

# Toward a Zoopolis: Animal *Poiesis* and the Poetry of Emily Dickinson and Brenda Hillman

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**Abstract** The poetry of Emily Dickinson and Brenda Hillman casts nonhuman animals as part of the polis. Their perspective resonates with the emergent animal rights theory, explored by Sue Donaldson and Will Kymlicka, that draws on political theory in order to rethink animal-human relationships in what they call the *zoopolis*. Dickinson's and Hillman's perspectives further inform the zoopolis. For both poets, animals have earned their place in a multispecies polis because of the self-evident manifestations of their alternative ways-of-making. Such poetry calls for expanding both the poetic tradition and the polis to include other animal makers.

**Key words** zoopolis; zoopoetics; zoopoetry; animals in literature; animals and poetry; animal rights theory

this is the  
door(opening it i  
  
think things  
which  
were supposed to  
be out of my  
reach  
    ,they are like  
jam on the shelf everybody guessed  
  
was too high)

*from "i'd think 'wonder'" — a poem on seeing a bat*  
— E.E. Cummings

The canon wars remain a stark reminder of the stakes surrounding literary studies. I recall many years ago reading Ishmael Reed's introduction to his multicultural anthology *From Totem Poles to Hip-hop*, and specifically, his foregrounding of reading practices that generate the "Ogre with One Eye" who fixates on the old canon of the Euro-American literary tradition (xviii–xix). The figure haunts: a hybrid monstrosity; not quite human, but not quite beast; a powerful, clumsy creature whose tunnel-vision eclipses other writers, stories, poems, cultures.

Though the ogre has extended its scope of the human sphere in numerous ways since Reed's anthology, a new awakening is underway, a tremendous shift within the humanities to turn its gaze toward the nonhuman animals living amongst and beyond humans. The now familiar work of Cary Wolfe, Jacques Derrida, and Donna Haraway provided impetus for the shift, and many other thinkers from interdisciplinary fields contribute ongoing momentum. In the 2011 *Zoopolis: A Political Theory of Animal Rights*, Sue Donaldson and Will Kymlicka provide a provocative theory that has far reaching implications. "Our aim in this book," they foreground, "is to offer a new framework, one that takes the 'animal question' as a central issue for how we theorize the nature of our political community," and they hope to "shift the debate" surrounding animal rights from "applied ethics to a question of political theory." To do so, they include nonhuman animals within categories once reserved for humans alone: domestic animals become co-citizens; wild animals assume sovereignty; and liminal animals become denizens. Donaldson and Kymlicka address many of the daunting challenges of such a shift, and even though it may seem insurmountable, the theory plants radical seeds for seeing human-animal interactions in new and productive ways. They connect animal rights theory "to broader political theories of justice and citizenship," which can "identify more clearly potential models of animal-human relationships" (1, 12, 23).

Later in their argument, Donaldson and Kymlicka acknowledge the "enormous uncharted territory" that opens up as a result of an applied political theory. "Integrating ... animals into the polis," they suggest, "involves rethinking our shared spaces on multiple levels" (121, 131). The tradition of poetry is one territory that can benefit from such a rethinking, but it is important to recognize that, within the tradition of American poetry, Emily Dickinson already began such work. One-and-a-half centuries later, Brenda Hillman continues it.

Many of the animals Dickinson and Hillman include in their poems are not domesticated, nor are they fully wild; rather, they inhabit an "in-between" space epitomizing Donaldson and Kymlicka's category of "liminal animals" who live in "our cities, and indeed our backyards and homes" (213). Depending on one's bioregion,

liminal animals may include sparrows, finches, hawks, blackbirds, owls; grasshoppers, spiders, praying mantises, butterflies, roly-polies, ants, termites; turtles, lizards, snakes; frogs and salamanders; foxes, deer, raccoons, prairie dogs, squirrels — and many more species. Liminal animals are “visible when they become a problem” — or, I add, when a poet celebrates their presence — but are “invisible as ubiquitous members of the community” (Donaldson and Kymlicka 68).

