immediately confuses the child “with white ideas of swans.” Burke notes that “in nature, dark, confused, uncertain images have a greater power on the fancy to form the grander passions, than those have which are more clear and determinate,” although both extreme light and darkness are similar in their effects on the eyes, momentarily obliterating vision: “Thus are two ideas as opposite as can be imagined reconciled in the extremes of both, and both, in spite of their opposite nature, brought to concur in producing the sublime.” We may recall Frost’s image in “Design” of white on white on white producing such an effect. The swan, already a powerful image of pure whiteness, is here thus inverted into an even more evocative figure of rare and mysterious blackness.

The power of the swan is skilfully enhanced by the syntax of the poem. As Yenser points out:

“The Black Swan” sets out with syntax that cooperates with lineation in such a way that the sentence follows the swan’s movement like a shadow: “Black on flat water past the jonquil lawns / Riding, the black swan draws / A private chaos ...” The trailing participle, the delayed subject, and the heavy run-on in both lines all

contribute to the swan's power. These features combine with the enjambment in line four, the indentations of some lines, and the staving off of the full stop until stanza's end to insinuate the swan's distinctive shape – the focus then of the second stanza. The swan is everywhere implicit and imperious.

In addition to its syntactical presence on the page, the swan is also depicted in terms of mystery and ambivalence, at once shaped like “a question-mark on the lake” and “outlaw[ing] all possible questioning.” The swan is ‘like’ “love,” and ‘like’ “disaster,” and is associated with “time’s damage” and “time’s grief,” “sorrow” and “tragedies,” but as a redeeming presence rather than a threatening one. Although Merrill speaks of “murderous swans” in “The Peacock,” this swan does not pose a physical threat. Its presence is enticing and enchanting but remains ambivalent, because however alluring the swan is; it remains unavailable to the child. The child, though drawn to the animal, is trapped on the shore of the lake (“stays / Forever” “upon the bank”) and cannot reach the swan, either physically or mentally. It is in this unavailability, this elusiveness that the swan becomes an object of the sublime. In its physical presence as well as on a metaphorical level, the Black Swan is a rare bird, an extraordinary creature that comes to represent in this poem, if not the secret of life itself, at least someone (something) that has “learned to enter / Sorrow’s lost secret center” where

The central hollowness is that pure winter
That does not change but is
Always brilliant ice and air.

The swan is thus the “tall emblem” of this ever frozen and unchanging centre of life. This mysterious “hollowness” seems to be a place where the laws of the world of time and change do not apply, where nothing *is*, and can therefore never be lost or tainted. At the close of the encounter, when the swan turns and glides away across the lake (“To the opposite side, always.”) the child is left in emotional turmoil and psychological confusion, its “hands full of difficult marvels.” Having had a glimpse of the existence of an answer to universal questions, or at least to an end to the questioning, it is nevertheless only confronted with “the huge silence of the swan.” Unable to vocalise its attraction to this bird, then, the child “stays / Forever to cry aloud / In anguish: I love the black swan” and thus becomes a metaphor for the mind’s desire for and inability to comprehend these elusive secrets of life, or loss, or sorrow.

This sublime, like that of the octopus and the locusts, is the sublime of the animal abyss, the confrontation between a human mind and the animal presence that it must always fail to comprehend. Most closely related to Kant’s explanation of the mathematical sublime, its sublimity revolves not around a combination of pain and pleasure or delight and terror, but around the inability of the imagination to comprehend what it sees, for lack of anything to compare it with, for lack of a metaphor. Though not a mathematical sublime in the sense of vastness or infinity, it may be seen to function in a similar way of attraction and repulsion, of frustration of the imagination, and of the threat of the annihilation of the self in the face of this incomprehension. Unlike Kant’s mathematical sublime, however, in these poems there does not seem to be a redeeming intervention of the faculty of reason that provides relief to the mind and asserts the supersensibility of the self in its capacity for pure reason. The sublime experience remains limited to the overwhelming mix of desire and repulsion, of bliss and doubt, without the relief of reason. This returns us to Stevens’ theory of the sublime in his essay on “The Irrational Element in Poetry,” briefly touched on above.

