

Araştırma Makalesi / Research Article DOI: 10.33207/trkede.1194971

## DYLAN THOMAS' ANIMALIZED SELF: A ZOOPOETICAL READING OF DYLAN THOMAS' POETRY

*Dylan Thomas'ın Hayvan Benliği: Dylan Thomas'ın Şiirlerinin  
Zoopoetik Okuması*

**Dilek BULUT SARIKAYA\***

**ABSTRACT:** Zoopoetics emerges as a reaction to the conventional poetic tradition that represents animals as silenced objects and symbolic elements of literature. Aligning animals with agency, subjectivity, and self-consciousness, zoopoetics treats animals as the essential and dynamic actors of the literary activity and refuses to perceive them as simple background materials. Hence, rising awareness towards animals and reconfiguring a more intimate and interdependent relationship between humans and nonhuman animals are the substantial issues, put forward by zoopoetics. Animals, undeniably, occupy a predominant place in the poetry of Dylan Thomas who incessantly emphasizes material and spiritual affinity between human and nonhuman animals. In this respect, zoopoetical scrutiny of Dylan Thomas' poetry will be the prevailing concern of this study to unravel the poet's unconventional identification with animals as his spiritual partners and companions. Reading Dylan Thomas' poetry from the perspective of zoopoetical criticism will provide a wider insight to Thomas' notion of animality, immersed in the human self as well as the agentic capacity of animals in the making of his poetry.

**Keywords:** Zoopoetics, Animals, Dylan Thomas, Poetry, Agency

**ÖZ:** Zoopoetika, hayvanları edebiyatın sessiz objeleri ve sembolik öğeleri olarak gören geleneksel şiir anlayışına karşı bir tepki olarak ortaya çıkmıştır. Hayvanlara canlılık, bireysellik ve öz bilinçsellik gibi özellikler atfeden zoopoetika, onları edebiyatın bir arka plan faktörü olarak görmektense, edebi metinlerin dinamik ve gerekli aktörleri olarak kabul eder. Bu nedenle, hayvanlara karşı farkındalığın artırılması ve insan ve hayvanlar arasında daha sıkı ve birbirine bağımlı bir ilişki kurulması zoopoetikanın ortaya attığı başlıca konulardır. İnsan ve hayvanlar arasında fiziksel ve duyuşal yakınlığa dikkat çeken Dylan Thomas'ın şiirlerinde hayvanlar azımsanmayacak derecede önemli bir yere sahiptir. Bu nedenle, bu çalışmanın temel amacı Dylan Thomas'ın şiirlerinin zoopoetik eleştirel okumasını yaparak, şairin hayvanlarla olan sıradışı özdeşleşmesini ve onları nasıl manevi dostları olarak gördüğünü ortaya çıkarmaktır. Zoopoetik eleştirel bakış açısı, Thomas'ın inancına göre, insan

---

\* Dr., Kapadokya Üniversitesi, Beşeri Bilimler Fakültesi, İngiliz Dili ve Edebiyatı, Nevşehir, dileksarikaya27@gmail.com, ORCID: 0000-0001-5514-6929

**Geliş Tarihi / Received: 26.10.2022**

**Kabul Tarihi / Accepted: 15.11.2022**

**Yayın Tarihi / Published: 30.01.2023**

kişiliğinde bulunan hayvanlık kavramını ve şairin şiirlerinin oluşumunda hayvanların faal bir rol alabilme kapasitesini ortaya çıkaracaktır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Zoopoetika, Hayvanlar, Dylan Thomas, Şiir, Canlılık

### **Introduction**

The inexorable impact of the animal activist movements is the upsurge of literary interest in human-animal studies, intersecting disciplines by drawing from science, politics, history, culture and philosophy. Questioning human exceptionality and supremacy in the literary sphere prompts scholars to develop new critical theories, practices and attitudes with the aim of investigating how animals are represented in literary texts and how human perception of animals is constructed stereotypically, erasing their distinctiveness and individuality. Human-animal studies urges humans to take animals seriously with a “growing cultural awareness of what animals mean, of what the animal as a concept means, and that animals have some form of inalienable value to and for themselves” (Oerlemans, 2018: 2). Zoopoetics appears as one of these critical theories, concerned with reconfiguring a more democratic human-animal relationship in literature. The term “zoopoetics” is first used by Derrida in an allusion to Kafka’s immense use of animals in his works (2008: 6). However, the emergence of zoopoetics as a poetic attempt to build a more intimate relationship between humans and animals is introduced by Aaron Moe with the publication of his book, *Zoopoetics: Animals and the Making of Poetry* in 2013. Moe’s revolutionary attempt of shifting the roles of animals from being silenced, insignificant objects into that of constructively assertive partners in the poetic production fosters zoopoetical criticism as an alternative to the anthropocentric domination of nonhuman animals in literature.

Nonhuman animals particularly play predominant roles in Dylan Thomas’ nature poetry which gives impression to the poet’s approbation of the material and emotional interconnectedness of humans and nonhuman animals. While Thomas has been appreciated for his scientific sense of cosmos “as absolute flux” in which human body is in a continual state of interaction with the natural elements, his endorsement of the inseparability of humans and animals seems to be either overlooked or under-scrutinized (Goodby, 2013: 8). Therefore, exploring Thomas’ poetry from the perspective of zoopoetical criticism will be the major concern of this study to instantiate the poet’s stupendous identification with animals as his spiritual partners and companions as well as the agency of animals in the making of his poetry. Respectively, a zoopoetical approach to Thomas’ poetry not only will add a further dimension to the cognizance of his poetry,

but also will provide a better insight to the poet's fascination with animality as the material constituent of the human self.

