

## **"Bitter to your Stomach, but Sweet as Honey in Your Mouth": Vegetarianism, Animals and Working towards an Ecospiritual Poetry**

*Hester Jones  
University of Bristol*

Writing about the status of non-human creatures and other sentient beings becomes significantly vexed when it considers the question of vegetarianism and when it ponders the acceptability—or otherwise—of the human consumption of non-human flesh. This question also raises issues of ecospiritual and eco-feminist significance, and has been perhaps most searchingly and most provocatively discussed in these contexts. The first part of this article, therefore, outlines traditional and Christian ethical arguments about animal autonomy, in particular as these relate to the debate about vegetarian practice. The second section examines some ways in which more recent feminist and eco-feminist arguments help to steer a path through what has become something of an ethical dilemma. Some of these views point to the arts as most helpfully articulating, or at least beginning to imagine, modes of relating to the animal world. Consequently, the essay concludes by illustrating how one of the arts—poetry—may indeed open us up to what could be called an ecospiritual approach to animal life, in particular through its use of metaphorical language, and thus offer a challenge to points of view that justify human dominion over non-human animal life.

In his recent and compelling *Eating Animals* (2009), Jonathan Safran Foer recalls that it was after observing some fish in an aquarium that Franz Kafka became a vegetarian; resolved to eat animal flesh no longer, Kafka told the fish: "Now at last I can look at you in peace" (Foer 36). Foer suggests that fish were resonant in this way for Kafka because their lives, their particular identities, are so easily overlooked and forgotten. As Foer dryly observes, as we eat them, we do not "blush with shame before fish" (Foer 36). We find it easy to deny our creatureliness, our shared life as animal bodies, when there is so little apparent continuity or commonality. But, Foer warns, "what we forget about animals we begin to forget about ourselves" (Foer 37). In striving to discover an awareness of the value and complexity of created beings, even those as apparently unremarkable and homely as fish in an aquarium, we may understand ourselves more deeply. For this reason, within the limits of an article-length study, the third section of this essay focuses on a single well-known poem, "The Fish," by Elizabeth Bishop, a poet influenced by Franz Kafka. By means of brief comparisons with other contemporary "fish" poems by women, the discussion explores, Bishop's

poetic articulation of some of the questions raised within ethical, theological and biblical debates about vegetarianism and about our relation with creatures.

In its entirety, the poem beautifully gives voice to a spiritually vital awareness of creaturely life. More importantly, perhaps, while acknowledging the many challenges to creaturely living posed by culture and by poetic creation in particular, it affirms poetry's potential to glimpse, in a visionary manner, an immanent spiritual presence within creaturely bodies quite different from our own. The poem thereby presents a vision closely in line with the argument of the ecospiritual writer Tania Dolley, when she writes, in "Reclaiming the Animal Body" (2010), of the ecospiritual journey towards wholeness of body and spirit: as will be seen, Bishop's poem can connect us "to a tangible 'felt sense' of my embodied self" and come to repair the rifts (between Spirit and self, between mind and body, between masculine and feminine) that a patriarchal culture has helped to engender (Dolley 76).

### **Christians, Animals and Vegetarians**

Let us then first consider the difficulties present within some ethical and theological debates about vegetarianism and about the status of animals within creation. In a provocative and thoughtfully searching account of his attempts to form a relationship with animals, in particular with a pet dog, the theologian Stephen Webb writes, "To be honest, writing about animals from a committed Christian viewpoint is a difficult task" (Webb 17). Stephen Clark has also, more boldly, declared that in this regard "the record of the Church has not been good" (Clark, *The Moral Status of Animals* 197). This is not simply a matter of religious bigotry, however, for many secular theorists and ethicists also argue that "animal rights" are hard to defend. For Michael Leahy, for example, indulging in the "sad and mischievous error of seeing little or no moral difference between the painless killing of chickens and that of unwanted children" is both intellectually foolish and morally irresponsible (Leahy 220). Further, as Kerry Walters puts it, "vegetarians have been charged with misguided sentimentality, have been viewed as fanatics, have been castigated as antiscience and antihumanist, and patronised as quaint" (Walters 253). Indeed, as Mary Midgley concedes, for most people "animals fall outside the province of morality altogether" (Midgley 10). But for Christian ethicists, such as Webb, who works in the space opened up by the varied and philosophically rigorous work of Stephen Clark, or the theologically expansive Andrew Linzey, many objections and traditional practices tend to obstruct a serious account of the place of animals either in the economy of salvation or in a "rights" philosophy. Indeed, the ethical questions raised by vegetarianism seem to provoke particularly heated debate in both secular and Christian writing; in the latter, in particular,

understanding of the Eucharist and of the scope of incarnational theology come into sharp focus.

Biblical teaching on the relation between humans and animals is, of course, complex and much debated. This complexity derives mainly from the apparently contradictory attitudes expressed in two chapters of Genesis, chapters that seem to express at different points andro- and theo-centric theologies, both of which can be used either to justify or to condemn the killing of animals for food. Though such ground cannot be elaborated upon in great detail here, it is cogently explored in work by Richard Alan Young, Andrew Linzey and Dan Cohn-Sherbok (Young 84; Linzey and Cohn-Sherbok 84). Genesis 1:29-30 describes the Creator giving created humans "dominion" ("radah") over the earth and providing "every plant" as food for animals and humans. Moreover, a little later in Genesis 9:1-4, God tells Noah and his sons: "Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you; as I gave you the green plants, I give you everything." Clearly, much depends here on how the term "dominion" is interpreted. In the vision of Genesis 1, difference between species is taken for granted, as is that between God and humanity, but such difference is maintained without discord: that is the nature of its paradisaic quality. Only after the catastrophic disappointment of the early episode of Cain and Abel, in which human violence erupts, does the taking of animal life become reluctantly permitted, with stringent qualifications regarding the shedding of blood. Nonetheless, the tradition of messianic thinking in the Hebrew Bible, expressed most powerfully in Isaiah 11, reminds its readers that this temporary dispensation will prevail until the Messiah returns to bring a newly harmonious relation between human beings and nature, wild and domesticated animals.<sup>1</sup>

