Animals

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Abstract and Keywords

This chapter focuses on poetry’s frequent use of animals to explore the complexities of love. Animals feature in poems as objects of love, as lovers themselves, or in various other, more figurative, capacities. Although creatures of all kinds populate love poetry, birds are the most ubiquitous. The mating behaviors of birds, at once instinctive and highly patterned, offer a natural parallel to the combination of impulse and predetermined structure that characterizes both love and poetry. And while the same could be said of other animals, birds employ song as a key component of their courtship and so reflect the work of love poetry. A focus on birds and other animals also offers the poet scope to celebrate the role of sexual desire in love. Yet animals, in their mingled familiarity and alienness, ultimately appeal to love poets less as direct models than as signs of erotic uncertainty, queerness, and inconclusiveness.

Keywords: animals, birds, instinct, pattern, birdsong, sex, queer
Near the beginning of Tom Stoppard’s *The Invention of Love* (1997) two young men—the future poet and classicist A. E. Housman and his fellow-undergraduate A. W. Pollard—discuss the poetry of Catullus, specifically his famous poems about kissing. As they take turns translating Catullus 5 (“Give me a thousand kisses…”) and speculating about what it is like to kiss a girl, Pollard proffers the claim that Catullus “invented the love poem.”

Like everything else…the love poem had to be invented. After millenniums of sex and centuries of poetry, the love poem as understood by Shakespeare and Donne, and by Oxford undergraduates—the true-life confessions of the poet in love, immortalizing the mistress, who is actually *the cause of the poem—that* was invented in Rome in the first century before Christ.

The play is set for the most part in 1936—the same year, coincidentally, that C. S. Lewis made his controversial assertion that love itself was invented in Provence, in the eleventh century. Pollard’s claim is just as open to dispute as Lewis’s: plenty of precedents could be cited for Catullus’ love poems, some of which are directly based on earlier Greek models. Yet it remains true that Catullus constitutes an important point of origin. He stands at the head of the vibrant tradition of Latin love elegy that includes Ovid, among others; and his work, after its rediscovery in the late Middle Ages, exerted a powerful influence on Renaissance love lyric. Given Catullus’ central role in the development of Western love poetry, it is worth noting that his own collection of poems begins, not with kissing, but with animals.

*The Invention of Love* (p.116) The first poem in Catullus’ book, after an introductory dedication, is a love poem, and it is addressed to a bird:

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Passer, deliciae meae puellae,  
quicum ludere, quem in sinu tenere,  
cui primum digitum dare appetenti  
et acris solet incitare morsus,  
cum desiderio meo nitenti  
carum nescio quid libet iocari,  
et solaciolum sui doloris,  
credo, ut tum gravis adquiescat ardor:  
tecum ludere sicut ipsa possem  
et tristis animi levare curas!
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Sparrow, the darling of my mistress, whom she likes to play with and to hold in her lap, and to whose pecks she offers her fingertip and elicits fierce bites, whenever it pleases my lustrous beloved in some dear object to find amusement—and also, I believe, a small solace for her pain, in hope that then her sharp passion might subside: would that I too could play with you, like her, and ease my soul’s distressing cares!

Catullus’ poem is powerfully erotic in ways that are familiar from earlier examples. As in the typical invitation poem, desire is displaced onto a natural object; as in the typical kiss poem, that object intensifies desire by both channeling and partly obstructing it. The three figures in Catullus’ poem provide the “three structural components” that Anne Carson identifies as essential to the flow of erotic energy: “lover, beloved and that which comes between them.” But Catullus introduces a twist on the model of mediated desire described by Carson. Carson takes as her archetype Sappho’s celebrated poem (fragment 31) in which the speaker gazes on while the beloved woman interacts with a man seated beside her: (p.117)

He seems to me equal to gods that man who opposite you sits and listens close to your sweet speaking and lovely laughing...
The eroticism of Catullus’ poem is both more mediated than this and more direct. In Sappho, the speaker approaches the beloved (“you”) by identifying, in fantasy, with the nameless man beside her. In Catullus, the situation is transposed: it is the bird who is addressed as “you,” while the mistress becomes the imaginative intermediary; the speaker’s desire for his “lustrous beloved” is transmuted into a desire simply to be in her position. More specifically, he fantasizes about being in her position at the moment that she is channeling her own erotic ardor (l. 8) into the substitutive satisfaction of playing with her pet—a displacement onto a displacement. At the same time, however, the physical interactions depicted in Catullus 2 are more explicitly sexual than in the Sappho poem: not looking, hearing, laughing, but touching, biting, cradling in the lap.

Both forms of eroticism—both the obliqueness and the directness—are made possible by the animality of the mediating figure. If the bird were replaced by another man, the necessary displacement would be lost; the biting and fondling are so suggestive specifically because they are not actually sexual, or at least are not recognized as such by the bird. Yet even more would be lost if the bird were replaced by a toy, a book, or some other inanimate object. The sparrow displays the crucial element of consciousness: bird and mistress share an understanding. When it pecks at her finger, they are engaged in a mutually acknowledged game, as in Ovid. The sparrow thus mediates, in multiple ways, between subject and object, and this erotically intermediate position helps explain why animals in general figure so prominently in love poetry. They permit a representation of sexual desire that is both decorously disguised (this is only a bird) and very open (as animal sexuality tends to be). More fundamentally, animals exhibit the basic erotic paradox: they hold their strong appeal for human observers because they seem at once recognizable and inherently alien. Each animal, furthermore, mediates between the singular and the general. We cannot help seeing an animal first as a representative of its whole species; thus Catullus addresses the bird simply as “Passer”—Sparrow. But he also recognizes it as a unique individual, the “darling of my mistress,” (p.118) and this duality suits it to a genre of poetry that shifts constantly between the particular and the universal.
Animals figure frequently in all types of poetry, but in love poems they are ubiquitous. They are so common as not to define an identifiable subset of love poetry, like invitation poems or kiss poems, but are found across all different genres. Often animals will figure as symbols or metaphors, as they do throughout the Song of Songs (“O my dove, in the clefts of the rock...Your teeth are like a flock of shorn ewes”). Just as often they appear as loving agents, characters in their own right, and in that case the erotic relationship tends to take one of three forms. Sometimes love is shown existing between a human and an animal. Sometimes, as in Catullus 2, the love is triangulated between a human pair and one or more animals. Sometimes the poem depicts love between animals in the absence of any human actor or observer; yet even then the animal example inevitably holds implicit significance for human love relationships.

The appeal of animals for love poets is manifold. In addition to serving as erotic intermediaries, animals offer the possibility of grounding love poetry in nature. One of the essential challenges of love lyric, as we have seen, lies in trying to represent spontaneous desire through self-conscious art. At the most basic level, animals seem to offer the poet a prime example of the former: to take birds and bees as a model is to conjure an image of love as immediate and unpremeditated. More subtly, animals help dissolve the apparent opposition between natural inclination and its artistic expression by displaying artistry of their own. The intricate mating rituals and behaviors exhibited by many species suggest that love is always cultivated as well as impulsive; a carefully composed love sonnet is not an aberration, since it resembles any other animal’s courtship display. Even apart from their mating rituals, moreover, animals inherently challenge the idea of a strict division between nature and culture. The pet sparrow, for instance, maintains its avian impulses (pecking) even as it functions within a human social system; it thus serves as a model for the love poem itself, which combines the irrational or unpredictable with conscious order. This duality may be particularly pronounced in domestic pets, but it is characteristic to some extent of all animals.
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(p.119) Animals also serve as a model for love poets in their relationship to language. Like poetry, animal communications seem both to transcend and to fall short of common human speech. Again Catullus’ sparrow serves as an example. Its habit of biting is erotically suggestive for the reasons already mentioned: because it mingles apparently wild behavior with a form of play; because it reminds us that erotic play exists even in the wild, in the false fierceness that makes up avian mating behavior. But the sparrow’s love bites also constitute a form of oral communication that both resembles speech—it is directed, mutually understood, and even potentially solacing—and clearly differs. (In this sense the sparrow’s biting is much like kissing, and the fact that the two kiss poems addressed to Catullus’ mistress follow so closely after this one in his sequence suggests that the kissing fantasies may even be partly inspired by the bird’s behavior.) The parallel between bird and love poet is reinforced in Catullus 3, which concerns the death of the same sparrow, where we learn that “he always used to chirp for his mistress alone” (ad solam dominam usque pipiabat (3.10)). On the one hand, this seems the most basic form of language: Catullus uses a relatively rare onomatopoeic verb (pipiabat) to convey the simple peep-peeping of the bird. On the other hand, it seems like the ultimate love language: sung to, and perhaps understood by, the beloved alone.11 The same can be said of the signs used by animals to communicate with one another, from simple preening and strutting to the glorious fanning of the peacock’s tail. Lacking human speech, animals rely on more idiosyncratic forms of expression; the feature that, according to common wisdom, most separates animals from humans approximates them to poets.
These various attributes are characteristic even more of birds than of other animals. Birds exhibit more intricate as well as more highly visible mating rituals than most other creatures, and their communication tends to include song, which makes it all the more readily assimilable to the work of the poet. Hence birds hold an especially prominent place in love poetry. But many other beasts have also attracted the attention of love poets. This chapter begins by considering some of the origin stories that humans have told about our relationship to animals, which suggest an intimate connection between animals, language, and love. It then investigates the invocation of animals by poets as a sign of erotic difference, and of birds in particular as a sign of (among other things) natural artistry. The chapter concludes by considering poets’ use of animals to suggest an erotic deferral of meaning, and to reflect the inherent queerness, or uncategorizability, of love. The scope of the inquiry is deliberately broad. In a sense this inclusiveness goes against the main tendency of animal studies, which in recent decades has often concentrated on drawing distinctions—pointing out the variations in our relation to, and conception of, animals over time, and even challenging the comprehensive category of “animal” in the first place. But the focus of this chapter, as of previous ones, is on the poetic trope, and on what can be learned from continuities in poets’ persistent practice of associating animals of all types with love.