### **Zoopoetics**

The evolution of zoopoetics can be traced back to the eco-poetical configuration of the universe as a “*community*, rather than a world of creatures and natural beings with whom the privileged human self interacts” (Bate 2000: 42, emphasis in the original). Within this communal understanding of the universe, the human affinity with the nonhuman world requires, as Jonathan Bate argues, not “dwelling with the earth, not a disengaged thinking about it, but an experiencing of it” (2000: 42). Maintaining the mutual co-enhancement of humans and nonhumans as a community on earth, eco-poetry delineates poetic activity as a dynamic process of “*poiesis*, making” that is assembling enduring connections between humans and the natural environment (Bate, 2000: 42, emphasis in the original).

Appropriating the eco-poetical view of human-nonhuman entrenchment within its theoretical debate, zoopoetics seeks to reinvigorate seemingly lost connection between humans and nonhuman animals by bringing them together as un-submissive partners in the literary domain as well as the outside material world. As Driscoll and Hoffmann insistently affirm, the purpose of zoopoetical reading is to elucidate “the mutual imbrication and entanglement of the material and semiotic, the body and the text, the animal and the word” (Driscoll and Hoffmann, 2018: 4). Diverging from the paths of dogmatic, externalizing attitudes to animals, zoopoetics is “predicated upon an engagement with animals and animality (human and nonhuman)” and questions the symbolic and metaphoric representation of animals in literature (Driscoll and Hoffmann, 2018: 4). Increasing awareness towards animals, exploring human-animal relationship, and liberating poetry from human *hegemony* are the essential premises of zoopoetics. In the formation of poetry, zoopoetics ascribes active roles to animals and “demands a recognition that animals possess communicative zones as well—zones that may differ from the human mouth” and eventually, transforms the poetic process into a multi-species and a multi-vocal activity (Moe, 2014: 3).

Quintessentially, zoopoetics develops a subversive attitude to the subjugation of animals within objectified depiction in literature and radically situates animals at the core of poetics as the most essential and dynamic constituting units of literature. In this respect, zoopoetics attempts to change literary tradition in favor of animals by maintaining the “reanimalization of

language”, giving animals back their speech and foregrounding the subversive and discursive animals who can speak for their own rights (Driscoll and Hoffmann, 2018: 3). Elaborating on the nature of human-animal encounters in the material and textual environments, Moe comments on the function of poetry as a site of bodily interaction between different species and states that:

“The starting point for zoopoetics is as follows: Zoopoetics is the process of discovering innovative breakthroughs in form through attentiveness to another species’ bodily *poiesis*...First, zoopoetics focuses on the process by which animals are makers. They make texts. They gesture. They vocalize. The sounds and vocalizations emerge from a rhetorical body, a poetic body, or rather a body that is able *to make*” (2014: 10-11, emphasis in the original).

Moe argues that what *constitutes poetry* is the presence of animals who, more than being background materials, are at the forefront of literature. Animals through their inter-species communication with various sign systems contribute to the *composition of poetry*. Animals, as poetic individuals, are capable of producing meaningful *communication* with their environment through their bodies, vocalizations, and gestures. Moe reinforces his argument by referring to the Aristotelian concept of poetics that is the “impulse or instinct to ‘imitate’” (2014: 7). If poetics is an act of imitation, Moe argues, animals are perfect imitators of what *they* see and perceive. Thus, “[i]nnovative imitations of gestures contributed to the evolution and emergence of animal rhetoric, and they helped shape the evolution of poetry and poetics in the Euro-American tradition” (Moe, 2014: 7). That is to say, animals are capable of rhetorical power to transmit their feelings and emotions effectively and poetically by using their bodily gestures and sounds, which appear as crucial embodiments of poetic activity that is open to cross-species engagement, including both humans and nonhumans as conjoint actors.

Ascribing agency to animals, zoopoetics destabilizes the essentialist and reductionist views of animals who are degraded to the status of serving human benefits. In his pioneering article, “A Hoot in the Dark”, George Kennedy underscores the rhetorical skill of animals with a hint at intentional agency of animals by declaring that “many [animals] manifest love, at least mothers for their offspring; some show signs of loneliness and depression; and biologists frequently describe some animals as demonstrating ‘altruism,’ meaning a concern for others expressed through protecting them at their own risks” (Kennedy, 1991: 11). From the zoopoetical perspective, animal agency is manifested through animals’ active participation in the making of

poetry with their bodily entanglements and meaningful vocal utterances. As Haraway confirms, “[n]othing is passive to the action of another, but all the infoldings can occur only in the fleshly detail of situated, material–semiotic beings” (2008: 263). Hence, allotting agency indiscriminately among humans and nonhumans enables zoopoetics to mitigate the rigidly drawn distinctions between species and represent them as equal partners in a continual interaction both in the textual sphere and in the outside physical world. Agency ensures animals as influential contributors “in the *production* of the very materiality of the texts” (Driscoll and Hoffmann, 2018: 7, emphasis in the original). For zoopoetical criticism, animals’ active involvement is the “crucial aspect of *poiesis*, that is, *makings* through their innumerable nuances of bodily movement, symbolic gesture, and in many cases, symbolic vocalization” (Moe, 2014: 7). Hence, poetry through zoopoetics turns into a polyphonic event and a multi-species enmeshment in which nonhuman individuals also have the right for self-revelation and self-expression.