To carve out space for animal denizenship, Donaldson and Kymlicka first establish what denizenship looks like in the human sphere. Many humans living amongst the citizens of a country assume the category of denizenship: people who opt out of citizenship rights by not voting, by homeschooling their children, or by wholeheartedly refusing to participate in citizenship. Other examples include migrant denizenship, green-card workers (231–40). Crucially, Donaldson and Kymlicka move beyond “human liminality as metaphor” and toward the “actual ways models of denizenship can be used to accommodate a fuller range of diversity in society, and to bring those perceived as deviant, foreign, second class, undesirable, or dangerous into just relations within the body politic” (216). Concerning nonhuman animals, many species living amongst urban, suburban, and rural areas are either opportunists, niche specialists, introduced exotics, or feral animals (219–26). The innumerable liminal animals are often overlooked in animal rights theory and in the imagination of the polis where emphasis is placed upon domesticated animals and upon the shrinking habitat of wild animals and their coming extinction. Even when one sees liminal animals in the category of denizenship, it is a slippery, “hybrid status, with fewer clear fixed points of reference” (251).

Perhaps this is why poets gravitate toward such animals.

In what follows, I foreground the liminal animals in Emily Dickinson and Brenda Hillman’s poetry. Dickinson helps anchor the move within the American poetic tradition to see animals as part of the polis. She also provides a foundation for such inclusion. For Dickinson and many other poets, animals are makers. They participate in the act of *poiesis*, and they impact the making of human poetry. I argue that this perspective — animal-as-maker — made an animal’s integral presence within the polis self-evident to Dickinson. Roughly a century-and-a-half later, Brenda Hillman continues Dickinson’s work as animal *poiesis* and a multispecies polis permeate the last two books she published, *Practical Water* (2009) and *Seasonal Works with Letters on Fire* (2013). Dickinson’s poetry contains seeds for the zoopolis in the American poetic tradition, and Hillman pushes readers toward the implications of those seeds in the context of today’s urgent times.

## Liminal Animals, Zoopoetics, and the Multispecies Polis in Emily Dickinson's Poetry

Often, when Dickinson folds liminal animals into her work, she sees their political status as self-evident. When discussing lizards and butterflies in a letter, she provokes, "Are not those *your* Countrymen?" (*Letters* 2:412). For Dickinson, these liminal animals surpass denizenship and attain the status of co-citizenship. They are countrymen, a status that carries with it certain relational duties from humans. In "His Bill is locked - his Eye estranged," Dickinson's speaker vociferates on behalf of a bird. The atrocity leads to a deeper valuation of seeing an animal in the context of political theory:

His Bill is locked - his Eye estranged  
 His Feathers wilted low -  
 The Claws that clung, like lifeless Gloves  
 Indifferent hanging now -  
 The Joy that in his happy Throat  
 Was waiting to be poured  
 Gored through and through with Death, to be  
 Assassin of a Bird  
 Resembles to my outraged mind  
 The firing in Heaven,  
 On Angels - squandering for you  
 Their Miracles of Tune - (*Poems* 1126)

The poem turns at "to be / Assassin of a Bird." This line break suggests a bewildering silence in which the speaker grapples for the right word: "to be ... Assassin." No other word fits. This bird has not been killed or murdered — two terms that skirt political implications. Written in 1866, the shadow of President Lincoln's 1865 assassination haunts the poem. Regular people are murdered. People with political clout are assassinated. Dickinson's perspective that other species have political status emerges, therefore, in her choice of *assassin*. The assassination stirs an indignation in the poem's speaker, so much so that she enters the state of an "outraged mind." In order to articulate her rage, she climbs the divine hierarchy. Though the bird may have begun as an "animal," he ascends to a political status in the human sphere and then to an angelic status in the divine sphere. Dickinson, though, envisions a mass "firing" of angels in a divine space, and it is difficult to read those lines in today's world without

thinking of the shootings in schools. Such shootings violate places that are sacrosanct. The last line draws readers back to earth: the angels' "Miracles of Tune" becomes a trope for the bird's now silent song. For as the earlier lines of the poem establish, "Death" has "gored" the bird's throat "through and through," violating the sacrosanct place where the species undergoes a portion of his *poiesis*, his makings. The makings have been silenced, for "His Bill is locked."

Herein lies the seed for the speaker's rage. The bird is a maker who undergoes his own *poiesis*. A bond exists across species lines, from the human maker to the animal maker. One reason why this bond is strong between Dickinson and nonhuman animals is because Dickinson made breakthroughs in her own craft through attentively engaging the material-semiotics of other animal makers. Elsewhere, I have called this process zoopoetics, and though the term suggests many facets, I begin with the word's etymology: *zōion*, from the Greek meaning *animal*, and *poiesis*, from the Greek meaning *to make*.<sup>1</sup> Zoopoetics has a close kinship to what Scott Knickerbocker terms "sensuous poiesis": the "process of rematerializing language specifically as a response to nonhuman nature" (2). One of Knickerbocker's early examples explores Gerard Manley Hopkins' "The Windhover," and he focuses on the ways that the falcon's ways-of-being contributed to the innovations found in the materiality (sound, rhythm, form) of the poem (13–14). This epitomizes what I call zoopoetics. Zoopoetics is a needed category — or subset — of eco-poetics, for there is an added energy *when species meet* that is different from the human animal's engagement with plants, streams, mountains, deserts. Furthermore, many species — including humans — are makers, and the process of making is often bound up with an attentive engagement with another species' way-of-being. It goes two ways. As Donna Haraway observes, both species undergo an "ontological and semiotic invention" through the "inventive potency of play" (232, 237) — and when a poet enters that ecotone where and when species meet, the "potency of play" involves *poiesis*.<sup>2</sup>

