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Making the Elements Animal-Like : Therio-Elemental Representations in Gerald Durrell's *The Bafut Beagles* and *Golden Bats and Pink Pigeons*

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Abstract : Gerald Durrell wrote about animals. He often noticed similarities between them and natural elements. Therefore , he frequently represented the one in terms of the other. Taking a cue from Garrard's critical triad of *therio* terms , I have referred to this kind of Durrellian representation as therio-elemental. To demonstrate his technique , I have quoted various passages from his books. A close study reveals that Durrell employs defamiliarization to achieve his effects. Often coupled with these therio-elemental representations are some vegeto-elemental representations as well , where Durrell describes some natural element/s in terms of plants or trees. Sometimes the animals concerned in Durrell's therio-elemental representations happen to be mythical ones too. I.A. Richards' twin concepts of tenor and vehicle are especially pertinent to such Durrellian representations. At some places , the natural elements are the tenors and the animals the vehicles. At some others , it is vice-versa. The quoted passages are 'celebratory' and intersubjective in tone.

Keywords : theriophobia , theriomorphism , therianthropism , therio-elementalism , therio-elemental , representations , defamiliarization , vegeto-elemental , animal , tenor , vehicle , snow , nature , ecological , celebratory , minatory , intersubjectivity

Gerald Durrell lived and breathed animals. So it is not very surprising to note that even when he looks at the non-living elements of nature, he finds that they resemble animals in their appearance and behaviour. Using the analogy of *theriophobia* – "fear of animals"(Garrard 153) - as well as those of *theriomorphism*, an image where "someone or something was presented as having the form of a beast" (Baker 108),

and *therianthropism* – "images combining the form of a beast with that of a man"(Baker 108), a fourth concept relating to animal representation, that of *therio-elementalism*, might well be added to the existing triad of therio- analogies to refer to the kind of Durrellian representations mentioned above.

In the third chapter of *The Bafut Beagles* (1954), Durrell's "best-selling book about his second Cameroons venture"(Botting 166), he describes the process of sunrise thus:

> Erecting nets in long grass up to your waist, when it is sodden with dew, is not a soothing pastime, and we were glad when the last one had been tied in place. Then we cautiously approached the forest, and crawled into hiding beneath a large bush. Here we squatted, trying to keep our teeth from chattering, not able to smoke or talk or move, watching the eastern sky grow paler as the darkness of the night was drained out of it. Slowly it turned to a pale opalescent grey, then it flushed to pink, and then, as the sun rose above the horizon, it turned suddenly and blindingly to a brilliant *kingfisher*[italics mine] blue. This pure and delicate light showed the mountains around us covered in a low-lying mist; as the sun rose higher, the mist started to move and slide on the ridges and pour down the hillsides to fill the valleys. For one brief instant we had seen the grasslands quiet and asleep under the blanket of mist; now it seemed as though the mountains were awakening, yawning and stretching under the white coverlet, pushing it aside in some places, gathering it more tightly in some others, hoisting itself, dew-misted and sleepy, from the depths of its white bed-clothes. On many occasions later I watched this awakening of the mountains, and I never wearied of the sight. Considering that the same thing has been happening each morning since the ancient mountains came into being, it is astonishing how fresh and new the sight appears each time you witness it. Never does it become dull and mechanical; it is always different : sometimes the mist in rising shaped itself into strange animal shapes – dragons, phoenix, wyvern, and milk-white unicorns – sometimes it would form itself into strange, drifting strands of seaweed, trees or great tumbling bushes of white flowers; occasionally, if there was a breeze to help it, it would startle you by assuming the most severe and complicated

> geometrical shapes, while all the time, underneath it, in tantalizing glimpses as it shifted, you could see the mountains gleaming in a range of soft colours so delicate and ethereal that it was impossible to put a name to them (Durrell 215).

Just as Durrell himself "never wearied of the sight" of a common and familiar process taking place everyday, he ensures that his readers too do not get tired of reading about a natural phenomenon that they know only too well. "A literary text represents the world in such a way that ordinary things appear different. This is what engages the reader's attention. This process is what Shklovsky termed defamiliarization" (Nayar 8). It is a "literary process that gives vitality to language that might otherwise be all too predictable" (Dobie 35). Durrell achieves a unique defamiliarization here through three kinds of representation. The first is an anthropomorphic one where the mountains are visualized as a person reluctant to get up from bed on a cold morning. The second is a *therio-elemental* one where the mist is seen in terms of specific mythical animals. The last is a *vegeto-elemental* representation, where the mist is said to be resembling members of the plant kingdom. In his well-known book *Himself and Other Animals* (1997), David Hughes, one of Durrell's biographers, makes the following comment about his subject's writing: "You had only to open a volume at random to hear his voice. This voice was often busy exaggerating. It often produced a comparison that defied belief" (Hughes 11).

