Poetic Animals and Animal Souls

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Mesoamericans’ rich spiritual beliefs about the importance of animals and about the correlation between the well-being of animals and that of human beings contrast with a diminutive respect accorded to animals in industrialized cultures. Some vestige of a parallel sensibility, however – granting animals an aura of dignity relatively independent of anthropocentric constructions – may be detected in the animal poetry of selected Western writers including Marianne Moore, Gary Snyder, and José Emilio Pacheco. Such animal poetry, although possessing no explicit links to Mesoamerican spirituality, may represent an ethos extant (albeit rare) in industrial-world culture that quietly celebrates – as Mesoamerican culture does more unabashedly – the sanctity and parity of nonhuman animals.

Building on cultural anthropological studies of Mesoamerican beliefs about nonhuman animals, this article constructs a critical frame for appraising a canon of animal poetry. Numerous other cultural orientations offer perspectives for regarding animals in drastically different fashions from the circumscribed ways (zoos, factory farms, vivisection, the housepet industry, and animal pageants) in which Western society conventionally does. I would like to examine different ways for people to interact with animals and to generate an expanded range of potential paradigms for human-animal interaction. The Mesoamerican conception of “animal souls” – the idea that a person’s soul is explicitly connected with an external animal counterpart or co-essence – represents one such model.

I hope to suggest how animal poetry might inculcate readers in our culture with some measure of the sensibilities held by those who believe in animal souls. This poetry might thereby provide a medium through which Western industrial-world readers, at present uninitiated, can tap into some portion of the world view evinced by those societies that possess a more sophisticated sense of how people and animals relate to each other. Examining animal poetry in the light of Mesoamerican animal beliefs promises to provide insights that industrial-world readers have sublimated or simply missed, but that, I believe, are recoverable. If we steep ourselves in “foreign” sensibilities, and then return to study our own poetry from...
this perspective, we may see how Western art makes contact (coincidentally rather than intentionally) with variant cultural philosophies. This refreshed view may help us to transcend our received ideas, and lead us to other ways of regarding animals.

Mesoamerican philosophies toward animals differ strikingly from prevalent inclinations in Western industrial culture, which disdains the integrity of nonhuman animals, disregards their importance in the ecosystem, and, as people mount increasingly dangerous assaults upon the planet’s environments, refuses to grant these animals any semblance of parity. Our disposition betokens an anthropocentric view of the natural, physical world and its nonhuman inhabitants as fodder for the global economy. Animal poetry may serve to counter our speciesist chauvinism, setting out a righter path, and resisting – even if only in homeopathic measure – the damage done on so many other fronts.

**Constructing Animals**

Animal poetry may facilitate an enlightened, perhaps even a spiritually transcendent, outlook toward animals. But it is not inherently noble – the animal poet risks succumbing to an Adamic temptation of hubris. As Weiss writes, “Adam’s naming of the creatures is connected with his birthright of dominion over them....The danger is this: to name is to cage; to preserve is to kill” (1990, p. 238). The singular animal poets are those who, in Weiss’s construction, “refuse to name” (p. 234) – who manage to evoke and poeticize animals without concomitantly colonizing them and without constraining them within our own epistemology. I do not claim monolithically that all animal poetry succeeds in, or even should aspire to, advancing an ecocultural epiphany. However, a significant portion of it may provide at least a hint as to how art may facilitate a better understanding and appreciation of animals and, thus, of nature and the world around us – better than our performance record in most of our political, economic, and cultural practices. This poetry may treat its subjects more sensitively and equitably than the way we treat animals in habitats that we desecrate or in wildlife management programs that relegate animals to a minor and inconvenient widget in our complex industrial workings, or in exploitative scientific and consumerist research, or in zoos where animals perform to entertain audiences and to render a glib naturalistic education.

