



Article

# Animal Poetry and Empathy

Tirza Brüggemann

Faculty of Humanities, Vrije Universiteit, De Boelelaan 1105, 1081 HV Amsterdam, The Netherlands; tbruggemann@amsterdams.com

Academic Editor: Joela Jacobs

Received: 24 January 2017; Accepted: 5 April 2017; Published: 10 April 2017

**Abstract:** This article discusses how our ideas of empathy are influenced by the dichotomy of mind versus body, also known as Cartesian dualism. Within the aesthetic field, this dichotomy is seen when researchers define narrative empathy as imaginatively reconstructing the fictional character's thoughts and feelings. Conversely, the empathy aroused by a non-narrative work of art is seen as an unconscious bodily mirroring of movements, postures or moods. Thinking dualistically does not only have consequences for what we consider human nature; it also affects our view on animals. To show the untenability of dualistic thinking, this article focuses on the animal poetry genre. Using the ideas of the French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty, I analyze two animal poems: "Inventing a Horse" by Meghan O'Rourke and "Spermaceti" by Les Murray. The analysis of these two poems suggests that the presiding ideas about aesthetic empathy and empathy in general need re-evaluation.

**Keywords:** empathy; Cartesian dualism; Maurice Merleau-Ponty; animal poetry; 'Inventing a Horse'; 'Spermaceti'

---

## 1. Introduction

For anyone interested in empathy research, the many definitions of the concept, the sometimes contradictory ways in which distinctions are made between forms of empathy, and the variety of fields and subjects in which the idea of empathy appears can be discouraging. Psychologists, philosophers, biologists, neuroscientists and aestheticians seek to answer questions about humans' supposed empathic nature, about our ability to read other people's minds, about our reservation to ascribe mind-reading to members of a different species than our own and about the question of how we can have the experience of 'feeling with' regarding a work of art. Researchers even differ in opinion on whether they should strive at a unifying theory on what empathy entails or not. For example, the psychologist Stephanie Preston and the biologist Frans de Waal favour a 'unified story', whereas the psychologist Amy Coplan maintains that the different definitions of empathy refer to different phenomena. In "Understanding Empathy: its Features and Effects", Coplan writes: "Preston and De Waal take us in the wrong direction [...] [t]he differences among processes [...] haven't been emphasized enough, particularly those that exist between some of the higher-level processes. We need more specificity, not more generality" ([1], p. 5).

One of these specifications in the empathy debate (of which Coplan believes requires further specification) is the distinction between high-level empathy and low-level mirroring. In this article, I argue that the peripheral genre of animal poetry can show us that this distinction rests on untenable Cartesian convictions about human nature. What these poems demonstrate is not only important in the literary field, but it also affects the empathy debate in general.

The structure of my argument is as follows: firstly, I explain the distinction in the empathy debate between high-level empathy and low-level mirroring as well as some concepts related to this distinction: affective matching, emotional contagion, self-oriented perspective taking and other-oriented perspective taking. Secondly, I analyze the underlying presuppositions to this distinction and I discuss some counterarguments. Thirdly, I will turn to the work of the French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Endorsing his position, I will argue that dividing low-level mirroring from high-level empathy is in fact based on the Cartesian dualistic conviction that there is a strict division between the mind (Descartes' *res cogitans*) and the body (Descartes' *res extensa*). Fourthly, I show how this distinction plays a role in aesthetic studies in general and literary studies in particular. Finally, I will return to the work of Merleau-Ponty. His critique of Descartes and his search for a monistic view on human nature is a fruitful way to approach animal poems. To illustrate this, I will discuss two animal poems, Meghan O'Rourke's: "Inventing A Horse" and Les Murray's, "Spermaceti". The analysis of these two poems suggests that the presiding ideas about aesthetic empathy and empathy in general need re-evaluation.

## 2. High-Level Empathy versus Low-Level Mirroring

It is difficult to give a unified definition of empathy. When theorists do define the phenomenon, the first step usually consists of contrasting empathy with sympathy. Empathy, then, is described as 'feeling with', whereas sympathy is described as 'feeling for'. For many researchers who strive for specificity, including Amy Coplan who I take as their representative, this definition of empathy is too broad. It captures instances that are perfectly described as 'feeling with', but would nevertheless not be generally considered as instances of empathy. For example, when we both suffer from arachnophobia and a spider approaches us, my fear will be similar to your fear, but this would not count as empathy. Sharing the same emotions, or 'affective matching' seems to be a necessary condition for empathy, but not a sufficient one. Another example of affective matching that would not be regarded as empathy according to Coplan, is the phenomenon of emotional contagion. Emotional contagion takes place when people catch the emotions of other people but are themselves unaware of the object of the copied emotion. An example of emotional contagion is the sensation of happiness one can suddenly feel when watching a group of happy people. To exclude such instances from empathy, Amy Coplan inserts the precondition that affective matching must be the result of imaginatively reconstructing the subjective experience of somebody else. She writes:

One of the key differences between emotional contagion and empathy is that contagion is a direct, automatic, unmediated process. Empathy is never fully unmediated since it requires perspective-taking. Roughly, perspective-taking is an imaginative process through which one constructs another person's subjective experience by simulating the experience of being in the other's situation ([1], p. 9).

