

Introduction

Françoise Besson*, Scott Slovic*

Animal love is not some Romantic notion or Disney-like phrase for idealists or sweet dreamers. It is the core of a society of change that should give a prominent place to attachments, bonds and connections, to an empathy which some people laugh at by asserting that a society founded on love cannot exist or is ridiculous. This apparently simple phrase opens up on many fundamental questions. What is love? A chemical reaction as some say? Animals give an answer and do show that this is not the case. If it is true that animals are ruled by pheromones in the mating season, to chemistry is added some empathy, an alchemy uniting two individual worlds and the world at large. Jayson Iwen, in his poem “Epithalamion¹ for Lovers,” starts his song of love by evoking wild animals:

The skunk rouses from a season of slumber,
wiggles her way through the hollow log,
and fills her lungs with dusk and hunger.
The paradox of love in the song
sung by a chorus of distant coyotes
confuses the pyrenees²
on the porch. “How far are you from me?
He tries to ask the foreign voices.
“Why do I feel both full and empty?”³

* Université Toulouse Jean Jaurès, Académie des Sciences, Inscriptions et Belles Lettres de Toulouse, SELVA.

* University of Idaho, USA, SELVA.

¹ An epithalamion is originally “a lyric poem in praise of Hymen (the Greek god of marriage)”, (“Glossary of poetic terms,” accessed March 11, 2021, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/learn/glossary-terms/epithalamion>). It is a love song for a bride or bridegroom.

² No capital letter.

“Explor[ing],” Scott Slovic writes, “the extreme variety of empathy called ‘love’ ”[Iwen] suggests that “any human love we might feel for each other derives from our attachment to the world itself: ‘The earth is in you wherever you go, / in everything you know’[Iwen].”⁴ The return of migrating birds crossing the world to mate in a same place, with the same partner all their life, may be the biological translation of love sung by the poet, “the earth is in you wherever you go;” and our human loves are perhaps the translation of this animal memory of love written in the skies of the world by migrating birds or monarch butterflies. That animal intelligence guiding animals is what makes them pass most obstacles, what makes “the beauties survive” as Alison Hawthorne Deming writes in her beautiful poem sequence, *The Monarchs*.⁵ Animal love makes beauty survive.

It is not only pheromones that lead some animal species to remain faithful couples all their lives, like blackbirds, wolves or storks. It is not only pheromones that lead them to find their partners by flying from the other end of the world, like a male stork, flying 13 000 kilometers to join his female partner who could no longer make this journey southward.⁶ Shot by a hunter, the female stork was healed by an elderly Croatian man, but she could no longer fly. Storks are migrating birds. And she was immobilized. So her male partner flew from South Africa and back every year. And at the beginning of spring, the male stork flew back to Croatia where, for sixteen years, he returned to his handicapped partner. There were many places on his itinerary, there were many storks, in Croatia, Spain, Alsace or elsewhere, young and healthy flying storks. But for sixteen years the male came back to his partner who could no longer fly. Even when he was thirty, when humans feared he should no longer come back, he returned to the apparently condemned stork whom he had chosen. It is that stork, whom he joined, it is that stork whom he considered as the other part of himself, it is to join her that he flew from the other end of the world. Is it chemistry? Or is it a deep empathy, an attachment between two beings? He came to her because there

³ Iwen, Jayson, “Epithalamion for Lovers,” *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, Volume 27, Issue 1 (Winter 2020): 179.

⁴ Slovic, Scott, “Editor’s Note,” *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* (Winter 2020): 4.

⁵ Hawthorne Deming, Alison, *The Monarchs. A Poem Sequence* (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1997), 1.

