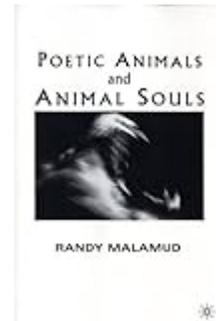




**Randy Malamud.** *Poetic Animals and Animal Souls*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003. xi + 200 pp. \$59.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-4039-6178-5.



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## Connecting with the Real Toads in Poetry's Imaginary Gardens

Connecting with the Real Toads in Poetry's Imaginary Gardens

Malamud's *Poetic Animals* is of special interest to those focused on the role of animals in literature, particularly in twentieth-century poetry (and more particularly still, in the poetry of Marianne Moore and Jose Emilio Pacheco). However, the theoretical framework he develops to examine animals in poetry will be of equal interest to anyone interested in the roles animals play in human society. As can be anticipated from his earlier book *Reading Zoos*, Malamud refers to contemporary Western society as "the box," suggesting it is a neatly packaged, pleasingly wrapped set of assumptions about almost everything, but about humans and animals in particular.[1] In the culture stories that comprise both the wrappings and the content of society's box, humans are central to everything—creation, evolution, and the works and words used to describe what we take to be "the real world." Everything not neatly packaged, everything outside the box—animals, wilderness, cultures with other stories—is considered, if not the heart of darkness itself,

empty of value. Our stories, then, may be projected on the darkness, the blank places on the map in a kind of cultural manifest destiny that we rationalize saves it from its meaningless self.

Malamud means to "reform" or at least "to suggest ways to reform our epistemological habits and assumptions: to think outside the box" in the hopes that then we will be able to discover or rediscover the "connection between people and animals" (p. 6). The value of poetry, as he sees it, is that art's ability to activate "[t]he empathizing imagination ... to enhance the awareness of sentient, cognitive, ethical, and emotional *affinities between people and animals*" (p. 9). To explain this Malamud refers frequently to the conceptual model Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, in *A Thousand Plateaus*, call "becoming animal." [2] Their model, and therefore Malamud's, is based on Mesoamerican beliefs about nonhuman animals. It is, then, a model from outside the box intended to allow us to look at the world with new eyes. As Malamud puts it: "The Mesoamerican conception of 'animal souls'—the idea that a person's soul is explicitly connected with an

external animal counterpart, or co-essence—suggests an expansive paradigm for human-animal relationships in my own culture” (p. 52).

The concept, strikingly similar to Philip Pullman’s in the *His Dark Materials* trilogy, is also related to familiar ideas like “guardian spirits,” “animal helpers,” vision quest animals, and totemic and animistic animal spirits, and substitutes “a model of human-animal interaction predicated upon equality” for our present hierarchical, anthropocentric model (p. 53).<sup>[3]</sup> Anthropological literature defines the Mesoamerican belief in terms of “*nagualismo*” and “*tonalismo*.” The former “signifies the transformation of a person into an animal,” something literature achieves in Malamud’s theory through imagination and empathy, tapping into “a realm of consciousness beyond our immediate quotidian perception and senses.” “*Tonalismo*” refers directly to one’s “companion [or totem] animal” or destiny (pp. 54-55).

Chapters 1 and 2 are devoted to these theoretical matters, establishing what Malamud refers to as “An Ecocritical Aesthetic Ethic” of use to anyone in the field of human-animal relations who agrees that reconnecting outside the box with the other animals, and thus with ourselves, is important. The ethic, in many ways ecofeminist, presumes: – “the subject at hand (... animals) is profoundly and systematically oppressed; – “any cultural expression that features these subjects ... can be maximally understood only if the history of their cultural exploitation is foregrounded; and – “the only humane response to such an understanding ... is the development of the consciousness that we, as a species, have behaved badly, inexcusably, toward our fellow creatures, and must behave better” (p. 43).