Reconstructing someone's subjective experience can only be done through other-oriented perspective taking, which is to be distinguished from self-oriented perspective taking. I engage in the first form when I ask myself how it would be for *me* in *her* situation. When I, however, imagine what it is like for *her* in *her* situation, I am taking on an other-oriented perspective. According to Coplan, together with a matching of feelings *because of* my other-oriented perspective taking, the phenomenon deserves the denomination of 'empathy'. Coplan adds as a reminder that it is necessary in other-oriented perspective taking to 'preserve a separate sense of self' ([1], p. 15), because if we don't we "might end [...] up experiencing the other's perspective as [our] own" ([1], p. 15). The awareness of the other person as someone who has "his own unique thoughts, feelings, desires and characteristics [...] prevent[s] one from losing sight of where the self ends and the other begins *and* where the other ends and the self begins" ([1], p. 16). A final prerequisite for empathy is the perceived similarity between myself and the other: Coplan writes: "[...] since the more unlike the target we are, the more difficult it is to reconstruct her subjective experiences" ([1], p. 13).

In summary, according to Coplan, to feel empathy one needs to have a separate sense of self, have matching affects with the target—which is more likely to happen when the other is similar to one’s self—and these matching affects must be the result of other-oriented perspective taking. Someone’s perspective consists of his own unique thoughts, feelings, desires and characteristics and can be reconstructed imaginatively. Empathy is thus a mediated process, because it requires reflection on the self and the other. The reconstruction of someone else’s subjective experience must be, according to Coplan, a conscious, non-automatic process, since otherwise I might confuse my own feelings and thoughts with that of the target.

Coplan distinguishes this non-automatic, voluntary, conscious process from another form of affective matching, which is, according to her, the result of the opposite: an involuntary automatic, unconscious process. Before I discuss the supposed differences between the two forms of ‘feeling with’, it is necessary to dwell on the many terms used in the empathy debate. Some researchers use the term ‘mind-reading’ where others would rather use the term ‘empathy’. There are even theorists who use the term ‘sympathy’ in place of ‘empathy’. Furthermore, the terms for the so-called higher processes differ. Coplan, in the citation above, describes perspective taking as an ‘imaginative process’, whereas others prefer the term ‘re-enactive empathy’ or avoid the term ‘empathy’ altogether because of its unclear connotation. In some cases, researchers use different terms for the same concept, but in other cases the terms refer to slightly different instances of empathy. It is important to keep in mind that for almost all researchers there is a difference between automatic low-level mirroring resulting in affective matching and voluntary conscious perspective taking resulting in affective matching. For the purposes of this article I will use the term ‘low-level mirroring’ instead of ‘high-level perspective taking’.

The idea that there are two routes to affective matching is thoroughly described by Alvin Goldman in *Simulating Minds: the Philosophy, Psychology and Neuroscience of Mind-reading*. Goldman goes even further in distinguishing these two routes from each other by linking them to different areas in the brain. In contrast to Coplan he calls both processes ‘empathy’. This seems nothing more than a question of definition, because the distinction stays the same: there is a voluntary, conscious route to empathy and an involuntary unconscious route to empathy. The former “targets mental states of a relatively complex nature whilst the latter is to be considered as “simple”, “primitive” “automatic and unconscious” ([2], p. 147). The low-level route to empathy is ‘automatic’ and ‘unconscious’ because Goldman connects this route to the working of mirror neurons. Since their discovery, mirror neurons have been considered to be the ‘hard-wire of empathy’. They fire when we perform, for instance, a goal-oriented action, but they fire as well when we see the same action performed by someone else. It would be beyond the scope of this article to go into detail of how mirror neurons work. For the argument presented here, it suffices to say, that Goldman considers this route to empathy to be distinct from the high level, cognitive route, because the mirroring route stays “below the threshold of consciousness” ([3], p. 33). To illustrate the two routes, Goldman refers to a situation in which someone sees a friend with a happy face and mirrors that happy state, while “the object of the stranger’s happiness remains undisclosed by mirroring”. Mirroring reproduces in the observer only happiness, not happiness *about X or about Y*” ([3], p. 43). The ‘aboutness’ of the happiness can be reconstructed through other-oriented perspective taking, which can only be consciously done and is therefore a high-level process.

Before I discuss some counterarguments against the distinction between the two types of empathy, or the two types of affective matching, it is helpful to make the presuppositions visible on which this distinction is built:

- (1) There is a boundary (in the brain) between conscious, voluntary processes and unconscious, automatic processes.
- (2) There is a boundary between inner mental states and observable behaviour.
- (3) Someone’s perspective consists of mental states: thoughts, feelings and desires (which we can deduce only from bodily behaviour).
- (4) My self has a boundary (which can be blurred by emotional contagion).

- (5) Similarity between the empath and the empathizee is a necessary condition for empathy.

Most of these presuppositions seem to go without saying, and maybe because of that Coplan and Goldman presume them without further reflection. However, the claims in these presuppositions have consequences. For instance, when we assume that subjective experience, or my perspective, consists of thoughts, feelings and desires and that these mental states are something other than bodily behaviour, we assume that there is a distinction between my perspective, or even *me*, and my body. Another consequence is that since someone's body only gives me an inkling of her closed-off inner mental states, I assume that my reconstruction of her perspective is far more likely to be successful when I judge her to be like myself.

This distinction between mind and body, between conscious and unconscious and between voluntary and automatic is known as Cartesian dualism. Looking at humans in this dualistic way has implications for our idea of empathy. Since it is exclusive to others we judge to be not like ourselves, it cannot account for an experience of 'feeling with' with animals. Descartes thought of animals as machines and even if we think this goes too far, empathy with animals is still looked upon with suspicion: are we assuming too many similarities and in doing so, are we anthropomorphizing the animal? These questions are natural outcomes when we have dualistic ideas about nature. However, I will show that they lose their validity when we give up Cartesian dualism.