In a careful reading of Stevens’ prose and poetry, Michael T. Beehler relates his concept of the irrational, the inexplicable, to Immanuel Kant’s “Analytic of the Sublime.” “The irrational bears the same relation to the rational that the unknown bears to the known,” Stevens states, and he argues that, as the ardour of scholars is excited by the unknown, who “in the known alone, would shrivel up with boredom,” so the ardour of poets is excited by the irrational: “We may resent the consideration of it by any except the most lucid minds; but when so considered, it has seductions more powerful and more profound than those of the known.” Although Stevens never directly identifies his notion of the “irrational element” with the sublime, Beehler effectively argues their similarity and interchangeable nature. His reading of Stevens reveals that where for Kant, the sublime takes place in the movement from the negative awareness

of the limitation of the imagination to the intervening force of the faculty of reason which reconstitutes the supersensibility of the mind, for Stevens, this moment of restoration, far from pointing out the limitations of representation and metaphor, actually marks their “boundless pervasiveness.”

Where the imagination lacks capacity, where what is perceived or experienced is without anything to compare it to, to describe it with, without a metaphor to make it comprehensible, the notion of the sublime steps in. Kant sees this as an intervention of reason in the failing imagination, rescuing the mind from the threat of disintegration, and he locates the sublime effect in this three-part movement from overwhelming experience to failure of the imagination causing anxiety to rescue by reason causing strong feelings of relief. Beehler explains that Stevens follows Kant’s “*via negativa* of the sublime moment,” but instead of describing the third stage as an ‘intervention of reason’ he argues that the sublime itself becomes the metaphor:

By refusing to take place simply inside poetry or simply outside of it, the irrational appears as a process that erases the boundary between inside and outside by allowing it to be written only as a metaphor of a boundary. [...] It is this boundary that allows the unknown to appear as that which lies over the horizon of the known, as its source and object. But it is precisely the *as* of metaphor that produces this boundary, since the unknown – the outside par excellence of the known – is a figure intended to be taken “*as* the source of knowledge, *as* the object of thought” [*sic*]. [...] The metaphor of the unknown as source and object thus becomes a sign of another metaphor – that of the horizon, boundary, or gap.

This deviation from Kant’s theory towards a more rhetorical interpretation of the sublime is particularly relevant to our reading of “The Black Swan.” Stevens here brings his theory of the irrational in poetry, an element never identified as ‘the sublime’ but convincingly aligned with it by Beehler, via Kant back towards Longinus.

Instead of taking the sublime simply as a product of language, Stevens identifies it as a metaphor for that for which we lack metaphors, for that which, according to Kant is “beyond comparison,” thus proving the circular, “horizonless dynamics” of poetic metaphor. And this is crucial to “The Black Swan,” since, as we have seen, there is no intervention of reason there. The child is attracted to and repelled by the swan, but is incapable of identifying with its power or of allowing reason to assert itself as superior to nature. The sublime here simply becomes a metaphor for that which cannot be explained or expressed. In part, I would argue, the absence of the intervention of reason in “The Black Swan” may be derived from Merrill’s use of a child as the subject of the sublime experience. As a young person of undisclosed age, the child may simply not have the mental faculties to understand the power of pure reason, to see that whereas his imagination cannot fully comprehend what he sees, he can at least rationally acknowledge the existence of things beyond his comprehension, thus reasserting the strength of pure reason. In the absence of this capacity for reason, the child’s experience of the sublime is stunted. In “The Octopus” and “The Locusts,” we see a similar absence of intervening reason and an experience of the sublime that does not fully follow Kant’s tripartite movement. Rather than as a stunted sublime, I would argue that Merrill follows Stevens’ example and completes the sublime experience in his poems by incorporating the sublime as a metaphor, as a stand-in for that which cannot be described but only suggested in poetry.

