

The Zoopoetics of Les Murray: Animal Poetry, Attentiveness and the More-Than-Human World

Merle Marianne Feddersen 

A human is a comet streamed in language far down time; no other living is like it.

—Les Murray, “From Where we Live on Presence”, *Translations from the Natural World*

Introduction

From the rhythmic clicks, whistles and pulses composed by marine mammals, through the melodic calls created by birds to the chirping of the cricket; from the purring cat and the tail-wagging dog, to the intricate formations arranged by fish to the delicate wing beat of the butterfly: The natural world teems with communicative diversity. Long before the age of blinking billboards and busy intersections, an attentiveness towards these nonhuman communicative systems determined the look between human and animal. To actively seek out the animal, “[s]eeing, smelling, hearing, and knowing other creatures”, was not “optional and frivolous”, but crucial to our survival (Shepard 237). Now, with language at its focal point, our human world of ever-expanding scientific knowledge and advancement seems to have ultimately changed how, when and where we encounter the nonhuman other. As John Berger states in his pioneering essay “Why Look at Animals?”: “[The animal’s] lack of common language, its silence, guarantees its distance, its distinctiveness, its exclusion, from and of man” (14). If language separates the animal from “man” as radically as Berger suggests, the experimental world of poetry in which the nonhuman animal exists as a thinking, feeling and most importantly *speaking* subject seems like nothing but an anthropocentric pastime.

The imaginative endeavour of the late Australian poet Leslie Allan Murray, however, seems to disrupt the notion that animal poems “inevitably find themselves confronting the limits of human language” (Robinson 28). Instead of depicting the nonhuman animal as a passive, observable object or rendering it invisible through metaphorization in order to contemplate the human condition, the main sequence *Presence* from Murray’s poetry collection *Translations from the Natural World* boldly gives a voice

to a remarkably diverse selection of animals, nonhuman others who inhabit, shape and transform both nonhuman and human spheres. First published in 1992, these forty poems play with the textual embodiment of nonhuman bodies *and* minds by drawing on their unique communicative systems and sensory perceptions, thereby actively challenging the notion that language must stand as the ultimate, unbreachable barrier between human and animal life.

As a point of departure, I will first discuss poetry's place in the interdisciplinary field of animal studies and explore how the literary genre can be utilized as a productive medium for challenging anthropocentric binaries. Here, Aaron M. Moe's concept of zoopoetics will be introduced. Zoopoetics is a theory and practice which asserts that both humans and animals are equally involved in the making of poetry. Following Moe, I will then zoom in on a selection of Murray's animal poems in order to offer not only an insight into the poet's innovative use of form and rhythm, but also highlight how the art of poetry ultimately (re-)activates an attentiveness towards nonhuman animals and their inherently rhetorical bodies which inhabit, shape and enrich both our imagination and physical reality.

Rethinking animal poetry through zoopoetics

Today, the burgeoning field of animal studies has become deeply interdisciplinary. While its scholarship once primarily focussed only on traditional animal sciences, contemporary animal studies now draws on a range of academic disciplines, including biology, zoology, ecology, geography, climatology, archaeology as well as history, anthropology, sociology, philosophy and literary studies, in order to offer rich, nuanced insights into the implications of past and present human-animal entanglements (Borgards 222). Even though animal studies has truly come to embrace its interdisciplinary nature, in direct comparison to the natural sciences, which offer clear, rational solutions based on facts and numbers, contributions to the field by the experimental world of poetry seem to simply muddle our understanding of how human-animal relations unfold and impact human and nonhuman lives.

As suggested by Onno Oerlemans, in a broader cultural context poetry is still frequently associated with adjectives such as "marginal" and "elitist" (6). Poetry is too abstract, too detached from the actual reality of nonhuman lives. A sophisticated use of symbolism and allegory, simile and metaphor, often renders the animal *as* animal invisible and nourishes in its most extreme sense a kind of "anthropocentric anthropomorphism" (de Waal 77). Coined by primatologist Frans de Waal, this term describes the process by which humans apply traits, emotions or entire behaviours to nonhuman animals without fully taking differences between a human's and another species' sensory and cognitive

perceptions into consideration. It is “the naïve, humanizing ... type” of anthropomorphism and stands in direct opposition to “animalcentric anthropomorphism”, which deploys “a mature form of empathy” in order to uncover both difference and relatedness between species (77). This kind of distinction is also made by other scholars, such as philosopher Lori Gruen. In her book *Entangled Empathy: An Alternative Ethic for Our Relationships with Animals*, she establishes a similar oppositional binary between “arrogant anthropomorphism” and “inevitable anthropomorphism” (24). While the first denotes “the type of human chauvinism [that] ... elevates the human perspective above all others” by naively pressing similarities between human and animal, the latter invites us to recognize our perceptive limits (24).

Applying Gruen’s and de Waal’s notions of adverse anthropomorphism to the realm of poetry brings forth the implications that arise through the dynamics between the *human* poet, as a maker of a text, and the *nonhuman* animal, as a subject within that specific text. It seems like the quintessential problem of utilizing a nonhuman subject lies, as Bernearts et al. suggest, in the poet’s complex task to mobilize the “ability to acknowledge similarity and otherness at the same time” (74). That is to say, the poet must “recognize the ratness of the rat, the monkeyness of the monkey and the humanness of the rat and the monkey as well as the ratness and the monkeyness of humans” (74). Before diving deeper into Murray’s multi-faceted world of *Presence*, it is thus essential to discuss how poetic representations of nonhuman animals can deploy a critical form of anthropomorphism in order to clearly distance themselves from anthropocentric thinking. How can rat, monkey and human become both other and akin through the innovative ways of poetry? Or to be more precise, how can one understand animal poetry as something other than a literary medium “suffering from anthropomorphic delusion” (Oerlemans 25)?