### 3. Objections to the Distinction between High and Low Level

The objections against the distinction between high-level empathy and low-level mirroring can be categorized as direct objections and fundamental objections. Frédérique de Vignemont formulates some direct objections against the distinction in her article "Drawing the Boundary Between Low-Level and High-Level Mindreading" and more fundamental objections can be found in the work of the French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty.

In her article, Frédérique de Vignemont claims that the two systems in the brain do not operate separately and that, consequently, there is no clear distinction between high-level processes and low-level processes. To demonstrate her argument, De Vignemont takes 'motor imaging' as an example of how the two systems work together. Motor imagery is the phenomenon of imagining an action whilst not performing it. Goldman considers motor imagery to be a case of high-level simulation, because of its voluntariness and its demand for consciousness. The observation of a movement, however, would be a case of a low-level process to Goldman, given the automaticity of the mirroring process. In contrast to this idea of separate processes, De Vignemont writes: "action execution, action observation, and also action imagination, all three, overlap at the neural level. In other words, here is a case of high-level simulation implemented in the cortical circuit of low-level mindreading" ([4], p. 459). Hence, the two systems are not as easily divided as Goldman suggests. To further substantiate her view, De Vignemont refers to various studies that indicate that one can control one's emotions and empathy. The study by Cheng et al., for instance, showed that mirroring pain was subject to the intention with which the pain was caused. When the pain was caused by a medical practitioner with the intention to heal, brain images showed that mirror neurons for pain fired far less frequently ([4], p. 461).

Defending a non-division in the brain, like De Vignemont does in her article, is only necessary because of what I labeled as the first presupposition in the former paragraph, namely that there is a clear distinction between conscious, voluntary processes and unconscious, automatic processes in the brain. This assumption is nothing other than a modern version of Cartesian dualism. Descartes distinguished two substances: the physical, material substance (*res extensa*) and the mental, non-material substance (*res cogitans*), which he also linked to automatic, machinelike behavior and conscious voluntary thinking. Both Coplan and Goldman use terms that fit this dichotomy to describe high-level empathy and low-level mirroring. For instance, Coplan lists "making inferences about another's mental states" ([1], p. 4) as one of the most popular descriptions of empathy. She defines affect as "a broad category encompassing multiple mental states" ([1], p. 6). Goldman writes that some researchers might "balk at calling the resonant (i.e., mirroring) states 'mental' states, because the mirroring

episodes commonly occur below the threshold of consciousness" ([3], p. 33). The dichotomy between a conscious mind and automatic bodily behavior also becomes clear from the earlier cited passage in which Goldman divides the smile itself from the 'aboutness' of the smile. Reconstructing the 'aboutness' is the conscious, reconstructive method, whereas mirroring the smile is only unconsciously mirroring the surface.

Although many philosophers and scientists have questioned this dualistic conviction about human nature, from Descartes' own time until today, it remains present in our day-to-day language and even in the way we do research. The philosopher Mark Johnson writes about these common assumptions about human nature: "although most people never think about it very carefully, they live their lives assuming and acting according to a set of dichotomies that distinguish mind from body, reason from emotion, and thought from feeling." [5]. Johnson claims that the opposing idea of embodied thoughts and thus of the inseparableness of our body and mind seems far more difficult to maintain.

One of the philosophers who tried to think through what it would mean to leave Cartesian dualism behind is the French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908–1961). His work belongs to the school of phenomenology. Phenomenologists try to capture the 'lived experience' in their theorizing about the world. Studying 'lived experience' puts theory in the second place. It is therefore not surprising that Merleau-Ponty's research is far more inclusive than that of dualistic thinkers and that his work *Nature. Course Notes from the Collège de France* deals with animals who are, according to Merleau-Ponty, our kin. Our experience of 'feeling with' animals is not something that has to be theorized away, on the contrary, we need to learn from it.

Just as Cartesian dualism has many consequences for thinking about human nature, the idea that body and mind are inseparable alters our ideas about who we fundamentally are. Consciousness, for instance, according to Merleau-Ponty, is always consciousness *of* something and not a faculty detached from the world. Relating to this central point Adrienne Dengerink Chaplin writes: "When I reach out my hand for a cup of coffee, there are not two actions, first my thinking about the action and then my arm responding to perform the action; it is one integrated bodily action" ([6], p. 168). Dengerink Chaplin cites Merleau-Ponty: "I do not have a body, I am my body" ([6], p. 168). From this follows, according to Dengerink Chaplin, that "[w]e have to reject any Cartesian subject-object, mind-body or consciousness-world dichotomies" ([6], p. 168). Fundamental to Merleau-Ponty's approach to other minds is his insistence that the human body is a psychophysical whole.

The question is what giving up these dichotomies might mean for the subject of empathy. First of all, since Merleau-Ponty sees consciousness as fundamentally embodied, it is not a question of whether I can take on your perspective by reenacting your thoughts, feelings and desires, as is suggested by approaches like those of Coplan and Goldman (cf. presupposition 3 in my overview above). So, my smile is not an expression of a specific joyous feeling, it is the specific joyous feeling. Since so-called mental states cannot be separated from the body, my mind is consequently not something that is closed-off from others: a detached thing that resides inside my body and to which others potentially can get access. Alec Hyslop writes in his entry to "Other Minds" in the Stanford Encyclopedia about the position of Merleau-Ponty: "to perceive a human body in action is to perceive, directly, a person" [7]. Even more strongly, and phrased by Merleau-Ponty himself: "thus there is an indivision of my body, of my body and the world, of my body and other bodies, and of other bodies between them" ([8], p. 279). From this it follows that our subjective experience does not hide inside of our brains; it is visible in a shared social world.