Merrill’s poetic animal sublime thus occupies a space between the Romantic natural sublime that locates the source of the experience in the external world and the rhetorical sublime that locates the source of the sublime in poetic strategy. Though referring to, and invoking, the reader’s shared experience of an encounter with the ultimate unknowability of the animal or the limits of human knowledge with regards to the essence of an animal and thus the boundary of the human self and the capacity of the human mind, which experience is located in an engagement with the material world and the real, living animal, Merrill’s sublime animals are an absence rather than a presence in the poem, and the sublime experience in the poem is a poetic device, a metaphor, that refers to that absence. From the unvoiced absence of the real, living animal in the earlier metaphorical animal poems, Merrill moves to an acknowledged absence of the real animal through the poetic invocation of the sublime, pointing to the boundaries of human understanding of the external world and the experience of looking across those

boundaries.

Conclusion

Merrill's poetic engagement with the animal is thus radically different from Kinnell and Snyder. Whereas Kinnell is less concerned with the essence of the animal itself, and more with the relationship between humans and animals, and the similarities and dissimilarities that are part of that relationship, and Snyder explores the human capacity for looking, or imagining, across the species boundaries and engaging with animals through myth and through hunting, Merrill is keenly aware of the limits of human engagement with the external world, which he deems objectively unknowable both because it is ever changing and because it is always filtered through the human mind. Merrill is therefore predominantly interested in the impressions that the external world make on the mind, and in the metaphorical potential of nature for poetic communication. His animal poems tend to revolve solely around metaphor, as the animal subjects and images are employed as symbols for human experiences in a sophisticated and at times labyrinthine complex of metaphorical play, and the meaning of the poems does not depend on conveying any sense of a real, living animal. In addition to these purely metaphorical poems, however, Merrill more directly engages with the notion of the real but unknowable animal in the poems that invoke the sublime. As sources of the sublime, these poetic animals remain metaphors, but are employed not as metaphors for human experiences but as stand-ins for their own, now acknowledged, absence in the poem. Merrill thus alternately ignores or displaces any sense of the actual animal, or distances it significantly from the human in conceptual or cognitive terms. Though he moves between complete absence and acknowledged absence, the real animal never attains any direct relevance in Merrill's poetry, and the success of the poems is not dependent on a direct connection to the material world. The (often beautiful and evocative) poems themselves are either more or less successful as literary artefacts, but their success does not rely on their connection to physical life. They employ animal subjects (and nature in general) overtly and unapologetically as poetical tools; Merrill's animals are metaphors, emblems, or symbols, in a poetic universe that reflects the mind's impressions rather than the physical world itself.

Conclusion

The remarkable surge in publication of animal poetry anthologies in the 1990s, with the appearance of no less than five separate anthologies within one decade encompassing poetry from various periods and languages, illustrates two important points: their contents demonstrate that animals have long been a prolific subject of poetry in many cultures and languages, and their publication attests to the fact that contemporary audiences continue to be interested in animal poetry. The presence of animals throughout world literature is consistent and pervasive, and this is not surprising when one bears in mind the important roles that animals have played in the emergence and development of abstract thinking and symbolic behaviour in man. The overwhelming presence of animal images in some of the oldest evidence of this symbolic behaviour, the underground cave paintings in Western Europe and the worldwide occurrence of animal totems among primitive peoples, points to their great significance and potential for metaphor, as well as to human fascination with their presence. Throughout human history, this significance and this fascination have remained, and can still be witnessed in their presence in contemporary poetry, and the popularity of such poetry with contemporary audiences. However, given the significance and presence that animals have in the history of poetry, it is surprising that so little critical attention has been paid to them. Though older studies exist, most research into the role and position of animals in the world, into human-animal interactions and into animal representations in different forms of cultural expression, is part of the field of Animal Studies, which emerged over the course of the last twenty or thirty years. Moreover, this field of research is characterised by a radical change in its approach to the animals or animal representations under discussion, influenced not only by developments in scientific knowledge of animals but also by changes in human perceptions of desired animal-human interaction since, roughly, the 1970s, conventionally summarized as the 'animal rights' or 'animal liberation' debate. A recent review of the developments in Animal Studies, as well as a discussion of the future of the research area, can be found in the articles in the Animal Studies section of the March 2009 issue of the *PMLA*. Furthermore, although there are selected studies of animals in literature, most studies focus on more general questions of representation, rather than on a detailed research into the actual representation of animals in literature of various genres, periods, languages or countries.

