

# Animals as objects of transition

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## INTRODUCTION

Oxen that rattle the yoke and chain or halt in the leafy shade,  
what is that you express in your eyes?  
It seems to me more than all the print I have read in my life.

(Whitman 1980, 58)

Art is not a mirror. It mediates and represents social relations in schema of signs which require a receptive and preconditioned reader in order to be meaningful. And it is at the level of what those signs connote, often unconsciously, that ideologies are reproduced (Parker & Pollock, 1981: 119). At the same time human society manipulates terms like «nature» and «natural» in order to naturalise its own socio-political parameters. In a situation where “hierarchy becomes a natural order» (Fairclough, 1992), what appears to survive as a prime symbol from the collective cultural capital, acts as an intermediator because its inherent significance determines the values of the present” (Pollock, 1999: 10). In this framework, the traditional discipline of art history has to be expanded and challenged by new insights and by alternative perspectives. ([www.enotes.com/twentieth.century.criticism](http://www.enotes.com/twentieth.century.criticism))

In human childhood development, a *transitional object* (Winnicott, 1965) is something, usually a physical object, which takes the place of the mother-child bond. When the young child begins to separate the ‘me’ from the ‘not-me’ and evolves from complete dependence to a stage of relative independence, it uses transitional objects in reference to a particular developmental sequence. With ‘transition’ Winnicott means an intermediate developmental phase between the psychic and external reality. In this ‘transitional space’ we can find the ‘transitional object’.

We claim that animal figures are used diachronically in a way that helps society to gain this transitional space, separating from the mother bonds of previous order, and adjusting in reference to a particular developmental sequence. Of course any kind of schematic transition from natural to societal order is extremely problematic. We should mention, thus, that we are referring to animals as collective representations and not as subjects (or objects for others) of natural world. Apart from that we should point that this is a multicated procedure and of course there are many parameters involved. Yet, one thing remain intact: That texts are produced in particular cultures and societies and in particular historical circumstances. In turn, they shape and are shaped by those cultures as they are

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read and re-read in changing circumstances by different groups, with different commitments, engagements and interests. But to do that they use symbols and rituals that transcend time despite their evolutions. Eternal symbols like animals are re-absorbed into the ideological frameworks within which the cultures develop.

## ANIMALS IN LITERATURE

Symbols survive time because they act as objects of ritualisation, expressing the symbolic order and relations of power and values made for cohesion of the society. Humans, having the capacity to create and even manipulate symbols, drawn their symbolisms from both natural and social reality and represent them in various forms of expression. Forms like written “logos”, literature.

Animals have held an important place in written literature for thousands of years. And prior to written languages, ancient people told animal stories by drawing symbolic visual narratives on the walls of their caves. These early examples of animals in literary history generally were imbued with religious and allegorical significance, making them strong ritualistic tools, to express deep ontological questions.

Yet at the same time they were carriers of social and political connotations, tools of the «proper socialisation»: Composed around the sixth century B.C., Aesop’s Fables continue to serve as standards of moral didacticism using animals as examples for humans or choices to follow or avoid. For the ancient Egyptians and Greeks, animals such as bulls and lions, as well as hybrid creatures like the griffin and sphinx, played important roles in the development of literature itself and in the creation of complex mythological systems that influenced everything from the stories told to the study of the stars. The Judeo-Christian tradition introduced other symbolic animal figures into literature. Stories in both the Old and New Testaments of the Bible have provided vivid and lasting images of animals that represent various human and godly attributes, including the snake, the swine, and the lamb ([www.jenniferdevlincalkins.net](http://www.jenniferdevlincalkins.net)).

Similarly, other cultures, in Asia, India, Africa, south and “Indian America”, have used stories of animals to explain the mysteries of life and the universe. The tremendous importance of animals in those cultures may be seen in the fact that they were used as objects of personification, naming humans, in a ritual of some qualities transition. In the European Middle Ages literary animals were placed into the formal structure of the bestiary, to teach a moral or religious lesson. As the process of socialisation and the construction of “social role” became more liberal in the age of Enlightenment (Sutton Smith, 1986, p. 222-3) moral allegories gave way to satire, which served not so much to teach lessons as to ridicule social, religious and political corruption. “Frequently angry and cynical about the state of the world, satirists such as Jonathan Swift used some of the less desirable traits of animals to skewer the less desirable traits of humans” ([www.enotes.com/twentieth.century.criticism](http://www.enotes.com/twentieth.century.criticism)).