The question of how one can see value in poetic representations of nonhuman animals constitutes a key concern in the practices of *zoopoetics*; a form of poetics which positions the animal as a maker, subject and individual at the heart of its genesis. The term zoopoetics was first mentioned by the French philosopher Jacques Derrida in his influential essay *The Animal That Therefore I Am* solely hinting at the animal imagery of the German-speaking Bohemian writer Franz Kafka (Derrida 6). Derrida’s original seeds of thought have since blossomed into a fruitful body of research in the fields of contemporary animal studies and literature. Accordingly, Aaron M. Moe’s *Zoopoetics: Animals and the Making of Poetry*, published in 2013, represents the root of modern zoopoetic thinking and its innovative outlook on the animal and the poet, otherness and similarity. In its most condensed form, a definition of zoopoetics as proposed by Moe reads as follows: “Zoopoetics is the process of discovering

innovative breakthroughs in form through attentiveness to another species' bodily *poiesis*" (16). Albeit being brief, this definition holds a complex theoretical framework regarding animal poetry and its impact on human/animal encounters and relations, which will be discussed in the following sections.

The animal as maker

Bodily poiesis, gesture and rhetorical energy

One can tackle the concept of zoopoetics by starting from the very end. Following Moe, all zoopoetic thinking is built on the concept of a species' "bodily *poiesis*" (16). The word *poiesis* is borrowed from Greek and means "to make" (16), which thereby defines it as a process of a *making* through the body. These bodily makings encompass speechless gestures as well as non-linguistic vocalizations. Thus, bodily *poiesis* becomes an active process distinct from speech production. It is catalysed through the senses and sensations of the body, and as a result it can be accessed by all living bodies including nonhuman ones. Furthermore, bodily *poiesis* defines itself as a process of engagement as it draws on expression through the gesture, which is crucial for understanding the concept specifically in relation to nonhuman animals. A gesture is the intentional, or unintentional, movement of a body part that carries expressiveness and thus is able to establish a rhetorical situation. Moe, drawing on the work of Brian Rotman, emphasizes the importance of so called "emblem gestures" (18). These are gestures that are not supported by nor transmitted through speech, but nevertheless carry complex meaning and in many cases "create a social fabric" (18) among species such as the social grooming of primates or the mating dances of birds. In human communication systems, emblem gestures are deeply integrated as well. One might consider a clenched fist a highly expressive gesture that connotes complex concepts such as unity, resistance or solidarity.

Zooming in on the interlude "Mimic Octopi", in which Moe outlines the fascinating lifeworld of the mimic octopus, the "*Thaumoctopus mimicus*" (36), can help to concretize how the concepts of bodily *poiesis* and gesture diffuse anthropocentric binaries such as body/mind. According to Moe, the cephalopod mollusc is "zoopoetic to the extreme" as it has perfected the ability to mimic the movement of other sea creatures by using its eight buoyant arms that "flare into new form, including venomous sea snakes, toxic flatfish, flounders, and more" (36). Through an attentiveness towards other beings and their rhetorical bodies, the mimic octopus has experienced a breakthrough in the way it moves and acts, its bodily *poiesis*, innovating ultimately the way it lives both as an individual and as an active agent within a wider, interconnected environment. The case of the mimic octopus demonstrates how the conceptual framework of zoopoetics can help us to think about other species,

whose bodies seem abstruse and distant at first, as beings who share the same capacities for expressiveness and engagement, a mind.

Thus, one of the two main foci of zoopoetics becomes the idea that all “animals are makers” (16) that can engage in rhetorical situations with other species through their expressive bodies by means of gesticulation and/or vocalization. They are not silent nor passive, the observed. Instead “[t]hey make texts,” so Moe, “[t]hey gesture. They vocalize. The sounds and vocalizations emerge from a rhetorical body, a poetic body, or rather a body that is able *to make*” (16). Here, the use of “texts” encompasses the myriad ways animals create rhetorical situations through their bodies within and across species lines, and thus outside an anthropocentric vacuum that leaves no air for non-language communication systems. These texts are for example bird songs or the click sounds produced by whales, but they can also be as subtle as a spider spinning a web. Consequently, the gestures and vocalizations of animals are not perceived as actions that must solely derive from instinct. Instead these actions possess “rhetorical energy” (Kennedy qtd. in Moe 4). This expression suggests that not only language, but also all bodily movement and non-linguistic vocalization conveys tangible, expressive energy, which “further [diffuses] the arbitrary boundaries between several binaries including MIND/body, LANGUAGE/gesture, HUMAN/animal” (Moe 21).

The poet as observer/listener

Attentiveness and the continuity between “animal thinking” and “poetic thinking”

The other main focus of zoopoetics arises from the idea that animals possess rhetorical bodies, or rather *poetic* bodies, which directly impact the making of human poetry itself. Returning to the definition of zoopoetics, one can detect how Moe understands zoopoetic thinking as a way to deploy critical anthropomorphism in order to create meaningful connections with a more-than-human world. It is when the human poet utilizes textual gestures, such as form, poetic voice, rhythm, sound techniques and sensory imagery, to represent the “more-than-human matrix of sensations and sensibilities” (Abram 22) that the poem is not simply about the nonhuman other, but actively engaging with it. It is “when the textual gestures re-enact, re-create, mimic, or respond to the gestures of animals [that] the making of the form includes the presence of animals” (Moe 7). However, these “innovative breakthroughs in form” that bring forth the presence of animals are only possible through an attentive mode of feeling, seeing and hearing the nonhuman other. The very process of making poetry must engage with the animal. As Malay observes: “The ‘poetic’ ... is not a property of poetry, an exclusive

feature of poems as such, but rather an attitude, sensibility or mode of attention” (Malay 3). The poet must stand still; she must observe and listen.

According to Moe such an attentive/poetic mode of looking at the nonhuman other therefore evolves through a combination of Donna Haraway’s concept of “*curiosity* and *respecere*” and the flow between the two – the word *respecere* denoting “regard/respect/seeing each other/looking back at/meeting/optic-haptic encounter” (Haraway qtd. in Moe 29)) – and Paul Shepard’s theory of “minding animal”, which suggests that the human “mind and its organ, the brain, are in reality that part of us most dependent on the survival of animals” (Shepard qtd in Moe 29)). Thus, attentiveness is the act of paying close attention to other forms of being. It is a process defined by curiosity and interest for other forms of corporeality and perception that explicitly or implicitly inhabit, shape and transform the spaces outside one’s own (human) sphere. In addition, Moe suggests that attentive thinking is an “embodied action of the mind” (29), which he traces back to the word’s Latin root. Accordingly, attentiveness in the context of making poetry can be understood as a “[stretching] toward another” (Moe 30) meaning that attentiveness is a shared process across species lines, a shared process between animal, poet, reader. It is always an active, conscious mode of looking at, for and after the other. It is the action of “steadily applying one’s mind, observant faculties, or energies” (“attentive, adj.,” *OED*) to the external world. It is to be curious and reflective. By being attentive the poet does not solely imitate the animal and animality, but instead responds to its presence through the textual gesture by means of innovative form or structure.

