

*Interviste/1*

## ***Animals in and around poetry***

### **Interview with John Burnside**

a cura di Myrtha de Meo-Ehlert

The scottish poet and novelist John Burnside, winner of the T.S. Eliot Prize (2011) and the Forward Poetry Prize (2011), author of 14 books of poetry and 12 novels, has explored in his first novel *The Dumb House* the origin of language picking up the thread of the persian myth of Akbar the Great and his experiment with children growing in an environment without any contact to human language. The research on how and what human language can express and reflect of human perception of the world and, even more, of its role in the world, is one of the main questions Burnside poses in his writings. In this interview the role of perception, language and imagination as main elements of any poetic production, but also usually identified as main distinction between humans and animals will be discussed, reflecting on Burnside's poems, the Aristotelian definitions of soul and imagination, Montaigne and Stifter.

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*In your poems animals play an important part as for example in the poem Cat where you describe a cat, playing with and offering a mouse to the speaker. In other poems we meet snakes, wild animals, humans treating cruelly diverse animals, or you write about the animals as reflection of human projections in both superiority and determinism. It seems to me, that you do not give in your poems a bucolic or romantic view on animals, would you call it a realistic one or rather an attempt to put yourself in their position? Could you describe how you first chose to write about animals and what it means for you?*

When I began writing about animals, I think it was mostly driven by epistemological concerns. When I worked as a gardener, I remember, the standard way to drive away moles was to bury a bottle in the soil, with just the neck protruding, the logic being that the wind blowing across the opening would annoy the moles so much that they would move away from the patch of land you were trying to protect. I remember thinking, what does that sound feel like to a mole? Which reminded me of all the times I had asked, as a child, what does a dog think? How long does a horse remember some event that happened to it? Those questions children ask. Of course, one of the interesting things, for a poet, is that these questions cannot be answered – we cannot know what animals

are thinking or feeling. It is a short step from this sense of curious interest in animal experience to a feeling that all subjectivity (if we can use that term here) is precious and, in one sense at least, equal. Finally, I became convinced that all lives should be regarded as 'equal' – that is, every creature living has as much right to take up its portion of space as any other – for philosophical purposes. And political purpose, too. We have to respect all life equally, not just human life, but all.

I do think – or maybe I hope – that social justice begins with this respect for all life. We have to renew our definition of 'The Other' to include all living things, and in fact, the land, sea, air – everything. If we do this, I think certain socio-economic and socio-political shifts will follow. Edward Abbey says: «The ugliest thing in America is greed, the lust for power and domination, the lunatic ideology of perpetual Growth.... 'Progress' in our nation has for too long been confused with 'Growth'; I see the two as different, almost incompatible, since progress means, or should mean, change for the better – toward social justice, a liveable and open world, equal opportunity and affirmative action for all forms of life. And I mean all forms, not merely the human. The grizzly, the wolf, the rattlesnake, the condor, the coyote, the crocodile, whatever, each and every species has as much right to be here as we do.» I believe this is true and I think all our activities, from planning to building to thinking would become more fruitful and less damaging to our environment if we made this respect for 'all forms' a matter of policy.

### Imagination and poetry

Sensitive imagination, as we have said, is found in all animals, deliberative imagination only in those that are calculative: for whether this or that shall be enacted is already a task requiring calculation; and there must be a single standard to measure by, for that is pursued which is greater. It follows that what acts in this way must be able to make a unity out of several images. (Aristotle, *De anima*, 434a.)

*Aristotle's distinction of different forms of imagination grants animals a «sensitive imagination» and provokes a whole debate about the essential difference between animals and humans. As imagination is closely linked to the intellectual faculties and, in the tripartition of the soul, to the intellectual soul, the Aristotelian distinction led to very opposite interpretations such as a gradual difference between animals and humans or even the negation of any ontological difference. In several of your poems you point out one human quality, I mean the quality of naming, speaking and interpreting, relating it to our determination and regulation on animals.*

In time, we came to think that house contained  
a presence: we could see it from the yard

shifting from room to room in the autumn rain  
and we thought it was watching us: a kindred shape  
more animal than ghost.