In "Emily Dickinson's Animal Pedagogies," Colleen Boggs explores what I call zoopoetics. She develops the term "animal orthography" from an attentive reading of "Many a phrase has the English language" (Boggs 539). Both terms, zoopoetics and animal orthography, help expose complementary dynamics within the poem:

Many a phrase has the English language -  
 I have heard by one -  
 Low as the laughter of the Cricket,  
 Loud, as the Thunder's Tongue -

Murmuring, like old Caspian Choirs,  
When the Tide's a lull -  
Saying itself in new inflection -  
Like a Whippowil -

Breaking in bright Orthography  
On my simple sleep -  
Thundering it's Prospective -  
Till I stir, and weep -

Not for the Sorrow, done me -  
But the push of Joy -  
Say it again, Saxon!  
Hush - Only to me! (*Poems* 333)

Boggs foregrounds how Dickinson “locates animal presence in orthography, in writing itself” (538). The poem demonstrates how human orthography — or the exploration of the sounds of letters and their combinations — is not a monospecies event. The whippoorwill’s *poiesis* quite literally “Break[s] in bright Orthography” every time someone utters *whippoorwill*. Through attentively listening to the bird’s common call, a new, onomatopoeic constellation of sounds broke into the English language.

I am interested, though, in Dickinson’s choice of verb. The speaker cannot sleep, for the *poiesis* of the bird makes her “stir.” After Aífe Murray’s *Maid as Muse: How Servants Changed Emily Dickinson’s Life and Language*, “stir” suggests several provocative implications. Murray uncovers how Dickinson environed herself in the most creative space of the homestead: “even when the poet could have been relieved of the burdens of nineteenth-century domesticity, [Dickinson] remained ‘below stairs’ for portions of the day, baking and writing.” Dickinson drafted poems on “tradesmen bills” and the “reverse of recipes — materials close to hand when spending time kitchen-side” (Murray 9). Murray reminds readers that the 19th century American kitchen was a “volatile space.” The cooking, along with the crackle of an explosive fire, made it the “noisiest room of the house, the location of combustion, spontaneity, of *making*” (99, italics added). As one lingers in the place of the kitchen, the many “baking verbs” such as “sift, stir, dissolve” take on new significance, for they contributed to the “material conditions of actual materials of her poetry-making” (100).

In this light, Dickinson’s choice of “stir” suggests not only a stirring of inspiration or of human energy, but moreover an energy that rises out of mixing together the ingredients of two different species’ ways-of-being, ways-of-*making*,

ways-of-*poiesis*. The “new inflection” of the second stanza only arises through the *stirring* of the makings of more than one species. This happens elsewhere in Dickinson’s poems, most famously — as Boggs highlights (539) — in “I heard a fly buzz when I died.” The poem exemplifies how another species becomes present in the Orthography of human language, but this happens, I argue, because Dickinson once again stirs the *poiesis* of a fly into the “stumbling Buzz” of human poetry (*Poems* 591). If the whippoorwill “Break[s] in bright orthography,” the fly “interpose[s]” himself in the room and throughout the materiality of the poem.

Dickinson, though, pushes things further. The perspective that sees other animals as makers elevates them to a political status, made explicit in the final lines of “Many of phrase” where the speaker pleads, “Say it again, Saxon! / Hush - Only to me!” The speaker of the poem addresses the whippoorwill as *Saxon*, but in the context of the poem, the bird attains political status because of the bird’s trait, in Dickinson’s perspective, of being a kindred poet. This drives Dickinson’s “outraged mind” discussed earlier, for who would shoot another maker? Furthermore, Dickinson anticipates the later arguments of Paul Shepard, David Abram, and W. S. Merwin, all of whom draw a correlation between the depletion of animals and the depletion of human imagination and human language. One must engage the *poiesis* of other species before one can stir their makings into human poetry.