In *Seeing in Nature What is Ours: Poetry and the Human-Animal Bond*, Lawrence (1994) argued for the special insights of animal poetry. She lamented “the inexorable intellectual heritage and social conditioning of the Western world” (p. 47) that has distanced humans from nonhuman life. If we aspire to “restore,
preserve, and enhance the human bond with animals" (p. 47), we must recognize that this bond

...emanates partly from the deep levels of our consciousness, originating from the same kind of experience as myth, folklore, and poetry, whose languages are symbolic. Tapping into a special aspect of the psyche, these forms of expression articulate truths that are more profound than observable “fact.”...Of all the forms which celebrate and illuminate the bond between animals and people, poetry possesses the most immediacy. Its expressions are composed of spontaneous outflows of affirmation for life, untempered by dependent variables. The symbolizing of animals that is peculiar to poetry contributes an essential key to the age-old search for “man’s place in nature.”... poetry becomes the most direct and revealing medium through which to cognitively balance the alternatives in the question that ultimately determines the character of all human-animal interactions: are the other forms of life like us or different? (pp. 47-48)

Animal poetry edifies readers, Lawrence believes, as no other medium can.

[People] may understand their own or even their species’ feelings about animals, but it is far more difficult for them to comprehend equally well the animal’s half of the relationship. To fully understand human-animal interaction, the most important requirement is empathy. It might be said that this quality is the poet’s stock in trade. A gifted poet communicates intimate feelings for the other beings. (p. 48)

In another study of the human-animal bond as manifested in literature, Frost (1991) concluded that the works she examined about people and their pets show “that human characters are attracted to the animals because their needs are not being fully met in human society” (p. 51). Animals cannot substitute for people, but

Still, although they are not people, and thus our relationship toward them must be different in most ways, how we come to know, respect, cherish, or love an animal is comparable to how we come to bond with a person since in both cases imagination is required. One can no more absolutely know another person than one can with certainty know the will of an animal. When a person chooses to bond with an animal she does so to extend her sense of self by granting, creating, or recognizing the selfhood of another that would otherwise remain unrealized. (pp. 51-52)
Frost described the literary expression of the human-animal connection as an extension of the human social contract – of the franchise of humanity, as it were – to nonhuman life, out of a recognition that an isolated, segregationist attention to humankind alone is inadequate. She suggested that the dominant culture (humanity) alone is insufficiently broad and could only be enriched by expanding its domain to include other groups within the membership of what we regard as sentient, conscious life.

**Animal Souls**

"Mesoamerican souls are fragile essences that link individuals to the forces of the earth, the cosmos, and the divine," wrote Gossen (1996). "They provide this link because they originate outside the body of their human counterpart, often in the bodies of animals" (pp. 81-82). Mesoamericans believe in “a private spiritual world of the self that is expressed through the concept of animal souls or other extrasomatic causal forces that influence their destiny” (1994, p. 555). The specific culture Gossen studies, the Chamula Tzotzil community of Southern Mexico (descendants of the ancient Maya), shares with the vast majority of more than 15 million Amerindians in Mexico and Central America “a pan-Mesoamerican indigenous belief in what is generally known as nagualismo or tonalismo in the anthropological literature of the area” (1975, p. 448). The kindred terms signify, respectively, the transformation of a person into an animal and a person’s companion animal or destiny, which everyone is believed to possess. (Adams & Rubel, 1967, p. 336)

Menchú (1984) wrote of her Guatemalan Quiché culture, which resembles the Chamula in affirming animals’ importance to people and interdependence with people.

Every child is born with a nahual. The nahual is like a shadow, his protective spirit who will go through life with him. The nahual is the representative of the earth, the animal world, the sun and water, and in this way the child communicates with nature. The nahual is our double, something very important to us....The child is taught that if he kills an animal, that animal’s human double will be very angry with him because he is killing his nahual. Every animal has its human counterpart and if you hurt him, you hurt the animal too. (1984, p. 18)

“The thread that unifies these various expressions” of the Mesoamerican human animal spiritual affiliation “focuses on the predestination and life history of the self
that lies outside the self and is thus not subject to individual control” (Gossen, 1996, p. 83). Events beyond the jurisdiction of our immediate influence have always compelled people to identify some domain or entity that mediates these issues – God, Zeus, the Fates, the planets. For Mesoamericans, it is animals who embody this domain.

Mesoamerican animal beliefs, for me, evoke some of poetry’s enticements. This inspires me to align or juxtapose my own contemporary humanism with animal souls. Poetry taps into a realm of consciousness beyond our immediate, literal, quotidian, perceptual, and sensory ken. Mesoamericans provide a paradigm for approaching and identifying such a suprasystem. Their metaphysical representations of human ties to the earth, nature, and fate, as mediated by animals, may illuminate processes underlying Western poetic inscriptions of animals.