#### **Dylan Thomas’ zoopoetics**

Taking the outlining principles of zoopoetical criticism into consideration, Dylan Thomas’ poetry is committed to forge an unassailable connection between humans and nonhumans along with unsettling the dogmatic assumptions about the species boundaries. In his poems, Thomas frequently envisions himself in animal personalities and depicts animals as social beings, having cognitive self-awareness and capable of building trans-species relationship. Thomas’ sensitivity to animals is most explicitly discerned in “Because the Pleasure-Bird Whistles” in which the problems of torturing, exploiting and abusing animals who are turned into commodity materials are introduced:

“Because the pleasure-bird whistles after the hot wires,  
Shall the blind horse sing sweeter?  
Convenient bird and beast lie lodged to suffer  
The supper and knives of a mood” (2003: 77).

The first two lines draw an image of a caged bird who is blinded for making him sing in a more beautiful way. Thomas questions the morality of blinding birds due to a “common belief that song-birds sang better if they were blinded” (Goodby, 2013: 306). The poet, further, imagines himself as a blind horse who is supposed to write better poems just like the blind bird who sings sweeter songs because of the pain and suffering. The poet’s emotional identification with the pleasure-bird, who is entrapped in a cage, enables him to visualize himself as a beast in a cage who suffers from the

cruelty of humans by saying that “bird and beast lie lodged to suffer” (Thomas, 2003: 77). Entwining himself with suffering animals and revealing his own animality, Thomas erases species differences and promulgates the emotional continuity between the human self and the animals who are inextricably interwoven together. Moe notes that “bodily *poiesis* of animals also suggests a zoomorphism of humans. That is, the *makings* of animals illuminate the bodily *poiesis* of humans. Through the material body, humans still badger, quail, bear, and leapfrog in all of our animality” (2014: 18, emphasis in the original). Accordingly, Thomas’ zoopoetical perspective enables him to imagine himself as a blinded bird and a horse who are capable of producing poetry through their bodily *poiesis*. The zoomorphic image of the poet as a bird and a horse, suffering from human cruelty not only broadens the literary platform to include nonhuman animals as makers of Thomas’ poem but also evokes emphatic understanding for the vulnerable and suppressed animals who are exposed to human violence.

While showing the “extreme narrowness of the individual genius”, Thomas reveals the “basic animal (one of his favorite symbols) in man” in order to obfuscate the anthropocentric exceptionality of humans (Shapiro, 1955: 108). Ackerman writes that Thomas’s poetry offers a “radical relationship between human and natural life” with his “sensitivity towards animal and vegetal life much more profound than the conventional ‘love of nature’” (1991: 76). Likewise, “Author’s Prologue”, the opening poem of *The Collected Poems, 1934-1952* (2003) is a perfect elucidation of the poet’s radical relationship with nature and its animal inhabitants:

“This day winding down now  
At God speeded summer’s end  
In the torrent salmon sun,  
In my seashaken house  
On a breakneck of rocks  
Tangled with chirrup and fruit,  
Froth, flute, fin and quill  
At a wood’s dancing hoof,  
By scummed, starfish sands  
With their fishwife cross  
Gulls, pipers, cockles, and sails,  
Out there, crow black, men  
Tackled with clouds, who kneel  
To the sunset nets,  
Geese nearly in heaven, boys  
Stabbing, and herons, and shells” (Thomas, 2003: ix).

The sentient and wakeful image of nature is created in these lines, imbued with the restlessness and hyperactivity of nonhuman dwellers of nature. It is a reflection of the poet's personal experience of the festive-like scenery in which all animals participate fervently in a choral performance of nature. The poem reflects a setting of the seaside, populated by a variety of sea birds like herons, gulls and pipers and other natural entities like sun, rocks, air, and wind that are all encumbered with exuberance and have stories to tell. The day's "winding down" at "God speeded summer's end" indicate the spirit and vitality of nature although the summer has come to an end (Thomas, 2003: ix). The poet, from the window of his house on the seashore, admirably watches the flock of birds flying over the sea and listens to their exhilarated screams while he is trying to write his poem. The use of words like "chirrup, froth, flute, fin, quill and dancing" endorses animals' articulative power, their distinctive ways of interaction with each other (Thomas, 2003: ix). The poet proves that the meaningful communication, instead of being a uniquely human trait, is more profoundly achieved by animal communities with their advanced form of aptitude for building social networks. Abram notes that "most other animals manage to communicate with each other, often employing a repertoire of gestures", manifesting their corporeal dynamism and potency for zoopoetic creativity (1997: 55). Similarly, animals, in Thomas' poem, reveal their agency in different ways like screaming, chirrups, dancing and flying in synchronized bodily movements over the sea. Unlike humans whose communicative capacities are limited to discourse and speech, animals display their agency in multiple forms in diverse bodily movements and gestures.

The passive role of the poet as a domestic observer is contrasted with the high-spirited carnivalesque atmosphere of the animal-animated world which is in everlasting state of alteration and convergence. Apart from suffusing nature with their vital energy, animals are also observed to be activating Thomas' poem with the pivotal role they play in the concretization of the poem. Actively involving in the poem as primary contributors, animals permeate the poem with their unique gestures, movements and voices, and successfully create a zoopoetical poem which is "inextricably bound up with the intensity of animal *poiesis*—poems with gestures playing with an animal's gestures and vocalizations" (Moe, 2014: 5, emphasis in the original). Animals are dominant forces that push forward the lyrical form of the poem as well as shaping the imagination of the poet.