⁶ Balen, Vedran, “Seize ans d’amour et de fidélité, 57 enfants : l’incroyable couple de cigognes croates,” *Le Courrier International*, 22/06/2018, accessed March 11, 2021, <https://www.courrierinternational.com/article/seize-ans-damour-et-de-fidelite-57-enfants-lincroyable-couple-de-cigognes-croates>

was an invisible bond linking the two birds and leading the migrating one to return year after year, among all places in the world, to the Croatian garden where his companion waited for him. This love story between two birds had started with a love story between a man and the female wounded stork. This man had rescued the wounded bird, had built a nest for her, had offered her a shelter in winter. The bird wounded by a man's act of violence, who would have been condemned without another man's intervention and love, found a new life and healed the man's own despair, as he had lost his wife. Through their mutual empathy they helped and saved each other. And this attachment between a man and a bird generated a new attachment between two storks. In the skies of the world fifty-seven new storks, born from this double animal love story, tell the world about bonds. The image of freedom we see when we gaze at birds or butterflies in flight is the image of a bond, an immemorial bond between animals, an immemorial bond between all living creatures and the world. It is also the story of hospitality, of how to welcome the other, the migrant, wounded or exhausted after a long travel. It is the story of the way of changing points of view.

To define animal love, a detour in the field of religions and spiritualities might throw some light on the discussion. Native American and Canadian spiritualities make animals creators of the world, members of the family or symbols of the clan. Between human and non-human beings, there is a respect and an empathy that appears in all myths but also in the everyday relationship between humans and animals. In the same way "in Africa," as mentioned in the presentation of the exhibition "Animal," which took place in Dapper Museum in Paris in 2007-2008, "animals have a paramount role in myths, legends, proverbs, riddles and tales, which are perpetuated and invigorated by the arts of speaking. They serve as models to women and men; the latter, since their earliest days, have acquired their knowledge, especially through initiation, by referring to codes drawn, among other things, from oral tradition, giving a determined value, be it positive or negative, to the various domestic or wild animals of the everyday environment."⁷ In Australia, too, Aborigines give an important place to animals who could speak and tell stories before men appeared: "Long, long ago, before there were any human beings, there were birds, animals and reptiles. Once a year, in spring-time, these different tribes met and held a great festival for story-telling, dancing and feasting. The bird tribes were

⁷ "Animal", accessed February 22, 2021, <https://www.dapper.fr/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/dp-animal.pdf>.

great talkers.”⁸ First peoples have always given animals a place of paramount importance. Claude Lévi-Strauss reminds us that: “For Native Americans and most peoples who stayed a long time without using writing, the time of myths was the time when humans and animals were not really distinct from one another and could communicate.”⁹ It is the rupture of communication that went together with a transformation of the relationship with animals. Communication implies some empathy. No longer communicating between one another implies a rupture of the primeval link. In monotheistic religions, the perception of animals is undoubtedly less present than in other spiritualities, but it has a fundamental role, too. In the same way, exactly as no religion urges people to violence, as neither the Bible, nor the Torah, nor the Quran urge people to disrespect, all religions and spiritualities bring animals into the language of parables, Suras or poetic texts, to show humans a new path. In monotheistic religions, even if there is not the everyday empathy towards animals that we can find with Native Americans and Canadian First Nations, if there are no sacred animals as in the religions from India, texts still provide keys on the place of animals and the love in which they are encompassed. If we think about Paul’s beautiful hymn of love, does not his definition of love look like the unconditional love of animals for their animal families or for the humans with whom they share their lives?

Love suffers long and is kind; love does not envy; love does not parade itself, is not puffed up; does not behave rudely, does not seek its own, is not provoked, thinks no evil; does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things [...].¹⁰

Is it not that kind of love that animals offer? Analysing the role of the donkey and the ox, introduced into the crib by Francis of Assisi, the brother of poor people, who spoke to birds and wolves, whom he also called his

⁸ Smith, Ramsay W., *Myths and Legends of the Australian Aborigines* (London, Bombay and Sydney: George G. Harrap and Co., Ltd., 1930), 94.