The New Testament also presents a contradictory account in relation to animal life and its consumption as food. Unlike John the Baptist, who is said to eat locusts but may have been otherwise vegetarian, Jesus, despite the claims of some Essenes, probably was not, blessing the eating of fish; in all likelihood, abstention from meat-eating would probably have provoked comment, and such seems lacking. Indeed, central in his ministry was the desire to challenge the rigorous dietary laws within Jewish observance, and, as Stephen Webb points out, one of the effects of these laws was to limit the consumption of meat to that which had been sacrificed in the temple, and therefore to retain where possible the sense of such consumption being sacred. (Webb 139) Webb also explores at length and with rewarding consequences the transformation of the complex idea of sacrifice involved in this practice; he summarises his argument by saying, "only by giving a portion of the animal back to God can humans use the rest" (Webb 139). However, he concludes: "the cross says no to our amazing and infinite

---

<sup>1</sup> It must also be acknowledged that this tradition is itself a complex one, emerging over time and raising further questions about the status of "natural" aggression (peaceful co-existence may be more desirable for the weak "lamb" than for the carnivorous "lion").

capacity to make violence meaningful. The implication for animals is enormous. Christ saves by freeing the scapegoat, the animal who must be our victim in order to vanquish violence from the world" (Webb 154). Nonetheless, while explaining why it is no longer necessary to approach animals sacrificially, this account of Christ's work does not necessarily rule out their consumption. Furthermore, Paul, or the disciple who wrote the letter attributed to him, prosecuting a campaign against Gnostic dualists whose philosophy condemned the body as intrinsically corrupt, declares: "every creature of God is good, and nothing [is] to be refused, if received with thanksgiving" (1 Timothy 4:4); and, further, in Romans, Paul applauds those who abstain from eating idol meat, if to do so is a gesture against idolatry (Romans 14:23).

Robert Grant infers that Paul "wanted to unify the church, not describe varieties of Christian experience" and, in general, this meant condemning those who set themselves apart through rigorous self-discipline (Grant 13). By contrast, however, some early church fathers such as Tatian, Irenaeus and, in moderation, Clement of Alexandria favoured refraining from meat on the grounds that it has a degrading effect on the soul (Grant 12). Like wine, meat inflames the passions. It is an argument that Kant was later to develop in claiming that the killing necessary for meat to be consumed will debase human dignity (see Clark, *The Moral Status of Animals* 119-125). Such an association in early Christianity between vegetarianism and the ascetic denial of the flesh perhaps lingers in writing even up to this day, and perhaps contributes to the difficulty in writing persuasively about it. However, Isaiah's vision, mentioned earlier, looking eschatologically to the so-called "peaceable kingdom" where peace obtains not only among people but between people and other animals, maybe hints at what might be the path to follow.

Indeed, the New Testament is not entirely lacking in such a vision of messianic peace with the animal kingdom. Richard Bauckham has revealingly explicated Mark 1:13, where Jesus "was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him" (Linzey and Yamamoto 49-60) so as to draw attention to the concept of "being with someone." Here, Jesus extends this association and even friendship not only to enemies, as later in the gospels, but also to creatures whose oppression has led them to show hostility to other creatures and to humans. Indeed, Jesus perhaps begins his messianic quest to bring peace and eschatological hope to the earth from this moment. As Bauckham points out, Jesus does not "terrorize or dominate the wild animals" (Linzey and Yamamoto 59), and he certainly does not eat them. Isaiah had imagined the "little child" leading the animal kingdom (Isaiah 11:6), but Mark's vision proves more egalitarian than this. It is not just that Jesus exerts power over the dangers of nature. Rather, his advent brings, in the vision of the gospel-writer, the possibility of a community in which man and animal can coexist, without mutual harm (Mark 1:13).

Such emphasis on the kinship between animals and human is, indeed, an ancient one in the tradition of ethical vegetarianism, underpinning Porphyry's essay "On Abstinence," for example, running alongside the commitment in such writing to abstention from meat as a prerequisite for the good life (Walters and Portmess 44). Stephen Clark, among other more recent Christian philosophers, has echoed this understanding of meat as "empty gluttony" and an obstruction to the moral life: "those who still eat flesh when they could do otherwise have no claim to be serious moralists" (Clark, *The Moral Status of Animals* 41). However, such approaches tend once again to be predominantly based on an ideal of moderation and self-restraint, rather than on the expression of a commitment to the intrinsic value of the whole created world, or to serve as a reminder of the moral imperative to work towards a vision of such holistic community. As Clark and others have acknowledged, the dynamic in early Christianity—particularly in the writing of Augustine and, after him, Aquinas—is towards creating an understanding of Christian community as defined against Manicheism and other forms of Gnosticism, many of which used vegetarianism as a trademark (Clark, *Animals and their Moral Standing* 105). In this argument, human reason, the sign of God's image, justifies the assertion of violent dominion over the animals and sanctions the killing of them, from a deontological stance. Consequently, whether through a challenge to Jewish animal sacrifice, or to Manichean dualism, much early Christian writing that becomes canonical tends to sanction the consumption of animals and redirect attention towards other moral and spiritual concerns (Gill 369). As has been suggested, while the language of Jesus the "lamb" celebrates the end of animal scapegoating, in practice such language may be used to justify it.