Romanticism, «in rebellion against the coming of mass society (Cox, 1996, p. 80), saw in nature «the glimpses of a lost paradise». The coidentity of the nature with this tremendous notion, puts on trial the collective – and through it the individual – «Self Image», contributing into a massive cultural shock, but also loads it with plenty of mystique notions.

“The nineteenth century ushered in an era of Romanticism, where poets such as William Wordsworth, Percy Bysshe Shelley, Lord Byron, and John Keats wrote of the beauty and freedom of animals in their natural wild state and the potential for humans to unleash their creativity by emulating that wildness” (ibid).

The conflict between the individual and the family (Somerville, 1982) that was seen as the new foundation of societal order was to be solved within a discourse in need of economic control, (Cunningham, 1991). The industrialisation led to the establishment of institutions aiming to force homogeny (ibid) in morals and in behaviours.

In Victorian England and America animals in literature took on a more literal meaning, in part because of the publication of Charles Darwin's shocking and controversial *On the Origin of Species* (1859, 1998), which advanced the theory that human beings had not been created separately from animals in order to lead and dominate but had instead evolved from animals and were thus merely another link in a chain millions of years old.

Darwin's work found much of Western society of his era into turmoil as many began to question their own metaphysical and ontological beliefs. With science, the new religion (Cunningham, 1991) elevating animals to a new level in the human and natural worlds, and rapidly spreading industrialization exploiting both humans and animals, concern for animal welfare became a major social issue. Animals, part of the inherited by Romantic discourse "noble aboriginal's world", were used once again so society to be able to absorb changes in actual and symbolic order. Animal figures were hired to express the good and the evil in human nature, «creators» of «a covenant theology» that cut God in two pieces, one expressed by maternal forgiveness (Laverenz, 1980), the other by paternal severity, embodiment of the day of judgement itself (Cox, 1996, p. 41). Society could once again express through this collective representation its anxieties and fears and hopes for its future.

Humane societies and antivivisection organizations sprang up around England and the United States, and writers began to include examples of noble and heroic companion animals in their works. Similarly, tales of animal abuse arose, in which animals were seen as the victims of human greed, ignorance, and brutal industrialization. In the twentieth century many writers turned to old animal stories and genres to produce revolutionary works dealing with the uniquely modern themes of paranoia, alienation, and futility. James Joyce revived and modernized elements of Greek mythology that featured allegorical animal figures, and Franz Kafka used the traditional animal fable style to tell jarring stories of twentieth-century angst. In the latter part of the century literal and figurative animals became particularly important in gender studies and women's literature. Recognizing parallels between their own struggles for equality and the abuses of the natural world, women imagined themselves as caged and voiceless, like the animals they portrayed in their writing.

That way they were used as objects of transition, in order the social subject to be able to "separate itself" from the maternal bonds of the previous state, in reference to a particular developmental sequence of their society (Winnicott, 1965).

## WHAT DO THE ANIMALS REPRESENT?

"What manner of life is this, which may be compared  
with the life of a night light whose extinction is not accomplished  
until the last drop of oil has burnt away?"

(Fabre, 1919, 2002)

Rarely, writers engage the "real" animal; more often it is used as a mirror. This may be because humans (especially in western culture) tend to see animals as the "other," "grouping them as types, naming these groups and caging them in generalities" ([www.enotes.com](http://www.enotes.com), [www.jenniferdevlincalkins.net](http://www.jenniferdevlincalkins.net)). It may be because the very act of writing essentially separates the human that writes from all other animal species. "To write the animal effectively requires awareness of the irony of attempting to create the animal from what has been used to cage it", (ibid) human culture and within it writing. This is what Pam Ore calls "keys hanging cold/on the gatehooks of language" (Ore, 2005: 4).

In this attitude contributes the almost ubiquitous notion of a hierarchy of life, from the Great Chain of Being to the concept of Universal Oneness to the greatly entrenched, "ethically simplistic, speciesm" ([www.enotes.com](http://www.enotes.com)).

