
David McLoghlin

A TRANSATLANTIC MENAGERIE: THE ANIMAL POETRY OF BISHOP, LOWELL, HEANEY AND GRENNAN

One literary pleasure – for writers as well as readers – that maybe isn’t mentioned as much as it should be is the kind of influence that stems from affection rather than anxiety and is not a burden. A good example is the ‘chain letter’ between two American poets, Elizabeth Bishop and Robert Lowell, that was later glossed, or added to, by two Irish poets of a younger generation: namely, Eamon Grennan and Seamus Heaney.

It has long been known that, as part of their mammoth correspondence, Bishop and Lowell wrote and dedicated poems to each other (*Words in Air*, their complete letters, runs to 795 pages).¹ Bishop started the process with ‘The Armadillo’ from Brazil in 1957.² Apart from the strangeness of a landscape where ‘almost every night / the frail, illegal fire balloons appear’, and the beauty of lines like ‘the kite sticks of the Southern Cross’, what is curious in Bishop’s poem is just how brief an appearance the armadillo makes in a poem named after it; once it eventually appears, it gets only three lines:

Hastily, all alone,
a glistening armadillo left the scene,
rose-flecked, head down, tail down ...

This could be due to the rarity of armadillo sightings, even in a place as unspoiled as Samambaia, the village outside Petrópolis where Bishop lived with her lover, Lota de Macedo Soares, forty-five miles north of Rio de Janeiro. It’s more interesting, though, to consider the shy armadillo in terms of the bestiary that Bishop uses to express her own submerged sense of anxiety and spiritual homelessness – ‘The Sandpiper’, for example, is constantly on alert, and nervous of the world: ‘He runs, he runs to the south, finical, awkward, / in a state of controlled panic, a student of Blake.’³

Lowell responded with ‘Skunk Hour’, from a macabre 1957 Massachusetts where ‘My mind’s not right.’⁴ In a letter from September 11, 1957, he writes: ‘There’s one in a small voice ... called “Skunk Hour”, not in your style yet indebted a little to your “Armadillo”.’⁵ Contrast Bishop’s armadillo with Lowell’s skunk family, who ‘march on their soles up Main Street: / white stripes, moonstruck eyes’ red fire’. Lowell’s animals populate a more confident anthropomorphic environment.

From the point of view of an interplay between traditions, what is in a sense more unexpected is the way Eamon Grennan and Seamus Heaney

pay homage to Lowell's and Bishop's influence by dipping their toes in American waters in their own animal poems. 'The Skunk' by Heaney appeared in *Field Work* in 1979; Grennan's 'Towards Dusk the Porcupine' was published in *So It Goes* in 1995.⁶

As he mentions in *Stepping Stones* – the autobiography-via-interview conducted with the late Dennis O'Driscoll – Heaney was house-sitting for friends in North Berkeley, California, when he had his first encounter. Told by the house's owners 'to look out for this skunk and her family', Heaney is immediately reminded of Lowell's 'mother skunk with her column of kittens'.⁷ However, it's vital to consider what Heaney does with this influence. As Michael Cavanagh has noted in *Professing Poetry: Seamus Heaney's Poetics*, "'The Skunk' doesn't simply borrow from or allude to 'Skunk Hour'; it is an answer to that poem, a rival vision of things, a place where Heaney doesn't suggest or declare, but enacts his independence."⁸ The American context, 'the night earth and air // Of California', doesn't continue to evoke Lowell for Heaney, but instead brings to mind his wife's absence:

The beautiful, useless
Tang of eucalyptus spelt your absence.
The aftermath of a mouthful of wine
Was like inhaling you off a cold pillow.

Despite the hypnotic beauty of his delivery, what is interesting is the way 'The Skunk' – as one of those rare breaks from an Irish context – illuminates Heaney's generative, Antaeus-like focus on Ireland and its countryside. Though clearly showing an enjoyment of 'parts foreign', his imagination doesn't linger in this setting.

Where Bishop begins with a poem about being elsewhere – and making her home there – Lowell responds with a work about the estrangement of home. Heaney, although responding to Lowell's skunks, chimes in with Bishop by thinking of home while abroad – the 'transatlantic cable that connected' him to his wife⁹ – the skunk's tail evoking the 'tail-up hunt in a bottom drawer / For the black plunge-line nightdress'. In the end, the dalliance with America only reminds him of where his true loyalties lie. Finally, Grennan returns to the poetic communion between Bishop and Lowell – not necessarily via Heaney, though he would have been aware of Heaney's 'Skunk' and its echoes of Lowell.