So the biblical tradition and much Christian thinking following it are often quite contradictory in their attitudes to the question of whether it is ethical, let alone spiritually helpful, to consume animal flesh. More recently, and approaching the topic from a secular perspective, the utilitarian philosopher Peter Singer, whose *Animal Liberation* was published in 1975 (following his 1973 collection of essays *Animals, Men and Morals*), has done much to popularise thinking in this area. The 1975 book uses the so-called "negative utilitarian" commitment to diminishing suffering among the greatest possible number, and it strongly argues that individual interests, whether human or non-human, are absolutely equal. This belief in equality of interests is central to Singer's argument. Also important is Singer's appropriation of a term originally coined by Richard Ryder, "speciesism," i.e. behaviour which gives an unequal and prejudicial importance to the human species over the non-human. Singer draws an analogy between this prejudice and comparable ones within humanity, such as racism or sexism. This analogy also underpins the book's rhetoric and polemic.

In emphasising animals' "equal" capacity for suffering and, therefore, equal interests, Singer is redirecting moral focus away from what over many centuries has

proved a usual starting point in definitions of the human, one which almost automatically provided a "speciesist" distinction between humans and non-humans: the place of reason as the defining feature of human autonomy and subjectivity. This focus begins with Aristotle and is continued through many subsequent philosophers, and easily leads to the inference that, apparently lacking rational powers, animals' interests are subordinate to those of humans. Singer's emphasis on the suffering caused by the neglect of animals' interests means that, in relation to the question of whether it is moral to eat meat, the considerable suffering experienced in the course of producing such meat is not justified by the pleasure which may be experienced by those who eat it. The same argument, it might be observed, applies to questions about the morality of hunting, of the use of animals in the cosmetic industry, and, although this last concerns a complicated area, the use of animals in scientific experiments. However, there is room in the argument for the concession that if meat could be produced without pain, it could be justified.

Singer also considers at length the issue of killing, clearly usually involved in the production of meat. In doing so, he makes use of the concept of the "person," understood as someone existing in a conscious relation to their own future, in contrast to the "non-person," who is sentient but does not share in a similar awareness (Singer 19). Animals can be persons, and humans can be non-persons. Traditional emphasis on rational autonomy as a normative feature of personhood is downplayed, but nonetheless remains clearly in operation. This part of Singer's argument has caused particular outrage, seeming to justify the killing of "non-persons," such as those with severe mental disability. Its consequences are indeed disturbing, and forcefully argued (Singer 19). Also notorious is the anecdote with which the book begins, in which Singer contemptuously describes a woman's assumption that his commitment to animal rights must come about from a "love" of animals. Singer somewhat brutally distances his commitment to equality of interests, non-human and human, from such sentimental assumptions (Singer x). His plethora of evidence, largely unfamiliar in its time, of the enormous quantity of suffering inflicted on non-humans, even in the yearly production of food, makes chastening reading, even for a vegetarian (Singer 165). Such a strategy perhaps sets out to alert the reader to the drastic consequences for less affluent nations of extravagant meat eating (since the production of meat requires about ten times as much land, protein and water as the production of wheat or cereals), as well as to the horrific creaturely suffering experienced by millions of factory-farmed livestock, denied basic freedoms of mobility or dignity or comfort. Other writers, Rosemary Radford Ruether among them, have subsequently focused on these aspects, and made valuable connections between world hunger and factory farming, predominantly practised by the West, contributing to the wider debate in important ways (see Ruether, *Gaia and God*).

The second secular figure in this area is Tom Regan, whose arguments against the utilitarian position are contained in *The Case for Animal Rights* (1983). Regan works in the tradition looking to Kant, who denied that animals possess rights but argued that humanity has a duty not to harm them on the grounds that cruelty debases human morality; following this Kantian position, the "contractarians" Hume and Rawls argued that humans have a positive duty of compassion for those who lack rights of their own. Regan's central disagreement with Singer is that Regan privileges animals' inherent value, irrespective of their capacity for suffering or pleasure as stressed by utilitarians. All who are "experiencing subjects of a life" (Regan 244) possess such rights, according to Regan.

Once again, of course, the argument has been challenged, for example by Roger Scruton, who, in *Animal Rights and Wrongs* (1996), argues that rights are only possessed by consenting members of a moral community, members able to make active use of such rights; animals are not such members and cannot make such a use, while humans, even if diminished in potential by illness or debility, might become such members and are therefore categorically different. Such challenge appears unsurprising, given that Regan's argument is even more uncompromising in some of its implications than Singer's.

The same emphasis on membership of a community as a prerequisite to moral agency informs the approach of Mary Midgley, whose *Animals and Why They Matter* (1983) doubts Singer's and Regan's assumption that "speciesism" is necessarily an evil. Midgley conceives of "self-love" as natural and species-bonding, therefore as an evolutionary necessity; but such does not preclude, and even in some respects it leads to, the reaching out by one individual towards others. From such an understanding of speciesism as the exercise of justifiable discrimination, Midgley questions Singer's reasons for recommending vegetarianism as a moral obligation, but accepts its values on other grounds, in particular, the wastefulness of widespread meat-consumption in a time of human famine—ironically, the same reason given by Radford Ruether for hesitating from "imposing a vegetarian ethic on third-world peasants" for whom occasional meat-eating is unavoidable (Ruether, *Sexism and Godtalk* 27; Ruether, *Gaia and God* 225).