As is evident, the passage above contains more than one example of these belief-defying comparisons. It is also relevant from the standpoint of the first developmental stage of ecocriticism which is interested in "representations", an examination of how nature is depicted in literature, thereby raising public awareness of attitudes towards the natural world. Ecocritics working from this viewpoint "Sometimes… narrow the focus to look carefully at a particular aspect of nature such as a geographical region or the wilderness or the mountains" (Dobie 242). Moreover, it also bears out well and truly P. Dhishna's claims that "Durrell was a writer who had given a lot of significance to the landscape and its tenants in his writings. Land is the basis of his interest in the animal world. …The element of giving 'colour' to [his]

representation[s] is what gives Durrell the credit of being a realistic writer. He was a writer who was able to give life to his landscape and animals through the magic wand of his writing skills" (268-269).

At the end of the chapter, occurs the following :

> We made our way out of the valley, along the edge of the mountain, and then down the gentle slopes of rolling golden grass towards Bafut. When we reached more or less level country we stopped for a smoke and a rest, and as we squatted in the warm grass I glanced back towards the mountains, my attention attracted by a low rumble of thunder. Unnoticed by us, a dark and heavy cloud had drifted across the sky, *the shape of a great Persiancat* [italics mine], and had sprawled itself along the crest of the mountains. Its shadow changed them from green and gold to a deep and ugly purple, with harsh black stripes where the valley lay. The cloud seemed to move, shifting and coiling within itself, and appeared to be padding and kneading the mountain crests like a cat on the arm of a gigantic chair. Occasionally a rent would appear in this nebulous shape, and then it would be pierced by an arrow of sunlight which would illuminate an area of the mountain below with a pure golden light, turning the grass to jade-green patches on the purple flanks of the mountains. With amazing rapidity the cloud grew darker and darker, and seemed to swell as though *gathering itself for a spring* [italics mine] (Durrell 223-224).

This passage forms a suitable corollary to the previous one with only this difference : here a non-living element of nature, i.e., the cloud, has been compared to a single, real living animal, i.e., a cat, unlike the mist's similarities with a number of mythical creatures. This is a characteristic we find often in Durrell's writings : a small bit of variety introduced even in representations of a similar nature. Moreover, he seamlessly juxtaposes the outdoor image of the defamiliarized cloud with the familiar domestic image of the cat on a chair.

In their book *The Spectrum of Rhetoric, Prosody and Phonetics* (2004), S.P. Roy And R.M. Singh inform us that "With I.A. Richards come two terms 'Tenor' and 'Vehicle' in critical parlance of our times offering a new perspective on the

discussion of metaphor. The 'Tenor' is the primary subject and the 'Vehicle' the secondary one… ." (5). As in the passage above, the cat / kitten is a favourite 'vehicle' of Durrell's. He uses it quite often, as will become evident in some of the following passages quoted from his writings.

In the second chapter of *The Bafut Beagles*, he describes the activities of the wind blowing in the hill-tops in these terms :

> The peace and silence of these heights was remarkable; nearly all sounds were created by the wind, and it was busy moving here and there, making each object produce its own song. It combed the grass and brought forth a soft, lisping rustle; it squeezed and wriggled between the cracks and joints of the rocks above us and made *owl-like moans and sudden hoots of mirth* [italics mine]; it pushed and wrestled with the tough little trees, making them creak and groan, and making their leaves flutter and *purr like kittens* [italics mine] (Durrell 210).

By his portrayal of the therio-elemental acoustics above, Durrell shows us that the therio-elemental representations need not always be visual. They can be aural as well.

In the second chapter of *Golden Bats and Pink Pigeons* (1977), "an engaging account of his animal rescue mission to Mauritius" (Botting 476), Dave, one of his associates, describes the inclement weather followed by bright sunshine, therio-elementally :

'Hi', he said, 'did you ever see such a weather? Black as a mole's behind one minute, and blue as a monkey's backside the next' (Durrell 30).

Durrell himself indulges in such an exercise not long after in chapter three, when he describes his boat trip from Mauritius to Round Island :

> The ropes were cast off, and the good ship *Dorade* started on her way across a black, velvety sea, besprinkled with the waning star reflections, for the eastern sky was already pale with hosts of tiny, dark cumulus clouds like a flock of curly black sheep grazing on a silver meadow (46).