John Berger begins his influential essay “Why Look at Animals?” (1977) by positing that animals have always been fundamental to human self-understanding. According to the origin story he proposes, humans first became conscious of themselves by looking at animals; this self-consciousness gave rise to language, which set humans further apart from animals even as it depended on animals for its signs and structures. Berger traces this whole development to the simple fact that animals are that which most resembles us while not being identical to us; in short, because “They are both like and unlike.”
The eyes of an animal when they consider a man are attentive and wary....The animal scrutinizes him across a narrow abyss of non-comprehension. This is why the man can surprise the animal. Yet the animal—even if domesticated—can also surprise the man. The man too is looking across a similar, but not identical, abyss of non-comprehension. And this is so wherever (p.121) he looks. He is always looking across ignorance and fear. And so, when he is being seen by the animal, he is being seen as his surroundings are seen by him. His recognition of this is what makes the look of the animal familiar. And yet the animal is distinct, and can never be confused with man. 15

Berger does not describe this gaze as erotic, but it clearly exhibits the same duality of familiarity and surprise that thinkers from Plato onward have associated with love. What makes the exchange of looks with an animal so riveting, according to Berger, is the man’s sense of recognition: he sees his own actions and reactions reflected in another. Yet the similarity is exciting—indeed is only recognizable as similarity—because of the accompanying sense of ineradicable difference. The same feeling of mingled alienation and homecoming that, in the invitation poem, characterizes love obtains also in our interactions with animals (hence the prominence of animal imagery in the Song of Songs).

Our continual confrontation with this stark embodiment of similarity and difference, Berger postulates, led humans to abstract and specifically metaphoric forms of thought: “The parallelism of their similar/dissimilar lives allowed animals to provoke some of the first questions and offer answers....It is not unreasonable to suppose that the first metaphor was animal.” 16 Evidence for this hypothesis lies in the ubiquity of animals in ancient hermeneutic systems: animal signs, as in the zodiac; animal gods and totems for every aspect of experience; etiological myths by which animals serve as the source for human understanding. Yet our dependence on animals for the development of these systems creates a paradox:
What distinguished man from animals was the human capacity for symbolic thought, the capacity which was inseparable from the development of language in which words were not mere signals, but signifiers of something other than themselves. Yet the first symbols were animals. What distinguished men from animals was born of their relationship with them.  

This paradox is once again familiar from the love poetry examined in previous chapters. As between two lovers, so between human and animal: language is the inevitable product of their relationship and also the great sign of their division. It is, in Carson’s loaded phrase, “that which comes between them”—what keeps them from knowing each other fully and what allows them to try to overcome that separation. Not all animal poems are love poems, but they all share the same essential conundrum; they rely on figurative language to express what lies by definition beyond the reach of conventional linguistic signs.

( p.122) Berger does not mention the most influential origin story in Western culture, the book of Genesis. Perhaps Genesis was too obvious to need mentioning, or too obvious for Berger even to have been conscious of it. But it illustrates very clearly the relationship he outlines: in the opening chapters of Genesis, humans are repeatedly defined in relation to animals, and they develop language as a result of their encounter with them. What the Bible includes that Berger’s account does not, however, is an etiology of erotic desire. The love relationship between Adam and Eve that develops over the course of the first three chapters of Genesis takes shape in response to their interaction with animals.
Chapter 1, which gives the first version of the Creation story, presents the simplest set of relationships. Man and woman are created simultaneously on the sixth day and are not differentiated from one another. They are defined instead by their shared distinction from all other creatures: although like other animals they are instructed to “Be fruitful and multiply,” human beings alone are said to have been created “in the image of God” and are given “dominion” over the rest of creation.\textsuperscript{19} Chapter 2, by contrast, distinguishes clearly between man and woman and establishes an erotic bond between them through the mediation of animals, whose creation intervenes between theirs. In this version of the Creation story, a solitary man is formed first, before any other living thing:

Then the Lord God said, “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner.” So out of the ground the Lord God formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name. The man gave names to all cattle, and to the birds of the air, and to every animal of the field; but for the man there was not found a helper as his partner. So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then he took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. And the rib that the Lord God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. Then the man said,

“This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; this one shall be called Woman, for out of Man this one was taken.”

\textbf{(p.123)} Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh.

(2:18–24)
This account complicates the simple bond of identity between man and woman offered by chapter 1. The man’s originary condition is one of radical isolation and need; the woman answers that need, but not directly or immediately. Human love comes into being only after a series of failed attempts by the man to relate to other creatures, who help make possible his moment of erotic recognition. Confronted “at last” with the woman, the man sees her as the answer to his desire, more suitable than the animals because her resemblance to him—grown from his rib—is metonymic rather than merely metaphoric. Yet it remains crucially a resemblance, rather than an exact equivalence. He is Man (ish), she is Woman (ishah): he records her different derivation in her very name. In the style of many subsequent love poets, Adam thus comes to understand love through his contemplation of animals. Through her contrast with the animals, the woman is instantly recognizable as his fit “partner”; yet, through her association with them—as the last in the series of newly created beings that he names—she is understood as unmistakably different from himself. Both the similarity and the difference, both his recognition and his surprise upon seeing her after all the others, are essential to the erotic impulse he then expresses in his irrepresible exclamation.

That exclamation is itself significant. In Genesis, just as in Berger’s conjectural history, human speech first arises in response to animals. The man’s naming of the animals seems to be an act of straightforward, one-to-one designation (“whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name”). But, when he sees the woman, his response is more complex. He relies on wordplay to produce her name, which does not function simply as a free-standing sign but refers back to another, pre-existing word. Likewise the man’s exclamation as a whole—the first direct speech by a human given in the Bible—constitutes a tiny, intricate poem. Many English translations print it as verse, based on cues in the original, which displays the verbal repetitions (“bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh”) and parallel constructions (“this one shall be called Woman [zot yikarei ish-ah], for out of Man this one was taken [me-ish l’kachah zot]”) that characterize Hebrew poetry. Love apparently requires, and inspires, new linguistic and rhetorical forms.
But no sooner are these means of demarcating human and animal established—both the capacity for language itself and the particular types of language associated with each—than they are called into question. Chapter 3 introduces the serpent, who not only speaks but speaks craftily; like Adam, he refers to earlier words (“Did God say, ‘You shall not eat…’?”) in order to complicate their meaning (3:1). The serpent continues the process of erotic mediation carried out by the animals in chapter 2. There, creation of the animals intervenes between those of man and woman, marking the difference between them that makes a love relationship possible; hence the culminating assertion of erotic choice: “Therefore a man…clings to his wife, and they become one flesh” (2:24). The chapter thus ends on an image of unity, but it is soon disrupted again. The serpent’s temptation of humankind in chapter 3 creates a new division, not only between humans and God, but between man and woman. That division is clearly established in the separate punishments received by the two sexes, in which God distinguishes the types of suffering to which each is now liable: the woman will labor in childbirth, the man in the fields. Yet at the same time, and not coincidentally, God reaffirms the erotic bond between them even as he sets them apart, telling the woman, “your desire shall be for your husband”—the first time female desire is mentioned in the story (3:16). The man too reaffirms the bond; immediately after their separate sentences are pronounced, he once again names the woman, just as he did the first time he saw her. As before, he is moved to play on words, though this time the woman’s name reflects something other than her origin in man: “The man named his wife Eve [chavah], because she was the mother of all living [chai]” (3:20).
This is not to assert that the fall was necessary in order for love to exist between Adam and Eve. Chapter 2 already establishes the necessary distance between them through their different origins, as well as through the fundamental image of rupture that underlies their union: Adam can find Eve only by losing a rib. Even the declaration of unity that concludes the chapter admits the prior necessity of division; a couple will become “one flesh” only when “a man leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife.” Some English translations, including the King James, choose to render that last verb as “cleave,” a word whose double meaning (to split, as well as to join) is particularly apt to this passage. Love is predicated on some form of sharp differentiation or alienation: from the beloved, most fundamentally, but also from one’s parents or home, and even from one’s own body. In Genesis that cleavage, and the “desire” it makes possible, is brought about by the humans’ interaction first with the beasts as a group, then, even more starkly, with the serpent.

The importance of animals to the development both of language and of love, as suggested by these various origin stories, helps explain their prominent role in love poetry. Robert Frost’s “Two Look at Two” (1923), for instance, explores the possibilities of interspecies mediation. It is clearly a love poem: “love” is both its first word and its last. But the significance of the word shifts over the course of the poem, as the lovers (p.125) who are the poem’s protagonists encounter a wild animal, which leads them to a greater sense, not only of self-awareness, as in Berger’s model, but of erotic connection, as in Genesis. At the start of the poem their love is a form of obliviousness:

Love and forgetting might have carried them
A little further up the mountainside
With night so near, but not much further up.
They must have halted soon in any case
With thoughts of the path back.20

“Love” is here equated with “forgetting.” Impersonal and apparently independent of the lovers, it makes them unconscious of their circumstances, with no “thoughts” of their own situation until some outside force should bring them to themselves.
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That force takes the form of a deer who unexpectedly appears and returns their gaze. The lovers’ ramble is cut short by a wall across their way, beyond which they look:

On up the failing path, where, if a stone
Or earthslide moved at night, it moved itself;
No footstep moved it. “This is all,” they sighed,
“Good-night to woods.” But not so; there was more.
A doe from round a spruce stood looking at them
Across the wall, as near the wall as they.
She saw them in their field, they her in hers.
The difficulty of seeing what stood still,
Like some up-ended boulder split in two,
Was in her clouded eyes: they saw no fear there.
She seemed to think that two thus they were safe.
Then, as if they were something that, though strange,
She could not trouble her mind with too long,
She sighed and passed unscared along the wall.