⁹ “Pour les Amérindiens et la plupart des peuples restés longtemps sans écriture, le temps des mythes fut celui où les hommes et les animaux n’étaient pas réellement distincts les uns des autres et pouvaient communiquer entre eux.” Lévi-Strauss, Claude, “La leçon de sagesse des vaches folles,” *Études Rurales* 157-158 / (2001) : 9-14, accessed March 11, 2021, <https://journals.openedition.org/etudesrurales/27>. Translation by Françoise Besson. Unless indicated otherwise, the translations in the introduction are by Françoise Besson.

¹⁰ Paul, *First Epistle to Corinthians*, 13.1-13. The Holy Bible, New King James Version, 1982.

brothers and sisters, Jean-Jacques Péré gives us a key. To the question “Which God do we serve?” he answers: “To [this] question, our two friends the donkey and the ox answer: *our* God, the one we have hosted in our manger is only LOVE.” And he adds: “his coming has not solved anything. He has even complicated Mary and Joseph’s life. But here’s the thing; if he is useless, yet he changes everything! Like any love that is a GIFT, that’s it!” And Jean-Jacques Péré goes on, using the image of the love of children for their parents. “The ‘little one’ having grown up, he will say to his parents: I no longer need you but I want you to love me and to let me love you in return! Why? For nothing! You love me, I love you, it is useless, but for me, that changes everything! It’s gratuitous! A gift!”¹¹ The donkey and the ox warm up the child rejected with his migrating parents by humans. *They* welcome him and give him that gratuitous love. To speak about divine love through two animals warming a child in a manger, Jean-Jacques Péré chose to let the donkey and the ox speak to give us a key. And is not that gift of love, that gratuitous love, the love of any animal?

It is also animals that, in the Old Testament, are entrusted with the task of showing a scene of union and absolute love between all living creatures in Isaiah’s text: “The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; and a little child shall lead them. [...] They shall not hurt nor destroy in all my holy mountain; for the Earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea.”¹² And the Quran also gathers humans and all animals in the Divine: “There is not an animal that lives on the earth, nor a being that flies on its wings, but they form communities like you. Nothing have we omitted from the Book, and they all shall be gathered to their Lord in the end.”¹³

Théodore Monod, who defended animals for eighty-seven years in his long active life of thought, research and activism, often quoted the life of the Muslim mystic Tierno Bokar:

It was in 1933, in Bandiagara, Mali. Tierno Bokar, a taylor, sitting in the yard of his house, was explaining a point of Muslim mystical theology, when a young swallow fell from its nest. The little bird desperately cried but nobody paid attention to it. Then the wise man interrupted his lesson, scolded his disciples for their indifference to the distress of a small miserable being who cried for help and he said: “give me that son of others.” He took the nestling

¹¹ Péré, Jean-Jacques, “Quel est ce Dieu que vous prétendez adorer et servir?,” *Foi et vie* n° 63 (décembre 2010): 17-18.

¹² Isaiah, 11 : 6-9.

¹³ Quran 6:38.

and placed it again into its nest, which he had repaired. Before explaining to them “the charity of one’s heart.” [And] Monod compared his speech about the little swallow to St. Paul’s hymn of Love.”¹⁴

This may remind us of the Japanese philosopher Fukuoka Masanobu, answering a question from one of his pupils, by just saying “Listen to the bird sing.”¹⁵ Théodore Monod also loved quoting a Sufi parable according to which a Muslim Iraqi mystic, after his death, was surprised to be welcomed in Paradise and asked if it was because he had fasted a lot, or prayed a lot; and the guardian of the door each time answered him that it was not the reason. To the question why he was there, the guardian answered him: “—I am going to tell you why, the guardian answered. It is because one winter night, a cold night in Bagdad, you picked a small she-cat and you warmed her up in your coat.’ That’s it. That is beautiful!”¹⁶