He continues with this simile in the next paragraph as well :

> The dawn sky had now turned from silver to yellow. Those flocks of cumulus grazing on the horizon, became jet-black, with each curl rimmed in golden light, while the flocks that meandered higher in the pasture of the sky, turned slate blue with flecks and stripes of delicate purple (Durrell 46-47).

A few paragraphs later, he writes :

> Gradually, the whole sky lightened to powder-blue and shell-pink, and the clouds became smooth and white, piled up on the horizon like a snow-bedecked group of trees. Then, suddenly, through this forest of cumulus, the sun shouldered its way like a tiger, and burnt a glittering path of light across the sea, that seemed to catch the *Dorade* in claws of heat, even at that early hour (Durrell 47-48).

Durrell's representations are hardly ever uni-dimensional. As in the very first passage quoted here, we have both a vegeto-elemental as well as a therio-elemental representation of the weather here which together combine to produce the magical, fairy-tale like effect he wishes to create.

In the next paragraph, we have the following :

> The good ship *Dorade* shouldered its way across a blue swell that was, though not fierce, languidly muscular, and gave the impression of great power, like *a half-asleep blue cat* [italics mine] (Durrell 48).

The feline image recurs again in chapter five of the same book, when he says :

> At the rim of the lagoon, the sea lapped very gently at the white sand, like a *kitten* [italics mine] delicately lapping at a saucer of milk (Durrell 115).

As we saw earlier, the heat of the sun was described in terms of the ferocity of a

tiger, an actual animal. In chapter six, however, the intense heat of the weather is conveyed to us by means of a therio-elemental image featuring a legendary animal :

> By now, the sun had crept up and peered over the carapace of the island, glowering down at us like the monstrous red-hot eye of some giant *dragon* [italics mine]. We knew that it would soon be really too hot to continue our search (Durrell 142).

Not only the sun, but the moon too gets a therio-elemental depiction later in the same chapter :

> Over my head, the palms rustled their leaves with a sound like spectral rain, their fronds stamped black against the sky. Resting among them in an abandoned position on her back, was a fragile sickle moon, white as a tropic bird (Durrell 156).

Sometimes, it is the other way round and animals (the 'tenors') resemble the elements (the 'vehicles'). In the fifth chapter of *The Bafut Beagles*, while describing a night-time scene, Durrell writes :

> Dozens of minute white moths rose from the long grass as we walked through it, and drifted out across the stream like a cloud of *snowflakes* [italics mine] (234).

Snow and its associated products – snowflakes, snowstorm, icicles – seem to be among Durrell's favourite similes / metaphors as they recur time and again in his descriptions of animals. In the very first chapter of *Golden Bats and Pink Pigeons*, he mentions a "gorge, where the tropic birds whirled like snowflakes" (Durrell 25). In chapter six, we again come across the following :

> Struggling and sweating, we manhandled our tent and supplies across the helipad and down the valley that ran alongside it, while the tropic birds dive-

bombed us like white icicles, creaking their strange cries…(Durrell 152).

Towards the end of the same chapter, another associated product of snow is once again employed as a forceful 'vehicle' in a therio-elemental image :

> … we heard the drone of the approaching helicopter. Within half an hour, we had packed everything in, and, in an indignant *snowstorm* [italics mine] of tropic birds, took off with our precious cargo of snakes and lizards lying in their cloth bags on our laps (Durrell 163).

Of the skinks on Round Island, he writes :

> The skinks, bright-eyed, fluid and quick as *raindrops* [italics mine] on a window, continued their never-ending movement, oblivious of the lavish praise that was being bestowed on them (Durrell 65).

Durrell also finds similarities between birds and stars, shooting stars and comets frequently. On Round Island, Durrell tells us about Dave, one of the members of his expedition, who had the unique ability to communicate with birds, thus :

> Dave sprawled between three patches of leaf shade the size of soup plates, and carried on a long and acrimonious exchange with the tropic birds that, with their long, needle-like tails and pointed wings and beaks, wheeled and dived above us like some *constellation of mad shooting stars* [Italics mine], uttering their shrill, whining cries. Wahab showed us that, by waving something white, a handkerchief, a snake bag or a shirt, you could get them to dive low at you. This excitement, combined with the endless cacophony of repartee that Dave indulged in, soon had some twenty or thirty birds around us, wheeling, diving and calling, *white as sea foam* [italics mine] against the blue sky (Durrell 62).