In a recent collection of essays, *Animal Rights: Current Debates*, edited by Sunstein and Nussbaum (2004), Cora Diamond incisively interrogates some of the assumptions and areas of apparent confusion in the work of Singer and Regan, and her argument focuses in particular on the issue of vegetarianism. "Eating Meat and Eating People" expresses frustration with the way in which Singer's arguments, in particular, seem to undermine human significance. Diamond concentrates on the degree of comfort shown by Singer and others with the idea of eating animal flesh that has not been "helped along" towards death, as she puts it, as if to suggest that animals are not, after all, perceived as meaningful, but that the act of killing remains morally problematic. By

contrast, as humans, "*we do not eat our dead*" (Diamond 95, 107ff). Eating roadkill, that is, seems acceptable, in the way that consuming casualties from an accident would not, because animals do not "really" have moral significance. Indeed, Diamond continues to argue, this is because our understanding of what a person is arises from the belief that she "*is not something to eat*" (Diamond 95). Like Midgley, therefore, Diamond, though herself a vegetarian, is endorsing a commitment to human difference, "speciesist" as it may be, as a necessary precursor to morally responsible and meaningful action. It is not a question of "interests" which "is involved in our not eating each other," but it is something "which goes to determine" what sort of concept "human being" is (Diamond 107). Further, we learn what a human being is through the contrast with animals established at meals, by—among other ways—"sitting at a table where *we eat them*. We are around the table and they are on it" (Diamond 107). The difference between humans and animals is not to be determined by analysis or by the privileging of one quality or another, whether it is the possession of self-aware reason, or the capacity for suffering. Such superficial distinctions can, indeed, be shown to mislead, since there are always humans who fall short or animals that prove more capable than had been assumed. By contrast, Diamond maintains that though a real one, the distinction is arrived at not by such means, but by what she calls "contemplation" (Diamond 108): "it is clear we create the idea of the difference" (Diamond 109). From this perspective, she contends that Singer and Regan are not, deep down, committed to what animals are, but to "attacking significance in humans"; they derive their arguments from a belief in a common biological origin, "animal" (Diamond 109).

Tortuous as it occasionally becomes in its explication of the distinctions she wishes to establish, Diamond's article, nevertheless, gradually works towards an understanding of what the term "fellow-creature" may imply for the relation between humans and other animals. It is this term and the proposals she makes that offer a distinctive path through what is, as has been suggested, something of a minefield. She indicates cogently the contradictory movements in culture and language towards the animal world, movements that seem to endorse both intimate co-existence and imaginative communication, and also savagely cruel neglect and objectification. Acknowledging the limitations to our ability to truly comprehend animals, however, leaves open room for pity, for relenting, for going beyond the limits of "rights" or "interests" stressed by the utilitarian position. Diamond here seems to be coming from the perspective of a virtue-based ethic, in which the performance of pity, in response to the imaginative perception of an animal's "plea," contributes to the unfolding process of ethical creation.

Such a belief in an emergent understanding of the good, achieved through experience and not through abstract thought, as she characterises Singer's process (Diamond 109), has, perhaps arising from a "secular" basis, much in common with



certain aspects both of some Christian and also some ecofeminist conceptions in this area. The human capacity to think beyond the moment towards a better outcome may both redeem present suffering, in a way that animals are perhaps not capable of doing, but may also be put to the service of such creatures, limited to a greater degree by their confinement within present experiencing. Such is, indeed, an area where difference between human and non-human animals may both be identified and overcome, for, as *The Inclusive God* (2006) puts it, "animals, apparently, do not hope for a better life [...] living within the horizon of the present, they do not ask whether tomorrow could be any better [...] hope is integral to what it is to be human" (Shakespeare and Rayment-Pickard 50). Whether this claim can in fact be proved is, to me, unclear, as the qualifier "apparently" suggests: animal behaviour certainly shows an ability to make an environment more congenial, and whether this derives from "hope" or from something more instinctual remains hard to know. Nonetheless, as Raymond Gaita, following and invoking Diamond's work, has recently stated, "Our understanding of the definitive facts of the human condition [...] is determined through and through by our creatureliness. Like other creatures we die rather than break down" (Gaita 208). Such an understanding of shared identity is surely essential to moral and ecospiritual thinking, and must, I suggest, be central in our understanding of how moral behaviour in relation to other animals might be described.

### **Creatureliness in Ecofeminism and Ecotheology**

At this stage, it can then perhaps be hypothesised that both the language of "rights," which exalts animal identity, and of religious "dominion," which seeks to control it, fall somewhat short in articulating this creatureliness. Feminist theory, however, may offer a further perspective, in proposing, through, for example, the work of Carol Adams, that it is the practice of vegetarianism that most precisely expresses this creatureliness. *The Sexual Politics of Meat* (1990) cogently demonstrates the interconnection, in both practice and language, between violence against women and violence against animals. Here Adams argues that culture uses language to rename the objects of its oppression—animals as meat—in order to justify the violence involved in this process, using what she calls the "structure of the absent referent" (Adams, *The Sexual Politics of Meat* 42), and making a sustained analogy between this process and the means by which women too are oppressed and exploited, in particular by pornography. This analysis is a compelling one. Once again, however, to some extent, it convinces by means of an appeal to human values, perceiving vegetarianism as the logical expression of a commitment to animal rights, and animal rights as closely "resonating with feminist theory and female experience" (Adams, *The Sexual Politics of Meat* 146). An assumption seems to be in place that the enlightened female reader will

adopt vegetarianism as a gesture against the patriarchal violence endemic in culture. Adams often suggests that meanings thus are expressed through food choices" (Adams, *The Sexual Politics of Meat* 127 and elsewhere), Adams writes, implying that these meanings are ones that patriarchy prefers to deny or obscure. Investigating such meanings may illuminate the construction of femininity, therefore—for example, women's connection with blood (Adams, *The Sexual Politics of Meat* 133) and therefore with other animals, oppressed and objectified as women also are. Powerful as Adams's polemic is, the argument seems again to point to the enhancement of human meaning rather than to the intrinsic value of animal life, in an instrumentalist fashion.

