Fat Cats and Poodles

On the history and symbolism of animals in art and society

Clive Adams

Throughout history, when civilisations become distressed through revolution – political, industrial or agricultural – there has been a special need for society and the arts to reassess our relationship to nature. At the start of this millennium, many of our greatest concerns centre around issues involving animals; new genetic technologies and viral epidemics in relation to those we have domesticated, loss of habitat and species depletion in the wild ones. It should therefore come as no surprise that there now exists a rich plurality of new artistic practice, exhibitions and essays which look at animals and what they mean to us today.

From earliest times and in different cultures, our sentiments towards animals have been focussed by art.[1] In the Later Palaeolithic period, around 30,000–10,000 BC, much of Europe was peopled by nomads who preyed on the migratory herds of reindeer, bison and mammoth on which they depended for food, clothing, tools and weapons. These hunters decorated the walls of their caves and made sculptures based on the images of such animals because of the importance they had to their lives, and to celebrate those animal qualities they most admired. Such subject matter was common in Assyrian, Egyptian, Chinese and Eurasian cultures and it led, in turn, to the rich tradition of animal imagery in medieval art.

The extraordinary medieval illustrated manuscripts called 'bestiaries' were a collection of stories based on ancient Greek texts, each of which used the qualities of an animal or plant to represent Christian allegories for moral and religious instruction. Sculptures and church carving were also based on such symbolism well into the Renaissance. Sometimes the significance of images common to several beliefs diverged; the snake, a symbol of temptation and eroticism in the West signifying, by its skin shedding, the renewal of life in Far Eastern iconography.

The Old Testament also drew upon earlier mythology and provided a rich source of subject matter for Western artists. Indeed, Genesis – specifically the Edenic narrative and the story of the Flood – provided the theological foundations on which Western civilisation justified the subordination of other species to man's needs. In Tudor and Stuart England every animal was thought to serve some human purpose, if not practical, then moral or aesthetic. Savage beasts were necessary instruments of God's wrath, left among us 'to be our schoolmasters'[2]; they fostered human courage and were thought to provide useful training for war.

The distinction of man from the beasts, central to the teaching of Descartes and a preoccupation of seventeenth and eighteenth century intellectuals, helped to justify hunting, livestock domestication and meat-eating and it also provided an analogue for the subjugation of other races, women, and the poor.[3] Anthropologists now suggest that human thought tends to project upon the natural world – particularly animals – values derived from human society and then serve them back as a reinforcement of the human order, justifying some particular arrangement on the grounds that is somehow more 'natural'.

Tho' Nature, red in tooth and claw
With ravine, shriek'd against his creed –[4]

Tennyson's poem 'In Memoriam' – with the often quoted line that gives a title to this exhibition – was published in 1850 but sections relating to evolution were written at least six years earlier, predating Darwin's 'On the Origin of Species' (1859). Unfortunately, Tennyson's words now flavour our sense of what Darwin actually means by 'the survival of the fittest', which was not to assert the 'natural' rights of the predator, but merely to state that those species which best adapted would be the most likely to survive. Today, science teaches us to question the wisdom of establishing models of social behaviour based on our incomplete understanding of predation and co-operation in nature. The biologist Richard Dawkins maintains that although animal nature is indeed altruistic and co-operative, it follows from, rather than contradicts, selfishness at the genetic level:

Animals are sometimes nice and sometimes nasty, since either can suit the self-interest of genes at different times. [5]

The Neolithic period saw the introduction from Western Asia of farming and the raising of domesticated animals, a new way of life which appeared sometime before 6,000 BC. The 'pastoral' tradition, itself largely based on Roman mythology, was perfectly expressed in the paintings of Claude Lorrain whose paintings were eagerly collected by the 'improving' landowners of eighteenth century Britain, for whom Claude's images of Arcadia served as a model for

1 For a historical overview see Barbara C. Matilsky, Fragile Ecologies, New York, 1992.

2 The remark was made by James Pilkington, the Elizabethan bishop.

3 Keith Thomas, Man and the Natural World: Changing Attitudes in England 1500-1800, London, 1983.

4 Alfred Tennyson, In Memoriam, section LVI, 1850.
In the context of the poem, 'ravine' means 'a violent rush' and 'his' refers to 'man's'.

5 Richard Dawkins, Unweaving the Rainbow, London 1998, Chapter 9.

their country estates and, beyond that, a new empire. From the Greeks came the allegorical use in Christian teaching of the 'good shepherd' as representing Christ, the 'flock' as His people and the members of the Church as 'the sheep of His pasture', becoming part of an important visual tradition in the hands of English artists, in particular William Blake and his followers.[6] Both traditions help to construct the aesthetic concept of the 'green and pleasant land' we still expect our countryside to be, whatever the economic realities.