Either we believe or not, we can note that religious texts and spiritual traditions define the relationship to the other, be it human or non-human, in a circle of love, both mystical and real, somewhat like the circle of wonder in N. Scott Momaday’s tale, *Circle of Wonder: A Native American Christmas Story*,¹⁷ in which young Tolo, on Christmas eve, finds himself with his grandfather (who had died not long before) in a circle at the foot of the mountain, where they meet an elk, a wolf and an eagle, all wounded to death, but living in front of them, and speaking to the child. The latter, who was mute so far, will wake up, recovering his voice, after that oneiric and spiritual meeting. Is not the recovered relationship to animals the key to the recovering of our deepest human voice, that interior voice that does not look for its interest but just loves the other, just offers him/her its presence without expecting anything? A silent communication translates the animal voice in us, which finds again something of its relationship to the other and to the world—that relationship that existed in mythical times when animals

¹⁴ Théodore Monod, *Terre et ciel* (Arles: Actes Sud, 1998), 207. See Nakos, Jean, “Théodore Monod et les protestants français défenseurs des animaux” (*Cahiers antispécistes* n°30-31 – décembre 2008), accessed March 11, 2021, <https://www.cahiers-antispecistes.org/theodore-monod-et-les-protestants-francais-defenseurs-des-animaux/>

¹⁵ Fukuoka Masanobu, qtd by Slovic, Scott, *Going Away to Think* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 2008), 29.

¹⁶ *Bulletin de l’OABA*, n° 45, May 1994, taken up in *Dictionnaire Théodore Monod*, 140, qtd by Nakos, Jean, “Théodore Monod et les protestants français défenseurs des animaux.”

¹⁷ Momaday, N. Scott, *Circle of Wonder. A Native American Christmas Story* (New Mexico: University of New Mexico Press, 1999).

spoke and when humans fed on fruit.¹⁸ This detour through texts linked to spirituality might throw some light on the notion of animal love.

From companion species to the love of animals for members of their own species or of other species, the phrase “animal love” is polysemous. We first think about the love dogs and cats have for their human companions and about the reciprocal relationship of attachment to human beings for those non-human companions accompanying parts of their lives; we can think about the dog following his human companion’s coffin and accompanying him/her to the grave, staying there days and nights and sometimes dying there. What can we say of the American cat Oscar, who, in a hospital, goes into dying people’s rooms, knowing before doctors that those people are going to die and accompanying them until their last breath?¹⁹ How can we define his gratuitous, strange role as a companion, allowing these people to pass away while offering them a friendly, reassuring presence? How can we define the behaviour of a whole family of cats who, feeling that their father and companion was going to die soon, surrounded him and spent his last days quietly lying around him in a circle, a scene I observed in my garden? And what made a fish in a little aquarium come to see its human companion whenever she came back from work, and greet her through the glass?²⁰ Or is

¹⁸ Claude Lévi-Strauss writes: “It is not surprising that killing animals to feed on them should pose humans, be they aware of it or not, a philosophical problem that all societies tried to solve. The Old Testament makes of that an indirect consequence of the Fall. In the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve fed on fruit and seeds (*Genesis* I, 29). It is only from Noah that man became carnivorous. (IX, 3). It is significant that this rupture between mankind and the other animals should immediately precede the story of Babel Tower, that is to say the separation of humans from one another, as if the latter was the consequence or a particular case of the former.” Lévi-Strauss, Claude, “La leçon de sagesse des vaches folles,” §3. And he adds further on: “experts consider that if mankind became fully vegetarian, the surfaces today cultivated could feed twice the population.” Lévi-Strauss, “La leçon de sagesse des vaches folles” § 21.