The idea that subjective experience is outside our heads and is to be found in a shared social world, seems difficult to envision and brings us back to Mark Johnson's remark that it is hard to leave standard dichotomies behind. One of these dichotomies is a result of the presupposition that my self has a boundary, which I formulated earlier (cf. my presupposition 5). As a result of this, my self is to be separated from others or the surroundings. For Coplan, having a separate self is an important prerequisite for empathy. According to Merleau-Ponty, however, there is rather an indivision between

me, others and the surroundings. Subjective experience is not the same as a mental state. It is found in a shared world, since we are our bodies and our bodies interact incessantly with the world. For Merleau-Ponty, this idea of a shared subjective experience rather than a closed-off subjective experience is not limited to humans. He writes:

Why would not the synergy exist among different organisms, if it is possible within each? Their landscapes interweave, their actions and their passions fit together exactly: this is possible as soon as we no longer make belongingness to one same “consciousness” the primordial definition of sensibility [...] ([9], p. 142).

He chooses to refer to this shared world as “the man-animality intertwining”. We can derive from this citation what consequences are connected to leaving Cartesian dualism behind. When one does not deny that living beings have intentions, wishes, thoughts and feelings, but at the same time rejects a mind-body dualism, one has to rethink not only the connections humans make amongst each other, but also the assumed special status of human beings in relation to other living beings. A simple and vivid example of this “man-animality intertwining” is given by Diane Dutton in her article “A View from the Bridge: Subjectivity, Embodiment and Animal Minds”. She writes that when a dog-owner walks his dog, the intentions of both parties are felt through the leash and are therefore not hidden inside their heads ([10], p. 216).

This man-animality intertwining connects with the presuppositions that I mentioned in the first paragraph. The supposed difficulties of empathy—knowing that I have a separate self, knowing that this ‘feeling with’ is the result of other-oriented perspective taking for which I need my consciousness to work—are being compromised by Merleau-Ponty’s statement that our subjective experience is present in a shared social world and that there is no boundary between body and mind. The presupposition of ‘similar to me’ consequently becomes far more inclusive than Coplan proposed, since we share the world not only with humans, but with other experiencing living beings as well. In the final paragraph I will formulate the implications for our ideas about empathizing with animals through a text. First, it is necessary to demonstrate that Cartesian dualism is also alive in the aesthetic empathy field.

#### 4. Cartesian Dualism in the Aesthetic Field

Before I discuss what leaving the mind-body distinction behind might mean for the aesthetic field, let me first go back to the distinction made by Coplan and Goldman between high-level empathy and low-level mirroring and see how it materializes in aesthetics.

Within aesthetic studies, researchers usually approach empathy in the same way as interpersonal empathy. Therefore, the ingredients of narrative empathy are considered to be the same: there has to be a fictional character with who the reader can identify and the reader has to experience a matching of feelings between herself and the character and, lastly, the matching of feelings has to be the result of perspective taking. This makes the novel with a human protagonist the standard choice of genre in the narrative empathy debate. In the same way, when there are no characters involved, aesthetic researchers typically link aesthetic empathy to mirroring (bodily) movement. For instance, Gregory Curie in his article “Empathy for Objects” defines empathy as a bodily simulation of forms [11]. For example, he writes that if we look at Rubens’ painting *Descent from the Cross* we “undergo bodily simulations which mirror aspects of [the depicted people’s] dispositions” ([11], pp. 86–87). Not only with paintings, but also in poetry, researchers choose to link the engagement between a reader and a poem to bodily sensations. In this respect Susan Lanzoni refers to the work of the psychologist and poet June Etta Downey (1875–1932) who, in the early years of the twentieth century, concluded that “[i]mages of felt or bodily movement were of particular significance for empathic response” ([12], p. 39). Although attention to bodily sensations is a somewhat forgotten tradition in the aesthetic field, linking human fictional characters to high-level processes of empathy and aesthetic expressions without linking them to low-level bodily processes of empathy in fact reinforces Cartesian dualism.

Conversely, in the narrative field, empathy is understood as reconstructive, high-level perspective taking. I will give two examples of the working of the body-mind division in this field: one in which Noël Carroll discusses mirror reflexes to characters in fiction and one in which Lisa Zunshine discusses Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* as an example of a cognitive experiment.

In his article "On Some Affective Relations between Audiences and the Characters in Popular Fictions" Noël Carroll writes about mirror reflexes: "these imitative reflexes grant us some *inkling* of what others are feeling" ([13], p. 178) and "[t]his (our muscular feedback) need not give us full *access* to his emotional state, but it supplies us with a valuable *clue* to the nature of that state by providing us with an experiential sense of the bodily-component [...]" (italics are mine, tb [13], p. 178). Note that this bodily-component is separated from the full emotion, similar to Goldman's idea of dividing the bodily smile from the 'aboutness' of the smile. Carroll presents to us here the classic idea of the mind closed-off from the outside world and the body as a mirror of that mind. Facial expressions are the *clues* for entering the mind; they represent the mind, and are the outcome of thinking and feeling. Just as we have seen in the former paragraph, this classic idea that the mind is something that is hinted at on people's faces but is ultimately hidden from the outside world, is based on the presupposition that mind and body are separate.

In *Why We Read Fiction. Theory of Mind and the Novel*, Lisa Zunshine even goes so far as to consider the novel essentially a cognitive experiment [14]. According to Zunshine, readers test their ability to form a theory of mind of fictional characters; when we read, we ascribe to characters a mind of their own. Likewise, writers rely on this cognitive ability of their readers. So, just as Carroll described, we read about a certain behaviour and then, according to Zunshine, deduce, like a detective—hence the cognitive experiment —, certain feelings or states of mind. Before I come to the reservations of viewing the novel as a cognitive experiment and, more generally, aesthetic empathy as a phenomenon that is essentially an achievement of the mind, let me give Zunshine's reading of *Mrs Dalloway* by Virginia Woolf.