In extension of Moe’s work, a closer look on research by Kàri Driscoll and Eva Hoffmann moreover expands an understanding of attentiveness in regard to the dynamics between making poetry and engaging with nonhuman life. In their introduction to *What is Zoopoetics? Texts, Bodies, Entanglement*, an expansive collection of zoopoetic analyses of texts reaching from the Middle Ages to the present, Driscoll and Hoffmann argue with respect to Derridean thought that there exists a tangible continuity between “animal thinking and “poetic thinking”. The first is essentially “all thinking ... in that it comes *after* or, indeed, *follows* from this encounter with ‘the animal’ ... [something] Western philosophy has – in and for the sake of its very essence – sought to forget”, while the latter, “poetic thinking”, is “thinking that has not forgotten, but has continued to ‘think’ or to ‘think through’ the question of the animal, repeatedly, ‘endlessly, and from a novel perspective” (2). What Driscoll and Hoffman’s equation here hints at, is the unique way the poet can function as a sort of translator who through the poem “thinks through” the animal aiming to understand as well as to implicate the realities of human-animal entanglements for herself and the reader. A translation of the nonhuman animal and its bodily

poiesis into the poetic form thus becomes a transformative experience for both poet and reader through the practice of attentiveness.

Les Murray as translator

Embodying the presences of nonhuman animals through poetry

Growing up in the small, rural town of Bunyah located in New South Wales, Australia, Murray's life has been greatly influenced by the direct presence of nonhuman animals and their bodily poiesis. Both the harsh realities of a day-to-day farm life and the adventurous explorations of the Australian landscape have shaped the poet's childhood significantly (Alexander 24; 27). In the biography *Les Murray: A Life in Progress*, which draws on extensive interviews with the Australian poet, the young Murray is in fact described as "a lonely farm-boy", who "had regarded animals like his goat, the dog and his cows as companions" (Alexander 245). For Murray "a deep understanding of and sympathy with animals" (Alexander 245) seems to have naturally evolved through the close proximity shared with his family's farm animals and the wildlife surrounding the property. The poem "Infant Among Cattle", published 1987 in the collection *The Daylight Moon*, can serve as a glimpse into Murray's empathic, attentive characteristics. Recounting a day on a dairy-farm reminiscent of the ones Murray must have experienced as a young boy, the poem tells of a child who is stunned by the sudden appearance of a raging bull. However, instead of being affected by "his parents' distress", the boy pities the frightened bovine:

Under the bench, crooning this without words to his rag dog,
 he hears a vague trotting outside increase – and the bull
 erupts, aghast, through the doorway, dribbling, clay in his curls,
 a slit of orange tongue working in and out under his belly –

 and is repulsed, with buckets and screams and a shovel.
 The little boy, swept up in his parents' distress, howls then
 but not in fear of the bull, who seemed a sad apparition:
 a huge prostate man, bewildered by a pitiless urgency. (lines 25-32)

In contrast to the generally critical stance towards the use of anthropomorphism, the poem "Infant Among Cattle" seems to be one of the many examples how Murray is not afraid to imagine the

nonhuman animal as an expressive, feeling being and to acknowledge its rhetorical body. In fact, the poet also nourishes his attentiveness by regarding nonhuman animals as beings who are able to respond to the bodily poiesis' of humans as well. "In Murray's view," so Alexander, "[his dog] Doug believed he could talk; certainly when spoken to the sagacious animal produced in response a throaty gargle which sounded peculiarly like garbled speech" (245). At first glance this observation may seem like blatant anthropomorphism, at second glance it reveals how Murray possesses intuitive, playful forms of "*curiosity* and *respecere*" (Haraway qtd. in Moe 29), which also weave themselves through *Presence*. Thus, the peculiar idea that the poet is able to translate nonhuman bodies and minds, experiences and perceptions, into poetic language through the attentive mode of looking at/listening to, is central to the sequence. The poetry collection's full title, *Translations from the Natural World*, directly positions Murray, the human poet, as a translator of and for the more-than-human world.

Here, it becomes important to understand that the creative act of translating nonhuman bodies and voices does not serve as a way to elevate the poet above the natural world, to make him the authoritative representative of nonhuman lives. Counter to de Waal and Gruen's notions of ignorant, anthropocentric anthropomorphism, Murray's poetic translations are more so to be understood as insights; glimpses into a world that continuously grows and decreases, both forms a part of our own human sphere as well as stands distinct from it. For Bate the title of the collection reveals this multifaceted, transformative potential: "'Translations' is a recognition that the poet's home in the *logos* is a different place from the natural world itself, but 'presence' proclaims poetry's capacity to reveal the being of things" (Bate 240). This idea that poetry can create presence, "reveal the beings of things", through textual gestures is not only central to Moe's zoopoetics, but also to Murray's personal view on poetry as embodiment.

In the poet's own terminology, poetic language that is able to embody the being of things is called "Wholespeak". This word envisions the art of making and the process of consuming poetry as "a mirror state, or an echoic state, in which we half-consciously imitate the dance that is danced before us" ("Poemes and the Mystery of Embodiment" 29). In contrast to "Narrowspeak", the "greyer, flatter speech of functional prose and rational dominance" which governs Western discourse, the Wholespeak of poetry is a mode of communication, which is pre-verbal and imaginative as well as bodily and expressive. It "models the fullness of life, and also gives its object presence" (Murray, "Poems and Poesies" 27) by actively engaging the body through form, structure, rhythm and the innovation of such. For Murray "[poetry] may lead on to action, but it is equally likely not to, because in a way it is the action" (28); it is the embodiment of being.