(ll. 11–24)

The humans think themselves alone, in every way. Like the man and woman in the first chapter of Genesis, they seem to recognize no distinction between themselves but behave as a single entity, apparently sighing out whole sentences in unison. And like Robinson Crusoe, or like Adam in his original isolation, they believe their world to be empty: looking at the landscape, they assume that “No footstep” but theirs can move it. The animal thus comes as a total surprise. But the excitement of surprise is heightened by a sense of simultaneous recognition. The doe is their specular double, equidistant from the wall that divides them, and this parallelism is reflected in the phrasing: “they sighed...She sighed”; “She saw them in their field, they [saw] her in hers.” There is even a moment of ontological confusion in the line “The difficulty of seeing what stood still,” which seems at first to refer to seeing the deer, who is described just above as something that “stood,” but turns out to refer to the lovers. The human couple and the animal are temporarily conflated as each freezes, looking at the other.
The result is a defamiliarizing self-consciousness. As the humans begin to see themselves through the animal’s eyes, the poem introduces its first metaphor: they are “Like some up-ended boulder split in two.” The turn to figuration is brought on by the need to account for a point of view that is not just extrinsic to the lovers’ but truly alien, one that can itself be conceived only through similar acts of speculation and comparison: “She seemed to think”; “as if they were something.” The doe’s “clouded” gaze provokes a new form of thought and language, a reliance on metaphor’s power to join and reconcile what is disparate. At the same time, her gaze cleaves the couple’s elemental unity—“Split in two,” “two thus”—starting off a process of differentiation that is then completed by what happens next:

“This, then, is all. What more is there to ask?”
But no, not yet. A snort to bid them wait.
A buck from round the spruce stood looking at them
Across the wall as near the wall as they.
This was an antlered buck of lusty nostril,
Not the same doe come back into her place.
He viewed them quizzically with jerks of head,
As if to ask, “Why don’t you make some motion?
Or give some sign of life? Because you can’t.
I doubt if you’re as living as you look.”

. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .
Then he too passed unscared along the wall.
Two had seen two, whichever side you spoke from.

(ll. 25–38)
This second encounter is described in terms nearly identical to the first and on the surface might seem like mere repetition. But the similarity serves to highlight crucial differences. The humans assume that having (p.127) seen the deer they have seen everything, but a derisive “snort” sets them right. What they have seen is not a general representation of the category “Deer,” much less of “Animal,” but an individual; the second deer, with his defiantly distinctive features (antlers, “lusty nostril”), makes that clear. Since the two deer form a pair, presumably with a relationship (“lusty”) of their own, they form a better reflection of the lovers than the doe by herself, and their explicit differentiation is therefore significant. What seems unitary turns out to be multiple; what seems “still” is actually shifting; what seems merely repetitive or at best affirmative can still be surprising.

The new perception that the buck brings about is reflected in the different rhetoric that surrounds him. He too is described by a speculative “As if,” but his imagined thoughts are presented as direct speech. The human speech in the poem is decidedly univocal; not only is it attributed to both lovers at once, but it culminates in a rhetorical question that seems to cut off the possibility of further discourse: “‘What more is there to ask?’” But the buck’s audible retort serves as a reminder that speech, especially love speech, is essentially dialogic; the choric declarations of the lovers thus give way to their imagination of the buck’s more dialogic mode of question and challenge.22 “Two had seen two”: the encounter with the two deer leaves the lovers conscious of their own duality, and of the distinctions, surprises, responses that compose an erotic relationship. At the end of the poem, “Still they stood, | A great wave from it going over them, | As if the earth in one unlooked-for favor | Had made them certain earth returned their love” (ll. 39–42). On the one hand, the experience has reconfirmed the original bond between the lovers, who continue to act and love as a unit (“they stood”; “their love”). On the other hand, much has changed. “Still...stood” means something different from the earlier “stood still.” The figurative language of metaphor (“A great wave”) and speculation (“As if”) that earlier described the animals now applies to the lovers themselves. And love is no longer cast as a free-standing, objectless force, like forgetting, but as a reciprocal one (“returned their love”).
Frost revisits the subject of erotic triangulation in his sonnet “Never Again Would Birds’ Song Be the Same” (1942), which focuses even more explicitly on language:

He would declare and could himself believe
That the birds there in all the garden round
From having heard the daylong voice of Eve
Had added to their own an oversound,
(p.128) Her tone of meaning but without the words.
Admittedly an eloquence so soft
Could only have had an influence on birds
When call or laughter carried it aloft.
Be that as may be, she was in their song.
Moreover her voice upon their voices crossed
Had now persisted in the woods so long
That probably it never would be lost.
Never again would birds’ song be the same.
And to do that to birds was why she came.

The poem takes place in the garden of Eden, though it is shy about revealing that fact. The only definite indication of the setting comes in the name “Eve” in line 3, and even that is tempered by the neighboring word “daylong,” which threatens by association to reduce “eve” to a common noun. Adam, meanwhile, appears only as “He.” Perhaps the unspecific pronoun reflects Adam’s status in the Genesis story as the unnamed namer. But its effect on the poem is to generalize it, making the story not just etiological but typical: this response could belong to anyone. The poem’s focus, after all, is less on the natural history of birds than on how another person can change our perception of the world. The opening sentence conveys neither a fact about birds nor even what Adam believes to be true about them, but what, under the influence of his feelings for Eve, he “would declare” and “could believe.” The highly subjective, speculative viewpoint is underlined by the use of free indirect discourse through the rest of the poem, which is itself repeatedly qualified (“Admittedly”; “Be that as may be”; “probably”). The poem thus tells two stories at once: an origin story about the relation between animals, humans, and language; and a love story, in which animals enable a human lover to understand and articulate the overwhelming effect the beloved exerts.
Under the influence of love the origin story takes unexpected turns, starting with its treatment of gender. The poem, as befits a sonnet, begins by seeming to reaffirm traditional gender expectations. The archetypal “He” is immediately associated with authoritative language (“declare”), whereas Eve is never shown using words at all; we hear her “voice” as a “tone” conveyed by “call or laughter.” But the poem casts into doubt the conventional prioritizing of the man’s verbal discourse. In contrast to Genesis, where Adam displays dominion over the animals by assigning them names, here it is Eve’s form of “eloquence” that exerts “influence” over the birds. (The aural chiming of the two words in successive lines suggests the form her influence takes: she exerts power through the sound of her speech rather than its meaning.) The poem does not show Eve falling into, or falling in line with, a logocentric, patriarchal order but celebrates her distance from it. Eve seems to have transcended human language. Her “call” and “laughter” lie at once below and above the common range of human speech—just as they are described as being both beneath the birdsong (they must rise “aloft” to reach the birds) and atop it (an “oversound”). The free play that marks Adam’s exclamation in Genesis upon seeing Eve, an emphasis on the sound and rhythm of words rather than on their mere indexical value, is here associated with Eve herself.
Even more strikingly, the poem reverses the usual relationship between human and animal. In most etiological myths of this sort, animals teach human beings some special skill; thus Berger cites one tradition in which “Elephant taught man how to pound millet...Mouse taught man to beget and women to bear.” In particular, birdsong is typically figured as inspiring human eloquence: the bird, warbling its native woodnotes wild, serves as a model for the poet. But here we find the opposite of that lyric commonplace. Eve’s unselfconscious voice is overheard by the birds, and they are the ones who preserve it, pass it on, and so immortalize it. The result is not just an inversion but a complex reduplication of the common origin story by which animals give rise to language and poetry. In Frost’s proto-poststructuralist version of the myth, language comes first, in the form of Adam’s declarative speech. This language is then distilled, through Eve’s voice and the birds’ imitation of it, to a concentrated essence, a “tone of meaning but without the words.” That tone is what Frost elsewhere calls “the sound of sense,” which constitutes, in Frost’s view, the very core of poetry and of all writing. As he explains in an early letter:

[I] have consciously set myself to make music out of what I may call the sound of sense....The best place to get the abstract sound of sense is from voices behind a door that cuts off the words....The sound of sense, then. You get that. It is the abstract vitality of our speech. It is pure sound—pure form. One who concerns himself with it more than the subject is an artist.