Zunshine, in her opening chapter "Why did Peter Walsh Tremble?" uses the meeting of Clarissa Dalloway and her former lover Peter Walsh as an illustration of the novel as a cognitive experiment. *Mrs Dalloway* starts off with the protagonist, Mrs Dalloway, preparing for a party that she will throw in the evening. Since readers are immediately drawn into the sensations, half uttered thoughts and not fully felt feelings of Clarissa Dalloway, they are not introduced in an orderly way as to who is who in the novel. When the reader arrives at the scene of their meeting, she does know that Clarissa and Peter were lovers years ago, but that instead of marrying him, Clarissa decided to marry Richard Dalloway. Peter went to India, but is now returning, pays a visit to Clarissa and trembles when he sees her. According to Zunshine, we, as readers, implicitly ask questions about the behaviour of fictional characters. We infer states of mind and emotions from their body language and solve the other-minds-puzzle by filling in missing information. In this case, the trembling of Peter Walsh needs an explanation. According to Zunshine, the ability of a reader to explain behaviour proves that their theory of mind is working well. Zunshine writes the following about Peter's trembling:

When Woolf shows Clarissa observing Peter's body language (Clarissa notices that he is "positively trembling"), she has an option of providing us with a representation of either Clarissa's mind that would make sense of Peter's physical action [...] or of Peter's own mind [...]. Instead she tells us, first, that Peter is thinking that Clarissa has "grown older" and, second, that Clarissa is thinking that Peter looks "exactly the same [...]" Peter's "trembling" still feels like an integral part of this scene, but make no mistake: we, the readers are called on to supply the missing bit of information (such as "he must be excited to see her again" which makes the narrative emotionally cohesive) ([14], p. 22).

Here, we can see that indeed Zunshine considers the novel to be a fundamentally cognitive affair. The reason why we read, Zunshine says, is that we like to fill in, like a detective, the missing clues and in that way solve the puzzle and make the narrative cohesive. In an 'objective reading', Peter Walsh's trembling could have been caused by Parkinson's disease, but, claims Zunshine, since we are

trained readers we interpret the trembling in the right way—as indicative of his mental state—and are consequently pleased by our well-functioning theory of mind ([14], p. 18). That this occurs almost effortlessly does not change the fact that “we have cognitive adaptations that prompt us to ‘see bodies animated by minds’” ([14], p. 15). Deducing the thoughts and feelings from bodily language would count as high-level empathy, high-level mindreading or reconstructive empathy. Similarly to persons in the real world, readers grant fictional characters a mind of their own. All in all, Zunshine’s interpretation perfectly fits into the distinction made by Goldman and Coplan.

When we read the passage by Woolf, however, we can see that there is so much more going on than ‘cognitively filling in a puzzle’. Here follows the passage that describes Peter Walsh’s entrance. The servant Lucy opens the door and hesitates to let him see Clarissa. In response, Peter answers her:

“Mrs. Dalloway will see me,” said the elderly man in the hall. “Oh yes, she will see ME,” he repeated, putting Lucy aside very benevolently, and running upstairs ever so quickly. “Yes, yes, yes,” he muttered as he ran upstairs. “She will see me. After five years in India, Clarissa will see me” [15].

This passage is followed by Clarissa’s reaction to Peter’s unexpected visit:

“Who can—what can,” asked Mrs. Dalloway (thinking it was outrageous to be interrupted at eleven o’clock on the morning of the day she was giving a party), hearing a step on the stairs. She heard a hand upon the door. She made to hide her dress, like a virgin protecting chastity, respecting privacy. Now the brass knob slipped. Now the door opened, and in came—For a single second she could not remember what he was called! so surprised she was to see him, so glad, so shy, so utterly taken aback to have Peter Walsh come to her unexpectedly in the morning! (She had not read his letter.)

“And how are you?” said Peter Walsh, positively trembling; taking both her hands; kissing both her hands [15].

Perhaps the literary term ‘stream of consciousness’ is misleading in this context. What we can read in this short excerpt from the novel is a stream of sensations—whether they are conscious or not is not mentioned—and more importantly, the stream of sensations are not specific to a character. It is clear that Clarissa hears “a hand upon the door”, but “Now the brass knob slipped. Now the door opened” are surely her observations, but they lead the reader to see the opening of the door in their own mind’s eye rather than Clarissa’s. The interpretation of Peter’s trembling is not just a cognitive achievement; the whole of the text trembles, the whole atmosphere is vibrant. We can read the hurry in Peter’s ‘yes, yes, yes’ as he runs upstairs, one ‘yes’ on each stair tread. When Woolf puts what Clarissa is thinking in a proposition, between brackets, it is only meant as a helping hand to the reader. Clarissa’s propositional thought is in fact the stumbling “Who can—what can”. We feel his excitement and her initial irritation in the short sentences “She heard a hand upon the door. She made to hide her dress [...]” and “Now the brass knob slipped. Now the door opened, [...]”. As a reader, we do not deduce a feeling from body language, we are not given an *inkling* of Peter’s thoughts, and we do not read ‘bodies animated by minds’. The trembling of Peter Walsh is his excitement and we know this not because of a puzzle we solve, but because Woolf lets us tremble with him.