Two poems from 1875 grapple further with the implications of Dickinson’s political theory of animal citizenship. In the first, Dickinson provides several, logical, reasons why one should refrain from seeing a rat as a pest. Rather, one should include the rat within the human sphere:

The Rat is the concisest Tenant.  
He pays no Rent.  
Repudiates the Obligation -  
On schemes intent

Balking our Wit  
To sound or circumvent -  
Hate cannot harm  
A Foe so reticent -

Neither Decree prohibit him -  
Lawful as Equilibrium. (*Poems* 1369)

Here, Dickinson casts the rat as a “Tenant,” thereby choosing to include the rat within

the nomenclature often reserved for humans. This rat, for Dickinson, is not a pest. He is a welcome presence within the house. The argument of the poem pushes readers to consider how, after all, rats take up little space, are mostly silent, and moreover, they follow the law of nature over the law of humans: equilibrium. Post-equilibrium ecologists may cringe at such a claim, but that should not detract from Dickinson's radical perspective to include such non-domesticated, non-wild animals as part of the relational responsibility within the human sphere.

In the second poem, Dickinson chooses to include another household presence within the human sphere: spiders. In keeping with seeing other species as makers, this spider is an artist:

The Spider as an Artist  
Has never been employed -  
Though his surpassing Merit  
Is freely certified

By every Broom and Bridget  
Throughout a Christian Land -  
Neglected Son of Genius  
I take thee by the Hand – (*Poems* 1373)

As the speaker “take[s]” the spider “by the Hand,” she folds him into the political sphere with the rats, flies, birds, butterflies, and lizards. The impetus, though, for such a move is a recognition of and respect for the other species’ way-of-being. Dickinson sees the poetic life of other species as something self-evident. They, too, are makers.

### **The Spell of Xenotransplantation in Hillman’s Poetry**

In an interview with Tod Marshall, Hillman discusses Dickinson’s poetics, concluding “But of course, [Dickinson] couldn’t do it all; poets after her had to continue this work” (114). The context of the quote pertains to Dickinson’s work in general and not to exploring the specifics of animal *poiesis* and a zoopolis; regardless, Hillman continues such work. In an interview with Angela Hume, Hillman reminds readers that ecopoetics “is about nonhuman bodies, too.” She also provides a three-fold definition of place: the “local bioregion,” “symbolic realms ... of spirit, myth, and dream,” and the “material syllable, the composition” (10, 14). Like Dickinson before her, Hillman emphasizes the animal presence within the “material syllable,” both in the sound and in the form of the composition. Just as Dickinson stirred the *poiesis* of whippoorwills and flies into her process of making, so bats, blackbirds, sparrows,

thrush, earthworms, ants, termites, squirrels, and the *poiesis* of many more species emerge throughout Hillman's two books *Practical Water* (2009) and *Seasonal Works with Letters on Fire* (2013). What is more, like Dickinson, Hillman locates animals directly within the sphere of the polis. Dickinson, for instance, would agree that the death of a sparrow calls for a "Partita without Instruments" — the opening poem to *Practical Water*. If nonhuman animals attain status within the polis — either as denizens or co-citizens — humans assume certain relational duties. When a liminal sparrow dies amongst human dwellings, Hillman calls for a burial: there should be "no unmarked graves" in the "neighborhoods of the resisters" (*Water* 3). For Hillman, it is not just the sparrows' song that makes them makers, but the totality of their physical ways-of-being. She sees their movement "half-spinning / back to clefs of grillwork" (*Water* 3), implying a comparison of the sparrow's body to a note on the musical clef of the grill. Unmarked graves of these makers contribute to the "outraged mind" of those who see nonhuman animals as part of the polis.