The sound of Eve’s sense is what the birds hear and imitate, and what Adam in turn hears and appreciates; the birds are the door through which he perceives Eve’s voice anew. We end up back with Adam, then, and with a more typical tale of instruction. The birds’ song teaches him to recognize aspects of language, and of Eve, that he did not notice at first.
Hence the poem’s final line: “And to do that to birds was why she came.” As a conclusion this seems oddly bathetic. Not only does it stand at odds with the story in Genesis, where Eve’s coming, as Adam’s ecstatic response confirms, fulfills nothing less than a primal human need for companionship, but it seems a let-down even from the previous line with its more soaring rhetoric (“Never again would…”). The final line’s understatement is emphasized by its form: ten low monosyllables, which in a different context would not be recognizable as having any meter at all. But the line’s odd simplicity of both sense and sound serves to draw attention to the “birds” at its center. Birds make this love poem possible. They provide insight into Eve and into Adam’s response to her, by offering a vivid example of her effect on her surroundings—what she is able “to do” to things simply by her presence. Just as importantly, they provide a model for a language suitable to express that insight, a language of oblique intimation, rather than declaration. The sound of the “woods” of line 11, in other words, gives rise to the suggestive “woulds” of lines 12 and 13 (“probably it never would…”). The birds get the last word in the poem because their song supplies its mode of expression as well as its means of perception.
Frost’s “Two Look at Two” forms part of a long tradition of love poems involving deer. Sir Thomas Wyatt’s “Whoso List to Hunt” (c.1535), one of the earliest sonnets in English, casts its lover-speaker as a hunter in pursuit of a “hind.” Wyatt’s poem participates in what was already a venerable convention: his immediate model is Petrarch’s “Una candida cerva” (poem 190 of the Canzoniere), but behind that stands Horace’s Ode 1.23, which compares a sexually shy young woman to a timorous fawn. The trope of woman as deer was widespread in post-Petrarchan European love poetry, especially in England, where the potential for puns on “deer” and “hart” proved irresistible. But, however distinguished and subtle individual poems in this tradition may be, the trope itself is predicated on a starkly simple equation: species difference stands in for gender difference; by implication, male is to female as human is to animal, and as subject to object. This particular use of animal imagery as a means of understanding gender had its appeal for (male) poets—hence its popularity—but it carries obvious limitations. Nor do deer of course constitute a special case; the same problems arise whenever a poet seeks to project a perceived human–animal binary onto a human love relationship.

It is perfectly possible, however, to invoke animals as a way of exploring erotic otherness, gendered or otherwise, without falling prey to the potential reductionism and objectification of the beloved-as-animal trope. Frost, for instance, avoids any such risk by multiplying the subjectivities (animal as well as human) in his poem, creating a complex circuit of mutual contemplation. In a different vein, the various animals that pullulate through the Song of Songs serve as symbols not of a unitary otherness but of multifarious difference. Animals in the Song take every conceivable form: some are present and actual, others imagined and figurative; some are tame, like the “flocks” belonging to the male speaker, while others are decidedly wild, like the “foxes, that ruin the vineyards” (Song 1:7, 2:15). Given this diversity of signification, when the speakers use animal imagery to describe one another—a strategy adopted equally by the woman and the man—they are able to do so without necessarily imposing. Instead, animal tropes allow them to capture the contradictory nature of the beloved: real and fantasized, intimate and unknowable.
This semantic versatility derives less from the variety of different animals in the Song than from the complex associations granted to the status of animal itself. If they represent anything, animals in the Song represent the limits of human representation and comprehension. Early in the poem the woman invokes animals as a standard for the ungovernable nature of love: “I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem, by the gazelles or the wild does: | do not stir up or awaken love until it is ready” (2:7). Like “the gazelles and wild does,” love has its own seasons and reasons and does not submit to human will. This exclamation colors the verses that follow, in which the same animals figure in what reads like a proto-Petrarchan simile: “My beloved is like a gazelle or a young stag. | Look, there he stands behind our wall, | gazing in at the windows, looking through the lattice” (2:9). The speaker here casts herself as human and the man as animal in an attempt to conceptualize his alterity, though at the risk, as always, of imposing on both man and beast. The risk grows even graver a few verses (p.132) later, when the simile is repeated in the imperative: “turn, my beloved, be like a gazelle or a young stag on the cleft mountains” (2:17). Yet however imperious such a command (“Be like this”) may seem, in the context of the Song—given not just the adjuration by gazelles and deer immediately preceding but the ubiquity of polysemous animal figures throughout the book—the instruction “Be like an animal” carries oxymoronic force: “Be free and undefinable; be other than what I can control or fully conceive.” The same command, repeated almost verbatim, serves as the final line of the Song of Songs: “Make haste, my beloved, and be like a gazelle | or a young stag upon the mountains of spices!” (8:14). The wild stag metaphor provides a fitting conclusion, suggesting both the power of human language to grasp and represent otherness and the limits of that power.
A similar flexibility appears in Edmund Spenser’s use of deer imagery in sonnet 67 of *Amoretti* (1595). *Amoretti* is a Petrarchan sequence, and on the surface sonnet 67 seems to conform to type: the male speaker is a “huntsman,” the female beloved a deer that he pursues. But Spenser’s sequence differs from its models in that, against all precedent and expectation, the speaker actually wins and marries the beloved; sonnet 67 marks the literal turning point in the narrative, when the beloved ceases to evade and begins to reciprocate the speaker’s desire. The Petrarchan image of the deer is, therefore, repurposed to suggest not opposition and categorical difference but precarious similarity, a change that is reflected as well in the poetic structure:

Lyke as a huntsman after weary chace,
Seeing the game from him escapt away:
sits downe to rest him in some shady place,
with panting hounds beguiled of their pray,
So after long pursuit and vaine assay,
when I all weary had the chace forsooke,
the gentle deare returnd the selfe-same way,
thinking to quench her thirst at the next brooke.
There she beholding me with mylder looke,
sought not to fly, but fearelesse still did bide:
till I in hand her yet halfe trembling tooke,
and with her owne goodwill hir fyrmely tyde.
Strange thing me seemd to see a beast so wyld,
so goodly wonne with her owne will
beguyld.28
Whereas Wyatt, following Petrarch, writes his sonnet in the form of an extended metaphor (I am a hunter pursuing a deer), Spenser opts instead (p.133) for simile: “Lyke as a huntsman.” The change is small—simile is merely a form of metaphor—but significant. Simile makes explicit the ontological distinction that metaphor obscures: vehicle and tenor, huntsman and lover, occupy clearly differentiated realms of existence. Yet Spenser establishes this distinction only to erase it all the more conspicuously; the most striking thing about his simile is how badly it succeeds. The two parts of the comparison are clearly set out in the first two quatrains: “Lyke as a huntsman” who gives up the chase, “So...I”—at which point the reader expects something literal rather than figurative (So I gave up courting this woman). Instead, at the very midpoint of the sonnet, the “deare” unexpectedly returns—not as a “dear” but as a defiantly animal deer. Tenor and vehicle merge, turning the simile into mere tautology (Like someone trying to catch a deer, I caught a deer) and signaling the erasure of apparent divisions that is the hallmark of the poem.
The animal metaphor makes this reversal possible, since, unlike other common Petrarchan figures imitated by Spenser—my love is like ice (*Amoretti*, sonnet 30) or like marble (*Amoretti*, sonnet 51)—the animal always holds the potential to turn from object to subject. In “return[ing]” toward the speaker, “thinking to quench her thirst,” the deer defies the unidirectionality of the hunt metaphor and asserts her own ability to think, desire, and pursue. She undermines the opposition between huntsman and “game” and instead turns love back into the mutually participatory game described by Ovid. The same resistance to strict differentiation can be seen in the rhetoric and texture of the verse, not just in the collapsed simile but, notably, in the rhymes. When the deer returns, she does so by the “selfe-same way” by which she had earlier “escapt away”: the identical rhyme defies the principle of difference on which rhyme is predicated (in English), even as it suggests the deer’s capacity, which she shares with the man, to change her ways. At a broader level, Spenser’s rhyme scheme eschews the sharp divisions of both the Petrarchan sonnet (which features different sets of end rhymes for the octave and the sestet) and the English sonnet (which introduces a new pair of rhymes in each quatrains) in favor of a continuous, gradually shifting set of rhymes over the first twelve lines. In this particular sonnet even the concluding couplet does not provide the usual contrast to the rest, since “wyld” grows organically out of the concluding sounds of the previous line (“will…tyde”), as well as echoing the earlier “myld.”
This is not to say that the poem denies all sense of difference or alienation. The speaker and the deer remain mutually distrustful and tentative at the end, and their roles certainly diverge, as one of them “takes” and “ties” the other (though with her own consent). Yet even as she is “beguyld” and tamed by the man, the deer remains inherently “wyld”; and she finds herself in any case in the same situation that the speaker occupied earlier, when he and his hounds were similarly “beguiled.” Whatever taming occurs appears to be mutual, as suggested by two key phrases that mediate between the pair. “There she beholding me with mylder looke”: it is unclear to whom the last three words apply—whether the deer looks with a milder gaze or whether she sees that the man has a milder appearance. Hanging indeterminately between the deer and the man, the syntax reproduces the categorical destabilization that inheres in the human–animal gaze. The same effect recurs two lines later in “till I in hand her yet halfe trembling tooke”: can it be the deer, who stood “fearelesse” in the previous line, who now trembles, or is it the man, shivering with desire and excitement? The poetry manages to suggest the two creatures’ equivalence even as it records their difference.

Berger asserts that animals fascinate us because of “the parallelism of their similar/dissimilar lives.”

Berger’s claim echoes William Wordsworth’s earlier pronouncement that “the pleasure received from metrical language” likewise arises from “the perception of similitude in dissimilitude.” As noted in Chapter 1, the same principle underlies all poetic form—not just meter but rhyme and many other features of poetry depend on a perception of simultaneous similarity and difference; and it also lies at the heart of eros, or what Wordsworth calls “the sexual appetite, and all the passions connected with it.” Spenser’s sonnet brings these three elements (eros, animals, poetic form) together, continually setting up expectations of difference only to reveal underlying similarities and continuities. Where Spenser’s poem is understated in its blurring of distinctions, however, other animal love poems are more explicit. Theodore Roethke’s sonnet “For an Amorous Lady” (1941), for example, exuberantly demonstrates (and celebrates) the instability of categories, whether zoological, erotic, or linguistic:

For an Amorous Lady
“Most mammals like caresses, in the sense
in
which we usually take the word, whereas
other creatures, even tame snakes, prefer
giving to receiving them.”