The goals of Malamud’s ecocritical ethic are five-fold and deserve to be quoted in full, but review length requires compression. Essentially they are: – to encourage seeing animals clearly without hurting (capturing, constraining, collecting, dissecting) them – to understand their lives “in their own contexts, not in ours” – to teach about their habits, emotions, and natures as accurately as we can, recognizing the limitations and biases of our knowledge – to advocate respect for animals in their own terms – to develop “a culturally and ecologically complex, problematized vision of what an animal means” that will replace present systems of identifying and defining (p. 45).

Chapter 3 deals in depth (and profoundly) with the animals in Marianne Moore’s poetry; chapter 4, in equal depth and profundity, with animals in the poetry of the

Mexican poet Jose Emilio Pacheco; chapter 5, in less depth, with animals in the poetry of Stevie Smith, Philip Larkin, Gary Snyder, Seamus Heaney, and Pattianne Rogers. Malamud freely admits the subjectivity of his choices, welcoming readers to apply his ecocritical ethics and goals to other equally worthy poets. He suggests a number—W. S. Merwin, Elizabeth Bishop, Wendell Berry, Ted Hughes, and Edward Thomas—but readers will undoubtedly know of others whose work would further expand the growing bestiary of poetic animals available to enhance our vision and understanding.

In the process of his introduction and analysis, Malamud suggests that a number of poets usually thought of as nature poets and frequently anthologized in compendiums of animal poetry actually do not qualify. To describe animals without “substantially approach[ing] or interact[ing]” with them, as Robert Frost, Ralph Waldo Emerson, D. H. Lawrence, Emily Dickinson, William Butler Yeats, or Mary Oliver frequently (in Malamud’s opinion) do, does not reveal animal soul and, therefore, these poets’ works do not create poetic animals that are able to evoke readers’ empathic slippage of self. Instead of meeting the animal in such poetry, the reader meets and identifies with the poet or narrator in what another groundbreaking theorist, John Talmadge, refers to, with obvious reference to William Wordsworth, as “the excursion format.” Thomas Lyon, another student of nature writing, calls such works “rambles,” tracing them to the work of Gilbert White, William Wordsworth, and Henry David Thoreau (Malamud feels Thoreau’s *Journal* reflections occasionally move from using the animal to comment on self to connecting with the animal itself).

As is clear both here and in his impressive essay “How People and Animals Coexist” in the January 2003 issue of the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Malamud’s “aspiration for animal poetry would be to situate the poet/reader and animal as coterminous; cohabitants; simultaneous, and thus ecologically and experientially equal. The conclusion of the poem should not signify the closure of the relationship between person and animal, but rather ... should initiate and inspire the *beginning* of an imaginative consideration and reformulation of who these animals are and how we share the world,” something difficult if not impossible to achieve outside the magic of art (pp. 33-34).<sup>[4]</sup> Consequently, he chooses to end *Poetic Animals* not with his own critical theories and commentary, but with a fine long poem by Pattianne Rogers, “The Human Heart in Conflict With Itself.” Malamud prepares the reader by explaining:

“The poem describes all of us and speaks for all of us. It represents the best example I have found of an eco-critical ethic in poetry that could lead our culture toward better relationships with animals if we grapple with it. Rogers finds, toward the end of the poem, our connection with animals despite ourselves—the affiliation that Mesoamericans realize to be necessary and inherent in our human (animal) existence. Their blood is our blood, and their fate is our fate.” (p. 183)

As Rogers puts it:

“... Thus we yearn for them. They are among us and within us and of us, inextricably woven with the form and manner of our being, with our understanding and our imaginations. They are the grit and the salt and the lullaby of our language.” (qtd. p. 186)

#### Notes

[1]. Randy Malamud, *Reading Zoos: Representations of Animals and Captivity* (New York: NYU Press, 1998).

[2]. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

[3]. Philip Pullman, *The Golden Compass* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996), *The Subtle Knife* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997), and *The Amber Spyglass* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2000).

[4]. Randy Malamud, “How People and Animals Coexist,” *Chronicle of Higher Education* 49, no. 20 (24 January 2003): p. B7. <http://chronicle.com/free/v49/i20/20b00701.htm>.

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