Based on the experience of breeding horses for racing and hunting, livestock breeding and improvement in England came in shortly after the middle of the eighteenth century to feed an expanding population in the new industrial cities. In contrast to the 'picturesque', where bony cattle often appeared as incidental detail in the landscape, there now emerged a market in the commissioning of paintings celebrating the new breeds – prize bulls and fat showground oxen – by artists such as George Garrard and Thomas Weaver.[7] Beef, already a national symbol from the sixteenth century, henceforth became an infallible sign of Englishness and its consumption a national duty.[8]

The Victorian era was one of acquisition and sentiment in both art and nature. By the 1830's it would have been possible to walk from exhibitions at the Royal Academy or the new National Gallery to others in the new Reptile House at the Zoological Gardens, Regent's Park, where industrially heated water and plate glass made it possible for the most exotic and dangerous snakes from around the world to be safely seen, or to London Zoo, where the apes were dressed up in nursery clothes and made to have tea parties.[9]

'Animal Farm' by George Orwell, first published in 1945, and recently illustrated by Ralph Steadman - whose artwork can be seen in this exhibition – follows another tradition of animal symbolism in literature which can be traced back to the fables of Aesop in the sixth century BC. Written at a time when agricultural issues were very much to the fore,[10] Orwell's allegory is one which tells of domesticated animals who take over a farm from their human oppressor. At a deeper level, it expresses disillusionment with the outcome of the Bolshevik Revolution which seemed, to Orwell, to simply replace one tyrannical system of government in Russia with another. In today's world, one is tempted to find in nature any lesson one wants – the industry of the ant or the indolence of the cat, the energy – squandering, rock-star lifestyle of the hummingbird, or the freeloading of the cuckoo – but, without Aesop or Orwell, how does one choose?[11]

Since the Seventies we have found animal analogies re-emerging in the urban 'jungle', with its 'bull' and 'bear' markets, 'fat cat' executives and 'tiger' economies whilst marketeers have used lions, tigers and eagles to glorify the 'natural' qualities of speed, power and competition.[12] Today, we seem more conscious of the need to control the influence of such aggressive images and the analogies that we draw from the natural world are subtly changing. The quality that Esso now expect us to associate with their tiger is 'watchfulness' – over forecourt prices – and Richard Rogers' re-working of the imperial eagle for his new Reichstag building in Berlin transforms it into a far more palatable 'fat hen'. The recent media coverage of the war in Iraq was rich in all the usual imagery of 'hawks', 'doves' and, surprisingly, a 'poodle'.

During the early years of the last century a preoccupation with realism increasingly became the prerogative of photographers and a new understanding of form was explored in painting and sculpture by such artists as Franz Marc and Constantin Brancusi, drawing on animal subjects. During the Sixties and Seventies, at a time of significant social change, artists started to address nature in new ways through 'environmental' art, and live animals entered the galleries in performance and installations by such artists as Joseph Beuys and Jannis Kounellis. Today, concurrent with a healthy mix of styles and techniques which draw upon every conceivable convention, there exist other works which explore new scientific theories, new visualising technology, new psychological, post-modern or feminist readings of ways of re-envisioning our long association with the animals.[13]

Clive Adams has been involved since the mid-seventies with the work of many artists who address our relationship with nature. He was the curator of the recent exhibition 'Love, Labour and Loss: 300 years of British Livestock Farming in Art' and proposes to open the Centre for Contemporary Art and the Natural World at Poltimore House near Exeter in 2006.

6 See essay by Christiana Payne, Love, Labour & Loss:300 Years of British Livestock Farming in Art, Carlisle, 2002, pp.13-31.

7 Ibid. essay by Juliet Clutton-Brock and Stephen J.G. Hall pp.33-51.

8 Ben Rogers, Beef and Liberty: Roast Beef, John Bull and the English Nation, London, 2003.

9 Simon Schama, Landscape and Memory, London, 1996, pp.560-570.

10 Graham Harvey, The Killing of the Countryside, London, 1998.

11 Evan Eisenberg, The Ecology of Eden, New York, 1998, pp.301-3.

12 Philip Mirowski, National Images in Economic Thought, Cambridge, 1994.

13 Steve Baker, The Post-modern Animal, London, 2000.

See essay by Clive Adams Love, Labour & Loss:300 Years of British Livestock Farming in Art, Carlisle, 2002, pp.71-86.