FROM A NATURAL-HISTORY BOOK

The pensive gnu, the staid aardvark,
Accept caresses in the dark;
The bear, equipped with paw and snout,
Would rather take than dish it out.
But snakes, both poisonous and garter,
In love are never known to barter;
The worm, though dank, is sensitive:
His noble nature bids him give.

But you, my dearest, have a soul
Encompassing fish, flesh, and fowl.
When amorous arts we would pursue,
You can, with pleasure, bill or coo.
You are, in truth, one in a million,
At once mammalian and reptilian.

The poem’s ironies begin with the title, which immediately asserts the very distinction that the woman is praised for subverting. The title presents the poem as a gift, “For” the recipient (the “Lady”)—rather than the more usual “To,” which would simply indicate address; the phrasing implies a unidirectional, hierarchical relationship, determined by gender. This division prefigures the sonnet’s octave, where mammals (a category based on and named after a female attribute) are cast as the recipients of erotic advances, while the snake (which in addition to its traditional phallic associations is referred to by the pronouns “His” and “him”) is the giver. The anachronistic “Amorous Lady,” meanwhile, comes laden with associations from courtly literature that annul whatever agency the phrase seems to grant: if “amorous” suggests, however primly, a desiring subject, “lady” even more primly counteracts it. The title thus belies the woman it addresses and describes, who is notable for defying rigid categories, and this dissociation reflects ironically not only on the traditional expectations of love poetry but on language itself, which inevitably imposes inexact labels and hierarchies.
The epigraph redoubles these ironies. It too is concerned with overdetermined categories rather than individuals: just as the title addresses itself to an anonymous “Lady,” the epigraph derives from a suspiciously generic “Natural-History Book.” Even the reader is slotted into an implicit category, in the phrase “the sense in which we usually take the word,” which attributes a normative behavior to the “we” (presumably meaning speakers of English) just as it does to the mammals and snakes. Yet the same phrase also stands at odds with the implications of the title, since now it is all of us, not just ladies, who are figured as receivers of language (we “take the word”). The whole clumsy qualification, moreover, undermines the epigraph’s effort to establish clear categories, since it acknowledges that words are unreliable and can sometimes mean opposite things: a “caress” can indicate something actively bestowed as much as something passively received. The language of the epigraph turns out to be so equivocal on closer inspection that the apparently scientific distinction being drawn simply evaporates. The rule about caresses applies to “most” mammals, but which ones are not specified (perhaps all humans are excepted). The rule extends to “tame” snakes, though it is not clear how these are distinguished, or indeed how it is possible to determine, in the case of a limbless creature, whether it is giving or receiving a caress. If a snake rubs its back against your leg, like a cat, is it giving a caress or taking one?
The play with empty or unsustainable distinctions continues into the poem itself. The sonnet is printed with a line break dividing octave and sestet, and in some ways this does mark a turn in the poem, a shift from universal to particular—from the representative “gnu” to “you,” from the epigraph’s presumptuously inclusive “we” to “we” meaning “you and I.” But the division into complementary sections turns out, as might be expected, to be largely illusory. At a formal level, the break is merely visual: the poem is written in continuous couplets rather than in any recognizable sonnet form, so there is nothing in the rhymes to demarcate octave from sestet. And the logical shift that seems to occur after the break—an apparent resolution of the mammal/snake binary set out in the first two quatrains—dissolves in the face of the terminological confusions of lines 9–12. Neither the triad “fish, flesh, and fowl” nor the paired terms “bill [and] coo” corresponds in any way to the dichotomy of “mammalian and reptilian” with which the poem begins and ends. The verse is simply carried along by its own nonsensical spirit, breezing past these misalignments. The categorical incompatibility appears already in line 5, where “poisonous,” a designation that includes a whole range of snake species, is paired uneasily with “garter,” a specific type of non-poisonous snake native to North America. “Garter” seems to be tossed in more because it belongs in a poem about an amorous lady than because it forms the proper antithesis to “poisonous.”

Yet these inconsistencies do not of course injure the poem, which like much light verse is superficial in its logic but meaningful in its illogic. (p.137) What might be a liability in a book of natural history is an advantage in a poem. The inexactitude of Roethke’s poem—its self-contradictions, qualifications, ironic clichés (“dish it out,” “one in a million”), and faulty parallelisms—suits it to the representation of eros. Love cannot be satisfactorily described by terms such as “give” and “receive,” or even “both give and receive,” but slips free of such binaries and reaches toward something less rigidly defined. The same is true of animals, which Roethke invokes for their defiance of human attempts at classification. An animal may be other than “we” are, but its alterity is never straightforward—an animal is not the opposite of a human, any more than it can be the opposite of another animal—but always protean, chimerical, unfixed.
Birds have always figured even more prominently in poetry than other animals, for obvious reasons. As Leonard Lutwack writes, “The ability of birds to fly” offers poets “a powerful symbol of the transcendence they wish to achieve in their writing,” while the “song of birds is especially cherished by poets” for its resemblance to human articulation. The appeal of birds to love poets in particular is just as evident: “It may be that birds are perceived to be more erotic than other animals because their mating and nesting are often so easily observed by humans. One does not have to watch sparrows and doves very long to confirm the literary tradition that they are extremely active sexually.” Although Lutwack uses the terms as equivalents, however, it is worth distinguishing between “mating and nesting” and “sex.” It is, of course, possible to see birds copulating, but generally they are distinguished by what might be called the decorousness of their mating behavior, especially in comparison to mammals. Sex itself constitutes a relatively inconspicuous aspect of avian mating; other behaviors are more visible, such as elaborate courtship, nesting, and the joint raising of young, all of which are notably reminiscent of human amatory (as opposed to strictly sexual) practices.

James Thomson celebrates these decorous and domestic behaviors in “Spring,” the opening book of his long georgic poem The Seasons (1730). More than half of “Spring” is given over to the topic of love, beginning with the love life of plants and ending with that of humans. The poem devotes a greater proportion of this sequence to birds than to all other animals and plants combined, focusing on three elements of avian love in particular: its delicacy, its artfulness, and its mingled constancy and novelty. Thomson explicitly contrasts the “purer loves” of birds to the “horrid loves” of mammals, doubting whether the latter are even an appropriate subject for poetry: “Dire were the strain and dissonant to sing | [Their] cruel raptures.” Bulls and horses, for instance, are “brutes” who, when moved to love, “rush furious into flame | And fierce desire” (ll. 791–2). Marine animals are scarcely more decent than their cousins on land: “From the deep ooze and gelid cavern roused, | They flounce and tumble in unwieldy joy” (ll. 823–4). Birds and their passions, by contrast, are supremely suited to song, as Thomson makes clear at the opening of the sequence:

My theme ascends, with equal wing ascend,
My panting Muse; and hark, how loud the woods
Invite you forth in all your gayest trim.
Lend me your song, ye nightingales! oh, pour
The mazy-running soul of melody
Into my varied verse! while I deduce,
From the first note the hollow cuckoo sings,
The symphony of Spring and touch a theme
Unknown to fame—the passion of the groves.

(ll. 573–81)

The winged “Muse” and birds blend together, as the second-person address shifts imperceptibly from one to the other. If anything, the birds are given priority; the invocation to the muse seems almost superfluous, since the birds, not she, are said to provide the keynote for the poem and to pour their melody into the verse.

Thomson leaves no doubt as to the ultimate source of the birds’ song: (p.139)

’Tis love creates their melody, and all
This waste of music is the voice of love,
That even to birds and beasts the tender arts
Of pleasing teaches. Hence the glossy kind
Try every winning way inventive love
Can dictate, and in courtship to their mates
Pour forth their little souls. First, wide around,
With distant awe, in airy rings they rove,
Endeavouring by a thousand tricks to catch
The cunning, conscious, half-averted glance
Of their regardless charmer. Should she seem
Softening the least approvance to bestow,
Their colours burnish, and, by hope inspired,
They brisk advance; then, on a sudden struck,
Retire disordered; then again approach,
In fond rotation spread the spotted wing,
And shiver every feather with desire.

(ll. 614–31)
The birdsong in this description is distinctly poetic in its mingled profusion and purposefulness. On the one hand, the birds “pour forth their little souls” in an effusive “waste of music.” On the other hand, unlike John Stuart Mill’s ideal of a poet, who sings “in utter unconsciousness of a listener,” or Percy Shelley’s poet–nightingale, “sing[ing] to cheer its own solitude,” these birds are highly conscious of their audience. Like Horatian poets they are schooled in the “arts | Of pleasing”; their melody is not purely self-sufficient but is accompanied by purposeful, directed signs (burnished colors, spread wings, shivering feathers). Yet this purposefulness in turn is tempered by a sense of sheer artistic gratuitousness. In contrast to the mammals, with their fiercely linear, end-directed sexual pursuits, the birds move in elliptical patterns, “airy rings” and “fond rotation.” Like Thomson himself, with his coy periphrases (“the glossy kind”), the birds seem to revel in indirection. Like the lovers in the Ars Amatoria, they delight not just in results but in the variety of the process, willing to “Try every winning way inventive love | Can dictate.” Nor is it only the male birds who indulge in this Ovidian artistry; the females too are “cunning, conscious,” and “charm[ing]” in the obliqueness of their “half-averted glances.” The sense of mutual play is reinforced by the puzzling phrase “in courtship to their mates.” The primary meaning of the words is presumably proleptic: these birds are courting their future mates. But given the tendency of some birds to mate for life, the phrase suggests another possibility: that all this courtship forms an elaborate game, performed by already-mated pairs every spring simply as a way of renewing their desire.