In 'Towards Dusk the Porcupine', Grennan completely enters the scene (rather like Bishop does in 'The Fish'). The way in which the context is not overly noted as American, or fetishized as different, might reflect the fact that Grennan has lived in the United States since 1964, and might not view his environs as foreign. (Though, I appreciate the gusto of

Hibernian touches like ‘the targe of his arse’). The poem’s close-up eye on the porcupine reflects the immediacy of the encounter. Typical of Grennan, although the poem has four full stops, it reads as if it unspooled in a single breath – one sentence, expertly syntactically sustained, winding through the tercets. Though the ‘I’ is only present as a vehicle for the moment captured in the poem, rather wonderfully, we are given the poet from the porcupine’s perspective as ‘this small walking tree at which / he nods once a bobbing head and then / goes deeper in, to be lost’.

Quills as writing instruments suggests the porcupine to be the writer’s mascot *par excellence*, and indeed the porcupine’s armature is punned on to great effect. Here, ‘one brilliant quill of curiosity’ stands in for ‘shooting a glance.’ Preceding these stanzas, the porcupine is described ‘peering shortsighted // at the ground he’s covering / hunched over – like Lowell reading’. And, a nod to Lowell’s nickname – Cal – comes in the ninth stanza, where the porcupine is envisioned ‘doing this undulant / slow waddle – fat Caliban’. (Per Lowell: ‘I’m called Cal, but I won’t explain why. None of the prototypes are flattering: Calvin, Caligula, Caliban’).¹⁰ Finally, and beautifully, after the porcupine’s noticing his own prickliness, ‘how / he ends at pointed edges like that // and can cast them off / when needs be’, we are given ‘his heart / in its reed basket // a full thumping, the twenty / species of beetle and seed / sweetening his belly’.

Grennan’s work is often a question of travel (travel also involves extended, decades-long stays, and I believe in this Bishop would approve). As such, his poems move expertly between Ireland and America. A vein in Grennan’s work uncannily captures the emigrant experience by bleeding both landscapes in a single poem, echoing the mind’s jet lag in a kind of melancholy double exposure. If at times Irish poets can tend too often to see landscape and fauna in historical terms, Grennan is a restorative: in many poems he gives us the sharply focused ‘moment of being’ in a painterly mode that is perhaps more American than Irish. (The eye, arguably, might be younger in the United States). In this he shows a new way of being an Irish poet, and one who has been fully received and welcomed by the American scene: maintaining a dual poetic citizenship, while keeping his passport to an honoured place in his original tradition.

Just as Lowell absorbs Bishop’s approach and *mise-en-scène* by responding with something of his own, Grennan and Heaney cleanly integrate the older poets by taking what they need to make their own non-derivative poems. In this way they pay the taxes that are due as they pass through customs, but also show the necessary confidence inherent to mature poets of stature. Where Heaney’s visits Stateside did not tend to register quite so forcefully again in his work, Grennan’s work has grown out of this transatlantic conversation.

Footnotes

Unless noted, any reference is to the specific poems under discussion: 'The Armadillo', 'Skunk Hour', 'The Skunk' and 'Towards Dusk the Porcupine'.

1. *Words in Air: The Complete Correspondence Between Elizabeth Bishop and Robert Lowell* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010), edited by Thomas Travisano with Saskia Hamilton.
2. Elizabeth Bishop, *Poems* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011).
3. Elizabeth Bishop, *Poems*.
4. See *Life Studies and For the Union Dead*, Robert Lowell, Farrar, Straus and Giroux Classics (2007).
5. *Words in Air*, p. 230
6. Seamus Heaney, *Field Work*, Faber & Faber (1979); Eamon Grennan, *So it Goes*, The Gallery Press (1995).
7. Dennis O'Driscoll, *Stepping Stones: Interviews with Seamus Heaney*, Faber & Faber (2009), p. 205.
8. Michael Cavanagh, *Professing Poetry: Seamus Heaney's Poetics*, Catholic University of America Press (2010), pp. 137-138.
9. *Stepping Stones*, p. 205
10. *Words in Air*, p. 7