Indeed, from the perspective of global justice as well as from the perspective of the stewardship of creation, such recommendations seem uncontentious. But there are further, broader and more complex questions also raised by this issue. The parallels explored by Carol Adams between the distancing language used of flesh-consumption, on the one hand, and the violent degradations of women in pornography and the sex-trade, on the other, are implicitly pursued, though Adams's work is not acknowledged, by Eric Schlosser's shocking and hard-hitting *Fast Food Nation* (2002), which uses as an epigraph Robert Lowell's remark "A savage servility slides by on grease." The book draws far-ranging parallels between the brutalising world of the abattoir, the "concentration camp" of modern America (Schlosser 223.), and the oppression and dehumanisation of those forced to work within it, particularly migrant women. Supervisors in the "production line" become "meatpacking Casanovas" (Schlosser 176), where the desensitisation required to endure the horrors of unceasing animal slaughter leads inexorably to a suspension of respect for human dignity also: it is "a different world that obeys different laws" (Schlosser 176). The book illustrates the Kantian proposition that collusion with the suffering of creatures, though not possessors of moral rights, nonetheless degrades the human agent. Lowell's remark succinctly conveys the way in which industrialisation of food, particularly of meat, not only turns living creatures into mechanised products, but also brutalises those involved, further enslaving through its appeal to economies of time and cost. In short, the Western world is "greased" by the blood and guts of millions of creatures, human and non-human.

Two emphases in more recent theological writing seem to me helpful in charting a path through these muddy waters and in the effort to find further theological and ethical bases for understanding "creatureliness." Andrew Linzey (who in December 2006 established a "Centre for Animal Ethics" in Oxford, and whose work is informed by that of Albert Schweitzer whilst contesting that of Karl Barth), highlights the concept of 'katabasis' or

[Christ's] power expressed in powerlessness and strength expressed in compassion. If self-costly, generous loving is the hallmark of true discipleship, then we have to ask

what grounds we have from excluding animals from this proper exercise of Christian responsibility. (Linzey 71)

Such costly love is offered regardless of the worth of its recipient: such love, as Linzey argues, may therefore be offered as much to the non-human members of creation as the human. Following on from this argument, Stephen Webb has developed an account of Christ's kenotic gift through his perception of divine grace operating within the animal world: grace, or "the inclusive and expansive power of God's love to create and sustain relationships of real mutuality and reciprocity" (Webb x). In such relationships of "excess," of gift, we see "prefigured and actualised" the self-giving love of God. (Webb x). This emphasis is helpful in avoiding the potential for rigid absolutism that sometimes marks the area of "animal rights." As Linzey says, it is impossible to serve all creation indiscriminately; the question "where do I draw the line?" (do we include all animate life but exclude inanimate one?) leads to both demanding, and, from a purist perspective, imperfect, choices (Linzey 71). Indeed, Webb acknowledges the tendency in this area for polarised or excessively dogmatic thinking, and consequently suggests that vegetarianism is to be adopted as a "kind of continuous fasting" through which "an interplay of plenty and frugality nicely captures the Christian double emphasis on celebration and compassion. The vegetarian eats well, even as he or she eats so that others may eat better" (Webb 165). The Christian Eucharist, understood as a "memorial meal" (a commemoration, initially of the Passover, then of Christ's last supper with the disciples and his gift on the cross) is inscribed by language that, as Adams (influenced by liberation theology) has observed "animalises and masculinises" vegetarian substance: meat is not consumed, but the vegetable food becomes the body and blood of Jesus, therefore, she argues, normalising the consumption of flesh (Adams, *Neither Man nor Beast* 178). Adams consequently redirects attention away from such a normalising emphasis, and suggests that the Christian Eucharist is an opportunity for thankfulness, but also for an eschatological element, the liberation of all flesh from bondage and slavery. As she puts it, "the goal of living in right relationships and ending injustice is to have grace in our meals as well as *at* our meals" (Adams, *Neither Man nor Beast* 178).

Such an emphasis reminds us that while, as we have seen, many arguments concerning the ethics of vegetarianism have arisen in a predominantly secular ethical context, the work of Clark, Linzey and recently Webb, following in the wake of feminist and ecofeminist, theological and ecological thought, has done much to open and animate the area. Consuming animal flesh may be seen as an expression of human "dominion" or ownership of creation. Celebrating but not consuming animal life, however, may, conversely, be regarded as an acknowledgement of human and animal co-participation in the universe. And, most importantly from the point of view of this essay, as Diamond, Gaita, Schlosser and others acknowledge, imaginative work (literature, the arts, and in particular, poetry) may also better prepare us to address the complex and multifaceted

questions raised by this area than the stark and sometimes polarised abstractions of traditional ethical enquiry. Indeed, in a cultural context, and an ethical area, where "fundamentalist" polarities are often prevalent, the readiness of such imaginative enquiry to avoid the endorsing of dogmatic certainties may be welcome.