Having concluded at a pitch of sexual expectation, as the birds “shiver every feather with desire,” Thomson begins a new verse paragraph in the following line with an unexpected leap: “Connubial leagues agreed, to the deep woods | They haste away” (ll. 631–2). The rest of the passage deals exclusively with nesting practices; we have skipped directly from desire, in other words, to domesticity. In keeping with the tendency of birds to court and nest more visibly than they mate, Thomson omits the whole marriage plot of sexual selection and congress, or rather compacts it into the unromantically passive construction “Connubial leagues agreed.” But the language of erotic love is not abandoned at this point, only transferred; it rears its head anew shortly afterward, when the birds produce a brood of hatchlings:
Oh, what passions then,
What melting sentiments of kindly care,
On the new parents seize! Away they fly
Affectionate, and undesiring bear
The most delicious morsel to their young;
Which equally distributed, again
The search begins.

(ll. 674–80)

The adult birds once again feel “passions” and “melting sentiments.” But in a Platonic progression, reminiscent of the *scala amoris* prescribed by Diotima in the *Symposium*, they have moved from the narrow love for a single other bird to a more diffuse and inclusive love, “equally distributed” among their offspring.39

In some ways this may seem less a progression than a falling-off of *eros*, as shivering desire has given way to “undesiring” affection and “kindly care.” But it is invigorated by Thomson’s persistent hints of erotic renewal. In this passage the phrase “again | The search begins,” like the earlier intimation of an annually re-enacted mating ritual, implies an element of perpetual novelty interwoven with the domestic constancy. This suggestion comes to the fore when the birds teach their fledglings to fly, a moment that marks at once the affective climax and the conclusion of their love relationship: (p.141)

This one glad office more, and then dissolves
Parental love at once, now needless grown:
...
...light in air
The acquitted parents see their soaring race,
And, once rejoicing, never know them more.

(ll. 732–3, 752–4)
The parents are “acquitted” in the sense that they are free to love a different set next year; the whole process, with the same melting passions as before, repeats. Thomson’s birds, like Petronius’ kiss, embody the impossible ideal of love as perpetual beginning. They enjoy constancy without monotony, varied as it is by the promise of starting anew. The birds thus suit the style of Thomson’s discursive, digressive, episodic poem. In place of lyric intensity, *The Seasons* provides delight through its small rhetorical surprises (periphrases, prolepses) and above all through its constantly unfolding variety. Over and over throughout the poem, a subject that has been pursued for many lines is suddenly abandoned, never to be known more. Like the lovebirds it describes, Thomson’s poem offers an emblem of regular variability.

Thomson’s claim that in singing “the passion of the groves” he is treating “a theme | Unknown to fame” does not hold actually hold up under scrutiny. A major precedent exists, as Thomson would have known, in Geoffrey Chaucer’s *The Parliament of Fowls* (c.1380), probably the most extensive and complex poem of bird love in English. *The Parliament of Fowls* is a 700-line dream vision which recounts how the narrator, a comically hapless version of Chaucer himself, falls asleep over a book and dreams that he is led by the Roman general Scipio to the garden of love. There the dreamer finds a number of allegorical figures among whom he wanders, until he reaches a spot where, it being St. Valentine’s Day, all the birds have gathered to choose their mates under the supervision of the embodied figure of Nature. (Among its other claims Chaucer’s poem appears to be the earliest text to suggest an association between Valentine’s Day and love.) Nature decrees that the birds shall proceed to choose in order of rank, beginning with the eagles; but here a difficulty arises. Three young male eagles, or “tersels,” all vie for the favor of a single female (“formel”). As the birds of lower rank grow more restless and impatient, (p.142) each suitor makes his appeal, only for the formel to announce at last that she is not yet willing to commit herself to any of them. Nature declares the eagles’ case adjourned until the following year, at which point the lower birds are all allowed to pair. They burst into a joyous song of love, and the dreamer awakes.
Chaucer’s poem clearly differs from Thomson’s in form and emphasis; the whole plot of *The Parliament of Fowls* corresponds to Thomson’s summary phrase “Connubial leagues agreed.” Yet the poems also feature significant similarities, including the same appealingly paradoxical combination of constancy and change. Chaucer’s birds are evidently to be understood as mating for life—“‘God forbede a lovere shulde chaunge!’” the turtledove exclaims. The first eagle suitor is even more explicit: “‘And if that I...in proces love a newe, | I preye to yow this be my jugement: | That with these foules I be al torent’” (And if in the course of time I love another, I ask that this be my punishment: that I be torn to pieces by the other birds) (ll. 428–32). Yet the poem also specifies that the birds choose mates every year. At the beginning of the proceedings, Nature bids “every foul to take his owne place, | As they were woned [wont] alwey fro yer to yeere”; later she reaffirms that the free choice (“eleccioun”) of mates “‘is our usage alwey, fro yer to yeere’” (ll. 320–2, 409–11). By a sleight the poem manages to have it both ways: the birds mate for life, annually. There is even a suggestion that the sleight may belong not to the poet but to the birds themselves. In their celebratory lyric at the end of the poem, the birds rejoice that “ech of hem recovered hath hys make” (each of them has recovered its mate) (l. 688). “Recovered” suggests the Platonic notion, voiced by Aristophanes, that love is a form of recuperation or reunion; but it also holds out the possibility that this annual ritual is an amatory game played by married couples, like that of Thomson’s birds who pay “courtship to their mates.” Because birds conspicuously display both avid sexual pursuit and apparent monogamous commitment, they offer an emblem of the erotic ideal of discovery and return, surprise and recognition. The form of the birds’ concluding song, a “roundel” in which a shifting refrain alternates with new verses, helps underline this duality (l. 675).

Chaucer also agrees with Thomson in emphasizing the artfulness of avian amours. Despite its focus on “Nature,” *The Parliament of Fowls* consistently presents love less as a natural impulse than as a conscious craft, beginning with the invocation:

The lyf so short, the craft so long to lerne,  
Th’assay so hard, so sharp the conquerynge,  
The dreadful joye alway that slit so yerne:
Al this mene I by Love.

(ll. 1–4)

The life so short, the craft so long to learn;
The attempt so hard, the achievement so painful
and precarious;
The fearful joy that still escapes so fast:
All this I mean by Love.

This reads more like an account of poetry than of love. Throughout the poem, however, love is presented not as an urge or a starting point but as a hard-earned reward, the result of patient labor. Rather than goading people on, the god of love is conceived as one who compensates people’s efforts (“quiteth fok here hyre” (l. 9)). Similarly when Scipio appears to the narrator in a dream, he offers to show him the garden of love as a recompense for his long study: “sumdel of thy labour wolde I quyte” (I wish to requite you somewhat for your work) (l. 112). Hence the poem’s focus on birds, for whom mating is recognizably not just an immediate impulse but a process. Chaucer’s “fowls” do feel the prickings of desire, as their impatience to mate reveals. But for the most part they are happy to treat love as an extended and orderly operation, delightful in itself, the occasion for elegant speeches and joyful song.
Where Chaucer sharply differs from Thomson is in recognizing frustration and deferral as essential parts of the erotic process. Thomson does mention various pains and difficulties in his description of human love, but he treats these as aberrations from the standard of complete, harmonious love represented by the birds. Chaucer by contrast builds lack and conflict into the very structure of love, whether avian or human. In the dream world, the gates at the entrance to love’s garden bear a double inscription: one promises a “blysful place” of eternal spring, while the other, echoing the inscription over the gates of hell in Dante’s *Inferno*, speaks of a “sorweful…prysoun” and warns the reader not to enter (ll. 127, 138–9). Inside the gate the landscape seems to correspond only to the first inscription, as the garden presents a paradise of flowers and music. Yet even here the narrator experiences dissatisfaction. In the midst (p.144) of the garden he finds a temple of brass, within which he discovers none other than the goddess of love herself. Venus is lying “naked from the brest unto the hed,” and below that she is wearing nothing but a diaphanous veil—as the narrator lasciviously puts it, “The remenaunt was wel kevered [covered] to my pay” (ll. 269–71). “To my pay” means “to my satisfaction,” but it also suggests that in this vision the narrator has been granted the “pay” or erotic reward Scipio had promised. It is all the more surprising, then, that, rather than relishing this sight, the narrator almost immediately moves on, restlessly abandoning Venus to continue his search: “But thus I let hire lye, | And ferther in the temple I gan espie” (ll. 279–80). The very nakedness of Venus, her brazen availability, diminishes her value as an object of erotic interest. Although he invokes Venus as his inspiration at the beginning of his dream vision (ll. 113–19), the narrator finds her too static to satisfy his curiosity.
The frustration carries over into the second half of the poem, where the focus shifts from the dreamer to the birds. In contrast to Thomson, but in keeping with ornithological reality, Chaucer presents a world in which not every bird mates successfully. The eagles' story of love deferred dwarfs the almost cursory description of happy love among the lower birds. Nor do the latter get the last word. Just as the mating of the eagles is complicated by a numerical disproportion—three to one instead of one to one—so the pairing of the other birds two by two is complicated by the triangulating figure of the narrator. After the songbirds have finished their rondel, the narrator returns to the foreground in the final stanza:

And with the shoutyng, whan the song was do
That foules maden at here flyght awey,
I wok, and othere bokes tok me to,
To reede upon, and yit I rede alwey.
I hope, ywis, to rede so som day
That I shal mete som thyng for to fare
The bet, and thus to rede I nyl nat spare.