Hillman explores further Dickinson's concept that a nonhuman animal "Break[s]" into orthography. One of the many dedications in *Seasonal Works* resonates with David Abram's work: TO CHILDREN LEARNING TO SPELL, TO THE SPELL (*Fire* iii). The letters within the alphabetic system still retain a sensuous quality. In *The Spell of the Sensuous*, Abram foregrounds how some animals contributed to the innovative breakthroughs of the form of some letters. The Hebrew word for *A* is the same Hebrew word for *ox*, and the Hebrew word for *Q* is the same Hebrew word for *Monkey*. Turn the *A* upside-down and one sees the ox's head and two horns, and the *Q* becomes a pictograph for a monkey's backside and swinging tail (Abram 101). Animal presence contributes to the spell, and when Hillman emphasizes "CHILDREN LEARNING TO SPELL" in conjunction with "THE SPELL," she conjures the material spell of orthography. Any parent has witnessed the tremendous profusion of animals throughout children's books — especially in books and puzzles focusing on the ABCs (see Fig.1). When a child learns alphabetic letters, she or he does so by attentively imagining how the body of the animal merges with the form of a letter, not unlike the early Semitic scribes who invented the *Q* and the *A*. Provocatively, in *Why the Wild Things Are: Animals in the Lives of Children*, Gail Melson, a scholar of child development, exposes the correlation between language acquisition and interacting with animals (71–98). She locates her argument within an evolutionary framework and the biophilia hypothesis that, simplified, sees the childhood mind "wired to vibrate to animals as dense packets of information" (188).<sup>3</sup> Paul Shepard, on whom she draws, called this process *minding animals*, which contributes to a "reciprocal spiral of consciousness" as one animal engages another (6–7). Melson also traces how, when children grow up, by and large, society weans them off of the pervasiveness of

animal presences in childhood (78, 140, 146).



Figure 1 Puzzle Pieces merging the form of letters with animal ontologies

The animal bodies once fused with the forms of letters dissipate. If, however, human intelligence *is* connected to animals, such a weaning has detrimental consequences with regards to the human imagination. Melson mentions that Shakespeare, nonetheless, generated over 4,000 animal metaphors/images (157), suggesting that some adult minds still “vibrate” when and where species meet. As Cummings shares, seeing a bat makes him “think things / which / were supposed to / be out of [his] reach” (354). The minds of Dickinson and Hillman, too, “think things” not thought possible in language through attentively engaging other species’ ways-of-being. Many other literary writers experience this as well as evidenced by William Faulkner’s *As I Lay Dying* and Franz Kafka’s *oeuvre*. Adult minds still “vibrate to animals.” The *spell* of *spelling*, acquired in childhood, continues to develop through the imaginations grappling with animal presences in the materiality of making human poetry.

Like Dickinson, Hillman’s *poiesis* is a multispecies event as she stirs, for instance, the “fire” of “spoken bird poetry” into her poems (*Fire* 1). In “Two Summer Aubades, after John Clare,” the towhee *breaks in bright orthography*: “pp cp cp cp chp chp” (*Fire* 27). Hillman gravitates to the space where animals and letters meet, such as “the vowel of an owl/the owl of a vowel” (*Fire* 19), and she unabashedly recognizes how the “crows are writing poems no one can read *aw aw aw aw*” (*Fire* 67). Another poem, “The Letters Learn to Breathe Twice,” begins with children who “form letters with pencils,” and as the poem progresses, Hillman stirs the *poiesis* of geese into the auditory and visual dynamics of the poem:

When the danger of fire has passed,  
 the children (even when wanting to text)  
 form letters with pencils,  
 tracing gray skin around  
 the unsayable while geese honk ~  
 overhead oñ-oñ-oñ- in their ~ ~  
 wedge of funny adults. The children ~ ~  
 try to be normal, though ~ ~  
 no one knows what normal is ... (*Fire* 63)

With all due respect to the American poet Walt Whitman, Hillman's "oñ-oñ-oñ-" more closely imitates the geese's vocalization than "Ya-honk" — but like Whitman, Hillman's poetry suggests that birds and humans share the "the same old law" of *poiesis* (Whitman 38–39). The innovative move of including iconic representations of the geese through the tildes emerges from an attentiveness to another species' ontology. Furthermore, the visual dynamic illustrates one way that a poem epitomizes one facet of place as Hillman defines it: "the material syllable, the composition" (qtd. in Hume, 14). For Dickinson and Hillman, the place of a poem contains the *poiesis* of myriad species.

Hillman creates several tropes that further explore the *poiesis* of nonhuman animals stirred into human poetry. In the spirit of Jed Rasula's *This Compost*, these tropes become the "composting medium" for readers who linger in the lines (9). First, in "Ecopoetics Manifesto: A Draft for Angie," Hillman establishes the trope "poem-as-animal": "such a poem like an animal could graze or hunt in its time, exploring each word, carrying symbolic rhythms, syntax & images directly between the dream & the myth" (*Fire* 29). These lines (directly or indirectly) echo Ralph Waldo Emerson's call for a poetic "architecture" that moves like the "spirit of ... an animal" (Emerson 290). The trope empowers readers to imagine how the poem's ontology has been shaped by, informed by, and made by an attentiveness to the ontology of other animals. Second, Hillman establishes at the opening of the first section the interconnections between sex, fire, letters, and more: "vowels ... sex ... loops in consonants ... spoken bird poetry ... are [all] made of fire" (*Fire* 1). Later in a poem, she further develops the sensual qualities of letters through pointing toward an erotic energy:

shadows wait under the stakes  
 as anarchy waits in the novel or sex  
 waits in college, a feeling  
 individual letters have before

a word is spelled — ; (*Fire* 30)

The primal energy of sex informs the primal energy of letters just prior to spelling a word. As Hillman says, “a vowel can start a fire.” The erotic energy further develops the play on the “spell” of “spelling.” The poems capture new groupings, new spellings from an openness to the (sensuous) *poiesis* of other species.