It is, of course, hard for such polarisation to be entirely avoided. Indeed, even within more recently emerging debates within ecocriticism, such polarisation can be found. It is present even within debates between "deep ecologists" and ecofeminists, both committed to "healing the wounds," as in Judith Plant's work by the same title (1989). The latter, for example, perceive the desire of the former to identify with all parts of the cosmos as a form of universalism that devalues the concrete and particular—two elements so often associated with women and, consequently, often celebrated by feminist revisioning by Val Plumwood (1993) and others. Feminist ecocritics have sought to challenge this potential for dualistic thought in much "deep ecology" and attempted to present an approach that is more "inclusive" and "holistic." Others again have, by contrast, charged such ecofeminists with expressing a somewhat self-interested version of "inclusive" thinking, in effect "failing to address the plight of non-human animals." Marti Kheel writes critically, for example, of those "new age" ecofeminists who concentrate on their own spiritual salvation and state, and even "give thanks" for the animal killing involved in the eating of meat, thereby presuming to dismiss creaturely pain by redescribing and elevating it into a sacrificial act (Kheel 21-22). In Kheel's view, a focus on personal spirituality here becomes an alternative to moral protest and virtuous action on behalf of other creatures. Both the "stewardship" model, which, as I have been suggesting, emphasises man's "dominion" over nature and informs much Christian understanding, and also the "biocentric" model, arising out of "deep ecology" and affirming the intrinsic worth of all beings, thus have their pitfalls. Yet at the same time, this latter movement has enabled many to become more open to the "contemplation of food as a holy mystery through which we eat ourselves into existence" (Miriam MacGillis, qtd. in Taylor 161). These words affirm in a contemporary and perhaps more explicitly ecospiritual context the strong connection between feminist commitment and vegetarian practice endorsed by Carol Adams, mentioned earlier. Alongside, many other figures urge that attention be given to the "consciousness" that accompanies the provision and consumption of food (Taylor 167).

### **Fishing for the Creature**

There are no doubt many ways in which such consciousness may be acquired, cultivated and expressed. This is a burgeoning area in contemporary writing, one in which the personal, cultural, racial odyssey meets with the area of social challenge and protest. As I have begun to suggest, poetry may offer a language and form within which

to probe the process by which the human reaches out to, or finds herself overcoming, the non-human animal. It may begin to challenge the ease with which we forget our uncomfortable closeness to some animals, or with which we fail to wonder at the utter difference of others.

Many poems across the ages strive to find words to express the sense of creaturely co-existence on the earth, even while some are constrained by the assumption of dominion and superiority that marks their time. A number of twentieth-century poems, nonetheless, work vigorously—and with a keen awareness of the limits of verbal utterance—to explore the relation between human self and animal other, and attempt to find words for something that is, in this sense, an “ecospiritual vision.” Such poems may not specifically engage with the question of vegetarianism. They are not works of “protest” in the narrow definition of the term. Nonetheless, they thoughtfully acknowledge the impoverishing effect of human—explicitly masculine—desire for dominion over nature, while also seeking to express the transforming and even transcendent consequences of an encounter between the human and the non-human universe when the former renders itself open to the latter’s responsive yet utterly distinct life.

Anne Stevenson has written that Elizabeth Bishop, the American poet, a lover of animals, felt “uneasy about exploiting a convention that took so little notice of the nature of animals themselves” (Stevenson 74). Bishop’s well-known and well-loved poem “The Fish” is probably more famous than many of her other works. It exemplifies an attempt to find words and poetic form for an ecospiritual vision of and relation to fellow creatures which differ greatly from ourselves, and which exist apart from our hungers and our desires to dominate them (Bishop, *Complete Poems* 42-44). In a dedicatory letter to Marianne Moore, Bishop mentioned the earlier American writers Hemingway and Frost, who might, she suggested, be present within the poem’s apparent concern with an epic battle between humanity and nature (Bishop, *One Art* 87). Indeed, its speaker, whose gender is not disclosed, invokes the American trope of hunting the Big Fish (“landing the big one”). Despite its ambivalent gendering, the poem initially expresses an objectifying and possessive attitude towards the natural world, one that is of a piece with the flauntingly human-centred attitude assumed in its opening lines: “I caught a tremendous fish/ and held him besides the boat/ half out of water, with my hook/ fast in a corner of his mouth” (Bishop, *Complete Poems* 42, ll. 1-4). The language here exults in the speaker’s power over the fish, whose size seems to magnify the stature and self-belief of the speaker. We are alerted to the way in which this triumph leads the speaker to view the creature as a reflection of himself—as the image would suggest—and of his desire for power and mastery: he elevates the fish—“him”—in language, as he also inscribes an exact and punishing hold, underlined by the alliterative “h” of “held,” “half” and “hook.” Such devices, however, alert us, the reader,

to this dramatic stance performed before our eyes: they encourage us to question the process by which the fish is constructed as a trophy and emblem of power. They remind us, as Foer and Kafka had also done, that the inner lives of fish are easily overlooked, and that art, far from serving our desires for mastery, may do better by beginning to imagine such otherwise obscure life.

Vicki Feaver's account of this poem in her essay "The Reclamation of Female Space" (Feaver 87-102) rightly places it in a wider context of other poems about fish by women poets, in particular "The Fish" by Marianne Moore, whom Bishop admired and regarded as a poetic mentor, and a less well-known poem by the English poet Stevie Smith, "Fish, Fish." Feaver contrasts both the elegant but distanced aestheticism of Moore's poem, on the one hand, and Smith's pretext for fantasy and escapism, on the other, with the precise and detailed realism of Bishop's work. This eye for exact and precise detail, so much a trademark of Bishop's verse, clearly contrasts with the bragging exaggerations of the opening lines. When discussing Smith's poem, Feaver suggests that in describing the fish who "sits *on* the hook" (Smith 453, l. 19) Smith implies the fish's resistance to the human attempt to catch "him," but nonetheless the poem is interpreted here as essentially uninterested in the reality of the natural creature. In Feaver's reading, Bishop's poem becomes, underneath its elaborate courtesy, a kind of rebuke to Smith's portrayal of the fish and a stark contrast. However, if "my hook/fast in a corner of his mouth" conjures at first sight human mastery over the caught fish (Bishop, *Complete Poems* 42, ll. 3-4), Feaver's reading perhaps overlooks the extent to which the line also suggests a powerful, "fast" hold by the fish, stuck in its moment and speedy in its vital resistance. The reference to its mouth, meanwhile, more remotely implies a disabling loss of speech. Initially, we hear of the "grunting" fish, a word whose evocation of non-verbal sound connects the creature lacking human language with the momentarily incapacitated poet. In this way, the poem reflects on its own clumsiness and vulnerability before the natural world and when asked to find words to express this sense of creaturely co-existence.