The presence of animals at the very centre of the poem implicates that animals are not the passive objects of the poetic creativity but are the active participants of it. Hence, the poem comes into being through a mutual participation of human and nonhuman actors, revealing that “[h]umans and nonhumans for their part can join their forces without requiring their counterparts on the other side disappear. To put it yet another way: *objects and subjects can never associate with one another; humans and nonhumans can*” (Latour, 2004: 76, emphasis in the original). In the same vein, Thomas’ animals are not the objects but the major actors of his poetry. What’s more, even the domineering power of nonhuman elements over humans is highlighted by the poet’s depiction of “my seashaken house”, showing the weakness of humans and their culture before nature (Thomas, 2003: ix).

The poem is, further, textually animalized by animals who dominate the diction and the atmosphere of the poem, invigorated by the animal presence and natural energy. The use of expressions like “torrent salmon sun”, “wood’s dancing hoof” “starfish sand”, “fishwife cross”, and “dogdayed night” are evidences, showing the poet’s animalistic perception of the outside world in which sun is visualized as torrent salmon and the movement of the leaves and branches of trees in the wind are associated with the hoof of a horse (Thomas, 2003: ix). The abundance of references to animals like gulls, pipers, cockles, sails, crow black and geese also indicate that animals are the controlling elements over the language of the poem as well as shaping the animalistic vision of the poet.

The intrusion of expressions as an allusion to the Second World War like “stabbing, herons and shells” implicitly draws attention to the incongruity of the serenity of animals with the aggression of the humankind, sustained by killing, hostility, and wars (Thomas 2003: ix). Thomas’ modernist disillusionment with the frenzied world of humans causes him to identify with animals who are unaware of the upcoming threat of war. Concerned about the potential distortion of the peaceful world of innocent animals, Thomas, in his poem, envisions himself as the prophet Noah building his ark to unite all the animals and rescue them from the approaching turmoil and uncertainty of war:

“I build my bellowing ark  
To the best of my love  
As the flood begins,  
Out of the fountainhead  
Of fear, rage red, manalive,  
Molten and mountainous to stream



Over the wound asleep  
Sheep white hollow farms  
To Wales in my arms" (2003: x).

Besides expressing his determination to escape from the forthcoming flood of "fear, rage red" caused by humans, the poet yearns for a reunion with nature and its animal inhabitants for whom he feels physical and emotional attachment (Thomas, 2003: x). Creating an image of a prophet who is responsible for the safety and the wellbeing of his community, Thomas undertakes the task of saving animals from humans' chaotic world of terror and violence in the shadow of war and expresses his genuine desire to escape to his native country, that is, Wales with animals in his arms. The notion of the poet's embracing all the animals in his arms is noteworthy in revealing the poet's care and emotional attachment to animals. In a tumultuous atmosphere of confusion, fear and hatred brought about by the Second World War Thomas considers animals as his only companions who are turned into vulnerable victims of the modern world. The prophetic image of Thomas underscores his unifying role in bringing together as many animals as possible in his ark of poetry: "Hark: I trumpet the place / From fish to jumping hill!" (2003: x). Thomas' sanctification of animals in his poem unfolds his zoopoetical appreciation of the physical universe which is not characterized by human domination and homogenous configurations, but by a heterogeneously woven web of interconnections among animals.

In the following lines, the "Author's Prologue" continues to display Thomas' zoopoetical view of animals who are competent enough to form their own social groups in a meaningful exchange of communication with their environment. Animals do not appear as simple instinctive creatures, acting irrationally, on the contrary, they stand as reasonable actors and emotional individuals, having their own animal vision of the world:

"But animals thick as thieves  
On God's rough tumbling grounds  
(Hail to His beasthood!).  
Beasts who sleep good and thin,  
Hist, in hogsback woods! The haystacked  
Hollow farms in a throng" (2003: xi).

The image of animals hailing to "His beasthood" indicates that God does not stand aloof from the universe in Thomas' animalistic universe (Thomas, 2003: xi). God is also part of the pantheistic universe and everything in nature including humans, nonhumans and God are in an inter-communal relationship with each other. Thomas' zoopoetics, in this quotation, is

revealed through his perception of animals as spiritual beings who can understand the existence of God in animal terms, an animalized religion in which animals hail to His beasthood. The poet creates a unique sense of animal religion in which every piece of nature is consecrated. Thomas's zoopoetically enlivened imagination allows him to understand the outside world from the perspective of animals and shatter the strictly drawn boundaries between the realm of religion and animals who emerge as divine creatures, having a potential for spirituality and piousness. The poem commemorates a perpetually evolving material universe where distinctions are eradicated, margins are broken and "animals and religion are proactively entwined", eliciting respect and dignity for animals and other natural entities (Malamud, 2003: 145).

To emphasize the connectedness of animals, the poet specifically describes them as "thick as thieves", sleeping peacefully on "God's rough tumbling grounds" (Thomas, 2003: xi). The notion of animals' being thick as thieves is reminiscent of Haraway's notion of semiotic "entanglement of beings" according to which all human and nonhuman beings have advanced skills of indulging in "reciprocal inductions to shape companion species" (2008: 281). Haraway names all living and nonliving entities in nature as "critters" who compose entanglements and intertwinements with each other (2008: 72). "This is a ramifying tapestry of shared being/becoming among critters (including humans) in which living well, flourishing, and being "polite" (political/ethical/in right relation) mean staying inside shared semiotic materiality" (Haraway, 2008: 72). Similarly, in Thomas' poem, animals are intra-acting critters whose bodily *poiesis* are capable of initiating semiotic entanglement with each other.