There is, therefore, a wide array of animal poetry from different countries, languages and periods that is critically unexplored, and that might yield fascinating outcomes of critical analysis and comparison. To what extent do these poems reflect cultural attitudes about animals and changes in those attitudes over time? What do animal poems from different countries or regions reveal about those countries and regions, and how do they compare to those of other countries? Is there, for instance, a significant difference in the tendencies and trends in American animal poetry versus Canadian animal poetry, or in North American animal poems versus South American or European animal poems? What influence might the different species of animals native to any region have on the poetry that that region produces? How are animals represented when they are used as metaphors, and what does that particular representation say about human perceptions of those animals? What kind of efforts are made towards the representation of real, living animals in poetry, and how do poets attempt to bridge the ontological gap or look beyond the boundaries of human knowledge or language? How have literary representations of animals been influenced by, reinforced, or subverted conventional cultural assumptions about animals and animal-human relationships? Are there significant differences between the representations of animals in prose and poetry? To form even tentative answers to any of these questions, much more research into the representation of animals in literature will be necessary.

As we have seen in this present study, a critical exploration and analysis of animal poems by three authors from the same period and the same country offers some insight into the very wide range of ways in which animals can be utilised and represented in poetry. In our examination of Kinnell's animal poetry we have observed how he embraces binarisms of life and death, love and isolation, transience and transcendence and more in his poetry, and allows both sides of each binarism to continually float into and out of the other's space in the poem. Kinnell does not so much question or interrogate these binarisms but acknowledges their presence and embraces their inevitable, continual mutual influence on each other. With regard to the animals present in his poetry, in particular, he embraces the binarisms of kinship and otherness, of familiarity and strangeness as pervasive motifs in human-animal interaction. This is not to say that Kinnell embraces a binary opposition of man versus animal or man versus nature. In fact, he presents a clear and outspoken view of the dualistic separation of man from nature as the source of many contemporary human evils and of a devaluation of life. For Kinnell, binarisms exist to influence and inform each other, to emphasize the aspect of connection and emphatically not the aspect of separation. Kinnell's outlook on animals in his poetry is casually anthropocentric. Speaking from the position of a human with a keen awareness of the presence of animals that share his living environment, Kinnell is not looking to subvert anthropocentrism but to mediate it, naturally including a great number of different animals and animal species in his poetic universe with intrinsic value independent of human interests; within their own world and their own experience of that world.

Snyder's approach is more subversive of the conventional human-nature dichotomies. Through his poetic retellings of animal marriage myths and trickster characters and the inclusions of mythological animals among real animals in his poetic bestiary Snyder creates a universe in which these animals exist in the same dimension of the world as humans and in which their communications are free and open. In this unrestricted, inclusive universe of real and mythological animals and humans, he gives shape to deep ecological beliefs of egalitarianism and a breaking down of human-animal, human-nature, and animate-inanimate nature binarisms. Humans are among animals rather than opposed to animals in Snyder's poetic world, and Snyder questions and subverts anthropocentrism where possible or carefully acknowledges it where unavoidable.