In “Till It Finishes What It Does,” Hillman’s trope of xenotransplantation provides yet another way to imagine the animal presences within the material composition of a poem:

the tiny valve of the pig beat inside  
 our father’s heart, like the spokes  
 of the sun-disk, in a hieroglyph —  
 above the squiggly river symbol (*Fire* 46)

The pig’s valve merges with the hieroglyphics of a sun suggesting that the vitality of human language, poetry, and imagination depends upon animal presences. The poem does not mention the term “xenotransplantation” — nor does it need to in order to subvert it. A fear of human animality may make one think that the “tiny valve of a pig” is a foreign (*xeno*) presence within the human heart, but the animal valve readily functions within the human. Likewise, one may think that the gestures and vocalizations of animals are “foreign” to human language — or that human language is somehow separate from animal ways-of-being — but animal *poiesis*, like the valve of the pig, readily animates the material semiotics of the poetic page. The Darwinian revelation of continuity between the species is not just physiology; it involves the sphere that once seemed to separate humans from animals: a physiology capable of rhetoric and poetry.

Poetic xenotransplantation occurs in the playful poem “Imitating a Squirrel at My Job.” Here, the poet need not highlight that the squirrel participates in the polis, though Hillman does playfully compare the squirrel to Napoleon. The speaker is not in the woods or in the countryside, but rather at work. The poem epitomizes the zoopoetic dynamic as the innovations in form emerge from an attentiveness to the squirrel’s *poiesis*, but this dynamic occurs in the space where two species meet. The squirrel, as an often overlooked “liminal animal,” is not fully wild nor fully domesticated. She or he chooses to dwell amongst humans. The poem’s celebration reinforces how the squirrel’s status within the polis is, like Dickinson saw it, self-evident:

When i get a little speedy  
 at work & part of the brain says *Calm down!*  
 i hear near our ear, in the outside tree:  
*speckle-speckle-speckle-speckle speckle*  
*uh uh uh* — you gonna tell a squirrel that? calm  
 down & try to be cheerful ...  
 Try to be ch-ch. Try-to-be-ch-  
 Trytobechchchchch. Try to be-e-e.  
 Trytobech ch chrfl-trytobechchchrrrrfl.  
 trytobeeeeee, tobechchchch. You  
 gonna tell a fast in the skull  
 till it shapes the cone  
 & tornado drops it  
 squirrel that? You gonna  
 tell the uhuhuhuhuh — aw aw aw  
 when it nut-nut-nut up  
 stands like Napoleon, paw paw  
 paw ahw ahw ahw, try to be ch  
 try to be chchchch  
 try to be calm and chchchcheerful,  
 aw aw all cute gray fast & craving-colored — (*Fire* 66)

Though it may be tempting to scan over the inventive spellings, slowing down and reading them phrase by phrase, syllable by syllable, reveals a marvelous “stirring” of the squirrel’s *poiesis* and human language. The phrase “try to be cheerful” breaks open through a series of onomatopoeic and visual iterations not unlike the way Dickinson’s whippoorwill “Break[s] in bright Orthography.” Effectively, Hillman “transplants” the squirrel’s *poiesis* into the materiality of her poem making it a multispecies event.

Poetic xenotransplantation impacts the polis. The little creatures of the world — the pests, the invaders, the insects — and the poet achieve a solidarity in the joint work of taking down large systems. The little creatures are not simply part of Hillman’s poems, for their ways-of-being become the model for political activism. Early on, Hillman establishes a kinship with the small animals of the earth: “Is poetry pointless? Maybe its points are moving, as in a fire .... The letters of this poem are also lucky to have a job for they are insects & addicts & thieves” (*Fire* 14). The poem-as-insect trope continues gaining momentum: “t t t t ermites riddle the wood / ... fly / up, drop wings at some point, brain- / light termite. Poet” (*Fire* 30). The