Thus, through a combination of the zoopoetic framework, which conceptualizes the animal as maker and the poet as observer/listener, and Murray's own understanding of poetry as a medium that is able to capture the wholeness of being, the reader can understand the poetic translations in *Presence* as bodies themselves. These poems embody (nonhuman) bodies one can access and experience, and they thereby draw significant attention to the myriad ways in which difference and otherness as well as kinship and sameness shape human/animal relations. As the following analyses will explore, poetic translation combined with the attentive mode of looking at/listening to becomes "a joining art, both pragmatic and utopian [which] provides access to the unknown, in hope of revealing an ever-expansive universality" (Jose 9).

Already in one of Murray's earliest animal poems titled "Bat's Ultrasound", first published in *Selected Poems* (1986) and later constituting the opening poem for the reprinted *Presence* sequence in *New Collected Poems* from 2002, the poet's enduring fascination with nonhuman communication systems and the implications of translating them into human language forges a tension between poetic innovation and bodily poiesis. This "'ancestor' poem" (Oerlemans 163) for the other poetic explorations in *Translations from the National Word* grapples with the astonishing ways bats sense their surroundings, their prey and themselves through sonar signals, and offers us an idea of how Murray's poetic style is experimental, boldly anthropomorphic and deeply attentive.

Accordingly, the first two stanzas of "Bat's Ultrasound" present the reader with a descriptive, yet vivid insight into the peculiar ways of how these nocturnal mammals sense the world through echolocation. They are "[s]leeping-bagged in a duplex wing / with fleas, in rock-cleft or building" and "at evening's queer" they "flutter" out into the open to hunt for prey (Murray, "Bat's Ultrasound", line 7); they locate "[i]nsect prey at the peak of our hearing" (line 9). As Oerlemans puts it, "they exist in sound" (163). As the possessive determiner "our" signifies, here, the poetic voice is that of a human who translates the "Umwelt" of bats into human language and systems of meaning. The term Umwelt was coined by the German bio-philosopher Jakob von Uexküll and encompasses the idea "that each and every living thing is a subject that lives in its own world, of which it is the center" (Uexküll 45). Thus, one can observe how the human Umwelt, a world governed by sight and speech, is challenged by that of a bat, who through "tufty crinkled ear / with weak eyes, fine teeth bared to sing" (lines 4-5) establishes a "tonal hunting zone above highest C" (line 8).

Especially, the second stanza plays with human systems of meaning and associations linked to these nocturnal mammals as the poetic voice contemplates: "Few are vampires. None flit through the mirror" (line 6). Furthermore, the poetic voice defines the "the hum of insects in the night" as "the

high note “re” (the second note of an octave), above which is the pitch of the bat ultrasound” (Oerlemans 163). These observations forge a tension between the familiar, our human perception and senses, and the unknown, the bat’s ultrasound. For us, who act as observers, “radar bats are darkness in miniature” (line 3); bat-bodies who wake at night and whose lifeworlds are located outside our own lifeworlds which, for most of us, are centred around daylight, vision, language.

However, with the last stanza Murray abruptly breaks through the observant, curious tone of the poetic voice by letting the bat speak for itself. It reads “as sort of “bat English””, a “rich onomatopoetic soundscape” (Cone 122), which is pushed forward across the page by the cursive font and the verse-lines’ lengths like sonar signals through the air:

ah, eyrie-ire; aero hour, eh?
O'er our ur-area (our era aye
ere your raw row) we air our array
err, yaw, row wry—aura our orrery,
our eerie ü our ray, our arrow.
A rare ear, our aery Yahweh. (lines 11-16)

The onomatopoetic sound structures formed by the excessive use of vowels embody the bat’s ultrasound and give presence to its being. As Oerlemans suggests, the “strong mix of vowel sounds and a few nonstopped consonants produce a theremin-like jumble of noise” (164) stripping language of all normative syntax and semantics. When the poem is read out loud, the non-rhotic r-consonants merge with the vowels creating an echoing effect, which as a result implicates both the process of differentiating the length and meaning of words. Consequently, one can detect how the bat’s bodily poiesis is not only creatively translated, but how it also compels the reader to actively translate and explore the onomatopoetic soundscape for herself. While some lines, such as “err, yaw, row wry – aura our orrery” (line 14), seem downright puzzling, other lines offer a glimpse into an Umwelt embedded in sound and flight, such as “we air our array” (line 13). This onomatopoetic verse demands “[a] rare ear” (line 16), and certainly patience and curiosity.

“Insect Mating Flight” is another such example of how Murray has discovered “a breakthrough in form through attentiveness to another species’ bodily *poiesis*” (Moe 16) by bringing forth the seemingly nonhuman properties of language. Here, the reader is offered access to the body and mind

of an insect named “Ee” (Murray, “Insect Mating Flight”, line 3), who drifts through the “air-ocean / breathing and upholding him” and “sings” (lines 2-3):

*with our chew eyewords' whim
moth reed haze racing vane,
butts hum and buoy or, fairer moan,
ex pencil eye fits elf, is gain,
Microbes leap ova neither lung
disdances leery quid threw awed.
Clewings eerie dissent inner cord. (lines 4-10)*

Certainly, but more subtly than in “Bat’s Ultrasound”, the onomatopoeic sound structures arise through the generous use of the nasal consonants m and n as well as the sibilants s and z, which mimic the gesture of “the high thin whine of insect wings” (Alexander 246). Hence, just like the bat’s ultrasonic verse unleashes its rich onomatopoeic sound structures through articulation, Ee’s song demands to be read out loud in order to give presence to the humming and buzzing of the insect’s mating flight. Almon, for example, has discovered how the last verse-line of Ee’s song, “Clewings eerie dissent inner cord.” (line 10) embodies “a sonically distorted reversal of the opening line, “Tredescent in accord, clear wings”” and “the vaguely sexual “fairer moan” becomes more precisely “pheromone”” (Murray, lines 10, 6; Almon 124), when read out loud. It seems like the more the reader actively engages with the verse, the more the poetic language paradoxically reveals something new as much as it bewilders the mind. Thus, even if Almon’s interpretation offers us a set of rules which support a decoding of Ee’s song, many instances of word choice and syntax still appear enigmatic, *inhuman*. What is an “eyewords’ whim” (line 4)? How exactly can we understand the verse-line “disdances leery quid threw awed” (line 9)?