Through specific stylistic strategies of juxtapositions, ellipsis, elision, space and silence, Snyder is the poet that most explicitly attempts to illuminate what Bataille terms "that animal darkness." Many of his shorter poems, especially, aim to see or show the unknowable essence of animals in poetry through acts of imagination and suggestion that increasingly lead to fragmentation and silence but nonetheless acknowledge this boundary into this "animal darkness," and the limits of human knowledge of its environment. Identifying the role of the poet as an intermediary between humans and their natural environment, Snyder places himself in both a primitive, shamanistic tradition and in the role described for the poet by Emerson in "The Poet." He utilizes poetic strategies influenced by the imagism of high modernism and Asian literary traditions to show the reader the experience of seeing the world, and especially seeing animals, without language, and to bring that experience into language in the form of poetry. Snyder's poetry has an element of didactic intent, inviting readers to seek out experiences of nature outside of language for themselves. Moreover, Snyder attempts to bridge the contemporary gap between nature and civilisation by reconnecting readers with their primitive roots and original relationships with animals through his poetic retellings of narrative plots and characters from world mythology.

Merrill far more often unapologetically employs animals as metaphors for human experiences and concerns than Snyder or Kinnell and frequently ignores or disregards the physical reality of nature in his impressionist representations of natural scenes and symbolist depictions of animals. Even so, he remains keenly aware of the limitations of human knowledge of the external world. Preferring the subjective reality of the impressions which this external world makes upon the internal mind to the objectively unknowable, ever-changing physical world, Merrill sees metaphor and association as not only a fascinating but also an unavoidable element of writing poetry or even of being in the world. In his poetry, he engages in extensive metaphorical convolutions involving animal subjects and images, and at times draws on and modifies

animals as already existing symbols and metaphors in Christianity and classical antiquity, creating a labyrinthine arrangement of metaphorical play. However, in addition to this extensive exploration of animals' metaphorical potential, Merrill explores his fascination with the boundaries of human engagement with real, living animals through the use of the sublime as a Stevensian metaphor for the irrational and unknowable element of these animals, as a metaphorical acknowledgement of the "animal darkness" to which he has no access.

As a close reading of their poems reveals, these three poets do not only 'write' animals in a great variety of ways. They also represent widely ranging positions on the spectrum of metaphoricity in their poetic engagement with animals. These positions range from Kinnell, who is concerned predominantly with the scope and the possibilities of human-animal relationships and kinship, to Snyder, who both actively tries to represent the unknowable otherness of animals and aims to break down conceptual binarisms of human versus animal and human versus nature, and to Merrill who unreservedly and eagerly utilizes the full metaphorical potential of animals but also deploys them as a source of the sublime, thus acknowledging the absence of a sense of the real, living animal in his poems and gesturing towards the limitations of human engagement with animals.

In addition to the many differences in focus and approach, we can also see some exciting similarities in the poems of these three authors. Some things that stand out from this study but need much more research before we can begin to draw conclusions are, for instance, the presence of a certain 'Americanness' of the animals that are portrayed. All three authors, for instance, engage substantially with bears. From Kinnell's "The Bear" and "The Stone Table," and Snyder's "*this poem is for bear*" and his many poems about the mythological Bear Wife motif, to Merrill's bear and stag in mortal combat in "Variations and Elegy: White Stag, Black Bear," this typically American wilderness animal seems to play a unique role in the American poets' imaginations. Equally, the overwhelming presence of birds among these animal poems is something that demands further research. Why do birds prove such prolific topics for poetic reflection and such metaphorical potential, and how are they represented in various countries, various periods or by various literary movements? As animal poetry continues to excite contemporary readers, and as it continues to be a realm in which the nature of animals, the position they have in contemporary societies and the ways in which humans and animals interact are observed, imagined, questioned and examined, these and other questions ought to be asked, and can only be answered through further research into the representations of animals in literature.

This study explores the animal poems of Kinnell, Snyder and Merrill through close readings of their animal poems and a detailed discussion of the main themes and approaches in their efforts to 'write animals.' In doing so, this study not only contributes new and original approaches to each of these poets' works, discussing their treatment of animal subjects within the wider context of their individual poetics and providing a unique perspective on the relationship between their poetic universe and the external world. It also forms a first step towards what will hopefully become a comprehensive critical examination of the ways in which American poets engage with the rich fauna of their continent and of the efforts they make towards illuminating "that animal darkness."

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