Given the ratio of the West there are few texts that reflect the concept of Supernature found from anthropologists in “primitive” cultures across the world. Yet, as it was pointed (o.p) this hierarchy has resulted in a literature that is heavily weighted to a few paradigms, primarily mammals and birds. The representation of animals in literature for human socio-psychological purposes may be seen in the fact that we choose those who are associated with us and with our needs. As mentioned «there are a few invertebrate species found across literature, those typically associated with humans (e.g. bees, fleas, ticks), and a handful of reptile, fish, and amphibian species» (<http://www.jenniferdevlincalkins.net>). However, all writing about animals, whether mirroring humans or actually elucidating the animal itself, provides a picture of how humans view and have viewed animals. In some cases these texts provide an empathetic space where the gap in being is bridged “the paper nautilus constructs her thin glass shell. Giving her perishable souvenir of hope” (Moore, 1994: 121-122)

Primarily they are inserted into writing for the human to understand the human. And that is what makes them transitional objects in the meaning that they are either sites of critical self-interrogation concerning exilic identity and critique to social hierarchy, or they are objects of legitimation of a social order, being translated into natural. The quantity and quality of the equilibrium between those two functions, is imbued to the needs of any society in transition. And any kind of transition might need objects of transition, translating and replacing at the same time the nature, the “archaic mother” as Kristeva, 1989, uses the term).

In that task, it is not accidental that ancient texts, oral folklore and religious-philosophical musings tend to drive the perception, and therefore the portrayal, of animals in literature. Not only Oedipus Sphinx still represents human nature into the desert land of his or her soul, but texts, such as the 5000 year old Sumerian cuneiform tablets and the 3000 year old Indus Valley text the Rig Veda, name animal groups, such as dogs, and give them roles in spiritual as well as everyday life. To the Sumerian dog “a dream is a joy” (Sumerian Proverbs: collection 5: c.6.1.05 72) while the Indus Valley deity Yama has “two guardian dogs...who watch over men” (Rig Veda 10.14.11). The Greek mythology used those figures to express the controversies conflicts and evolutions of society. And ancient texts have often generated and reinforced the hierarchy of animals with the notion that humans “have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth” (The Holy Bible Genesis 1:28) and through this expand the hierarchy and relations of power as natural orders, in fact Devine orders, into human life.

The tendency human, like a substitute of “the” creator, to group, name and thereby simplify other species can be seen across ancient religious literature like Holy Bible, “and whatsoever Adam called every living creature, that was the name thereof” (Genesis 2:19).

Yet there are other, more “humanitarian” approaches concerning animals, such as the Koran’s idea that humans must give care to them, because of their dependence upon human agency. The very peculiar circumstances of the rise and construction of Arabs as a “nation” (<http://www.alfavita.gr/artra/art>) and the peculiar economy founded in the desert, made this notion achievable. There was less hierarchy, less separation, and more need to collective encounters at the time.

Modern texts are influenced by these ancient texts in their integration of the character traits of particular animals as symbols, omens and metaphors such as the starling in William Shakespeare’s Henry IV, the raven in Poe’s The Raven and the whale in Herman Melville’s Moby Dick. At this level, the animals both illustrate something about their own nature as well as about the nature of the environment/society in which they find themselves.

And that is why they were and are used even recently by poets such as Angelou, or Sikelianos and Ritsos and Artists like Tsimino that we will use case-studies in the next pages, to express the needs of human nature and their evolving societies.

## OBJECTS OF TRANSITION

As written before a *transitional object* is something, usually a physical object, which takes the place of the mother-child bond. When the young child begins to separate the 'me' from the 'not-me' and evolves from complete dependence to a stage of relative independence, it uses transitional objects in reference to a particular developmental sequence. With 'transition' Winnicott (1965) means an intermediate developmental phase between the psychic and external reality. In this 'transitional space' we can find the 'transitional object'.

The textual Animal, differentiated from the «real animal» (as in literature different animals were categorized according to the single trait unique to each of them that might teach a moral or religious lesson) expresses in history that transition from the natural dependence into the human independence. And that is why they were employed whenever that independency had to be explored into different groups of people.

For instance, Seventeenth-century poets of postwar England address the aftermath of regicide through traditional elegy and funereal lament. As the century wears on, however, artists come to write about the beheading of the king using a more sophisticated sentimental idiom. Poets such as John Denham, Margaret Cavendish, and Andrew Marvell utilize the allegorical figure of the stalked deer to illustrate more clearly the brutality of which men are capable and to vivify the pain and suffering experienced by the vanquished monarch. This essay examines their methods and reasons for fusing Charles's memory with the pathetic symbol of the hunted stag.