Murray’s use of such onomatopoeic sound structures, which bend language to its extremes, culminates in the poem “Lyre Bird”. In contrast to the preceding two poems, “Lyre Bird” does not offer a clear cut between the human and nonhuman Umwelt and stands for many critics as a poem akin to “an echo chamber” (Almon 124), “self-reflexive, playful and tongue in cheek” (Lambert 51). Here, Murray creates a melodic, sonnet-esque sequence, which gives presence to the lyrebird, an Australian species of songbird, which is a master of sound mimicry, and most certainly “zoopoetic to the extreme” (Moe 36), because it is able to perfectly imitate other beings’ vocalizations through an

attentiveness towards their bodily makings. Accordingly, the lyrebird's bodily poiesis, its sound mimicry, is embodied by the poet through a rich soundscape structured not only by onomatopoeia, but also "frequent rhymes, alliterations [and] homonyms" (Lambert 51):

I mew catbird, I saw crosscut, I howl she-dingo, I kink
 forest hush distinct with bellbirds, warble magpie garble, link
 cattlebell with kettle-boil; I rank ducks' cranky presidium
 or simulate a triller like a rill mirrored lyrical to a rim.
 I ring dim. I alter nothing. Real to real only I sing, (lines 5-9)

Through these lines the reader is challenged significantly as sense and nonsense melt together and the rules of language become a playground for a poetic voice who does not care to familiarize us with its Umwelt of imitation, sound and lyric. Instead, the lyrebird's song is very much a song of defamiliarization and ambiguity unabashedly calling into question how we often equate language with 'the "human essence", the distinctive qualities of mind that are, so far as we know, unique to man" (Chomsky 88). The lyrebird's use of language is saturated with an intrinsic self-awareness ("The miming is all of I" (line 12)) and self-reflection ("I alter nothing. / Real to real only I sing" (line 9)), and utterly uninterested in translating any of its mimicry for the human reader. Instead, Murray's lyrebird makes us mockingly aware of the fact that "human talk" is able to be nonsensical. To the ear of the lyrebird, it is just noise and jumble, just "eedieAi and uddyunnunoan" (line 11).

At the same time, the poem points towards the fluidity between the bodily poiesis of humans and nonhuman animals by blurring the lines between the lyrebirds' song and a seemingly human, observant voice, who mimics the melodic gestures of the songbird. Enclosing the rhythmic birdsong, this poetic voice paints a rather peculiar picture of the lyrebird, a creaturely, enigmatic picture:

Liar made of leaf-litter, quivering ribby in shim,
 hen-sized under froufrou, chinks in a quiff display him
 or her, dancing in mating time, or out. And in any order.
 Tailed mimic aeon-sent to intrigue the next recorder, (lines 1-4)

... Silent, they are a function
 of wet forest, cometary lyrebirds. Their flight lifts them barely a

semitone. (lines 12-14)

As one can detract from these lines, the poetic voice which seemed rather human, rational and observant in “Bat’s Ultrasound” and “Insect Mating Flight”, now totally stuns the reader with riddling alliterations such as “Liar made of leaf-litter” (line 1), allusions to the songbird’s prehuman ancestry created by words such as “aeon-sent” and “cometary lyrebirds” (lines 4, 13) and the sheer euphonious, performative quality of expressions like “hen-sized under froufrou / chinks in a quiff display him” (line 2). As Lambert notes: “the poet mimics the sounds of the bird and thus moves further towards the creaturely, and further away from an attempt to communicate meaning” (51). In its most extreme sense, Murray becomes lyrebird; lyrebird becomes Murray.

Poems such as “Bat’s Ultrasound”, “Insect Mating Flight” and “Lyre Bird” are instances of Murray’s use of “wild translation,” a mode of translation that, as Malay argues, “intimates otherness by going beyond the bounds of grammar” (164). Through an attentiveness towards the bat’s, the insect’s and the lyrebird’s rich rhetorical energies that become tangible through their unique vocalizations and gestures, Murray creates verse-lines that dance on the verge of unintelligibility. Here in the poetic world of *Presence*, Thomas Nagel’s famous essay “What Is It Like to Be a Bat?” which argues that humans, or rather every thinking mind, is “restricted to the resources of [the own mind]”, is stripped of its authority as the human poet embodies the Umwelt of the bat through complex sound imagery. “Bat’s Ultrasound”, just like its two counterparts, plays with the idea that human/animal encounters through poetry are not determined by us stumbling upon “a fundamentally *alien* form of life” (Nagel 438), a form of life that cannot be understood, because its perceptive and sensory faculties are inherently distinct from ours. Rather the defamiliarizing effects on language, caused by Murray’s innovations in sound structures, make us aware of the fact that it is important to actively sense another form of being and to acknowledge how nonhuman others, too, are in possession of rhetorical bodies - bodies that invite us to read aloud and to listen closely. The goal for the reader is, therefore, not so much to translate word for word, but to experience these “wild translations” as “embodied engagement ... a phenomenological commitment to being-with and being-before other animals” (Malay 202). Consequently, the innovative, at times enigmatic, poetic vocabulary and structure used in the poems “Bat’s Ultrasound”, “Insect Mating Flight” and “Lyre Bird” push the limits of language and thereby also the limits of our habitual perception of what it means to be bat, insect, lyrebird and human.

Complementary to the de-humanized language utilized in these onomatopoeic poems of *Presence*, Murray also recognizes the importance of communicating otherness and embodying the

presences of nonhuman animals through a poetic language that is deeply connected to empathy. Set within the zoopoetic framework, one might consider the evocation of empathy, which in its most condensed form can be defined as “other-oriented perspective taking” (Brüggemann 2), through the textual gesture as an extension of the attentive mode of looking at/listening to the bodily poiesis of nonhuman others. Crucial to empathetic thinking is namely the ability to recognize one’s own self, including personal emotions, desires and motivations, whilst simultaneously being aware of another self - a self that both exists independently from and as a part of the own individual perception. Especially in Western culture and discourse, the notion of a *nonhuman* self has been continuously disrupted, one of the many reasons for this rupture being our growing disconnect from the rhetorical bodies of nonhuman animals. As Abram notes: “We consciously encounter nonhuman nature only as it has been circumscribed by our civilization and its technologies: through our domesticated pets, on the television, or at the zoo” (28). Murray’s lyric works with the intention of sensitizing readers to the idea that nonhuman others, like our own (human) selves, exist as individuals, or rather, “psychological wholes in interweaving landscapes” (Brüggemann 13). Therefore, by not only innovating sound structures and form, but also the poetic voice itself Murray familiarizes us through the means of other-oriented perspective taking with the rhetorical bodies of nonhuman animals including their emotions, desires and motivations: their minds.