## 5. Leaving Cartesian Dualism behind

Perhaps a trembling text is not what we consider to be the cause of an empathetic reaction towards a protagonist. Usually, when we look at a narrative, we think that the protagonist’s likeness to us, her similar opportunities, her comparable course of life and her understandable thoughts and feelings make it easier for us to shift perspectives. We might think of Woolf’s sensory language and rhythmical sentences as means to enter Mrs Dalloway’s mind and not as empathy itself.

To show that this idea rests on a body-mind division is best seen when we focus on a genre in which no humans are present, namely that of animal poetry. When reading an animal poem we might hesitate as to what to call the feeling of engagement we can experience. The only reason, however, for this hesitation is because we do not think of animals (or ourselves) as psychophysical wholes. Contrastively, poets of the following poems do think of the animals as psychophysical wholes and stay close to their 'lived experience'. First I discuss Meghan O'Rourke's "Inventing a Horse" [16] and thereafter Les Murray's "Spermaceti" [17].

In a public reading on 19 February 2010, O'Rourke explained how the poem came into existence: "I grew up in New York City and, like not a few other little girls, was infatuated with horses. My main resentment about living in a big city was that it was impossible to have a horse. So, many years later, haunted by this childhood drama, I wrote 'Inventing a Horse'" [18]. Since the lines run over the stanzas, I will present the whole poem before discussing it:

Inventing a Horse  
by Meghan O'Rourke

Inventing a horse is not easy.  
One must not only think of the horse.  
One must dig fence posts around him.  
One must include a place where horses like to live;  
or do when they live with humans like you.                    5  
Slowly, you must walk him in the cold;  
feed him bran mash, apples;  
accustom him to the harness;  
holding in mind even when you are tired  
harnesses and tack cloths and saddle oil                    10  
to keep the saddle clean as a face in the sun;  
one must imagine teaching him to run  
among the knuckles of tree roots,  
not to be skittish at first sight of timber wolves,  
and not to grow thin in the city,                                    15  
where at some point you will have to live;  
and one must imagine the absence of money.  
Most of all, though: The living weight,  
the sound of his feet on the needles,  
and, since he is heavy, and real,                                    20  
and sometimes tired after a run  
down the river with a light whip at his side,  
one must imagine love  
in the mind that does not know love,  
an animal mind, a love that does not depend                    25  
on your image of it,  
your understanding of it;  
indifferent to all that it lacks:  
a muzzle and two black eyes  
looking the day away, a field empty                                30  
of everything but witchgrass, fluent trees,  
and some piles of hay.

The poem starts off with “Inventing a Horse” as an optimistic title, only to be downplayed again immediately by the first line that completes it: “Inventing a horse is not easy”. To explain why this may not be easy, O’Rourke asks the reader to imagine all the things that one has to have and bear in mind when keeping a horse in real life. Hence, the invention of the horse is not a gratuitous fantasy. Inventing a horse goes further than only focusing on a mental picture. In fact, it involves visualizing all the things you would have to do and give up to maintain a horse. All these things are listed in the first four stanzas. They probably echo the reservations her parents might have had when O’Rourke, as a child, expressed her wish of having a horse.

In the fifth stanza O’Rourke interrupts her list of practicalities. The sentence that began in line 6 ends here in line 13 with the imagining of the absence of money being the outcome of all the material things that one would need. After this conclusion of all the constraints it is as if she asks herself again what inventing a horse involves and the listing of practicalities seems to not be enough. Then, in line 18 and 19, she focuses first on the body (the living weight, the sound of his feet on the needles and again his heaviness in line 20) and after that on the horse’s mind, a word that she alternates with ‘love’. It is noteworthy that in the second line of the poem O’Rourke warned the reader that one must not only think of the horse, but rather of its surroundings. However, after imagining the horse’s environment its body nevertheless slowly comes into view. In line 16 begins a sentence that ends in the final line. Since the main clause is interrupted by a subordinated clause and a coordinated clause, the reader almost forgets that “since he is heavy and real/.../one must imagine love”. ‘Real’ is a word that stands out in this line. All the characteristics of the horse are mentioned and it is as if its realness is one among these many qualities. One might recognize this as a category mistake (“I have a brown, quick, strong and real horse”), but in this case the category mistake is intended. It reminds the reader of the task of a poet, which lies in the Greek word ‘poiesis’, which is to make or create something. Hence, it emphasizes the task O’Rourke has set for herself which is to overcome the drama in her childhood by inventing a horse.

The enjambment after ‘love’ in line 23 reflects the difficulty with the kind of love O’Rourke wants the reader to imagine. One must imagine love, yes; the whole point of keeping a horse is the love for the animal. However, this love will be less romantic than the clichéd imagery of horses offered by a TV-series. The love that is at stake here is a love for a real animal who has a mind that does not know love. Or, as the following line says: it is a love that does not depend on the image of it in a human mind. How can anyone imagine this? Can we set aside our comforting images and picture an animal mind?

In the final lines, O’Rourke helps the reader to imagine the hardest part of the invention, which is the understanding of the horse on his own terms. For doing this, one needs to leave one’s own images of love and understanding behind. When she focuses on the horse’s black eyes, she does not only describe what they look like, but also what they see. In the ongoing act of invention, the realization that easy images will not do and the constant effort of setting aside one’s own convictions of what a horse essentially is, O’Rourke finally arrives at imagining the horse from the horse’s point of view and she describes the world seen through his eyes: “a field empty of everything but witchgrass, fluent trees and some piles of hay”. What we can learn from the poem is that the horse’s mind, or the horse’s point of view is not something that is to be found inside his mind. The final sentences are formulations of the horse’s experience, but show at the same time that there is another way of approaching subjective experience. These sentences seem to indicate that there is no boundary between knowing what it is for me to have a horse’s experience and knowing what it is for a horse to have a horse’s (i.e., his own) experience. Such a boundary would, again, assume an underlying separate self, detached from the body.