What is our relationship to animals? What should or might it be? How does human culture frame our relationship to animals? Mesoamerican communities have confronted these questions, arriving at a simple, compelling answer: Human existence is directly linked to, and dependent upon, the fortunes of other creatures. We and our poets fumble around, more tentatively, lacking a widespread, vital system of belief and knowledge about the relationship between human and nonhuman animals. But animal poetry may embody a displaced realm of contemporary Western intellectual/aesthetic spirituality – one that, like Mesoamerican spirituality, emanates from the natural world that exceeds the merely human realm.

In this sense, the concept of animal souls takes on much broader latitude, figuratively and transculturally, as it becomes imported from its native context into literary criticism. When Gossen invoked the term in reference to Chamula culture, he described the animal component, or complement, of a human soul – what is on some level a shared existence, a symbiotic human-animal consciousness. To dispute Descartes, who explicitly denied the concept of animals’ souls, I use the term to celebrate the sentience and importance that I believe animals possess. I believe the concept of animal souls can invoke a range of qualities unnoticed or undervalued by the common cultural prejudices that relegate animals to a consummately subordinate position. Cultural anthropologists, when referring to animal souls, mean people’s animal souls – the part of the human spirit situated in an external animal.

It would be disingenuous to deny, in this formulation, the residual privileging of the human being in this human-animal relationship, as if, in some sense, a degree of human sentience is franchised out, transposed into an animal host, but still a constituent of our own domain of consciousness. The dynamics of the human-
animal bond encompassed by *nagualismo* and *tonalismo* can grant animals a potent parity with humanity by acknowledging their spiritual force and their equitable, intimate interaction with people, or as representing animals as colonized subjects, outposts of our own central empire of self. Certainly the same is true of poets who use animals in their art. The crux of the potential ambivalence inheres in the various possible interpretations of what it means to “use” animals in the first place. It makes sense, then, to examine the presence of animal souls in an assembly of poetic animals. This examination would be based on a presumption that animal poets evince some approximation of the fierce conviction demonstrated by Mesoamericans that animals crucially matter and embody a spiritual and ecological potency on their own terms — that they are not simply being supporting players in an anthropocentric fantasy.

**Respecting Nature**

A profoundly respectful environmental sensitivity — inculcated even prenatally — accompanies a belief in animal souls. Menchú (1984) explained that a pregnant woman “talks to the child continuously from the first moment he’s in her stomach.... She’ll say, for instance; ‘You must never abuse nature’” (p. 8). After the birth, the community symbolically affirms that “the earth is the mother and father of the child” (p. 9). In Quiche agricultural rituals, the harvest fiesta “really starts months before when we asked the earth’s permission to cultivate her” (p. 52). Even when animals threaten their agricultural livelihood and children are posted guard to prevent birds and rodents from eating seeds after they have been sown, Menchú writes, “We set traps but when the poor animals cry out, we go and see. Since they are animals and our parents have forbidden us to kill them, we let them go after we’ve given them a telling off so they won’t come back” (p. 53). Menchú recounts a plethora of customs testifying to the pervasive reverence her culture promotes:

We worship — or rather not worship but respect — a lot of things to do with the natural world, the most important things for us. For instance, to us, water is sacred. Our parents tell us when we’re very small not to waste water, even when we have it. Water is pure, clean, and gives life to man. Without water we cannot survive, nor could our ancestors have survived. The idea that water is sacred is in us children, and we never stop thinking of it as something pure. The same goes for the earth. Our parents tell us: “Children, the earth is the mother of man, because she gives him food.”...So we think of the earth as the mother of man, and our parents teach us to
respect the earth....[During] prayers and ceremonies....We evoke the representatives of the animal world....We say: “Mother Earth, you who give us food, whose children we are and on whom we depend, please make this produce you give us flourish and make our children and animals grow....We do not abuse you, we only beg your permission, you who are part of the natural world and part of the family of our parents and our grandparents.” This means we believe, for instance, that the sun is our grandfather, that he is a member of our family....[The Quiché] must respect the life of trees, the birds, the animals around us. We say the names of birds and animals – cows, horses, dogs, cats. All these. We mention them all. We must respect the life of every single one of them. (pp. 56-58)