The poet presses from the very start the notion that a more-than-human world consists of autonomous individuals with expressive, interlinking lifeworlds. The first two poems of the 1993 version of *Translations from the Natural World*, “Eagle Pair” and “Layers of Pregnancy”, illustrate this idea fluidly. In “Eagle Pair”, Murray ascribes a strong sense of self to a pair of eagles through the pronoun “We” as the birds reveal their lifeworld of “limitless Up” to the reader by means of coupled rhymes:

We shell down on the sleeping-branch. All night
the limitless Up digests its meats of light.

The circle-winged Egg then emerging from long pink and brown
re-inverts life, and meats move or are still on the Down.

Irritably we unshell, into feathers; we lean open and rise
and magnify this meat, then that, with the eyes of our eyes.

Meat is light, it is power and Up, as we free it from load
 and our mainstay, the cunningest hunter, is the human road

 but all the Down is heavy and tangled. Only meat is good there
 and the rebound heat ribbing up vertical rivers of air.

As these verse-lines signal, in this eagle-world there is no such thing as sun, sky or earth. Instead, the nonhuman poetic voice finds itself amidst of “The circle-winged Egg” (line 3), “the limitless Up” (line 2) and “the Down” that is all “heavy and tangled” (line 9). The vocabulary used seems very much familiar, or rather *human*, as there are no pure onomatopoeic sound structures such as in “Bat’s Ultrasound”. Yet, these words also take on an inherently different meaning in comparison to their normal function within the rigid realm of grammar. Accordingly, in “Eagle Pair” the world diverges from an anthropocentric perception through the means of language itself as it floats between the “limitless Up” (line 2) and the “heavy and tangled” “Down” (line 9). Furthermore, the nonhuman voice displays a strikingly conscious mode of experiencing its lifeworld and its place in a wider, interconnected nonhuman/human sphere. Not only do these eagles, this autonomous “We”, live in close proximity to fellow nonhuman others, which they call “meats” (line 4), but Murray also hints at the idea that human presences interweave with the more-than-human world as well by letting the eagle pair declare: “and our mainstay, the cunningest hunter, is the human road” (line 9).

The strong sense of self denoted by the pronoun “We” combined with the creative vocabulary ultimately points towards the myriad ways in which eagle-worlds are, albeit inherently other, able to be understood through an attentive close reading. What Murray’s verse here essentially demands is “the sympathetic transposition of the human self into the other’s way of being” (Malay 188). In other words, in addition to translating the mere meaning of the poetic vocabulary, it becomes key to sense the relations between those words in order to fully immerse oneself in the eagle-world. Both poet and reader must be involved in this other-oriented perspective taking, or as Malay puts it, reader and poet must face “an imaginative challenge” as one has “to relearn the ordinary from another perspective, by conceiving a form of life in which these words do make sense” (188).

In the poem that follows, “Layers of Pregnancy”, this interconnectedness between poet/animal/reader, and thereby also the fluid lines between human/animal and mind/body, is furthermore manifested. Through a direct reference to the preceding poem, a more objective poetic voice embodies a pregnant kangaroo who lives “Under eagle worlds” (line 1). As Almon observes:

“We have left the vast sweeps of the phenomenal world of the eagles, but we are still “under eagle worlds” (124); we still need to actively engage with the poem. Not only Murray, the poet, needs “to switch perspectives” (Almon 124), the reader must do so as well with each new poem. This switch in perspective is inter alia catalysed by the very form of the poem. While “Eagle Pair” embodies the eagle through rhymed couplets, the bodily poiesis of a pregnant kangaroo mother is given presence by means of a strong caesura. All while its baby becomes another nonhuman self by transitioning from “wet womb / to womb of fur” (line 10), the kangaroo mother experiences a world of “all fragrant space” (line 2) set between motion and stillness, between “hop” and “stop” (lines 3-4), and just like in “Eagle Pair”, the natural environment and its processes are given a significant role. In kangaroo-worlds “Rain” is “the father” (line 7) fertilizing and giving life to the nonhuman self as he “implants another // in the ruby wall” (line 11).

As these two poems exemplify, instead of bending language to its extremes by the use of “wild translation”, which is to recall “a form of interlinear writing that pushes language to the very limits of grammatical comprehensibility” (Malay 186), Murray also understands to innovate his form through familiarization in order to effectively decentre anthropocentrism and promote animalcentric anthropomorphism. This empathetic mode of translation is called “translation by analogy”, as dubbed by Malay, and “operates through the discovery or forging of analogies, a process that renders what we do not know through the terms of what we do” (164). Supplementing Malay’s idea with the dictionary definition of the word “analogy” brings forth the transformative potential that lies within the forging of analogies between nonhuman and human life through poetry. While an obsolete definition may only suggest that an analogy is “a figure of speech involving a comparison; a simile, a metaphor”, the broader conception of the word foregrounds interconnectedness and shared experience. An analogy is a “[c]orrespondence between two things” and focusses on “their respective attributes”. It is a form of “parallelism, equivalence” and is used with the prepositions “*between, to, with*” (“analogy, n.” OED).

As can be seen in poems such as “Spermaceti” and “Pigs,” Murray pushes the limits of “translation by analogy” through innovating the poetic language in order to express in words, in our *human* language, what it feels like to experience the world from the perspective of another *nonhuman* self. That is, the poet draws analogous relations “*between, to, with*” human and nonhuman life, perception and bodily poiesis, which in turn allows the reader to both actively foster empathetic thinking and practice attentiveness.