If we think about it, a deer is always on alert for enemies, and industrialisation seemed like an enemy to the Romantics. In that realm after all, the «wave of illusioned naturalism» was developed having deer as one of its prime symbols. A naturalism in search of a nature violated by the industrial hierarchy, a nature ready to raise and take its revenge.

Fairchild argued that the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century wave of illusioned naturalism «involved not only the cult of scenery but also the cult of the child ,the peasant and the savage» (Quoted to Cox, 1996: 82 ), revealing with the common characteristics ascribing to these , the anti-industrial symbolic discourse of the era.

Not accidentally when America was facing similar dilemmas regarding its purity and its true nature, in the post Vietnam period, the deer, an Anglosaxon archetype, was employed once again to express the inner struggles of society in Michael Tsimino's film the «Deer hunter».

The same effort to express the sociopolitical framework of an era happens when Angelou uses the caged bird to create a symbol of all the caged. As critic Pierre A. Walker notes, when Angelou wrote *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* at the end of the 1960s, one of the necessary and accepted features of literature was thematic unity, and one of Angelou's goals was to create a book that satisfied this criterion. The structure of the text, which resembles a series of short stories, is not chronological but rather thematic. Walker believes that Angelou succeeded in emphasizing identity, racism, rape, and literacy, despite the narrative's episodic quality.

*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* is the 1969 story about the early years of African-American writer and poet. Illustrates how strength of character and a love of literature can help overcome social and gender odds and Angelou's description of being raped as an eight-year-old child overwhelms the book, although it is presented briefly in the text. Rape is used as a metaphor for the suffering of her race and gender. Another metaphor, that of a bird struggling to escape its cage, is a central image throughout the work, which consists of "a sequence of lessons about resisting racist, and not only, oppression". Angelou's treatment of racism delivers a thematic unity to the book, but it is far more than a simple denunciation of colonialism and racism. Literacy, and seizing the power of words, help young Maya cope with her bewildering world; in an era – in which the economic, political and ideological power of the dominant version of the west to colonise the minds and bodies of others was being challenged by new discourses and struggles of liberation.

In that framework books become her refuge as she works through her trauma, and yet her work is still profoundly relevant today when forms of oppression and power have evolved but by no means disappeared.

Caged Bird nominated in 1970 and remained on top for two years is a fundamental text. It has been used in educational settings from high schools to universities, and the book has been celebrated for creating new literary avenues for the American memoir. However, the book's graphic depiction of childhood rape, racism, and sexuality has caused it to be challenged or banned in some schools and libraries, as "moral panic" (Hall, 1984) never cease to exist as a conservative movement to control through censorship social criticism and evolution.

Having the need to exclude paradigms and material in order to use only a few case-studies due to lack of space, we move forward to some Greek texts.

On the contrary, in the 60's the Greek literature has chosen symbols too, but there are symbols expressing the Greek agricultural way of life. Those symbols do exist in American literature too, but what we compare here is the symbols that prevailed as literature representations gaining publicity and respect, in the same era of transition, in the mid of the previous century. After all the bird is also a common symbol, as it prevails in Greek folk songs, written in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when Greek society had to gain its liberty from Ottoman empire and felt caged too. Caged and in search for objects of transition to gain its independence from the stepmother of the era. But, in the Greek example of the 60's, the bear and the cow are prevail, as Greek society is in an era of urbanization and seeks to express its soul that is going to be lost. Sikelianos in *Holly Road* (Iera Odos, in Orfika, 1984) gives us the image of a caged bear, a mother bear seeing her newly born bearing being abused, unable to offer any help. In order to fully understand the poem it is important to realise its socio-historic framework. In Balkans there were the ritual gypsies to hung around exhibiting caged bears, gaining money in folklore festivities or in other everyday occasions. In that poem, the bear, the mother, our true nature and nature itself, becomes symbol of caged humanity, «a huge, martyr symbol of the entire world, present and passed and bypast, a huge, martyr symbol symbol of the entire pain, present, past and bypast, the ancient pain that has not been completed yet as a tax of the soul. Because she is yet to "Hedes", to underworld. Here Sikelianos also plays with the archaic myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, having Eurydice as the human collective soul and Orpheus as humanity, as man itself.