**Concepts and Co-Essences**

Of course, Menchú’s people do not hold a monopoly on respect for nature – every religion, mythos, and culture contains tributes to the earth and the elements. Certainly all American parents, like their Quiché counterparts, have pleaded with their children not to waste water while brushing their teeth. Evidence in every culture indicates at least an inkling of animals’ spiritual potency and some aspiration to tap into this. But communities such as the Chamula and Quiché seem sincere in their intimate, respectful acknowledgment of animals’ importance, on a widespread scale and with a conviction that vastly exceeds the experience of Western society. “The concept of animal souls and other co-essences goes well beyond being a mere evaluative vocabulary. These ideas matter. They constitute a key node in Indian cosmologies and beliefs about health and general well-being” (Gossen, 1994, p. 555).

In Western culture, generally, interest in animals rings hollow. It is rote or symbolic, possessing a diminutive cultural currency. Animals and animal imagery are ubiquitous, but the importance we accord them is shallow. Politically, aesthetically, and sociologically, animals are perpetually subaltern. For Mesoamericans, animal souls are real, immediate. They live out, at the core of their belief system, a valorization of animal life. Gossen (1994) wrote that the “set of beliefs and language for talking about [animal souls] reside at the very core of what might be called a native metaphysics of personhood in Mesoamerica.” He went further to say that “the language of souls has fundamentally to do with Mesoamerican construction of self and social identity, destiny and power, as much now as has apparently been the case for 2,000 years in Mexico and Central America” (p. 556), and
constitutes a salient element of the most central aspects of human nature—“our strength, our frailty, our vulnerability, our inequality, and even our unwitting capacity to destroy ourselves” (p. 566).

**Poetry as Best Hope**

Our animal poetry may offer the best hope for discovering within our culture an incipient sensibility—embracing a sound relationship with animals and an appreciation of their importance to the earth—approximating attitudes more prevalent in numerous societies outside the Western sphere. Even if we probably cannot finally achieve the faith in animal souls that other cultures have, we may nevertheless try to learn from and emulate those who have attained keen insights about interspecies relationships. We might strive to embrace some of their perceptions and celebrate some areas in our own culture where we may have already taken a step in the right direction. We might try to understand and value the natural world more than we do in our predominantly artificial communities (pervaded with artificial climates, plastic plants, synthetic foods, and on and on), and we might embrace animals as creatures who can help us in this endeavor. We might worship in animal spirits what is inexplicable in our own cultural processes. Kowalski suggested how we might conceptualize animals’ spiritual potentiality:

> My contention is that spirituality is quite natural, rooted firmly in the biological order and in the ecology shared by all life....To me, animals have all the traits indicative of soul....No one can prove that animals have souls. But if we open our hearts to other creatures and allow them to sympathize with their joys and struggles, we find they have they power to touch and transform us. There is an inwardness in other creatures that awakens what is innermost in ourselves. (1991, pp. 3, 5)

Independent of Mesoamerican tenets but congruent with these sensibilities, Kowalski concluded, “Animals are our spiritual colleagues and emotional companions. We know this to be true less through debate than through direct experience” (p. 108). Asking people to open our hearts to animals and greet them as soul mates, Kowalski wrote, “The things that make life most precious and blessed—courage and daring, conscience and compassion, imagination and originality, fantasy and play—do not belong to our kind alone” (p. 111).

Animal poems represent a topos, a contact zone, through which writers attempt to effectuate what the Chamula possess as part of their ingrained epistemology.
This poetry may be regarded as the poets’ (and readers’) attempts to find something like what the Chamula would recognize as their animal souls. If we can accomplish this approximation of the Mesoamerican metaphysics, we will have achieved much, venturing closer to the rhythms and workings of the natural world than we usually do in Western industrial acculturation. Animals are so important to our lives in so many ways, and yet we largely construct our world and our lives as necessarily separate from theirs. We should feel compelled to think about them and understand them, both on their own merits and in terms of how their existence and their survival impacts our lives.