Correspondingly, "In Country Sleep" is another exceptional poem which is intensely populated by animals among which are goose, gander, raven, night-bird, robin, roc, rook, cock, nightingale, and gull and attempts to raise "attentiveness towards animals" by undermining the anthropocentric categorization of humans and animals as two contradictory forces (Moe, 2014: 24). The poem strives to reconstruct a harmonious world of human and nonhuman beings in an interdependent relationship with each other by referring to the erroneousness of the biased fictional representations of animals:

"Never and never, my girl riding far and near  
In the land of the hearthstone tales, and spelled asleep,  
Fear or believe that the wolf in a sheepwhite hood  
Loping and bleating roughly and blithely shall leap,

My dear, my dear,  
Out of a lair in the flocked leaves in the dew dipped year  
To eat your heart in the house in the rosy wood" (2003: 162).

Sending his daughter to a good night's sleep, the speaker of the poem, instead of telling bedtime stories of fables, tries to warn his daughter against the fables in which animals are mystified and alienated from the human world. The symbolic portrayal of animals in fables is perceived by the poet to be the root cause of the creation of hostility in the minds of small children towards animals. The poet refers to the allegorical representation of animals in fables, generated by the untenable ideology of anthropocentrism as an expression of 'human chauvinism' and a justification of "human ontological boundaries", positioning humans in a contested, complex and hostile relationship with the nonhuman world (Boddice, 2011: 1).

Reducing animals into abstract concepts through fables and captivating them within stereotypical images stimulate the manipulation of the minds of children into considering nature as the ultimate source of evil. An allegorical image of the wolf in a sheepwhite hood, preparing to eat the heart of a little girl is given as an example by the poet who tries to subvert the ecophobic conceptualization of nature that is feared and seen as a menace for human beings. Ecophobia as a determining element of humans' relation to nature, is defined by Simon Estok as "an irrational and groundless hatred of the natural world, as present and subtle in our daily lives and literature" (2010: 144). Likewise, Thomas, without using the term ecophobia in his poem, displays the irrationality of considering animals as a threat to human life. Such unreasonable condemnation of certain animals inevitably plants the seeds of fear and terror in the human mind, that is, ecophobia, creating unbridgeable distances between humans and animals.

Additionally, the poet's dissatisfaction with the anthropocentric mystification of animals is reminiscent of Derrida who insistently warns against fables which are "always a discourse *of* man, on man, indeed on the animality of man, but for and in man" (2008: 37, emphasis in the original). Hence, the poem is a reflection of Thomas's struggle to extricate animals from the textual victimization of metaphoric representations, and re-establish a totally radical, zoopoetical representation in which animality of animals is not obliterated but enacted. Zoopoetics, as Driscoll and Hoffmann also argue, is an exploration of the "complex relationship between animality and poetic language" and the convergence of "poetic thinking' with 'animal thinking'" (2018: 3). Accordingly, Thomas' poem induces sensitivity to animals who are objectified and stigmatized through textual representations.

Accordingly, “In Country Sleep” is another polyphonic zoopoetry in which animals are not reduced into homogenous representation through which animality of animals is undermined. Unsettling the stereotypical image of nature as a terrifying space, posed against humans, the poem constructs an exclusively new perspective of nature where humans and nonhumans are connected to each other by inherent bonds. The poet assures that nature indeed, is the only place where humans can feel safe and secure from all dangers. The following lines draw attention to the sparkling energy, animal-animated world of nature in which animals are skilled to form their own communities:

“Her robin breasted tree, three Marys in the rays.  
*Sanctum sanctorum* the animal eye of the wood  
In the rain telling its beads, and the gravest ghost  
The owl at its knelling. Fox and holt kneel before blood.  
Now the tales praise  
The star rise at pasture and nightlong the fables graze  
On the lord's-table of the bowing grass. Fear most

For ever of all not the wolf in his baaing hood  
Nor the tusked prince, in the ruttish farm, at the rind  
And mire of love, but the Thief as meek as the dew.  
The country is holy: O bide in that country kind,  
Know the green good,  
Under the prayer wheeling moon in the rosy wood  
Be shielded by chant and flower and gay may you” (2003: 163).

The poem attributes holiness to animals who are presented in a ritualistic act of worshipping in their own unique ways. The use of Latin phrase, “*Sanctum sanctorum*”, meaning “the holy of holies” not only asserts the sacredness of nature but also reveals Thomas’s attempt to restore the sacramental value of animals, mislaid within the consumerist values of the modern world (“*Sanctum sanctorum*,” def. 2020: 1). Being the holy of the holies, “the animal eye of the wood” designates a natural world which is animated by the presence of animals whose agency is revealed through their performances of praying (Thomas, 2003: 163). Each animal in the poem participates in a religious ritual, acting together as a community. The use of religious terms like “telling its beads”, “[t]he owl at its knelling”, “[f]ox and holt kneel before blood”, “prayer wheeling moon”, “the country is holy” all expose the sacredness of life in nature along with displaying the free agency of animals who act intentionally and carry out the communal ceremonies as companion animals (Thomas, 2003: 163). Animals’ collective activities help them build a strong spiritual union with each other and reflect their

interdependent lives. The poem, in that sense, raises awareness about animals who possess heart and soul, acting and behaving not only rationally but also spiritually and morally.