Zooming in on the long, unrhymed verse of “Spermaceti”, the reader can thus observe how Murray gives presence to a sperm whale, who makes its communicative and sensory faculties

intelligible by means of creating an analogous relation between “sound” and “sight” (line 1). While humans primarily rely on sight, this nonhuman self and its rhetorical body is realized through echolocation, or to be more precise, “the spermaceti organ,” a waxy fluid situated in the mammal’s brain and which translates the reverberations of high-frequency clicks into “three-dimensional images” for navigation and hunting (Brüggemann 12). Hence, the first line, “I sound my sight”, not only creates a vivid sense of self, but also embodies the deep vibrations of sonar signals, which weave themselves throughout the poem by means of “alliterations and internal echoes” that create a “ringing structure” (Almon 125). These rich alliterative structures, such as the first verse-line or also the verse-lines, “I receive an island's slump. / song-scrambling ship's heartbeats, and the sheer shear of current-forms / bracketing a seamount.” (lines 20-22) drive, as Brüggeman notes, “the effect of experiencing sound and sight as one thing—exactly what echolocation entails” (12). For a sperm whale and its school of “song-fellows” (line 19) a “greater sight is uttered” (line 17) and “true sight barely functions” over water in “the dwarf-making Air” (line 11). Sound becomes interchangeably linked to sight, however, as Malay points out, “we may recognise that the whale’s sensitivity to sound is not our sensitivity to sound, or that our capacity for vision is profoundly unlike the whale’s”, which in turn “amplifies our sense of otherness” (164).

In extension of “Spermaceti”, the nonhuman poetic voice of “Pigs” furthermore highlights how analogy and empathy work hand in hand to establish meaningful relations between the human and nonhuman self. Here, the reader follows a collective “Us” (Murray, “Pigs”, line 1), whose speech does not adhere to a normative syntax, but instead gives presence to the complex emotions of a group of pigs who await slaughter by mimicking “the sound of snuffling” (Beer 319): “Us all on sore cement was we” (line 1). In the final part of the poem, the poetic voice vividly pursues evoking a life of being raised collectively for slaughter:

Never stopped growing. We sloughed, we soughed
and balked no weird till the high ridgebacks was us
with weight-buried hooves. Or bristly, with milk.
Us never knowed like slitting nor hose-biff then.
Not the terrible sheet-cutting screams up ahead.
The burnt water kicking. This gone-already feeling
here in no place with our heads on upside down. (lines 11-17)

These verse-lines embody a strong sense of self, and ultimately point towards a “de-objectification of the other” as “the subjectivity of otherness is granted a vital existential status” (Clark 43). An analogous relation is forged between the suffering body, this “[n]ever stopped growing” (line 11) body which is carried by “weight-buried hooves” (line 13), and the suffering mind; a collective pig-self that is aware of the fact that it is bound to experience “the terrible sheet-cutting screams up ahead” (line 15) that will result in a death by dismemberment: “This gone-already feeling / here is no place with our heads on upside down” (line 16). Instead of explicitly mentioning the act of slaughter, the reader is familiarized with it by means of expressions that bend human language in order to express nonhuman suffering. There is the “slitting” and the “hose-biff”, “the onomatopoetic thwack of water from hoses” (Beer 320), inflicted upon the body as the pig-selves become discarded, literally “sloughed”, and are reduced to nothing, “soughed” (line 11). Like the pigs themselves, the reader is “shoved down the soft cement of rivers” (line 9), the cement flooring of the slaughterhouse, and towards distress. The human self might never truly grasp what it means to await slaughter as Murray’s pigs do, but these analogies forged on poetic grounds allow us to establish valuable connections *between, to* and *with* our own human life; experiences, perceptions and bodily poiesis’ which are, albeit extensively embedded in language, exposed to similar levels of corporeality, community and companionship.

Conclusion

The concept of zoopoetics allows for a re-evaluation of poetry’s place within a wider discourse surrounding past and present human-animal entanglements. As Moe suggests, an attentiveness towards nonhuman others and their bodily makings help the poet to “discover innovative breakthroughs in form” (16) that in turn push the limits of the reader’s habitual perception of what it means to be human within an interconnected human/animal sphere; a more-than-human world in where nonhuman bodies and voices remind us through rhyme and rhythm that non-linguistic expression does matter and, in fact, shapes the world around us. Thus, once the reader exits the more-than-human world of *Presence*, the idea that humans are not the only poetic beings dwelling on this earth becomes exceedingly compelling. Murray’s animal poems use language in order to give presence to the nonhuman other by fluidly shifting between “wild translations” and “translation by analogy”. While some poems bring forth the nonhuman properties of language, other poems create analogies *between, to* and *with* human expression, perception and sense, exploring otherness through an empathetic magnifying glass.

When all is said and done, we may still rightfully question, whether animal poetry will ever be able to capture an unmediated, pure form of nonhuman presence. However, what Murray’s poetic

translations call for is the act of replanting an understanding of our human existence within a growing and ever-changing world, into a bigger, open-minded pot that explicitly includes the innumerable ways the (nonhuman) self exists outside of anthropocentric binaries. The poems of *Presence* may serve as the fertilizer that “cultivates an imagination that sees animals as much more than a “nicety” or a “metaphorical convenience” in the poetic tradition and in human culture” (Moe 125). Nevertheless, one might just have to explore for oneself who else crawls and claws, sings and swims, flies and flutters, in the remaining poems that make up the more-than-human world of *Presence*.