Like canaries who accompanied miners into the tunnels, dying of gas inhalation before the people could smell the danger, all animals possess a sensitive survival instinct whose fragility may serve to warn us of impending threats. But here, there need be no dead birds to enable our survival. We should aspire to learn from animals — as every previous society has done to some degree — but without leaving them poorer, crippled, displaced, captured, contaminated, or dead. At the vanguard of the modern intellectual/industrial world, people’s perceptions are so crudely stinted, with respect to our sensitivity to the earth and its processes, that we may overlook imminent natural hazards: Our cultural systems seem to be proceeding just fine, disguising or sublimating the ecosystem’s global warming, acid rain, eroding shorelines, dying trees, polluted rivers, disappearing nature, and so forth. It is possible to look at the world through the lens of our immensely developed and sophisticated culture and not notice what is wrong. It is less possible to do this if we are clearly attuned to animal consciousness and perspectives. Like animal souls, animal poetry fosters such transcendence of anthropocentrism.

Three Poets

Marianne Moore (1887–1972)

This article attempts to theorize the vitality of animal poetry rather than to implement a practical critical analysis. To this end, three poets offer valuable bodies of work that substantially serve both aesthetic and ecological interests. The poetry of Marianne Moore (1887-1972) features animals who are resoundingly unique and splendid, yet tend to appear somewhat opaque and weirdly elusive to us. Readers may initially resist or fault Moore’s verse because her animals are hard to relate to – it is difficult to penetrate her poesis and feel a keen sense of knowing control over the animals she describes. But gradually, Moore’s ideal reader comes
to appreciate that this intentional effect serves to teach people about nonhuman animals and their difference from us. She extols the eloquence of animals in their habitats and teaches her readers to respect animals in their own places, on their own terms, and not (like so many other appropriative representations of animals) transposed into our distorting, artificial constructs for our more convenient cultural consumption. “The Fish,” Moore writes, in the strikingly watery poem of that title,

wade
through black jade.
Of the crow-blue mussel-shells, one keeps
adjusting the ash-heaps;
opening and shutting itself like
an
injured fan.
The barnacles which encrust the side
of the wave, cannot hide
there for the submerged shafts of the
sun,
split like spun
glass, move themselves with spotlight swiftness
into the crevices –
in and out, illuminating
the
turquoise sea
of bodies. (1967, p. 32)

Her animals march to their own beat. Her poetry, however humanly and artificially, at least tries to suggest how animals might really look and act. The syntactic, linguistic, prosodic, and conceptual difficulties of Moore’s poetry formally evoke the difficulty people have demonstrated in understanding animals and in situating themselves perceptually in a cognitive perspective that is not human-centered. At the same time, the rich, indirect complexity of her poesis tantalizes readers with insights achievable if they can let go of conventional sensibilities. Enigmatically, her poetry envelops, in the experience of observing animals, a promise of the philosophical and ethical complexity that exists profusely all around us if we only knew how to look:
I have seen ambition without understanding in a variety of forms. Happening to stand by an ant-hill, I have seen a fastidious ant carrying a stick north, south, east, west, till it turned on itself, struck out from the flower-bed into the lawn, and returned to the point from which it had started. Then abandoning the stick as useless and overtaxing its jaws with a particle of whitewash – pill-like but heavy, it again went through the same course of procedure. What is there in being able to say that one has dominated the stream in an attitude of self-defense; in proving that one has had the experience of carrying a stick? (pp. 38-39)

The profound dignity of Moore’s attention to animals, and her expansive meditation on their lives and habits, suggest she is the rare industrial-world citizen who takes animals as seriously, and believes in their force as devoutly, as Mesoamericans. Moore is a prime illustration of one who can be compared to believers in animal souls because it is obvious that her vocation is one she embraces seriously, unwaveringly, and, let us say, religiously – the quidditas of her poetry is a profusion of noble, soul-infused animals.