Such a sense leads to fear (it is "tremendous" or terrible), since realising that our experience is not unique, or entirely distinctive, can indeed be alarming. Consequently the poet attempts to allay this fear with anthropomorphising pronouns ("my hook," "his mouth" [Bishop, *Complete Poems* 42, ll. 1, 22]) and domesticating language (images of wallpaper, petite "rosettes" [ll. 3, 4, 11, 17]). It is perhaps by means of such consciously artful metaphorical language that the poem proves able to discover a more substantial and truthful apprehension of the inner life that exists beyond what is seen and what is spoken. This in turn yields to the dramatic gesture of giving up and back to nature, as the speaker at the end of the poem returns the captured fish to the sea. The poem therefore acknowledges a human implication in the depredation of natural creatures and environment. Even within the longing for a "messianic" peace between

creatures, the lion cannot do without its roar and still be a lion; yet he also enacts a way in which such violence may be accommodated. Similarly, distortion and appropriation of creatureliness are likely to be present in the act of poetic creation. But in the vision of the poem, this need not be all: it is possible to go beyond this, through a gesture of quasi-penitential turning, towards a moment of creaturely living and seeing. In this act of seeing, the suffering and the potentially heroic endurance of *observer-artist* and *observed-creature* are recognised as being both of value, and worthy of wonder.

Such an acknowledgment makes an idea of common living possible. Both artist and creature struggle to live within an alien atmosphere ("breathing in/ The terrible oxygen") and both can inflict pain ("That can cut so badly" [Bishop, *Complete Poems* 42, ll. 22-23, 26]). Marilyn May Lombardi has connected this former phrase with Bishop's own asthmatic struggles, and observed very pertinently that it is only oxygen in air, and not in water, that is unbreathable for fish (Lombardi 38). The self's terrors interrupt her ability to see and know the external world truly: they form a "hook" that draws her out of the water of true creative and creaturely vision. In such a condition, the artist may offer consoling similes to redress this alienation: "I thought of the coarse white flesh/ packed in like feathers,/ the big bones and the little bones", and they may move from the scientific precision of "swim-bladder" to the more extravagantly decorative "like a big peony" (Bishop, *Complete Poems* 42, ll. 27-9, 34-5). In these watery fluctuations of dismembering analysis and imaginative reconstruction, Bishop describes the drive to take apart and to recreate. In viewing the body of the fish as "flesh," the poet acknowledges its potential to be consumed. But "flesh" is not the same as "meat." "Flesh" makes contact with the human body, which is both consumed and also, through Christian ritual, made sacred. Here the poem works through alliteration, an assertion of commonality, to lead us towards the image of "feathers," which evoke flight and ascent. Thereby, transformation and a redemptive celebration of the physical is enacted, and the body's limitations, particular as they are to species and to the individual creature, are acknowledged, yet not regarded as terminal or incapable of transcendence. As Susan McCabe has observed, it is "less usual to read 'The Fish' [...] in surreal or spiritual terms" (McCabe 94). But in the poem, nonetheless, body and spirit are perceived as interdependent. The body of the fish becomes the means by which the speaker is enabled to touch the hem of the spiritual and even of the transcendent. This experience returns the speaker into a deeper understanding of the fragility and ephemerality of the material world in which she or he lives.

The observer is, herself, hooked: she "stared and stared" (Bishop, *Complete Poems* 43, l. 67), and rather than consuming the fish for her own satisfaction and indulging the human fantasy of mastery and transcendence, she is reminded of her own provisionality, "the little rented boat" and the searing oil a symptom of industry's despoliation of nature (Bishop, *Complete Poems* 43, l. 69). Underlying this moment of

enhanced and transformed vision is, indeed, a language drawn from biblical tradition, which is also present—though perhaps not fully acknowledged in Feaver’s analysis—within Stevie Smith’s parallel fish poem. In both poems, the fish evokes a hinterland of spiritual and Christian symbolism, though this in both cases remains shadowy. Smith’s speaker remarks, imagining the freedom of the fish’s habitat, “I shall be happy then/ In the watery company of his kingdom” (Smith 453, l. 24). Smith’s line recalls the Christian concept of the kingdom of heaven, and as the poem unfolds, it appears that the hook on which the fish “sits” may be comparable to the cross on which Christ accepted crucifixion and from which in Christian tradition he rises. In describing the poem as “escapist,” Feaver suggests a lack of ambiguity in Smith’s relation with the imagined “watery” state. But Smith’s voice also turns out to be complex: the fish is powerful, patient; despite the images of confinement associated with it (“underneath” the brook, and “on” the hook [Smith 453, ll. 2, 19]) the fish enables the speaker to inhabit the present and look more confidently to the future “then.” The image of “patient,” masterful and attentive suffering yields the observer a power and an autonomy that is far from “escapist.” In Bishop’s ‘The Fish’ also, the five hooks that have attempted to defy the fish resemble the wounds of Christ, which in the Gospels, Christ indicates and invites doubting Thomas to touch, a symbol of their power of enabling the speaker to inhabit the present with acceptance.