poet is most powerful not as a mammal, but as an instinct. In “A Brutal Encounter Recollected in Tranquility: An Essay from November 9,” Hillman’s allusion to the British poet William Wordsworth places political activism in the same sphere as nature poetry. Instead of a “nature” being recollected, Hillman recollects the events of Occupy Berkeley on November 9, 2011. Robert Hass and Brenda Hillman went in support of the students. They both witnessed police brutality and suffered inflictions themselves (Hass). Throughout Hillman’s recollected poem/essay, she plays with the presence of ants. The resisters’ “feet no longer touch earth but connect other feet underground”; she “admires the anti-heroic line of ants”; she emphasizes “we cannot forget the ants under us making smart corridors in the wet ground, even ===== under the Chancellor’s house”; she suggests a “group” of ants or of humans “can be mystical or a mob”; and she concludes that “ants reach other ants at the edge of the lawn; they pass the message along” (*Fire* 83–84). One may suspect, at first, that Hillman draws on the ant merely as a potent trope for the activist. However, the context of the both *Practical Water* and *Seasonal Works with Letters on Fire* suggests that Hillman foregrounds the work of actual ants who shape the poem’s materiality through poetic xenotransplantation (“=====”) and who can slowly eat away at large systems to the point of dilapidation. In *Practical Water*, for instance, the earthworms on the steps of the state capitol building move beyond being a trope for the activist to joining the activist in a joint solidarity (*Water* 10–11). She muses, in *Practical Water*, upon how an attentiveness to nonhuman ways-of-being opens up possibilities: “If bees can detect ultraviolet rays, there are surely more possibilities in language & government” (*Water* 33). The poet/activist makes breakthroughs in her makings and in her political involvement through exploring and learning from other members of the polis: worms, ants, termites.

Hillman intersperses a refrain throughout *Seasonal Works with Letters on Fire* regarding how the *lord of literature* has grown tired, weak, stagnant — ineffective. One arc throughout *Seasonal Works*, then, aspires to awaken the *lord of literature* through a daring poetics. Hillman grounds such daring poetics, though, through an allusion to an earlier poem by another poet of fire: Percy Shelley and his “Ode to the West Wind.” The allusion is subtle, but in “Coda: Suggested Activism for Endangered Seeds,” Hillman modernizes Shelley’s comparison of words to “wingèd seeds” and to “sparks” as she discusses making a poem, cutting it into “seed-like syllables,” and mailing them to the “CEOs of Monsanto, AstraZeneca & Novartis” where they can enact the “meaningless gesture” of “tumbling onto desks of corporations.” The speaker knows little may happen in the short term, but she also knows “the word-seeds will outlast you” — and she envisions a hope that such seeds may, to echo Shelley, “quicken a new birth” (*Fire* 59; see Shelley 616–18). Animal presences

infuse Hillman's "wingèd seeds" and can contribute to an awakening. But if this awakening is going to happen, the *lord of literature* must be revitalized. One way to revitalize literature is through exposing the animal presences therein, and expanding the tradition to include other animal makers.

### **Imagination, the Work of Zoopoetry, and a Multispecies Polis**

As many ecocritics and ecopoets have argued, ecopoetry works against the failure of the imagination. To put it another way, the cultivation of the imagination is a crucial task of the real work poetry can accomplish. I see zoopoetry as a needed category within the broader scope of ecopoetry. Zoopoetry is the stuff of xenotransplantation, of stirring the *poiesis* of another species into the process of making human poetry. Hillman and Dickinson's zoopoetry cultivate the imagination, for as they stir the *poiesis* of many species with their poetry, readers witness a xenotransplantation of animal ways-of-being. Moreover, both poets assume a self-evident stance that other animals are *makers*, and therefore part of the fabric of the polis. This insight contributes to the greater movement within animal rights theory to see nonhuman animals as either co-citizens, denizens, or as sovereign — but it is a crucial contribution. Donaldson and Kymlicka provide a theory for such possibility, and the poetry of Dickinson and Hillman directs the imagination to bring such a theory toward fruition. It is hoped that more readers begin to see the poetic and political status of nonhuman animals as self-evident.