Gary Snyder (1930– )

Gary Snyder imbues his animals with spirited, feisty integrity. Infused with awe, he acknowledged animals’ own lives and processes, while aware that the awe itself is part of the human construct, the artifice inherent in how we look at animals. Implicit in his animal poetry is an unabashed reverence for their power, sometimes intoned explicitly, as in “Prayer for the Great Family,” He writes: “Gratitude to Wild Beings, our brothers and sisters, teaching / secrets, freedoms, and ways; who share with us their / milk; self-complete, brave, and aware” (1992, p. 223). Perhaps Snyder’s most potent representational trope regarding animals occurs when he counterpoises their majesty against human habits of interaction with them that
result in their loss and distance from our lives. The tragic dissonance is self-evident in such poems as “The Dead by the Side of the Road,” a catalogue of animals carelessly slain by people, that ends:

The Doe was apparently shot
   lengthwise and through the side –
   shoulder and out the flank
   belly full of blood

Can save the other shoulder maybe,
   if she didn’t lie too long –

Pray to their spirits. Ask them to bless us:
   our ancient sisters’ trails
   the roads were laid across and kill them:
   night-shining eyes

The dead by the side of the road. (pp. 209-210)

Again in “Mother Earth: Her Whales,” Snyder juxtaposes animals’ magnificence with people’s dishonorable treatment of them:

The whales turn and glisten, plunge
   and sound and rise again,
Hanging over subtly darkening deeps
Flowing like breathing planets
   in the sparkling whorls of
   living light –

And Japan quibbles for words on
   what kinds of whales they can kill?
A once-great Buddhist nation
dribbles methyl mercury
   like gonorrhea
   in the sea. (p. 236)

Like Mesoamericans, Snyder is intensely attuned to the intricate links between people and animals, the interstices of our worlds. In the effusion of gratitude toward animals, the prayer for the does’ blessing, or the ecstatic experience of the whales’
movement that these excerpts describe, Snyder exhibits a spiritual reverence as intense as the Mesoamericans'. But when he extrapolates animals' connection with people, the shot deer and poisoned whales produce a jarring discordance. If his animal poems provide more unsettling accounts of the human-nonhuman relationship than believers in animal souls might affirm, that testifies to the distance our culture must travel before we can achieve the metaphysic that Mesoamerican spirituality evinces.

José Emilio Pacheco (1939– )

José Emilio Pacheco shows the variety and complexity of each animal’s life in *An Ark for the Next Millennium*, a collection featuring dozens of animals resplendent in their rich sociological, psychological, and ethical workings (along with other such epistemological sublimities that people have abrogated). Like Snyder and Moore, Pacheco evokes an acutely rapturous vision of animals’ lives and habitats, their quotidian existence, far from the range of normal human vision. In “Octopus” he writes:

Dark god of the deep,
fern, mushroom, hyacinth
among rocks unseen by man, hidden in the abyss
where at dawn, against the fire of the sun,
night falls to the bottom of the sea where the octopus
absorbs its murky ink through the suckers of its tentacles
Radiant, nocturnal beauty, it pulses
through the caliginous brine of mother waters
it perceives as fresh and crystalline. (1993, p. 23)

As in Snyder’s poetry, the attribution of spirituality is not a gratuitous construct but conveys an honest conviction in the divinity of animals. Pacheco offers a humbling perspective that reflects his sincere fascination with all the other species that exist in our world – human beings slip down a few notches as our pervasive egocentrism/anthropocentrism is corrected by the poet’s attunement to all the other fascinating life on our “ark.” Pacheco paints the conditions of animals with a pragmatic, eloquent simplicity, which aspires to inform readers of what is going on in their world, as in the prose poem “Augury”:

Until just recently I was awakened by the sound of birds. Today I realized they’re no longer there. Those signs of life are gone. Without them, things
seem much drearier. I wonder what may have killed them – pollution? noise? starving city dwellers? Or maybe the birds realized that Mexico City is dying, and have flown away before the final ruin. (p. 37)

As in Mesoamerican spirituality, Pacheco’s poetry alerts us, quietly yet ominously, to the importance of animals in our biosphere and the danger implicit in their absence. The set of standards and orientations that ring especially crisply in the poems by one or another of these poets, and in the works of many other poets as well, transcend any single writer and stand as a general touchstone of an ecologically ethical apotheosis. Readers might profitably consider the kind of spiritual, intellectual, personal relations that can exist between people and animals, as indicated by Mesoamerican animal souls, and try to replicate some of these experiences via aesthetic representations of animals. We may find, or at least approach, our own animal souls through these poetic animals.

Note

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