They say, if you dream an animal, it means

“the self” - that mess of memory and fear  
that wants, remembers, understands, denies

John Burnside, *Animals*

*Could we understand the animal as a nightmare and fear of human being, a reflection of the self as a daimon, like the Landscape is a «reflection of this image of myself», rather than a model for civilized and pacific life as we find it in many medieval bestiaries?*

I can honestly say that I have not thought about this question before. So, of course, I want to think for a year or two before answering ... But – I feel that I stand halfway between my ‘natural’ self (what I am, as it were) and the ‘self’ that results from the socialisation process. I will never ‘become’ my natural self, but it would be loathsome to me to simply accept the person I have been socialised to be. The difference here, in terms of experience, is the difference between education (the ‘leading out’ of an inherent self, though of course all of these terms are inadequate) and the formation process that socialisation is – a process, in short, intended to create more or less obedient social subjects, who may be able to exercise certain natural faculties, and will, of course, have appetites, wishes and longings that must be assuaged, appeased or diverted, but who, nevertheless, not rock the boat so much that they become a problem for the social system – or worse, exemplars of a different mode of thinking and dwelling in the world, (true, isolated individuals may live quite separate and self-governed lives, but they must always be seen – and quite often will collude with their portrayal – as eccentrics, or mavericks).

The animal, then, stands in some lights for a ‘natural self’ that probably cannot be attained, but still exists as an imaginative touchstone. We see how, at certain times, children understand this in much the same way as the shaman or shape-shifter does: they become animals according to their needs at certain times. As a child, I spent a good deal of my time being one bird or another, sometimes a Crow. Sometimes an Eagle.

*In your famous poem Septuagesima you allude to a comprehension «beyond the gloss of things» not limited by the qualities of human intellect.*

I dream of the silence  
the day before Adam came  
to name the animals,  
The gold skins newly dropped  
from God’s bright fingers, still  
implicit with the light.  
A day like this, perhaps:  
a winter whiteness

haunting the creation,  
as we are sometimes  
haunted by the space  
we fill, or by the forms  
we might have known  
before the names,  
beyond the gloss of things.  
Septuagesima

*The iustinian «nomina sunt consequentia rerum» which has influenced several poetologies, for instance Dantes Vita Nuova but also Inger Christensen's Alphabet, what does it mean for your poetics?*

As a child, it often occurred to me that I was not to be allowed to name the things in my world – that the names had already been given. I rather resented this. A friend told me how, on a trip to Amazonia, he found a frog as yet ‘unknown to science’ (though I imagine the local people had a name for it) and he was allowed to name it – and I felt quite jealous of him for that... Seriously, though, this is an interesting thought when it first occurs to one – as a young child, if my memory is anything to go by, (though I have no real sense of time). Then, not long after that, there comes the recognition that the name one is given in one’s native language for a ‘bird’ or a ‘tree’ is something else in another language. A ‘Vogel’, a ‘Baum’. For example. That, for me, was gratifying. I liked it, that naming was arbitrary and I never really bought the idea of – say – a pre-Babel *Ur*-language, or some divine system of naming that our names merely approximated.

What is more gratifying, though, is when you learn how much grammar forms the way we see the world – which means the world could be seen in other ways from the convention you are accustomed to. For example, we know that the subject – predicate type of sentence structure is not universal – it is just one way of seeing how events unfold. I don’t know enough about this – and I am ashamed to say that – but I do know from people more informed than me that Chinese, say, works differently. This is excellent news – it had always seemed rather a limited view of the world that a subject acts upon an object in the way our grammar seems to suggest is universal.

That our naming an sometimes get in the way of our experiencing of things – that was the point of *Septuagesima*, or one of the points there. If we are not careful, naming becomes a gloss. We think we know, because we have named. Or somebody who came before us has named.

