

Preface

On the opening page of the 2015 novel *Fifteen Dogs* by André Alexis, we find the gods Apollo and Hermes sitting in a Toronto tavern. As is often the case with barroom conversations, theirs takes a philosophical turn. Apollo insists humans are no better or worse than other creatures, and even if they think themselves superior, they are not. Hermes wonders what might happen if animals had human intelligence. And then it gets interesting as Apollo wagers a year's servitude that misery is the likely outcome. The gods make it happen, giving human intelligence and language to fifteen dogs in a nearby veterinary clinic, and for the rest of the novel, we follow them through the highs and lows, blessings and curses of their newly-gifted existence. It's a bit like Jonathan Swift's horses in the Land of the Houyhnhnms. *Fifteen Dogs* also holds up an unlikely mirror to readers, forcing them to critique their own "pack" behaviour. In that sense, it's about us, not dogs. But it's more than that. To look at the world through non-human eyes is oddly disorienting. We cheer for the dogs (the good ones, at least) and are saddened by their hurts and deaths. The fantasy awakens emotion, if even for a moment. Maybe we hear the neighbour's dog barking as we read. Maybe the boundaries between fiction and nonfiction blur a little. Animals, real

animals, feel pain too. Animals, real animals, experience fear, joy, love and sadness. Animals are social beings.

I fancy the dog-loving C. S. Lewis would have enjoyed this novel. Not only did he tell his own story of fifteen talking dogs (see Chapter 11 of *The Last Battle*) but he was also a classicist so quite at home with stories about the mischievous gods of antiquity. He was a poet too so would have enjoyed following the dogs' progress as they discover language and its figurative capacities. (The canine poet Prince would surely be his favourite!) Lewis is best known for his own humanlike animals, of course, and his fascination with this literary device started early. He not only enjoyed reading "the anthropomorphized beasts of nursery literature" when a child, as he puts it in his memoir, but also wrote his own stories, complete with drawings. A collection of juvenilia is now in print.

What started when a young boy continued into early adulthood. When he was only twenty years old on 20 March, 1919, he published his first book. *Spirits in Bondage: A Cycle of Lyrics* failed to establish the young writer as a major poet but in hindsight, it is a harbinger of a prolific output and a fascinating glimpse into his intellectual formation a full decade before his conversion to Christianity. Already at this stage of his career, on the first page of the first poem, in the first part of this three-part collection, we find Lewis still contemplating nature, and not only that, but contemplating it in theological terms. "Satan Speaks" (the first of two poems so titled) includes a series of first person singular self-descriptors by the dark narrator. Satan identifies himself with many things, including death, lust, war and

... the spider making her net,
I am the beast with jaws blood-wet.

Predation is a subject Lewis thought about often. Twenty years later in *The Problem of Pain* (1940) he returns to it, still associating violence in nature with spiritual darkness. The only difference was that he now believed in the existence of those devilish powers.

As a child, as a young adult nonbeliever and as a middle-aged Christian, C. S. Lewis marvelled at the teeming life filling our world, and that is the topic of this book. He loved animals. He loved to write

about animals. And unlike many of his contemporaries, he insisted they are worthy subjects for study within Christian theological and ethical discourses.

Relatively few theologians and communities of faith take animals seriously as a matter of religious concern. My aim is to introduce the already-familiar C. S. Lewis as an animal thinker who invites a specifically Christian response to animals. It is a study of Lewis's writing but the motive behind it relates more to that last point. If animals are not a high priority for Christians, there is strategic value in recovering the insights of respected luminaries from the church's history who articulate an animal-friendly interpretation of the faith. From Jesus's remark about sparrows (Matthew 10:29) through to Pope Francis's encyclical *Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home* (2015), there are many resources within the tradition urging consideration of animals. C. S. Lewis is one of them.

Judging by his books, letters, poems, diary and the anecdotes of friends, animals occupied his thoughts and inspired his art. No wonder. They seemed to follow him everywhere he went. Pets indoors and wildlife on the property of his Headington Quarry home provided entertainments and distractions. It was no different in his professional life. There were mice—which he refused to trap, he is careful to point out—in his Magdalen College rooms in New Building, and whenever he looked out the windows of those rooms, he likely saw the herd of deer that roamed the grounds. (The cover photo of this book shows one of their descendants. That's New Building in the background.) For more than twenty years he listened to the “click click” of their antlers, as he puts it on more than one occasion.

We read his books for all kinds of reasons. His poetry is often beautiful, his scholarship insightful, his theologizing and apologetics accessible and thought provoking, his novels entertaining. But his writings also urge us to think about animals. Like the Alexis novel, his stories disorient at times. Under Lewis's spell, we become a wee bit less self-absorbed and more attentive to the non-human other.

He is also, I realize, a polarizing figure. Those who know the books seem to love or loathe them. There seems to be no middle ground and those who comment on them often “take sides.” Hagiographers and iconoclasts. I try to avoid these extremes. I admire and enjoy reading

Lewis—that much will be obvious—but this does not mean I agree with everything he writes. But this is the case with many authors, perhaps especially those removed from us in time. I cringe at the anti-Semitism in *The Merchant of Venice* and *Oliver Twist* but still read Shakespeare and Dickens. Censorship is too blunt a tool when it comes to literature. Appreciation does not preclude criticism. I mention this because I do not always distinguish my opinions from Lewis's in what follows. I try to follow rabbit trails of the *leporidae* variety in this book, leaving most others to the side for another occasion.

A few words of thanks are in order. Andrew Linzey, as is often the case in theological animal studies, pointed the way with an important paper on Lewis and animals delivered to the C. S. Lewis Society at Oxford University and later published in the *Anglican Theological Review*. I am grateful he gave me the opportunity to tackle this subject for the Palgrave Macmillan Animal Ethics Series even though he had designs on doing it himself. A word of thanks is also due to my niece Kate Henderson, a voracious reader who kindly helped track the animals of Narnia. Kyla, as always, was a partner in the adventure. Aravis to my Shasta, Jill to my Eustace. And I happily dedicate this book to my mother, Gayle Gilmour. A lifelong reader who passed along that most rewarding of gifts—the habit of escaping into good books.

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