Both poems, it may be suggested, draw into play Christian ideas of resurrection and restoration, while they also, in an ecologically alert manner, seek to challenge masculinist and modern(ist) incursions on the natural world and on the “perishable depths” of material life. In different ways, both Smith and Bishop acknowledge the self-deceptions of art, and refrain from expressing allegiance to an orthodox Christian or other religious position. Conversely, though, both also put forth that artistic vision may be one way in which human dominion over the non-human may be put aside in favour of a *creaturely attention*, and one in which an “ecospiritual” sensitivity is powerfully rendered. In Bishop’s poem, at least, this is given an added dimension as the form of killing envisaged is explicitly masculinist. Within the expansive and versatile space offered by poetry, therefore, as Bishop’s poem demonstrates, some vexed and complicated ethical questions relating to the killing and consumption of animals, and the forgetting that ensues, are fruitfully and sensitively addressed. Furthermore, the journey towards wholeness that is often a part of ecospiritual writing and thinking is also here undertaken.

## Works Cited

Adams, Carol J. *The Sexual Politics of Meat*. Oxford: Polity Press, 1990. Print.



- . *Neither Man nor Beast: Feminism and the Defence of Animals*. New York: Continuum, New York, 1994. Print.
- Bauckham, Richard. *Moltmann: Messianic Theology in the Making*. Basingstoke: Marshall Pickering, 1987. Print.
- Bishop, Elizabeth, *Complete Poems*. London: Chatto and Windus, 1983. Print.
- . *One Art: Letters*. New York: Noonday, 1994. Print.
- Clark, Stephen R. *The Moral Status of Animals*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977. Print.
- . *Animals and their Moral Standing*. London: Routledge, 1997. Print.
- Diamond, Cora. "Eating Meat and Eating People." *Animal Rights: Current Debates and New Directions*. Eds. Cass R. Sunstein and Martha Nussbaum. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004. 93-107. Print.
- Dolley, Tania, "Reclaiming our Animal Body." *Greenspirit: Path to a New Consciousness*. Eds. Marian Van Eyk McCain. Winchester: O Books, 2010. 76-84. Print.
- Feaver, Vicky. "The Reclamation of Female Space." In *Elizabeth Bishop: Poet of the Periphery*. Eds. Linda Anderson and Jo Shapcott. Bloodaxe, 2002. 87-102. Print.
- Foer, Jonathan Safran. *Eating Animals*. Penguin, 2009. Print.
- Gaita, Raymond, *The Philosopher's Dog*. London: Routledge, 2003. Print.
- Gill, Robin. *A Textbook of Christian Ethics (New Revised Edition)*. Edinburgh: T and T Clark, 1995. Print.
- Grant, Robert. *Early Christians and Animals*. London: Routledge, 1999. Print.
- Kheel, Marti. *Nature Ethics: An Ecofeminist Perspective*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008. Print
- Leahy, Michael, *After Liberation*. London: Routledge, 1991. Print.
- Linzey, Andrew. *Animal Theology*. London: SCM, 1994. Print.
- Linzey, Andrew and Dan Cohn-Sherbrook. *After Noah: Animals and the Liberation of Theology*. London: SCM, 1997. Print.
- Linzey, Andrew and Dorothy Yamamoto, eds. *Animals on the Agenda*. London: SCM, 1998. Print.
- Lombardi, Marilyn May. *The Body and the Song: Elizabeth Bishop's Poetics*. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1995. Print.
- McCabe, Susan. *Elizabeth Bishop: Her Poetics of Loss*. Philadelphia: Pennsylvania State University, 1994.
- Midgley, Mary. *Why Animals Matter*. Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1983. Print.
- Plant, Judith, ed. *Healing the Wounds*. Gabriola Island, BC: New Society Publishers, 1989. Print.
- Plumwood, Val. *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*. London: Routledge, 1993. Print.

*Author: Jones, Hester; Title: "Bitter to your Stomach, but Sweet as Honey in Your Mouth":  
Vegetarianism, Animals and Working towards an Ecospiritual Poetry*

- Regan, Tom. *The Case for Animal Rights*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983. Print.
- Ruether, Rosemary Radford. *Gaia and God*. New York: Harpercollins, New York, 1992. Print.
- . *Sexism and Godtalk: Towards a Feminist Theology*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1993. Print.
- Scruton, R. *Animal Rights and Wrongs*. London: Demos, 1996. Print.
- Shakespeare, Steven and Hugh Rayment-Pickard. *The Inclusive God*. Norwich: Canterbury Press, Norwich, 2006. Print.
- Schlosser, Eric. *Fast Food Nation: The Dark Side of the All-American Meal*. Penguin, 2002.
- Singer, Peter. *Animal Liberation*. 1975. London: Pimlico, 1995. Print.
- Smith, Stevie. *The Collected Poems*. Ed. James MacGibbon. Penguin, 1989. Print.
- Stevenson, Anne. *Five Looks at Elizabeth Bishop*. Bloodaxe, 1998.
- Taylor, Sarah Macfarland. *GreenSisters: A Spiritual Ecology*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007. Print.
- Young, Richard Alan. *Is God a Vegetarian? Christianity, Vegetarianism and Animal Rights*. Peru, IL: Carus Publishing Company, 1999. Print.
- Walters, Kerry S. and Lisa Portmess. *Ethical Vegetarianism*. Albany: State University of New York, 1999. Print.
- Webb, Stephen H. *On God and Dogs: A Christian Theology of Compassion for Animals*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998. Print.