



Writer and Nature

Cliff Forshaw

I AM A POET AND A PAINTER. Apart from the human figure, I rarely draw or paint 'nature'. My landscapes tend to be cityscapes, often post-industrial. I do, however, often write about animals and admire poets who try to see the world from inside an animal's skin. I am keen on nature going about its business: what used to be known as *natura naturans* — 'nature naturing'. In *Translations from the Natural World* Les Murray performs a sleight-of-the-senses to present his poems as snapshots of animal consciousness. Here's his 'Bats' Ultrasound':

*ah, eyrie-ire, aero hour, eh?
O'er our ur-area (our era aye
ere your raw row) we air our array,
err, yaw, row wry — aura our orrery,
our eerie ü our ray, our arrow.*

In Murray's 'The Cows on Killing Day' the herd *is* the individual:

All me are standing on feed. The sky is shining.

All me have just been milked. Teats all tingling still
from that dry toothless sucking by the chilly mouths
that gasp loudly in in in, and never breathe out.

The charge of anthropomorphism is hard to avoid if you are translating animal consciousness into an essentially human medium: language. It



also risks sentimentality. I'm not sure that a little sentiment and human-shaping is such a bad thing in a poem. To paraphrase Neruda: 'Those who flee sentiment, die in ice.' Here's Murray's 'Goose to Donkey':

My big friend, I bow help;
I bow Get up, big friend:
let me land-swim again beside your clicky feet,
don't sleep flat with dried wet in your holes.

Ironically, Murray deals with the incomprehensibility of death by exploiting the expressive power of inarticulacy. Seeing the world through animal senses is an example of a basic poetic strategy: what the Russian formalists called 'ostranenie' or 'defamiliarisation'. To see the world afresh we 'make it strange'. It is also a way of creeping up close to realities, instincts and fears we have difficulty thinking or talking about. For Murray's 'Pigs' the abattoir, and hence death, is incomprehensible: 'Us all on sore cement was we':

The burnt water kicking. This gone-already feeling
here in no place with our heads on upside down.

Of course, the poet may wish to register sensation from within his own consciousness. Gerard Manley Hopkins is intent on 'inscape' — knowing the peculiar essence or nature of things. Hopkins the Jesuit, agrees with Thomas Aquinas: 'All knowledge comes through the senses' and gives us precise observation.

For rose-moles all in stipple upon trout that swim;
Fresh-firecoal chestnut-falls; finches' wings [...]

Hopkins both registers the natural world with its 'All things counter, original, spare, strange' and sees behind this a spiritual principle 'whose beauty is past change'. Murray, too, pulls back, as his bats become 'A raw ear, our aery Yahweh.'



Modern nature writing can shift rather easily into the gothic. Ted Hughes's 'malevolent' cannibalistic pike are 'Killers from the egg' with 'One jammed past its gills down the other's gullet'. The drama depends on playing with an anthropomorphic perspective: The pike are 'A hundred feet long in their world.' (That 'hundred feet' is, of course, the measurement of our world, not theirs.)

The world of living things, from the whale to the mayfly, each with its own, often strange, sensory world can provide an inexhaustible set of new perspectives, and by engaging with it, trying to bring a sense of measure to our observations, we stretch language and, perhaps also, our consciousness of all those other ways and forms of being, and what it is to be ourselves.