“Zoopoetics”, as Moe suggests, “gravitates toward pantomimes that emerged from an attentiveness to animals” (2014: 15). Animals’ gestural power to communicate their meanings and their reciprocal bodily exchanges are determining features of a zoopoetical work. Animal gestures and sounds, Moe argues, “turn the movements of the body into material signs” through which animals can receive and respond meaningful sensory messages among themselves (2014: 20). Similarly, animals in Thomas’ poem, are not simple impulsive beings who are not aware of the outside phenomena but they come out as self-conscious individuals, telling their beads, expressing their prayers and living as a religious community, sharing the same religious and moral codes with humans.

Besides, animals are the animators and the makers of Thomas’ poem with their active involvement during the constitution of its diction, rhythm, music, energy and vitality. Saying their prayers in their own distinctive ways, their manners, gestures and particular bodily movements as means of communicative tools between each other are the significant elements that contribute to the materialization of the poem. As Moe affirms, animal “gestures and vocalizations turn the movements of the body into material signs. Some of the material signs are involuntary, requiring little conscious intention (bristling hair, the rattlesnake’s rattle). Other material signs involve voluntary, conscious intention” (2014: 20). Likewise, Thomas’ animals compose their own poetry and produce their own *poiesis* without being internalized as mere textual tools. Poet’s unusual poetic expressions like “[n]ow the tales praise” and “the fables graze” explicitly demonstrate the animalization of literature through animals as the active performers and narrators of their own tales without instrumentally serving to human concerns (Thomas, 2003: 163). Rather than employing the allegorical representation of animals as fearful and dangerous objects, Thomas’ poem depicts animals as agential beings, having their rationality and spirituality. Nonhuman natural world is affirmed to be a place of happiness where one can be “shielded by chant and flower” as well as humans and animals are reconciled as companions in an harmonious relationship with each other (Thomas, 2003: 163). Thomas’ skepticism towards the symbolic representation of animals in literature is a revelation of his zoopoetical distress about the fallacy of allegories that “occlude the complexity and

material-semiotic recalcitrance of these nonhuman presences” (Driscoll and Hoffmann, 2018: 6).

In addition to “In Country Sleep” which focuses on the sacred world of animals, “Poem in October” is another outstanding poem which positions the wakefulness and energy of the natural world against the dumbness and the passivity of human world:

“It was my thirtieth year to heaven  
Woke to my hearing from harbour and neighbour wood  
And the mussel pooled and the heron  
Priested shore  
The morning beckon  
With water praying and call of seagull and rook  
And the knock of sailing boats on the net webbed wall  
Myself to set foot  
That second  
In the still sleeping town and set forth” (2003: 102).

The poem explores the alluring power of the natural world that calls the persona to walk outside in the early morning of his thirtieth birthday. The speaker’s senses are widely awake, listening to the blissful voice of nature in which every entity seems to be celebrating his birthday. He is captivated by the sounds of trees in the wood, the seashore, priested by herons, the praying of the sea waves, and the summoning of the seagulls and rooks. The sky, being thickly populated by the herons, flying over the seashore is described as being priested while the movements of the sea waves are envisioned to be praying. The use of religious discourse to define the communal interface of birds and other natural entities is quite significant in entailing natural world with sanctity as well as attributing material agency to each natural entity. Thomas underscores the agency of animals who physically and actively contribute to the ongoing evolution of the universe which is in a constant state of flux and freshly becomings.

“My birthday began with the water –  
Birds and the birds of the winged trees flying my name  
Above the farms and the white horses  
And I rose  
In rainy autumn  
And walked abroad in a shower of all my days” (Thomas, 2003: 102).

The speaker, as the observer of the animal-dominated world is not kept outside of nature’s dynamic coming into being but is incorporated physically within its inter-species communication. The lines above show how human life is intersecting with animal life in the way that birds and branches of trees

are flying the name of the speaker in the sky, celebrating the speaker's birthday. Human and nature are no longer kept apart since the speaker engages in a more intimate sensory and bodily relationship with nature by going out and experiencing the shower of rain, touching his body and watching the celebratory flight of the birds. The speaker extensively feels his emotional and material enmeshment with nonhuman nature which stands as fully awake, vital force inviting humans to join in its festivity.

Considering the flight of birds as a rational and intellectual performance of animals, Abram argues that intelligence does not necessarily emanate from an individual's brain but "rather *the sensate, muscled body itself that is doing the thinking*, its diverse senses and its flexing limbs playing off one another as it feels out fresh solutions to problems posed, adjusting old habits (and ancestral patterns) to present circumstances" (2010: 190, emphasis in the original). Thomas' poem depicts birds as fully aware of their surroundings, capable of engaging in meaningful dialogue with each other. Accordingly, the birds' gestures and movements generate the reality of the outside world while creating the materiality of the poem. The synchronized flight pattern of birds is inscribed in the shape of the poem that consists of long and short lines, resembling the wings of birds. Thus, the sentient bodily motions of birds not only stimulate the vitality of the universe but also compose a zoopoetical poem, predominated by animal actors.

"How Shall My Animal" is another outstanding poem, unraveling the poet's admiration of the animal presence in human mind. The poem records the existence of animality in human self, connecting him to other living beings in nature by showing the impossibility of disengaging humanity from animality:

"How shall my animal  
Whose wizard shape I trace in the cavernous skull,  
Vessel of abscesses and exultation's shell,  
Endure burial under the spelling wall,  
The invoked, shrouding veil at the cap of the face,  
Who should be furious,  
Drunk as a vineyard snail, flailed like an octopus,  
Roaring, crawling, quarrel  
With the outside weathers,  
The natural circle of the discovered skies  
Draw down to its weird eyes?" (Thomas, 2003: 91).

