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Tracking Animal Traces: The Role of Animals in Selections of Children's Poetry by Ahmad Shawqy and Ted Hughes

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To Baba,

my lighthouse..

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Introduction

Nowhere are animals more celebrated than in children's imagination; which is substantially reflected in children's literature over time and across cultures. Since its emergence in the seventeenth century as a distinct area of writing, children's literature has been strongly dominated by animal characters that either preserve their original nature or rather display human characteristics. The undeniable popularity of animals in children's books points to the affinity observed between children and animals. Broadly speaking, human fascination with wild and tame animals alike has been evident throughout the evolutionary history of human cultures ever since the time of gatherer-hunters. Examples like the Chauvet cave animal paintings that date back to 32,000 BC and the Ancient Egyptian fairy tale that features talking cows arguably recorded in the thirteenth century BC are precursors of the prevalence of animals in the human cultural production.[1]

Tracking animals in the area of children's poetry, with the aim of acquiring a proper understanding of their potential impact, requires a crossing of the boundaries separating these three constituent strands: animals, children, and literature. In the attempt to bridge the animal-human divide, there appeared two major theoretical trends: the first views the human as animal while the second considers the animal as human. Along this line of thought, animals and children were commonly linked together in terms of their allegedly similar unruly behaviour. By the time Darwinian theory appeared in the nineteenth century, parallels between animals and children were drawn with reference to undeveloped speech and reason as examples of similarities. The linkage continued in recent centuries drawing on the

privileged and protected position they began to share. However, such theoretical traditions of stressing animal-human commonalities do not allow for an exploration of the actual interaction between animals and humans (Melson, "Psychology and Human-Animal Relationships").

One approach centred on the complex human interactions with animals is developed through the academic field of human-animal studies that emerged in the late 1990s. The hyphen, as pointed out by Garry Marvin and Susan McHugh in their introduction to human-animal studies, brings the terms human and animal "'together in one' . . . to mark a precise starting point, which is to study animals with humans, and humans with animals" (2). In this field,

> scholars are interested in the whys, hows, and whats of human-animal relations: *why* animals are represented and configured in different ways in human cultures and societies around the world; *how* they are imagined, experienced, and given significance; *what* these relationships might signify about being human; and *what about* these relationships might be improved for the sake of the individuals as well as the communities concerned. (Marvin and McHugh 2)

In addressing the multidimensional relationships between humans and other animals, "human-animal studies reveals itself as a creature evolved to fill an interdisciplinary niche" (6). It embraces new perspectives from the natural sciences, social sciences, and humanities. Marvin and McHugh further assert its potential as:

> not only a multi- or trans-disciplinary but more importantly a meta-disciplinary field: a discursive environment conducive to

> developing positions and forms within existing academic discourses, as well as metamorphosing the status of each and all through crossings and other mutations that are peculiar to interspecies life. (3)

The growth of human-animal studies can be seen in the attention given to the human-animal bond, the emergence of trans-species psychology, and the trending of critical animal studies. Over the past two decades, research has been increasingly conducted around the human-animal bond in order to explore the many ways humans and animals are connected as well as to highlight the benefits reaped by both ends of the bond.

In terms of the theory of a trans-species psyche established by the American psychologist and ecologist Gay A. Bradshaw (b.1959), the project of psychology is extended across species lines. Trans-species psychology provides a shift from a separationist paradigm to an inclusive model where nonhuman individuals are integrated. In a 2010 interview, Bradshaw points out that the prefix "Trans re-embeds humans within the larger matrix of the animal kingdom by erasing the 'and' between humans and animals that has been used to demarcate and reinforce the false notion that humans are substantively different cognitively and emotionally from other species" ("Trans-species Living"). Bradshaw and Mary Watkins in "Trans-Species Psychology: Theory and Praxis" clarify that the theory "does not erase species differences . . . but the epistemic logic informing core cultural and political agendas based on human privilege is significantly eroded" (7-8). Trans-species psychology makes bidirectional inferences from human to animal and vice versa. For example, the traumatizing impact

of oppression on humans is applied to animals that experience similar oppression and exploitation (Bradshaw and Watkins 2).