¹⁹ See the book of the geriatrician David Dosa, *Making Rounds with Oscar: The Extraordinary Gift of an Ordinary Cat* (Paris: Hachette books, 2011), and also his article, “A day in the life of Oscar the cat.” *New England Journal of Medicine*, 357;4 (2007): 328–9, accessed March 11, 2021, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/6185444_A_Day_in_the_Life_of_Oscar_the_Cat

²⁰ Elise Henton, who had told me that story, also told me about her grandmother’s farm and her grandmother who could never kill a hen or a chicken and had hens everywhere in her house including in her bedside table. She had also told me about a goose, so attached to her father that if he did not get up early enough, she knocked at

it not motherly love that leads all mothers to risk or even sacrifice their lives to protect their children? The most striking scene I attended of absolute courage out of love was a face to face between a big cat expecting to attack a tiny mouse, a shrew,²¹ one of the tiniest mice. The small animal was standing on its rear paws to try to make a wall of its tiny body. If she had that bold behaviour, opposing her three grammes and two centimeters to the cat's five kilos and long paws, it was probably to draw attention on her and save her children not far away. She was all shivering, shivering but standing and ready to die out of love. The human I am broke the scene of nature and the little mouse was saved and rushed under a hedge while the cat quietly took the opposite direction. She had faced him in a desperate gesture out of love for her cubs. The cat, who could have seized the mouse before leaving, accepted to turn away from his prey, not out of fear, not to obey, but perhaps out of love for me. Two different forms of empathy, face to face: between a mother and her children and between two companion species. The result of that double empathy was just the preservation of life. And it is a two-centimeter-high shrew and a cat that usually was a great hunter, who gave that amazing lesson of life.

Animal love is the love for any breath of life: the love of the shrew, of the mother cat for her kittens, the gesture of a hippopotamus for the antelope that he rescues from the crocodile's teeth,²² or staying with her head in his mouth until her last breath,²³ the care of a group of stray cats in Argentina, who saved a lost human infant by giving him food and lying on him so that he did not die of cold in the night, until the day when he was found.²⁴ Or at

the door and after her mother had opened the door, rushed to the bedroom and took the sheets off to invite her human companion to start his day with her and the other animals. Humans and animals made a whole family. She had also told me that her grandson, doing his military service in cooperation in a coastal country where there were sharks, went to the beach every morning and a young shark came close to the beach and played with him. From then on, never had he wanted to eat shark, yet a usual dish in that country. The shark was a friend for him.

²¹ A shrew generally weighs around three grammes, as Marcel Delpoux said to me.

²² "Hero Hippo Saves Impala from Crocodile", accessed 12 February 2021,

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1O0JDO16Yps>.

²³ "Hippo Saves Impala", accessed 12 February 2021,

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ENWp0Q2RkTA>

²⁴ "Real Life Mowgli Kept Alive on Freezing Streets by Wild Cats", *Daily Mail*, 20 December 2008, accessed February 12, 2021,

<https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1099043/Real-life-Mowgli-kept-alive-freezing-streets-wild-cats.html>

the beginning of the nineteenth century, the bears allowing a woman in the forest of Montcalm in the Pyrenees to survive two winters before she was imprisoned and died because of humans' lack of compassion, after having pronounced only two sentences, one of which being: "The bears? They were my friends, they saved me."²⁵ Is this love? Is it some survival instinct shared by those who are threatened? Is it some unexplainable empathy? How can we define the notion of animal love? Can those gestures of apparent tenderness, compassion or empathy of the animal world be qualified as love—can they be linked to love or are they instinctive rescuing gestures made by whatever species to prolong animal presence on Earth? Are they gestures of solidarity and cooperation as described by Jean-Marie Pelt?

These phenomena of altruism much preoccupied Darwinian zoologists who have tried to highlight the advantage such behaviours represented for those who had them, since the auxiliary does not work for himself/herself, does not draw any advantage from his /her altruistic behaviour, and in no way favours the perpetuation of his/her own genes. So how can we explain that undermining of selfishness, which is supposed to be nature's iron law, at least to the eyes of the most "rigorous" Darwinians, sociobiologists? [...] But what can we say when altruistic phenomena occur between individuals belonging to different species? This question has been the topic of thousands of discussions among sociobiologists who have still not found any satisfying answer. But perhaps after all, genes are less "selfish"²⁶ than we can think, and disinterested altruism is perhaps a fact of nature about which the following pages will offer us multiple examples.²⁷

²⁵ Bernadac, Christian, *Madame de...qui vivait nue parmi les ours au sommet des monts perdus...* (Paris: France-Empire édition, 1984).