The speaker expresses his suffering about the entrapment of his animal self in his physical body. He tracks the trace of his animal self in the "cavernous skull" of his human body which is infused with animal vitality,

circulated through his body by the animalistic power in his veins, “vessel of abscesses and exultation’s shell” (Thomas, 2003: 91). He senses his animality intensively in his mind and body particles and feels deeply the animal potency that enlivens him by the transfer of energy through his veins. The speaker repeatedly identifies himself with animals, feeling the existence of animal within his blood and veins to such an extent that he uses animal imagery to describe his physical and emotional status: “[d]runk as vineyard snail and flailed like octopus” (2003: 91). The speaker also laments the loss of his animal self and stresses that he cannot endure the burial of his animal “under the spelling wall” of his human self (2003: 91). The spelling wall, an indication of humans’ linguistic faculties, is the underlying reason of the death of his animal self. The speaker implies that human culture, presented in opposition to nature is like a wall, preventing him to merge with his animality that is entrapped under the spelling wall of human culture. The speaker’s wailing over the death of his animal self continues in the last stanza of “How Shall My Animal” where he idealizes his animal self as his lover:

“Sigh long, clay cold, lie shorn,  
Cast high, stunned on gilled stone; sly scissors ground in frost  
Clack through the thicket of strength, love hewn in pillars drop  
With carved bird, saint, and sun, the wrack-spiked maiden mouth  
Lops, as a bush plumed with flames, the rant of the fierce eye,  
Clips short the gesture of breath.  
Die in red feathers when the flying heaven's cut,  
And roll with the knocked earth:  
Lie dry, rest robbed, my beast.  
You have kicked from a dark den, leaped up the whinnying light,  
And dug your grave in my breast” (Thomas, 2003: 92).

The hidden animal self is depicted as the speaker’s lover who is on the brink of death, giving her last breath. Taking his lover in his arms, the persona gently lies her down and consoles her by saying “sigh long, clay cold, lie shorn” (2003: 92). After the death of his animal self, the speaker calls his animal as “my beast” and says, “dug your grave in my breast”, a statement which shows that even if he has killed his animal self, it will continue to remain connected to him, deep down in his breast (2003: 92). The poet’s involuntary exile of human body from his animal self evokes Karl Shapiro who asserts that Thomas’s poetry is not a “cry of desire” but it is the “cry of entrapped animal” (1955: 107). For Thomas, human is “an animal becoming an angel. But becoming an angel he becomes more a beast” (Shapiro 1955: 109). Similarly, the poem “How Shall my Animal”



can be read as a lamentation of the poet who is distressed by subduing his animal self, entrapped in his mind.

Thomas' "How Shall my Animal" with its emphasis on the animality of human self is reminiscent of Deleuze and Guattari's concept of "becoming animal" which they describe as "composing a body with the animal, a body without organs defined by zones of intensity and proximity" (1987: 274). The concept of becoming animal conveys the entanglement of human with animal into a further stage of transforming human identity to epitomize animals. It does not suggest a simple identification or imitation of animal behavior but requires feeling and experiencing animal presence in molecular composition of the human body. The only way to become an animal is to "enter the zone of proximity of the animal molecule" (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 274-275). Humans' spiritual and molecular transformation into animal provides a release for humans from their bodily entrapment and offers "a dissolution of form that connects the most diverse longitudes and latitudes, the most varied speeds and slowness, which guarantees a continuum by stretching variation far beyond its formal limits" (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 309). In this regard, "How Shall my Animal" describes the poet's awareness of his becoming animal, and later his pain and suffering for the loss of his animality under the "spelling wall" of human culture which prevents the extension of his material body into a broader cosmic universe where he will be more intrinsically entrenched with nonhuman beings. With the death of his animal self, the poet is confronted with the feelings of absence and incompleteness because he recognizes his animal and human self as two constituting parts of his material body. Thus, Thomas in "How Shall my Animal" emphasizes the biological and material connectivity between the human and animal self. In anthropocentric discourse, animal is either excluded or instrumentally used for human ends and "bestiality becomes a term of abuse, animals reduced to the horizons created by humans, adapted to the human condition" (Bleakley, 2000: xiv). Nevertheless, bestiality is crucial to the Thomas' zoopoetics which is committed to reconcile human and animal selves on the common ground of animality.

Correspondingly, "Here in This Spring" is another zoopoetical poem, reflecting the poet's comprehension of the complexity of nature's interconnected system. The poem focuses on the everlasting energy of nature where the concept of time is understood not by a mechanical clock of a human invention, but by the natural progression of seasons. Death does not

mean a total extermination but a contribution to the regeneration of vigor and dynamism of life. In such a perfectly organized system of nature, animals stand as intentional individuals who are extremely sensitive to the outside world, equipped with a powerful memory, helping them keep an accurate record of events:

“I should tell summer from the trees, the worms  
Tell, if at all, the winter’s storms  
Or the funeral of the sun;  
I should learn spring by the cuckooing,  
And the slug should teach me destruction.  
A worm tells summer better than the clock,  
The slug’s a living calendar of days;  
That shall it tell me if a timeless insect  
Says the world wears away?” (2003: 45).