An ethical response to the suffering and exploitation of animals is offered by Critical Animal Studies. Because of its alignment with the animal rights movement, critical animal studies can be said to steer human-animal studies to activism and political action. It does not focus solely on conceptual animal issues. Instead, "CAS is concerned with the nexus of activism, academia and animal suffering and maltreatment. This makes CAS more overtly political than the often wholly academic AS [Animal Studies]" (Taylor and Twine 2). As summed up by Shapiro and DeMello in "The State of Human-Animal Studies," "Critical Animal Studies develop and employ an ideological critique of current animal-related institutions, using approaches originating in the Frankfurt school of social criticism and posthumanist thought" (311).

Posthumanism—as defined in terms of blurring the neatly drawn lines between the categories of human, animal, and machine—has come to represent a major intellectual turn influenced by poststructuralist philosophers like Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961) and Jacques Derrida (1930-2004). In refiguring the human-nonhuman relation, Merleau-Ponty's ontological perspective is seen to provide the basis for an ethics of the posthuman world (Diprose). Merleau-Ponty's writings, as Louise Westling notes, imply not a hierarchical orientation "that places humans (and only an elite group of humans) in a superior position at an abyssal remove from all other life, but instead a lateral relationship with the animal and plant communities in which humans have co-evolved" (234). This

eliminates the separate status of humans informed by traditional dualisms and places human beings within the wild community of life. Per this view, Westling elucidates: "there is no clear distinction between subject and object, or mind and body, or each of us and the things around us" (241).

Derrida, in his essay "The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow," raises challenging questions about the border between animal and human; which overlap with the notions of posthumanism. He examines his "question of what 'to follow' or 'to pursue' means" in the sense of moving "from 'the ends of man,' that is the confines of man, to 'the crossing of borders' between man and animal" (Derrida, "Animal Therefore I Am" 3). This frontier when investigated by Derrida gets the name "abyssal limit". He identifies it not as a "unilinear and indivisible line having two edges, Man and the Animal in general" (31). Instead, this border "between Man with a capital M and Animal with a capital A" is fractured and manifold (29). Derrida puts forward his thesis as follows:

> Beyond the edge of the *so-called* human, beyond it but by no means on a single opposing side, rather than "the Animal" or "Animal life," there is already a heterogeneous multiplicity of the living, or more precisely . . . a multiplicity of organizations or relations between living and dead, relations of organization or lack of organization among realms that are more and more difficult to dissociate by means of the figure of the organic and inorganic, of life and/or death. These relations are at once close and abyssal, and they can never be totally objectified. . . . It follows from that that one will never have the right to take

> animals to be the species of a kind that would be named the Animal, or animal in general. (31)

In thinking about animals, Derrida follows a non-Cartesian track. He embarks on deconstructing logocentrism, the western traditional system of thinking that holds speech and reason to be fundamental expressions of presence. Peter Mahon highlights that "Derrida dislocates the philosophical limit most often used to separate humans from animals—logos; this effectively permits him to consider what humans and animals, despite their radical otherness, share" (225). Derrida, in his essay "But as for me, who am I (following)?," then substitutes "the concept of the trace or mark for those of speech, sign, or signifier" (104). This substitution is made "to cross the frontiers of anthropocentrism, the limits of a language confined to human words and discourse. Mark, gramma, trace, and différance refer differentially to all living things, all the relations between living and non-living," to use Derrida's own words (104).

This study takes on Derrida's "concept of the trace" in its attempt to follow the various activities of animals in the space of poems and inside the psyche of children. Poetry as argued by Derrida constitutes the source of compassion towards the other called 'animal'; "For thinking concerning the animal, if there is such a thing, derives from poetry" ("Animal Therefore I Am" 7). He distinguishes this category of discourse from both philosophy and fables. Derrida claims that philosophy, from Aristotle and Descartes to Kant and Lacan, tends to deny the "experience of the seeing animal, of the animal that looks at them" (14). As for his view of fables, he believes that "it would be necessary to avoid fables" for "it remains an anthropomorphic taming,

a moralizing subjection, a domestication. Always a discourse of man, on man, indeed on the animality of man, but for and as man" (Derrida, "Animal Therefore I Am" 37). Thus, poetry is singled out as the medium that may allow people (including children) to be addressed by the gaze of an animal.