*In the anthology Animals and Angels you put a quotation by Lucretius at the beginning of a collection of 12 poems, dealing with nature, creation and human place in it, could you describe this work, your intention and the place of animals in it and the confrontation of these two categories which classically are seen as two distinct genera or, allegorically read, as two opposing models of life?*

Ah. *Angels*. That was a while ago. I guess I was playing with what I had grown up with, just as I played then – and sometimes still play – with Christian/Catholic iconography and concepts. I guess there are two kinds of writing, in broad (very broad) terms: writing that interrogates what is there already, existing/received ideas and images for example, and writing that proposes another way of looking at things, an individual *Weltanschauung*, to go back to that old term. It's hard to get away with either of these unless there is a certain amount of play in the process. For me, thinking about angels in particular gave rise to a certain kind of play that, at the time, interested me.

Recently, I surprised myself on that subject, however. The artist Jürgen Partenheimer asked me to write a poem in response to some work of his, and – perhaps because I started work on this project while I was staying in Switzerland, not far from where Rilke lived in his final years – I found myself thinking about the figures of angels in his work, and in work influenced by him. Then I found myself writing – with no conscious intention, as it were, of doing so – an opening to the new poem with the following lines:

It's not that I'm tired, it's just that I'm almost  
finished with the angels:

the palaces of breath, the pale  
machinery of misbegotten wings,

noon as Annunciation in the perfect  
garden,  
    (fluted columns;  
                    fleur-de-lys).

What claims me, now, is the swell  
of the literal: sky pouring down

through the branches of willow and alder; small  
dark butterflies charting the meadows above the town

when the mowing is done;

This is how it happens for/to me quite often, in fact: I do not decide, in some logical or systematic way, that I have to make a change. The change happens and then I begin to understand it. To stand under it, and so, see its implications. In recent poems, I find myself more concerned with the swell of the literal, with what I think is there, in the world, the thing I am guessing at as I look, and as I speak. I see each poem now as a kind of *Ansatz*, just as, more and more, I see each perception, each experience, as an *Ansatz*. for me, now a poem is a starting point, an educated guess, in the process of finding the world that is there, as opposed to the world I am expecting – that is, socialized – to find.

## Human and animal cognition

There are times when I think  
of the knowledge we had as children:

the patterns we saw in number, or the spells  
and recipes we had  
for love and fear;

the knowledge we kept in the bones  
for wet afternoons  
the slink of tides, the absolute of fog.

John Burnside, *Being and Time, The Light Trap*

*This description reminded me of Stifter's description of his memory of his first perception, offered in his essay Granit. The question of memory and imagination is also relevant for question about our relation of animals, usually described as a hierarchy in which all the other beings are subordinated to humans (Aristotle, Politics, 1256b14). In the peripatetic theory of perception and cognition the cognition of a child is often used as an image to illustrate a primitive and initial state of knowledge, a comparison which has been recently used by the modern philosopher Peter Singer relating this state of knowing and selfcomprehension to those of certain animals. What do you think about this traslation?*

I don't want to romanticise the child, in the style of Wordsworth. I do think, though, that as we get older, the world can withdraw from us, as we get busy with the less immediate sense data and the questions inherent in the very fact of being. No romanticising – but don't children seem more capable of wonder – or rather, shall we say, that each one of us was more consistently capable of wonder as a child than s/he is now, as the grown-up that child became?

I would try to clarify this by quoting Paul Shepard, who seems to me as right as it is humanly possible to be about our 'place in nature', which is certainly not, in his view, as part of a hierarchy of any kind. He says, «If nature is not a prison and earth a shoddy way-station, we must find the faith and force to affirm its metabolism as our own... To do so means nothing less than a shift in our whole frame of reference and our attitude toward life itself, a wider perception of the landscape as a creative, harmonious being where relationships of things are as real as the things. Without losing our sense of a great human destiny and without intellectual surrender, we must affirm that the world is a being, a part of our own body».

This is a big task: what he is suggesting is that, while continuing to think and act as adult humans, we must at the same time attempt to regain a sense of the

continuum – or rather, not a sense, but a direct experience – in which we live and move and have our being.