My emphasis upon the ways human language, poetry, and imagination depend upon animals may seem, at first, to reinforce an anthropocentric approach to animal studies. Animals matter because of how they nurture our minds — so the criticism runs. In *Animal Studies: An Introduction*, Paul Waldau rightly exposes the ways some scholarship inadvertently reinforces human exceptionality even while attempting to undermine it (11–12). Similarly, in *Poetic Animals and Animal Souls*, Randy Malamud encourages readers to be critical of animal poetry, asking "what [animal poetry] reveals about people's relationship with animals and about how human culture frames this relationship" (60). If Hillman and Dickinson went no further than to celebrate the ways animals burst into human language, then, indeed, their exploration of animal *poiesis* surmounts to little beyond a profound source of poetic material. However, animal *poiesis* pushes Hillman and Dickinson to see nonhuman animals as *makers* and therefore as contributors to the life of the polis. They offer a radical "frame" for humans to grapple with human-animal relationships within the polis.

The above exploration ought to be enough to at least jar the Ogre with One Eye into seeing that nonhuman animals are necessarily and inextricably woven throughout the poetic enterprises of both Emily Dickinson and Brenda Hillman. But to push the

perspective further, another radical step must be taken. When discussing the poetic tradition, we need to begin with the continuity between humans and other animals. If nonhuman animals are going to gain prominence within the polis, we need, as a starting point, to see many species as *makers*, capable of *poiesis*. Both Dickinson and Hillman see such a capacity as self-evident. Literary studies can contribute, therefore, immensely to such a project. Instead of introducing the origin of the poetic tradition solely within the human sphere, we can start with the nonhuman by drawing on Aristotle. He claimed, of course, that the “general origin of poetry” involves the instinct or impulse to “imitate” (Aristotle 2:2318). Other species, too, imitate. Examples abound, but take, for instance, the bowhead whale who migrates beneath the Arctic ice in spring. In *Thousand Mile Song*, David Rothenberg includes a couple of pages on how multiple sounds of ice infuse the song of the bowhead (194–96). Could this be a form of a place-based poetics, that is, a process of making songs that integrates one’s environment innovatively into that process? The interiority of a bowhead’s psyche is beyond our grasp at this point, but isn’t the evidence of the sounds of ice enough? It is time to extend Knickerbocker’s theory of “sensuous *poiesis*” to the bowhead whale. When discussing the process of sensuous *poiesis* in Wallace Stevens’ “The Idea of Order at Key West,” Knickerbocker foregrounds how Stevens rematerializes the sounds of the sea to such an extent that the reader hears the ocean’s sounds “pushing through the poem” (23). The bowhead whale’s *poiesis* rematerializes the sounds of ice so that the creaks and groans of non-whale nature “push” through the whale’s song. In Donaldson and Kymlicka’s schema, the bowhead is part of the zoopolis as whales possess sovereignty over their own wild places. Seeing them as *makers* in the same tradition as Dickinson and Hillman’s sparrows, whippoorwills, squirrels, and many other species helps give the whales’ political status weight. Aristotle has already planted the seed for such a move. The bowhead expands their repertoire of making through following the impulse near the origin of poetry: they innovatively imitate the sound of arctic ice as they migrant vast distances of darkness.

Zoopoetry ought not be limited to the human sphere; rather, it expands from the work of poets like Hillman and Dickinson who stir animal *poiesis* into their makings to species like the bowhead who are makers in their own right, innovatively imitating the sounds environing them. Only then will the ogre begin to see, as self-evident, the status of animals as *makers* and therefore as members of a multispecies polis.

## Notes

1. In *Zoopoetics: Animals and the Making of Poetry*, I provide a thorough foundation for the zoopoetic process, and I trace it in the *oeuvres* of the American poets Walt Whitman, E. E.

Cummings, W. S. Merwin, Brenda Hillman — as well as in the gestures and vocalizations of other animal makers such as beluga whales, elephants, and mimic octopi. Concerning Hillman, the monograph is limited to her 2009 *Practical Water*, while this article engages her 2013 *Seasonal Works with Letters on Fire* in which Hillman, in many ways, provides new insights into the animal presences within human *poiesis* and political activism.

2. I see Donna Haraway's *When Species Meet* to be consanguineous with Donaldson and Kymlicka's *Zoopolis*. From the first paragraph onward, Haraway frames her argument in terms of an "autremondialisation" — "other-globalization" — that is a multispecies event. This coexistence of species occurs in the polis through "retying some of the knots of ordinary multispecies living on earth" (3). Donaldson and Kymlicka retie those knots through an application of political theory to nonhuman animals.

3. Melson summarizes the biophilia hypothesis early in her argument: "The biophilia hypothesis ... suggests that a predisposition to attune to animals and other living things is part of the human evolutionary heritage .... Biophilia depicts children as born assuming a connection with other living things." The biophilia hypothesis has a tremendous amount of explanatory power with regards to early cave art, animals in dreams, and the animals permeating the process of language acquisition.

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