The medium of poetry is particularly chosen as the focus of the study for it has the power to seep into the child's subconscious. Poetry is regarded as a natural language of children (Kormanski). Morag Styles (b. 1947), Cambridge professor of Children's poetry, asserts the natural affinity children have for poetry as she explains why poetry matters to children. In "The Case for Children's Poetry," Styles says: "Children's responses to poetry are innate, instinctive and natural. Maybe it starts in the womb with the mother's heartbeat. Children are hard wired to musical language, taking pleasure in rhyme, rhythm and repetition and other patterns of language." They are often observed reciting rhymes for hide and seek, tongue-twisters, riddles and jingles while playing. Children tend to delight in rhyme, rhythm, and other elements of musicality. On top of that, poetry speaks directly to their active imagination.

With reference to the demarcation issue, poetry serves as "the *edge* between mankind and nonhuman nature, providing an access for culture into a world beyond its preconceptions" (Elder 210). It is the common ground where both humans and animals can meet halfway. Randy Malamud in *Poetic Animals and Animal Souls* believes that poetry is "a literary portal into the world of animals, the world beyond human boundaries" because of its ability to summon up animal images via metaphors (59). Of all the forms, Elizabeth A. Lawrence in "Seeing

in Nature What is Ours: Poetry and the Human-animal Bond" names poetry as the most immediate and revealing medium due to the aspect of symbolism which expresses the profound truth about one's place in nature.

Now that children are growing up increasingly detached from animals and the natural world at large, examining the impact of what is considered the "most indirect forms of contact with wild animals" becomes imperative (Melson, "Children and Wild Animals" 101). Richard Louv in his book *Last Child in the Woods* describes the consequences of the current generation's disconnect from nature as "nature-deficit disorder." To what extent can poetry save children from this disorder? Can poetry connect children with animals? Can poetry as a mode of engagement with animals provide children with the missing "Vitamin N (for nature)"?[2]

With the help of such questions, this research is concerned with how children's poetry presents animals and what sensations it carries into the mindset of the child. It aims at understanding the poetic patterns that involve animals and examining their effect on the course of children's development. The point of departure in this study is the assumption that engagement with poetic animals, real and imaginary, is linked to all aspects of development.

The first chapter looks into the numerous roles animals play in the various domains of child development: cognitive, self, socio-emotional, and moral. It starts with Gail F. Melson's thorough investigation of the relationship between animals and children. The discussion next proceeds towards identifying the relevant aspects of

development with respect to children's interactions with literary animals. Ecopoetics is also brought up in connection with the recommended biocentric approach.

In this context, the following two chapters explore the developmental significance of animals as portrayed in the poetry for children of two major poets from across the cultural continuum—Egyptian Ahmad Shawqy (1868-1932) and British Ted Hughes (1930-1998). Both are poets laureate highly regarded in their homelands as thinkers whose ideas have influenced the education of children. Although each poet represents a different time and place, their writings for children are replete with animal evocations. The thesis attempts to apply the relevant theories of animals in child development to selected animal poems of the two writers.

In chapter two entitled "Meeting Shawqy's Animals," the work of the far-famed Egyptian poet laureate Ahmad Shawqy is closely analysed. Given the shortage of Shawqy's translated works into English, a translation is provided for all the poems used in this comparative thesis.[3] Shawqy's fifty-six poems provide interesting dimensions to the animal characters carrying his socio-political messages. The fundamental question about the human-animal bond is addressed as well as the underlying environmental concerns hardly tackled in the available critical material on Shawqy's children's poems.

A quite detailed reading is conducted of Britain's former poet laureate Ted Hughes in chapter three "Hughes Capturing Animals." The wide scope of Hughes's writings is inescapably reflected in the