In *The Drunken Forest* (1956), "an account of [his] Argentina-Paraguay foray" (Botting 216), he goes deep into the Chaco forests of Paraguay and relates his

discoveries thus :

> Occasionally the forest would be broken by a great grass-field, studded with tall, flame-coloured flowers that covered several acres, and neatly bisected by rows of palms, their curving fronds making them look like green rockets bursting against the sky. These grass-fields were sprinkled with dozens of widow tyrants – birds about the size of a sparrow but with jet-black upper parts and their breasts and throats as white as ermine. They perched on convenient sticks and dead trees, and now and again one would flip off, catch a passing insect and return to its perch, its breast gleaming and twinkling against the grass like a *shooting star* [italics mine] (Durrell 341).

In Argentina, Durrell goes on a trip to the countryside on the outskirts of Buenos Aires and happens to notice the following :

> Hung among the flowers, in such a position that I could see it from where I lay in bed, was a humming-bird's nest, a tiny cup the size of half a walnut shell, containing two pea-size white eggs. The morning after our arrival, as I lay in the warm depths of the gargantuan bed, sipping my tea, I watched the female humming-bird sitting quietly on her eggs, while her mate hovered and flipped among the blue flowers, like a microscopic, *glittering comet* [italics mine] (317).

In the last paragraph of the eighth chapter of *The Aye-aye and I* (1992), "an account of his quest for one of the endangered lemurs of Madagascar" (Botting 577), Durrell has this to say :

> Seven egrets, who nested near the camp and had been miles away at the sea fishing, flew upstream to their roosting tree. They were breathtakingly white and quite silent as they flapped along, *shining like stars* [italics mine] against the darkening river and trees (190).

The fifth chapter of *Golden Bats and Pink Pigeons*, appropriately entitled 'The

Enchanted World', contains a series of delightful descriptions of Durrell's underwater explorations as he goes snorkelling in the tropical reef of Mauritius, an experience which, in his opinion, "a naturalist should try to have before he dies" (113). Not surprisingly, these sub-marine descriptions have a couple of therio-elemental representations in them. The first of these is the following :

> Instantly I forgot my firm resolve to swim out into deeper water, for I was surrounded by a world as bizarre as any science fiction writer had thought up for a Martian biology. Around my feet, a trifle close for my comfort, lay six or seven large, flattish sea-urchins, like a litter of hibernating hedgehogs with bits of seaweed and coral fragments enmeshed in their spines so that, until one looked closely, they appeared to be weed-covered lumps of *dark lava* [italics mine] (Durrell 118).

The second vivid therio-elemental depiction (along with a therio-vegetal one) appears at the very end of the same chapter. In this, quite interestingly and startlingly, Durrell discovers the firmament under the water and not predictably on a hill-top or mountain-top like most people. He writes :

> In the flower garden one day I suddenly came upon a huge concourse of Leaf Fish. There must have been a couple of thousand of them, spread over an area of fifty or sixty square feet. I swam with them for half an hour and it was unforgettable; one moment it was like being in a forest of green leaves greeting the spring, the next like floating through bits of Mediterranean-blue sky that had miraculously fallen into the sea in the shape of fish (Durrell 137).

What is at once obvious in the foregoing representations is that first and foremost, they are not anthropocentric in nature, though "inescapably shaped by human feelings and the human imagination" (Abrams and Harpham 83). They are ecocentric and their emphasis is on the interconnections between different components of nature, which is a major concern in ecocriticism. They draw on the similarities, rather than the fundamental differences, between the living and the non-living parts of nature, thereby collapsing any possible binaries between the living / non-living.

The second important aspect of these passages is related to the distinctions made by Peter Barry between 'celebratory' and 'minatory' ecological writings in his *Beginning Theory* (2008). Here, he talks of "The existence of two distinct national variants of the ecological approach" – the British and the American ones. He elaborates by saying that "there is perhaps a tendency for the American writing to be 'celebratory' in tone, whereas the British variant tends to be more 'minatory', that is, it seeks to warn us of environmental threats emanating from governmental, industrial, commercial, and neo-colonial forces" (Barry 251). Interestingly enough, though Durrell is a British writer, his ecological approach in the passages discussed is highly 'celebratory' in tone, and not at all 'minatory'. They do not conform to Barry's classification and buck the trend.

Lastly, they conform to Barry Commoner's first law of ecology which states that "everything is connected to everything else" (qtd. in Sumathy 84). Edward Abbey coined the term *intersubjectivity* in his *Desert Solitaire* (1971), to describe his life lived in unison with nature. Durrell, too, lived such a life and the quoted passages provide ample testimony to his intersubjective eco-vision.

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