²⁶ Dawskin, Richard, *Le gène égoïste* (Paris: Odile Jacob, 2003).

²⁷ "Ces phénomènes d'altruisme ont beaucoup préoccupé les zoologistes darwiniens qui ont cherché à mettre en évidence l'avantage que de tels comportements représentaient pour ceux qui les exercent, puisque l'auxiliaire ne travaille pas pour lui-même, ne tire aucun avantage de son comportement altruiste, et ne favorise donc en aucune façon la perpétuation de ses propres gènes. Comment expliquer alors cette atteinte à l'égoïsme, censé être la loi d'airain de la nature, tout au moins aux yeux des darwiniens les plus "pointus", les sociobiologistes [...] Mais que dire lorsque les phénomènes d'altruisme se produisent entre individus appartenant à des espèces différentes ? Cette question a fait couler des flots d'encre chez les sociobiologistes qui ne lui ont toujours pas trouvé de réponse satisfaisante. Mais peut-être qu'après tout les gènes sont moins "égoïstes" qu'on ne le pense, et l'altruisme désintéressé un fait de nature dont les lignes ci-après vont nous offrir de multiples exemples." Pelt,

Solidarity between humans and animals can be found in a novel by Ariane Bois, *L'amour au temps des éléphants*,²⁸ telling the story of three young Americans, a young southerner woman wanting to escape her very strict family, a young journalist deciding to enlist in the Navy to go to France and fight in the war, and Kid, a young worker in cotton fields, chased by the Ku Klux Klan. Without knowing one another, in 1916, the three of them attended the hanging of an elephant that will determine their lives. They will meet later in the Paris of the 1920s and unite their fates to save elephants and go to Africa. The novelist started from the photo of an event that really happened in September 1916: the hanging of an elephant in Tennessee. She had been executed because she had killed a man mistreating her. From that scene of violence to the terrorism of Ku Klux Klan and the violence of the trench war and, in Africa, the killing of elephants for ivory, the author gives a survey of the beginning of the twentieth century marked by racism, war, and colonization. The solidarity between three young people reunited by the tragedies of human history and violence shows another way, starting with the execution of an elephant exploited by humans in an American circus to the creation of a sanctuary to save baby elephants whose mothers were killed in Kenya. The novel shows a way indicated by elephants, as is suggested by the last sentence of the novel: “les éléphants, ces monstres d’humanité, leur montraient le chemin.”²⁹ Reunited without being aware of it by the trauma of the violence of an animal hanging, opening on other forms of violence towards humans, they are going to make the initial horror a way towards love and solidarity. The condemned elephant generates a feeling of empathy in the young people, empathy for animals of her kind, and this will lead them to Kenya to discover free elephants and eventually found a sanctuary. An “Ode to freedom,” as the author defines the novel, a love story centred on solidarity, *L'amour au temps des éléphants* reveals the links between all forms of violence, to humans and to animals, and it shows the way to love and freedom, a way illuminated here by elephants—like those elephants, who mysteriously came to greet the man who had saved them and who had just died. Was it love that led two groups

Jean-Marie, *La Solidarité chez les plantes, les animaux, les humains* (Paris : Le Livre de poche, 2004), 86-87.

²⁸ Bois, Ariane, *L'amour au temps des éléphants*. (Paris: Belfond, 2021).

²⁹ “The elephants, those monsters full of humanity, showed them the way.” Bois, *L'amour au temps des éléphants*, 248.