(ll. 693–9)

And with the shouting, when the song was done,
That the birds made as they flew away,
I woke, and took up other books
To read, and still I continue to read.
I hope in truth so to read some day
That I shall dream something to help me fare
Better, and thus to read I will not spare.
It seems as if the narrator is back where he started. He begins
the poem looking to books for an understanding of love: “al be
I knowe nat Love in dede, |…Yit happeth me ful ofte in bokes
reed” (ll. 8–10). His (p.145) studiousness wins him the favor
of Scipio, who wishes to “quyte” him for it, but the promised
reward seems never to have materialized. And yet the
tantalizing insufficiency of the dream itself provides an erotic
lesson. As A. C. Spearing writes: “If a major component of
the poem is the yearning for a center and a meaning that are
absent, is not that very yearning a definition of love?...For the
poem, as for the lover, love is that absent presence that will
one day—perhaps next Saint Valentine’s Day—supply a center
for experience.”43 The poem leaves the reader with the
impression that “successful,” self-sufficient love is for the
(lower) birds. Higher creatures—eagles and poets—are forever
looking beyond, for “som thyng” more.

Chaucer’s poem finds a twentieth-century echo in Elizabeth
Bishop’s “Three Valentines” (1934). The title itself already
signals an erotic imbalance. If one valentine is romantic and
two suggests the possibility of reciprocity, three can only raise
questions. Are these valentines sent from three different
lovers to one recipient, or from one busy lover to three objects
of affection? If they are all addressed from a single writer to a
single beloved, their quantity is still puzzling: it diffuses the
intensity of a single lyric appeal without in return giving scope
for the development allowed by a longer form, like a sonnet
sequence. But the unevenness and uncertainty of the three-
part structure is what lends it erotic potential. Perhaps the
most tempting interpretation is to read the different sections
of the poem as the utterances of the three disappointed eagles
in The Parliament of Fowls—a connection suggested not only
by the shared Valentine’s Day setting but by the focus on birds
and on frustrated love. However we picture the speaker(s), the
opening stanzas of the first section—itself three stanzas long—
unmistakably set the tone:

Love with his gilded bow and crystal arrows
  Has slain us all,
Has pierced the English sparrows
Who languish for each other in the dust,
While from their bosoms, puffed with hopeless
lust,
  The red drops fall.

The robins’ wings fan fev’rish arcs and swirls
Attempting hugs,
While Venus pats her darling’s curls
And just to polish off his aim, suggests
Some unrequited passions in the breasts
Of am’rous bugs. 44

(p.146) In this account, “languish[ing],” “hopeless,”
“unrequited” love is the universal order of nature. It includes
“us all”: humans (if the speaker is assumed to be human),
birds, insects. In Thomson, the parabolic obliqueness of avian
love, its “airy rings” and “fond rotation,” acted as artistic
flourishes; here the same “arcs and swirls” are symbols of
impotent desire.

The ironic note struck by the opening, with its self-consciously
archaic language (“fev’rish”) and Anacreontic imagery, is
deepened in the third stanza:

See, up there, pink and plump and smug in
sashes,
    The little bastard grin,
Watching the pretty rainbows on his lashes...
Oh, sweet, sweet Love—go kick thy naughty self
Around a cloud, or prick thy naughty self
    Upon a gilded pin.

(ll. 13–18)
Despite its flippancy, this stanza is scarcely light-hearted, as it identifies love even more closely with suffering. Cupid is no longer differentiated from his victims as he was before: “pink and plump,” he resembles the “puffed...red” sparrows; pictured pricked on a pin like a butterfly specimen, he resembles the “am’rous” bugs he pierces with his arrows. This convergence continues in the rest of the poem, until by section 3 the conflation of tenor and vehicle, subject and object is complete, and “Love” simply becomes a bird (“the grackle Love” (l. 65)). On the surface Bishop seems to have rejected most of the traditional reasons for invoking animals in a love poem. Unlike in the Song of Songs or similar works, animals in “Three Valentines” do not represent otherness but are closely identified with the speaker (“us all”) and with Love itself (“the grackle”), forming a confused continuum. Unlike in Thomson, they do not represent an ideal of unselfconscious and reciprocated desire. Instead, animals seem to symbolize the failure of symbolism. Like Chaucer, Bishop ironizes and quickly dismisses the traditional poetic symbols of love, Venus and Cupid. Birds, by contrast, seem to offer hope of a more flexible and appropriate mode of representation; as Berger says, animals are central to our very capacity for symbolic thought. But, precisely because animals do furnish such rich possibilities, the fact that both Chaucer’s narrator and Bishop’s speaker find them to be a tempting but ultimately unsatisfying means for comprehending love is significant. Both poems celebrate love for what Bishop calls its “limitations,” the way “Love confounds” and frustrates (p.147) expectations (ll. 48, 21). Hence animals provide an apt symbolic vocabulary—varied, suggestive, yet finally insufficient. Like love itself, they hold out a promise that remains ever unfulfilled.
Birds in *The Parliament of Fowls* offer a normative model of love—heterosexual, monogamous—and also challenge the universality of that model. The challenge grows even more pointed when a work invokes interspecies love. The two poems with which this chapter began, by Catullus and Sappho, offer an example: the recognizable erotic structures and categories represented in Sappho’s fragment, where the speaker’s desire for her beloved (in this case a same-sex desire) is triangulated through the figure of a male companion, become radically estranged when Catullus replaces the man with a sparrow. Whenever species outlines begin to blur—as they do so vividly in Roethke’s “To an Amorous Lady” but also, more subtly, in Spenser’s sonnet 67 and Frost’s “Two Look at Two”—other categories in turn quickly become destabilized. Interspecies love, in other words, is queer in its defiance of traditional boundaries and distinctions. Hence critics have increasingly begun to explore the connections between animal studies and queer theory. As Alice Kuzniar notes, the literary representation of love for animals (she focuses on dogs) can offer a radically disruptive challenge to traditional conceptions of love, “continuing and furthering the work of queer studies that interrogates the binaries that arise from inflexible gender and sexual identity categories.”
Often these literary representations take the form of poems. It would be too easy to say that all poetry is “queer”—the term loses its force when it is applied indiscriminately to anything that deviates from a hypothetical norm. But it can be said that poetry, with its deliberately nonconforming language and defamiliarizing tropes, offers an abundance of resources to writers wishing to express queer forms of desire. Such is the case, for instance, of Michael Field, which was the pen name and literary persona adopted by two Englishwomen, Katharine Bradley and Edith Cooper, who, beginning in the 1880s, collaborated in writing poems and verse dramas; they also, despite being aunt and niece, lived together as lovers for the last forty years of their lives. “Michael Field” defies classification. Contemporaries (along with critics ever since) referred to the couple (p.148) variously by singular and plural, male and female pronouns. Their first collection of poems, *Long Ago* (1889), which includes many love poems, celebrates this queerness; based on the fragments of Sappho, it highlights the confusions of gender, number, and language that characterize their relationship. But *Long Ago* seems almost straightforward in comparison to *Whym Chow: Flame of Love* (1914), the last collection published during either of their lifetimes. In 1898 Bradley gave Cooper a dog as a birthday present, whom they named Whym Chow; when he died, eight years later, the two women were overwhelmed with grief. The dual result of their bereavement was a turn to religion, culminating in their joint conversion to Catholicism the following year, and a sequence of thirty poems, which Bradley eventually published a few months after her niece’s death and shortly before her own. The poems take many forms: elegy, prayer, paean. But they are all, at heart, love poems, describing and expressing the uncategorizable love that bound these three beings together.

The unusual nature of their ménage is most succinctly expressed in the fifth lyric of the sequence, “Trinity”:

```
I did not love him for myself alone:
I loved him that he loved my dearest love.
O God, no blasphemy
It is to feel we loved in trinity,
To tell Thee that I loved him as Thy Dove
Is loved, and is Thy own,
That comforted the moan
Of Thy Beloved, when earth could give no balm
```
And in Thy Presence makes His tenderest calm.

So I possess this creature of Love’s flame,
So loving what I love he lives from me;
Not white, a thing of fire,
Of seraph-plumèd limbs and one desire,
That is my heart’s own, and shall ever be:
An animal—with aim
Thy Dove avers the same...
O symbol of our perfect union, strange
Unconscious Bearer of Love’s interchange.48

(p.149) The first two lines of the poem present a situation familiar from Sappho 31, among many other examples: the speaker’s love is intensified by being channeled through a third party (I loved him for loving my beloved). But the triangle in this case is queerer than the one in Sappho’s poem. Not only does it involve an animal but, in contrast to most love triangles, it seems not to involve any sense of jealousy or imbalance. Unlike in Catullus 2, for instance, the three-way interspecies love appears to be equal on all sides and in all directions. To elucidate the nature of the relationship, the speaker therefore invokes, not classical precedents, but the triune godhead itself. The love experienced by the Trinity is like theirs: same sex, interspecies (since the Holy Spirit is typically figured as a dove), and free from jealousy.