Works cited

- Abram, David. *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World*. Vintage, 1997.
- “analogy, n.” *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, June 2020, www.oed.com/view/Entry/7030. Accessed 28 Jul. 2020.
- Alexander, Peter F. *Les Murray: A Life in Progress*. Oxford University Press, 2001.
- Almon, Bert. “Fullness of Being in Les Murray’s ‘Presence: Translations from the Natural World.’” *Antipodes*, vol. 8, no. 2, 1994, pp. 123-130. *JSTOR*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4195847>. Accessed 11 Feb. 2020.
- “attentive, adj.” *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, June 2020, www.oed.com/view/Entry/12804. Accessed 3 Jul. 2020.
- Bate, Jonathan. *The Song of the Earth*. Picador, 2000.
- Beer, Gillian. “Animal Presences: Tussles with Anthropomorphism.” *Comparative Critical Studies*, vol. 2, no. 3, 2005, pp. 311-322. *Edinburgh University Press*, doi:10.3366/ccs.2005.2.3.311. Accessed 30 Jan. 2020.
- Berger, John. *Why Look at Animals?* Penguin, 2009.
- Bernaerts, Lars, et al. “The Storied Lives of Non-Human Narrators.” *Narrative*, vol. 22, no. 1, 2014, p. 68-93. *Project MUSE*, doi:10.1353/nar.2014.0002. Accessed 12 Sep. 2019.
- Borgards, Roland. “Animal Studies.” *Rethinking Nature: Challenging Disciplinary Boundaries*, edited by Aurélie Choné et al., 1st ed., Routledge, 2017, pp. 221-231. *Taylor & Francis eBooks*, doi:10.4324/9781315444765. Accessed 27 Mar. 2020.
- Brüggemann, Tirza. “Animal Poetry and Empathy.” *Humanities (Basel)*, vol. 6, no. 2, 2017, pp. 1-14. *DOAJ*, doi:10.3390/h6020018. Accessed 5 Feb. 2020.
- Chomsky, Noam. *Language and Mind*. 2006. *ACLS Humanities E-Book*, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/heb.08422>. Accessed 16 Jun. 2020.
- Clark, Gary. “History and Ecology: the Poetry of Les Murray and Gary Snyder.” *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, vol. 10, no. 1, 2003, pp. 27-53. *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, doi:10.1093/isle/10.1.27. Accessed 30 Jan. 2020.
- Cone, Temple. “Murray’s Presence: Translations from the Natural World.” *The Explicator*, vol. 64, no. 2, 2006, pp. 121-124. *Taylor and Francis Online*, doi:10.3200/EXPL.64.2.131-133. Accessed 30 Jan. 2020.

- Derrida, Jacques. *The Animal That Therefore I Am*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2008. *ACLS Humanities E-Book*, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/heh.30596>. Accessed 30 Mar. 2020.
- Driscoll, Kári and Eva Hoffmann. "Introduction: What Is Zoopoetics?" *What is Zoopoetics? Texts, Bodies, Entanglements*, 1st ed., Palgrave Macmillan, 2018. *Springer Link*, doi:10.1007/978-3-319-64416-5_1. Accessed 28 Mar. 2020.
- Gruen, Lori. *Entangled Empathy: An Alternative Ethic for Our Relationships with Animals*. Lantern Books, 2015.
- Jose, Nicholas. "Compost and Pollination." *Southerly: The Journal of the English Association*, Sydney, vol. 60, no. 1, 2003, pp. 9-23.
- Lambert, Helen. "The Australian Language Forest: Les Murray's Translations from the Natural World." *Colloquy: Text, Theory, Critique*, no. 19, 2010, pp. 43-55. *Monash University*, <https://doi.org/10.4225/03/59226a172e9c1>. Accessed 30 Jan. 2020.
- Malay, Michael. *The Figure of the Animal in Modern and Contemporary Poetry*. 1st ed., Palgrave Macmillan, 2018. *Springer Link*, <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-70666-5>. Accessed 30 Jan. 2020.
- Moe, Aaron M. *Zoopoetics: Animals and the Making of Poetry*, Lexington Books, 2013. *ProQuest Ebook Central*, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/asb/detail.action?docID=1584880>. Accessed 30 Mar. 2020.
- Murray, Leslie Allan. "Bat's Ultrasound." *Selected Poems*, 1986. *Lyrik Line*, <https://www.lyrikline.org/en/poems/bats-ultrasound-331>. Accessed 25 Mar. 2020.
- . "Eagle Pair." *Translations from the Natural World*. Carcanet Press, 1993, p. 15.
- . "Infant Among Cattle." *PN Review*, general editors, Michael Schmidt and Michael Freeman, vol. 14, no. 1, 1987, p. 35.
- . "Insects Mating Flight." *Translations from the Natural World*. Carcanet Press, 1993, p. 18.
- . "Layers of Pregnancy." *Translations from the Natural World*. Carcanet Press, 1993, p. 16.
- . "Lyre Bird." *Translations from the Natural World*. Carcanet Press, 1993, p. 21.
- . "Pigs." *Translations from the Natural World*. Carcanet Press, 1993, p. 36.
- . "Poems and Poesies." *PN Review*, general editors, Michael Schmidt and Michael Freeman, vol. 14, no. 1, 1987, p. 25-31.
- . "Poemes and the Mystery of Embodiment." *PN Review*, general editors, Michael Schmidt and Michael Freeman, vol. 16, no. 4, 1989, pp. 28-35.
- . "Spermaceti." *Translations from the Natural World*. Carcanet Press, 1993, p. 44.

- . “From Where we Live on Presence.” *Translations from the Natural World*. Carcanet Press, 1993, p. 53.
- Nagel, Thomas. “What Is It Like to Be a Bat?” *The Philosophical Review*, vol. 83, no. 4, 1974, pp. 435-450. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2183914>. Accessed 4 Jul. 2020.
- Oerlemans, Onno. *Poetry and Animals: Blurring the Boundaries with the Human*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2018. *DeGruyter*, <https://doi.org/10.7312/oeerl15954>. Accessed 26 Apr. 2020.
- Robinson, Vanessa. “Poetry’s Language of Animals: Towards a New Understanding of the Animal Other.” *The Modern Language Research Association*, vol. 110, no. 1, 2015, pp. 28-46. *JSTOR*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5699/modelangrevi.110.1.0028>. Accessed 21 Feb. 2020.
- Shepard, Paul. *Thinking Animals: Animals and the Development of Human Intelligence*, University of Georgia Press, 1998. *ProQuest Ebook Central*, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/asb/detail.action?docID=3038997>. Accessed 20 Feb. 2020.
- Uexkull, Jakob von. *Foray into the Worlds of Animals and Humans: With A Theory of Meaning*, University of Minnesota Press, 2010. *ProQuest Ebook Central*, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/asb/detail.action?docID=648097>. Accessed 5 Apr. 2020.
- de Waal, F. B. M. *The Ape and the Sushi Master: Cultural Reflections by a Primatologist*. Basic Books, 1st ed., 2001.