Tied up with her baby, the bear tired, has no strength to keep on dancing but she has to bend the head as her owner exercised violence over her, being the symbol of all brutal, dominating powers. In the most strong icon of the poem the owner pushes the chain that holds the nose of the baby and the baby starts dancing in front of the devastated mother that maintains her dance with tears in her eyes while the babe is incapable 'to guess the time length of the pain in front oh him and the bitterness of the slavery that was mirrored in the eyes of the mother as she lies eyes upon him.

Sikelianos connects the animal figure with the ancient myths we examined and with the Magna matter the Earth and the Nature, creating a tremendous transitional object. That of caged mother-bear.

In Ritsos (1981) the cow, symbol of Greek farmer life and thus of the underprivileged, and not of any religion as the text points, functions also as a «a huge, martyr symbol of the entire world, as a huge martyr symbol symbol of humanity's the entire pain», but at the same time she carries side by side with pain something more: A fundamental wisdom, following the «progressive ideology» of its Poet (Ritsos) that at the end world and the struggles will be justified, she is able, after one more hard day, to look the beauty of the scenery, the beauty of the world in silence.

Caged herself, participating through that in the eternal struggle for the justification of justice, she looks at the red, mauve, golden sunset, silent, hurted in the bones in the back, in the forehead» and patient :possibly knowing the denial, and the surrender and the arrogance and the hostility, beneath and under the agreement».

«Liking with its bloody tongue the tongue of its water image (a reference to Narcissus) from outside the «inside», her inner wound, liking the silent, tremendous, round wound of the world – she might stop being thirsty. Maybe it is only our own blood able to make us stop being thirsty».

Cow's importance is obvious in the text when Orestis, the ancient mythical hero, refers: «Do not omit or mistook the cow if you want to comprehend what i m really saying» (Ritsos, 1981: 82). And that is also true for all the animal figures and the texts we examined.

## CONCLUSIONS

A class of literature focuses on relationships between humans and animals. Many such works (from Eliot to Hemingway and Kundera)<sup>1</sup> focus on very specific animals and their human companions. Within it a class of literature explore the relationship between narrator and companion animals. And yet another class focuses on another function:

We claim that animal figures are used diachronically in order society to gain this transitional space, separating from the mother bonds of previous order, and adjusting in reference to a particular developmental sequence. Textual animals, like other collective enterprises, consist a collective representation: reflecting «the arrangements of the society and historical era in which it is carried on» (Stone, 1982). Eternal symbols like animals gain the archetype status and survive time, re-absorbed into the ideological frameworks within which the cultures develop. For instance, though all animal texts have the potential to engage the reader empathetically and emotionally with the focal animal/species, they often gloss over individual differences among animals within groups. This is a result of a desire to capture the essence of the other rather than its actuality and a lack of interest/awareness in variation in other species. The very unity of the species in which a single lion represents all lions results in a sense of immortality for the animal thus linking it to the mythological. But this is a mythology used as a justification or critique of social hierarchy, embodying the beliefs and the disbeliefs of our kind. There is a hegemonic version of nature, in the sense that attitudes that should be omitted from human behaviour, are excluded from natural order in order to shape it accordingly to societal “needs”. For instance the widespread homosexuality in animal kingdom never gained the publicity it required, and the term “natural” is used to describe a homophobic human sexuality, having social connotations.

The qualities and quantities of this function differ. In this realm political writers were and are able to express their evolving societies and human nature/identity, by exerting specific animals from the entire kingdom, powerful figures such as the deer or the bird the cow or the bear, in constant dialogue with the sociopolitical connotations of their eras.

The bond that the human feels for the nonhuman animal is rendered immediate and periodically the author successfully describes aspects of the animal itself developing them in the way the human characters are developed. There is always a space in these texts, however, where the ultimately mystery of the animal is maintained. And that mystery becomes symbol of the entire mystery of social and psychological needs becomes symbol of the entire mystery of the human existence too.

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<sup>1</sup> Interestingly there is an evolution even in the transition, related to choice of the animal, the era, character and sociopolitical circumstances. For instance in Hemingway’s texts animals are to prove the values of a macho world and heroic, and hunting is projected as a thrill, while in Kundera’s novel *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Karenin the dog, is clearly a developed character even if only through the eyes of the humans with whom he interacts.

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