Yet the invocation of the Trinity disturbs the perfection of the lovers’ triangle, even as it provides an illuminating analogy for it. “O God” in line 3 adds a fourth party to the happy triad of “I,” “him,” and “my dearest love”—an observer or audience to whom account must be given and who thus uncomfortably squares their queer triangle. This effect is underlined by the structure of the stanza, which begins with threes: an opening abc rhyme scheme that is then mirrored (cba) to form a chiastic embrace. These first six lines, in syntax as well as form, are self-sufficient and could constitute a complete stanza. Instead, the stanza continues for three more lines, breaking the self-enclosure of the chiasmus with another a rhyme and adding a fourth rhyme in the concluding couplet. The disruption of the initial symmetry serves as a reminder that this relationship, happy and stable as it is, remains defiantly queer; a “strange...interchange” (as the final couplet has it) that cannot be so easily diagrammed.
The same pattern repeats throughout the poem; no sooner are relationships and subjectivities established than they begin to morph and multiply. The many pronouns, as Kuzniar notes, are “confusing and need to be paid close attention.” The “I,” as always in the work of Michael Field, is particularly elusive: since this highly autobiographical volume was composed by two women who wrote and even identified as one man (they referred to each other as “Michael” and “Field”), the speaking voice reads simultaneously as masculine singular and feminine plural. The “thou,” meanwhile, also shifts. The first apostrophe, “O God,” seems to establish the addressee, and the identification continues in the references to “Thee” and “Thy” that follow. But the final address, “O symbol of our perfect union,” is less certain. The “symbol” could be God, who in the form of the Trinity has already been adduced as an emblem of the lovers’ “union.” But (p.150) the apostrophe is more likely directed not to God but to the dog, unconscious symbol and channel of the love between the two women (as the opening lines intimate). These suggestive confusions, the erotic blurring of the bounds between individuals, are made possible both by the dog, whose inclusion breaks down what are usually perceived as sharp categorical distinctions, and by the resources of lyric poetry. As Jonathan Culler explains, the structure of “triangulated address,” by which a lyric voice speaks simultaneously to an apostrophized addressee and to an audience outside the poem, is “central to the lyric” as a genre. “Trinity,” with its two apostrophes that may or may not address the same being, takes advantage of this recognizable structure both to establish the triangular relationship at its center and to expand beyond it.
Love eschews strict taxonomies and tabulations. “Number...in love [is] slain,” as Shakespeare writes in “The Phoenix and the Turtle”—another poem that figures ideal love through a queer interspecies relationship, in this case between the “Turtle” or turtledove (usually represented as female in poetry but here recast as the male partner) and the Phoenix (also a sort of bird, but a legendary and semi-immortal one). In Shakespeare’s poem, however, number is slain by being reduced to perfect loving unity: “So they loved as love in twain
| Had the essence but in one, | Two distincts, division none.”

In “Trinity,” more unexpectedly, number is drowned through love’s multiplicity. The normative, indeed cliché rhyme of “love” with “Dove” in stanza 1 is complicated and in a sense redeemed by multiplication. “Dove” may rhyme officially with the “love” at the end of line 2, but it chimes more proximately with the two instances of “loved” to either side. The poem contains “love” in all its forms: love, loved, Love’s, loving, Beloved—twelve instances of the word in all, in multiple cases. The polyptoton suggests the innumerability of the possible shapes of love. By the same token, the poem ends by underlining love’s ineffability. “An animal—with aim | Thy Dove avers the same...”: the lines begin with an alliterative stutter in the first two syllables, then cut themselves off abruptly (aposiopesis), then continue with faulty grammar (anacoluthon) before concluding in tautology. The poetic tropes all serve (p.151) to emphasize the limitations of merely human language to convey erotic truths.

The close interrelationship between love, animals, and poetry is highlighted in the ninth poem of the sequence, “My loved One is away from me.” The poem describes how Whym Chow would wait anxiously all day for his beloved mistress to come home and would react ecstatically when she did. This is also the subject of an earlier poem (number 6, “What is the other name of Love?”), which details the dog’s obstreperous joy at their daily reunion:

thy rage of welcome how
Should words tell dim—the bound,
The dances round and round,
As if the sun had come down carrying love
. . . . . . . . .
And in thy body had his hour
Of cabriole and circle on the ground!53
In poem 9, however, the waiting dog is joined by one of the two women—the “I” of the poem—who shares both his utter despondency and his inexpressible glee at the beloved’s return:

For, lo, our loved One surely came,
Lo, she was at the door!
Your eyes demanded Yes, in running flame;
Mine gave them Yes—no more:
And we had reached our vigil’s end in gladness
Of so great ease from terror it seemed
madness.54

There is something unavoidably uncomfortable about this account. However natural it may seem for the dog to experience love in this way, it seems queer for the speaker to align herself so closely with his experience. The love that is described, after all, involves almost no interaction with the beloved—no speech, or even physical contemplation—but is summed up in a single, blissful moment of sheer presence, regularly repeated.
Queer, yet not unprecedented. To the contrary: in *La Vita Nuova* (1295), Dante explains that his highest happiness, the end and sum of all his desires, was simply to receive Beatrice’s salutation. So anxious is he for the reader to comprehend the power of her “sweet greeting, in which all my bliss consisted” that he digresses from his narrative and devotes an entire short chapter to describing its effect on him.\(^{55}\) In his expectation of \(^{(p.152)}\) her greeting, he is “overcome by a flame” of love, to such an extent that, “if anyone had asked me for anything at such times, my reply would have been merely ‘Love.’” When the salutation is actually bestowed, his eyes tremble, and his whole body, “by a surfeit of sweetness,” escapes his command and comes “completely under [Love’s] control.”\(^{56}\) Dante and the dog share a particular experience of passionate love, one that forgoes certain benefits—dialogue, for instance, or even duration—in favor of the exquisitely concentrated rapture of the suspended moment of encounter.

In identifying so wholly with Whym Chow, the speaker of “My loved One is away from me” thus presents us with a version of love that is both undeniably queer (as all the love expressed in the volume is) and deeply familiar. For Dante is not alone in his vision of love. Lyric poets both before and after, from Sappho onward, have testified to the power of the moment of encounter—how such a moment, even if expected or daily repeated, is capable of depriving the lover of sense and speech.

Lyric poetry, in fact, shares the defining features of canine or Dantean love: concentration, and the celebration of a single suspended moment. Brevity is perhaps the one feature of lyric on which all theorists agree: a lyric poem is characterized by focus and unity. It is also typically associated with a particular form of temporality, what is sometimes called “lyric time,” which often involves a form of present-tense discourse that mediates between the momentary and the eternal.\(^{57}\) This affinity helps explain the metapoetic turn near the beginning of “My loved One is away from me”:

\[
\text{My loved One is away from me;} \\
\text{I may not turn to find,} \\
\text{Chow, in thy senses the infinity} \\
\text{That in my senses pined} \\
\text{For her we loved in absence and together,} \\
\text{My feet, thine eager paws, questioning whether}
\]
The loved One would come back to us
Or now, or soon, or late.
Oh, in our vigil to be solaced thus,
By the unbounded pressure of one yearning
Vaster than we, no pause in it, no turning!  

(p.153) The reference to the dog’s “paws” at the end of the first of these stanzas, coming as it does at a caesura, draws attention to the poetic pause that follows—a pun that is reinforced by the (re)appearance of the word “pause” in the same metrical position at the end of the next stanza. “My feet, thine eager paws,” meanwhile, carries a double implication. In the first place it suggests—again rather embarrassingly—that the speaker joins the dog in pacing around the house all day until the beloved comes home. But it also suggests that the two creatures measure the beloved’s absence each in his or her own way: the dog through its restless movements, the poet through her metrical “feet.” These two stanzas notably use the resources of poetry to convey their experience of waiting: the enjambment between the stanzas (this is the only place in the poem where it occurs) suggests the endlessness of their “vigil”; the missing rhyme for “late” in the second stanza (this is the one stanza to be short of a line) suggests the beloved’s painful absence. But the speaker, unembarrassed, makes no attempt to distinguish her poetic efforts from the dog’s activity; to the contrary she puts her love lyric and the dog’s love, her feet and his eager paws, in parallel. The trinity of animal, poem, and love forms an equilateral triangle.

Notes:


(2) Stoppard, The Invention of Love, 13.

(3) The scene in which the discussion about Catullus takes place is set earlier, when Housman and Pollard are still students at Oxford. On C. S. Lewis’s claim, see Introduction, pp. 4–5.

(5) The ordering of the poems in Catullus’ collection is usually considered to be authorial. It has in any case been taken as standard since the collection’s rediscovery in the fourteenth century.


Animals


(22) In “The Most of It” (1942), another poem about seeing a wild buck, Frost makes the point more explicitly: “what [life] wants | Is not its own love back in copy speech, | But counter-love, original response” (ll. 6–8).

(23) Berger, “Why Look at Animals?,” 6; Berger is quoting from Roy Willis, *Man and Beast*, and attributes the story to “the Nuer of southern Sudan.”


(29) Identical or “rich” rhymes, such as “away” and “way,” are common in Italian and French (from both of which Spenser made poetic translations) but are generally less accepted in English.


(39) See *Symposium* 210a–e, as well as the discussion above in Chapter 1, pp. 35–7.


(42) *theare*A. C. Spearing, “‘Al This Mene I Be Love,’” *Studies in the Age of Chaucer*, 2 (1987), 169–77,

(43) Spearing, “‘Al This Mene I Be Love,’” 177.

(45) In section 2 the beloved too becomes identified with "Love" ("I swear I cannot tell you two apart" (l. 23)), so that all elements merge indistinguishably.


(49) Kuzniar, "‘I Married My Dog,’" 211. Kuzniar’s essay includes good brief readings both of “Trinity” and of the ninth poem, “My loved One is away from me.”


(53) Field, *Whym Chow*, 16.


(58) Field, *Whym Chow*, 22; these are the second and third stanzas of the poem.
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