Does this ‘perspective shifting’ count as an instance of empathy? It certainly would not if we as readers were to hold onto an idea of empathy based on Cartesian dualism. Then, we would not be able to know the horse’s subjective experience, since his mind would be understood as being closed-off from the world and his behaviour as an easily misinterpreted outcome. The inferences from his behaviour would probably be called anthropomorphic; ascribing human-like features to the animal.

However, what we can read in the poem by O'Rourke is that inventing a horse does not begin from the inside of the horse, but starts by a focus on his surroundings that cannot be separated from the horse himself. This is exactly what Merleau-Ponty means by the idea that subjective experience is to be found in the world. Notice how the final lines "a field empty/of everything but witchgrass, fluent trees, /and some piles of hay" are comparable to the lines from Mrs Dalloway: "Now the brass knob slipped. Now the door opened [...]". Similar to Woolf's presentation of subjective experience-in-the-world, we are at the end of the poem not *inside* the horse's mind; rather the horse's intentions and interests are visible to the trained eye of the poet.

A famous answer to our hesitations with the possibility of taking up an animal's perspective is giving by John Coetzee in *The Lives of Animals* through his protagonist Elizabeth Costello [19]. She answers that she once wrote a book about a fictional character and had to "think [her] way into [her] existence" and then states about this 'thinking into': "If I can think my way into the existence of a being who has never existed, then I can think my way into the existence of a bat or a chimpanzee or an oyster, any being with whom I share the substrate of life" ([19], p. 49). To Costello, just as to phenomenologists, poems are the apt way of bringing forth animals' "living, electric being to language" ([19], p. 114). Elizabeth Costello is a fictional character and can therefore speak freely about the limitlessness of our imagination. Her ideas, however, were already addressed by Merleau-Ponty and are still being examined by phenomenologists. The phenomenologist Louise Westling writes in her monograph *The Logos of the Living World. Merleau-Ponty, Animals and Language* about how humans' and animals' behaviour and expressions are to be found in a shared world:

[H]uman linguistic behavior gradually emerged in the course of evolution from neural structures and physical behaviors we share with primates and other animals, [...] it remains embedded within shared abilities and cultures in a continuum of animal behaviors that are themselves part of a myriad of communications in the living world, and that increasing evidence suggests that it is embodied and gestural, as Merleau-Ponty claimed more than a half century ago ([20], p. 103).

Understanding empathy as entering an intersubjective realm is easier to understand when we share physical behaviour with an animal or when we can see that there is a continuum between the animal and ourselves. Costello claims that sharing a substrate of life is enough to get access to the world of another being. Along these lines, Louise Westling writes about Merleau-Ponty's view on the ecological relationships between all beings that "they carry with them the weight of time and entanglements with space" ([20], p. 34). The poem *Spermaceti* by the Australian poet Les Murray endorses the view of Costello and Merleau-Ponty. Although we are inclined to classify a whale as a creature very different from ourselves, Murray pushes the reader in this poem to feel her way into the lived experience of a sperm whale.

Spermaceti  
by Les Murray

I sound my sight, and flexing skeletons eddy  
in our common wall. With a sonic bolt from the fragrant  
chamber of my head, I burst the lives of some  
and slow, backwashing them into my mouth. I lighten,  
breathe, and laze below again. And peer in long low tones 5  
over the curve of Hard to river-tasting and oil-tasting  
coasts, to the grand grinding coasts of rigid air.  
How the wall of our medium has a shining, pumping rim:  
the withstood crush of deep flight in it, perpetual entry!  
Only the holes of eyesight and breath still tie us 10  
to the dwarf-making Air, where true sight barely functions.

The power of our wall likewise guards us from  
 slowness of the rock Hard, its life-powdering compaction,  
 from its fissures and streamy layers that we sing into sight  
 but are silent, fixed, disjointed in. Eyesight is a leakage 15  
 of nearby into us, and shows us the taste of food  
 conformed over its spines. But our greater sight is uttered.  
 I sing beyond the curve of distance the living joined bones  
 of my song-fellows; I sound a deep volcano's valve tubes  
 storming whitely in black weight; I receive an island's slump, 20  
 song-scrambling ship's heartbeats, and the sheer shear of current-forms  
 bracketing a seamount. The wall, which running blind I demolish,  
 heals, prickling me with sonars. My every long shaped cry  
 re-establishes the world, and centres its ringing structure.

In 'Spermaceti' the 'I' in the poem seems to be the sperm whale. The title refers to the organ through which a sperm whale perceives its world: the spermaceti organ [21]. This organ consists of a waxy substance and was originally wrongly taken to be the whale's semen. A sperm whale has poor eye vision and uses echolocation—an auditory imaging system—for hunting and communication. Sperm whales emit a series of clicks through the spermaceti when they dive and the reverberation of the clicks gives them information about prey and other whales. The reverberation is picked up by an 'acoustic' fat pad in the whale's lower jaw which sends the information to the brain. There, three-dimensional images are formed about the size and the movement of the prey (mostly squid).