*In Strong words you write: «Our response to the world is essentially one of wonder, of confronting the mysterious with a sense, not a being small, or insignificant, but of being part of a rich and complex narrative». Stifter in his preface to the Bunte Steine presents a very similar argument for the «collection of this marvels» of «sweet law of the small things» which mirror the complex structure of the universe but and at the same time the most inner motions of humankind. How do you see your approach and writing, sometimes called nature poetry or ecopoetry, and which authors and figures have been important for you?*

I will take this opportunity, if I may, to argue with the term 'nature poetry', and to qualify 'ecopoetry' – I write as often about human relationships, or memories of childhood, as I do about what is usually recognised as 'nature' (i.e. greenery etc.) but I class all this work as part of an ecopoetic world-view. that is because I think, at this juncture, an ecopoetic view is what the age demands. I am not talking about climate change here, I am talking about repairing our relationship with the world that we, humans, inhabit. All too often, this world is fractured, poisoned, polluted with unnecessary light and noise and swamped with celebrity gossip and media buzz, which is to say, from the big picture down to the most trivial detail our experience of the world has been cheapened, mostly from the sake of commerce, either directly or indirectly. I do think the way out of this trap is by way of the sweet law of small things – that is, by way of recognising the fine detail of the quality of our surroundings, as in the old arts of wabi-sabi, say, or the Still Life – and to begin to see these 'small things' we have to discard, to refuse, a good deal of what we have been told is big, so much of what is important (question: is it important to me, or to the masters of my society?).

On that latter note – re 'masters' – we can make one small but important point about how we use 'nature' to justify certain kinds of human behaviour and social institutions e.g. we find hierarchies in nature where they actually do not exist, (e.g. the bee colony, with its supposed 'queen') and we see animals as representative of certain 'virtues' (The Ant and the Grasshopper, the wise old owl, bees again) teaching us important moral lessons. This is all nonsense, of course – it's not just history that is written by the winners, nature is also rewritten again and again according to the dictates and needs of those in power. The job of the poet – any poet who talks about this world we inhabit – is not dissimilar to the work of the naturalist: we have to look at what is there, in that world, and not what we expect or hope to find there, and then we have to tell it as honestly and precisely as we can.

*Finally I would like to ask you to comment on a passage of Montaigne's Apology for Raymond Sebond in view of your own considerations on animals and you way to present and represent them in your writings: «It is through the vanitie of the same*

*imagination that he dare equall himself to God, that he ascribeth divine conditions unto himself, that he selecteth and separateth himselfe from out the ranke of other creatures».*

A similar notion is found in *Ecclesiastes*, which I used as the epigraph for my last poetry collection: «For that which befalleth the sons of men befalleth beasts; even one thing befalleth them: as the one dieth, so dieth the other; yea, they have all one breath; so that a man hath no pre-eminence above a beast: for all is vanity.» However, I left out that last «for all is vanity» because, while the Bible text seems to lament the fact that we are «all one breath», I wanted to celebrate it. Every living thing depends on the whole body of living things for the quality of its existence and we would profit by recognising that. Sure, we can survive, for a while at least, with fewer flamingos and mangrove swamps and peatlands, but with each act of destruction, we diminish, not only the creaturely realm as a whole, but the quality of our lives too. The real tragedy is that the abuse of other lives – plant, animal, the poor in places we don't have to see, etc., is so ingrained into our system of values – that, in spite of all the lip service paid to biodiversity, say, in spite of all the greenwashing everyone from banks to so-called renewable energy companies produce every day, it is still the case that anything is permissible if it brings in profit for the one percent. We only have to look at what is going on now with the Shell drilling project in Alaska to see that this is so.

*Thank you, mister Burnside, for your contribution and interesting answers\* .*

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\* Selected Bibliography: *Black Cat Bone*, Jonathan Cape, 2011; *Glister*, Jonathan Cape, 2008; *The Dump House*, Vintage, 1998; *Sense Data: New Science Poems*, Waning Moon Press, 1998; *Feast Days*, Secker & Warburg, 1992. Italian translations *Una bugia su mio padre*, tr. da M. Ortelio, Neri Pozza 2012; *Glister*, tr. da E. Terrinoni, Fazi, 2010 *La casa del silenzio*, tr. F. Francis, Padova 2007.