The poet acknowledges natural elements and animals as the philosophical teachers of life and has a strong confidence in animals to teach him everything better than humanity. Insects, worms and slugs are appreciated for their percipience and wisdom and thought to be the living memory of nature, having more professional and precise knowledge of time in comparison to humans who have to rely on clock to tell time. Self-consciousness and alertness of animals to their surroundings, their unique ways of acting and responding to events ignite the dynamism and self-evolution of nature while contributing to the evolution of Thomas’ zoopoetics. In other words, Thomas’ poem foregrounds animals as the authentic sources of information for human beings who can have a thorough knowledge of life only through a diligent observation of the natural world, not through mechanical inventions like a clock. Animals emerge as intellectually competent individuals and non-replaceable sources of wisdom for human beings. Hence, zoopoetical principle that the poetic activity of writing and representation should “proceed via the animal” finds a solid ground in Thomas’ poem as the dynamic participants of poetic activity and the natural world (Driscoll and Hoffmann, 2018: 4). Animals, in Thomas’ poem, are allowed to be themselves, to live their animality and tell their own stories. Worms narrate “the winter’s storms,” spring defines itself by the “cuckooing” of the birds, and “slug” as the “living calendar of days” teaches destruction vividly and realistically (Thomas, 2003: 45). “Here in This Spring”, in this respect, is a zoopoetical poem which calls for sensitivity and admiration for animals who evolve as “material-semiotic nodes or knots in which diverse bodies and meanings coshape one another” (Haraway, 2008: 4).

### Conclusion

Thomas tries to change humans' anthropocentric perception of animals towards an understanding of an inextricable attachment of humans to nonhuman animals. Thomas' poetry demonstrates an important zoopoetical principle that "many animals share common genus—a poiesis of the energy of the gesture—attributes crisscross along the supposed human/animal divide, rendering it a blurry borderland full of possibility" (Moe, 2014: 18). A zoopoetical reading of Thomas' poems reveals that animals are not imprisoned within symbolic representations, but stand as indispensable partners in the generation of poetic process. Rather than being pushed into the status of absenteeism through allegories and metaphors, animals appear to be self-conscious, self-autonomous individuals, free to exert their individuality in Thomas's poetry. More broadly, Thomas develops an innovative approach to animals who are delineated with emotional and rational faculties as well as agential capacities of representing themselves and creating their own meaning and stories. Disseminating agency equally among human and animal species and extricating animals from their objectified position, Thomas overthrows the strongly established binaries between humans and nonhuman animals, and proves that "it is not just human gestures that shape the origin of speech" but animals, through their bodily *poiesis*, are also capable of making their own poetry (Moe 2014: 15).

### REFERENCES

- ABRAM, David (2010), *Becoming Animal: An Earthly Cosmology*, Pantheon Books, New York.
- ABRAM, David (1997), *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World*, Vintage, New York.
- ACKERMAN, John (1991), *A Dylan Thomas Companion: Life, Poetry and Prose*, The Macmillan Press, London.
- BATE, Jonathan (2000), *The Song of the Earth*, Picador, London.
- BLEAKLEY, Alan (2000), *The Animalizing Imagination: Totemism, Textuality and Ecocriticism*, Macmillan, London.
- BODDICE, Rob (2011), "Introduction. The End of Anthropocentrism.", In *Anthropocentrism: Humans, Animals, Environments*, Ed. Rob BODDICE, Brill, Leiden, 1-18.
- DELEUZE, Gilles and Felix GUATTARI (1987), *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Trans. Brian MASSUMI, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis.

- DERRIDA, Jacques (2008), *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, Ed. Marie-Louise MALLET, Trans. David WILLS, Fordham University Press, New York.
- DRISCOLL, Kari and Eva HOFFMANN (2018), "Introduction: What is Zoopoetics?", In *What is Zoopoetics?: Texts, Bodies, Entanglements*, Eds. Kari DRISCOLL and Eva HOFFMANN, Palgrave Macmillan, Switzerland, 1-13.
- ESTOK, Simon C. (2010), "Narrativizing Science: The Ecocritical Imagination and Ecophobia", *Configurations*, 18.1-2, 141-159.
- GOODBY, John (2013), *The Poetry of Dylan Thomas: Under the Spelling Wall*, Liverpool University Press, Liverpool.
- HARAWAY, Donna J. (2008), *When Species Meet*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis.
- KENNEDY, George A. (1991), "A Hoot in the Dark: The Evolution of General Rhetoric", *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, 25.1, 1-21.
- LATOUR, Bruno (2004), *Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy*, Trans. Catherina PORTER, Harvard University Press, Cambridge.
- MALAMUD, Randy (2003), *Poetic Animals and Animal Souls*, Palgrave, New York.
- MCHUGH, Susan (2011), *Animal Stories: Narrating across Species Lines*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis.
- MOE, Aaron M. (2014), *Zoopoetics: Animals and the Making of Poetry*, Lanham, Lexington Books.
- OERLEMANS, Onno (2018), *Poetry and Animals: Blurring the Boundaries with the Human*, Columbia University Press, New York.
- "Sanctum Sanctorum" (2020), Merriam Webster Dictionary, e-library <<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/sanctum%sanctorum>> accessed 20 Jan. 2021.
- SHAPIRO, Karl (1955), "Dylan Thomas", *Poetry*, 87.2, 100-110.
- THOMAS, Dylan (2003), *Collected Poems 1934-1953*, J. M. Dent and Sons, Aldine Press, London.