Entering Murray's poem from a biological perspective adds to the understanding of it. Knowing how echolocation works helps to understand certain lines in the poem in which this phenomenon is addressed. However, what a biological perspective cannot bring about is what it is like to be a sperm whale and this is what Murray is after. He does not emphasize the similarities between humans and whales to establish perspective taking, he instead focuses on two main differences between the two species: being in the water instead of being on land and using echolocation instead of using eyesight. In contrast to human experience, the air to a whale is rigid (line 7), dwarf-making (line 11) and true sight (i.e., echolocation) barely functions there. The Wall (the water and its surface) on the other hand gives the whale the possibility to shape his world through his song. Repeating in various depictions the difference between human and whale is one way to make the reader familiar with the whale's world. But Murray goes further than familiarizing the reader with another world. He even lets the reader feel the subjective experience of echolocation by using the poetic device of alliteration. When we read the first four words—I sound my sight—we are drawn into the sensation of echolocation firstly by the use of 'I' and secondly by the alliterative use of the 's' in 'sound' and 'sight'. The alliteration establishes the effect of experiencing sound and sight as one thing—exactly what echolocation entails. The notion of 'sound as sight' occurs five times in the poem: 'I sound my sight' (line 1), 'I peer in long low tones' (line 5), 'we sing into sight' (line 14), 'our greater sight is uttered' (line 17) and 'I sound a deep volcano's valve tubes' (line 19). Becoming familiar with the world of the whale through repetition and alliteration establishes a sense of recognition even in the untrained reader. Following Merleau-Ponty, Louise Westling sees precisely in literature and poetry the possibility of bridging the gap between others—be they of a different species or not—and myself:

it [literature] functions as one of our species' ways of singing the world to ourselves, in concert with the songs and artistic creations of many other creatures, from birds and primates to dogs and dolphins ([20], p. 103).

This musical metaphor articulates that the human world is consonant with the non-human world. There is an obvious connection between this insight and Les Murray's 'Spermaceti', and not only because the citation reminds us of the singing whale in the poem. 'Spermaceti' gives us access to the world of the whale through its almost bodily language and lets us recognize our 'man-animality intertwining'. When we see animals and ourselves as psychophysical wholes in interweaving landscapes it is not a question of being alike enough to establish empathy. It is rather a question of how to train the senses to be able to see this wholeness. In finding a route to accomplish this, poets can serve as a guide.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

## References and Notes

1. Amy Coplan. "Understanding Empathy: Its Features and Effects." In *Empathy. Philosophical and Psychological Perspectives*. Edited by Amy Coplan and Peter Goldie. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014, pp. 3–18.
2. Alvin Goldman. *Simulating Minds: The Philosophy, Psychology and Neuroscience of Mind-Reading*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006.
3. Alvin Goldman. "Two Routes to Empathy: Insights from Neuroscience." In *Empathy Philosophical and Psychological Perspectives*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014, pp. 31–44.
4. Frédérique de Vignemont. "Drawing the Boundary between Low-level and High-level Mindreading." *Philosophical Studies* 144 (2009): 457–66. [CrossRef]
5. Mark Johnson. *The Meaning of the Body. Aesthetics of Human Understanding*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2007.
6. Adrienne Dengerink Chaplin. "Phenomenology. Merleau-Ponty and Sartre." In *The Routledge Companion to Aesthetics*. Edited by Berys Gaut and Dominic McIver Lopes. New York: Routledge, 2002.
7. Alec Hyslop. "Other Minds." In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Spring 2016 ed. Edited by Edward N. Zalta. Stanford: Stanford University, 2016, Available online: <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2016/entries/other-minds/> (accessed on 24 January 2017).
8. Maurice Merleau-Ponty. *Nature. Course Notes from the Collège de France*. Translated by Robert Vallier. Compiled and with notes by Dominique Séglaard. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2003.
9. Maurice Merleau-Ponty. *The Visible and the Invisible*. Edited by Claude Lefort. Translated by Alphonso Lingis. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968.
10. Diane Dutton. "A View from the Bridge: Subjectivity, Embodiment and Animal Minds." *Anthrozoös* 17 (2004): 210–24. [CrossRef]
11. Gregory Currie. "Empathy for Objects." In *Empathy. Philosophical and Psychological Perspectives*. Edited by Amy Coplan and Peter Goldie. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014, pp. 82–95.
12. Suzan Lanzoni. "Empathy Aesthetics. Experimenting Between Psychology and Poetry." In *Rethinking Empathy through Literature*. Edited by Meghan Marie Hammond and Sue J. Kim. New York: Routledge, 2014.
13. Noël Carroll. "On Some Affective Relations between Audiences and the Characters in Popular Fictions." In *Empathy. Philosophical and Psychological Perspectives*. Edited by Amy Coplan and Peter Goldie. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014, pp. 162–84.
14. Lisa Zunshine. *Why We Read Fiction. Theory of Mind and the Novel*. Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2006.
15. Virginia Woolf. *Mrs Dalloway*. Adelaide: University of Adelaide, 2015. Available online: <https://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/w/woolf/virginia/w91md/> (accessed on 24 January 2017).
16. Meghan O'Rourke. "Inventing a Horse." In *Halflife*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2007. Available online: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems-and-poets/poems/detail/54896> (accessed on 24 January 2017).
17. Les Murray. "Spermaceti." In *Translations from the Natural World*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1994. Available online: <http://www.poetrylibrary.edu.au/poets/murray-les/spermaceti-0576034> (accessed on 24 January 2017).
18. Youtube. "Meghan O'Rourke: The Writers Studio Reading Series." 2010. Available online: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PtZmiMunS54> (accessed on 24 January 2017).

19. John Coetzee. *The Lives of Animals*. London: Profile Books, Ltd., 2000.
20. Louise Westling. *The Logos of the Living World*. Merleau-Ponty, Animals and Language. New York: Fordham University Press, 2014.
21. The whale might also be another toothed whale from the Physeteroidea family. This superfamily contains the well-known sperm whale and the class of Kogiidae that consists of two smaller types of sperm whale.



© 2017 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).