Animal Vehicles
Mobility beyond Metaphor

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In the book that inspired this one, John Urry redefines not just social structures but also the social agent. “[O]f course,” he writes, “agents are not just humans but will be a variety of human and non-human actants that constitute the typical mobile, roaming hybrids.”¹ Out of context, “non-human actants” would probably mean nonhuman animals; “roaming hybrids” might be peripatetic centaurs or cyborgs. In fact, however, the nonhuman actants that Urry discusses are principally objects, and his “hybrids” are “assemblages of humans, machines, and technologies.”² Animals play only a passive role in his “mobile sociology,” as the potential recipients of rights and “citizenship.”³

Animals play a major role, however, in Urry’s rhetoric. The last chapter of his Sociology beyond Societies centers on Zygmunt Bauman’s contrast between two sociopolitical orders: “the gardening state,” which “presumes exceptional concern with pattern, regularity and ordering, with what is growing and what should be weeded out;” and the “gamekeeper state,” “concerned

² Ibid., 4, 77–78.
³ Ibid., 169–72.
with regulating mobilities, with ensuring that there was sufficient stock for hunting in a particular site but not with the detailed cultivation of each animal in each particular place.” In Bauman’s view, the former has replaced the latter: like gardeners, modern legislators and social scientists determine how to produce social order. In contrast, Urry sees a reversion to the gamekeeper model, in which “[a]nimals roamed around and beyond the estate, like the roaming hybrids that currently roam in and across national borders.” What interests me more than Urry’s argument is the analogy that he deploys. Absent from the state’s actual “roaming hybrids,” animals serve as their metaphorical vehicle.

Urry makes clear in the second chapter of *Sociology beyond Societies*, titled “Metaphor,” that he does not use figurative language carelessly, and his animal analogy is certainly apt. Nor is he unusual in referring to nonhuman animals only to clarify his sociological argument. Academic writing shares with imaginative literature and common speech the assumption that humans are fundamentally different from all other animals; any assertions of resemblance across that divide can only be metaphorical.6 But classical and medieval thinkers might have regarded the vehicle of Urry’s metaphor as singularly appropriate: to them, mobility defines animals. “In Latin,” writes Isidore of Seville, “they are called animals (*animal*) or ‘animate beings’ (*animans*), because they are animated (*animare*) by life and moved

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5 Urry, *Sociology beyond Societies*, 189.
by spirit.” John of Trevisa, translating Bartholomaeus Anglicus, writes that the “vertu [power] of moeuynge and of feelynge” is “in alle bestes,” a category that includes “men and bestes wilde and tame.” Similarly, at least one modern dictionary groups humans with other species on the basis of their common motility. According to the online Merriam-Webster dictionary an animal is simply a life form with “the capacity for spontaneous movement and rapid motor responses to stimulation.” The definition goes on to distinguish the “lower animals” from “human beings” but cites no differentiae.

In light of those definitions, mobility is the capacity that collapses the human tenor and animal vehicles of Urry’s metaphors. In being provisioned for hunting but able to cross national boundaries, game animals are not like the human and institutional “hybrids” of the modern state; they are among those roaming agents. So too, the cultivated stock of a “gardening state” includes nonhuman animals (and hybrids). I propose, therefore, that we reformulate Urry’s “mobile sociology” to include a fuller range of living actors. In this chapter, I will argue that animals were crucial in medieval mobilities, both material and textual.

Power of Moving and Feeling: Material Mobility

In the prehistory of interspecies mobility, nonhuman animals made the first moves. Terry O’Connor writes that early in the British postglacial period, perhaps 10,000 years ago, a “mix of temperate large vertebrates” may have established “clearings and ‘trails’ by grazing and browsing pressure alone. Into this environment, too, came people, drawn by [among other resources]
the herds of large prey." That is, large animals created paths across a landscape into which they attracted human beings. The new arrivals immediately exerted “predation pressure” on their predecessors, however, and produced new paths and networks.

Human control over the movements of other animals increased and ramified during the British Middle Ages, but the resulting scapes and flows (to use Urry’s terminology) were always coproduced. In the following pages, I will sketch three large multispecies movements: importation, management, and collaboration.

Importation: Trafficked Beasts
In the first of those movements, animals were objects to be relocated, often for purposes of display. The postglacial landscape into which the “temperate large vertebrates” attracted Homo sapiens lacked many species now regarded as endemic. Two that now seem particularly British — rabbits and fallow deer — were imported during the Middle Ages for rather surprising reasons. Naomi Sykes and Julie Curl, two British archaeologists, conclude from “the historical, iconographic, zooarcheological and landscape evidence” that “modern [rabbit] populations descend […] from individuals brought to Britain” beginning in the twelfth century “as part of a fully-fledged and pan European ‘coney culture,’” maintained at great expense by elite households. So too, the motives for transferring fallow deer from the eastern Mediterranean were cultural rather than pragmatic. According to Sykes, “a series of repeated importations” seems to have begun when wealthy Roman colonizers brought small numbers of

11 “It has long been known,” writes Anthony J. Legge, “that South-west Asia is the region of origin for many of our [British] domestic plants and animals” (Anthony J. Legge, “The Aurochs and Domestic Cattle,” in O’Connor and Sykes (eds), Extinctions and Invasions, 26–35, at 30).
fallow deer into parks inhabited also by other “exotic” animals, seeking to entertain or impress their guests. Likewise, if Anglo-Saxon rulers imported a few fallow deer, they did so through “peaceful cultural exchange and political negotiation,” perhaps “to cement political relationships.” Then the Normans did something similar on a larger scale. At the time of the Conquest, deer were still not endemic in Normandy, but they were in Norman Sicily; from there, Norman barons borrowed the “concepts of animal parks,” stocking those enclosures with fallow deer and other exotic animals, some of which foreign kings donated to Henry I. Sykes argues that Henry’s collection “was a metaphor for the Norman Empire, a statement that the Norman kings had power not only over the wild creatures in their possession but also over the countries from which the animals derived.”

Management: Droves and Enclosures
As Jennie Friedrich and Sarah Breckenridge Wright point out in essays for this volume, travel can entail both movement and emplacement. That was pre-eminently true for animals trafficked through human cultural and social networks, but a similar binary characterizes their subsequent use. Once imported, many animals were subject to a second kind of control over their mobility: management of independent movement. With rabbits and deer, that management did not mean close restriction.

14 Ibid., 56.
16 Sykes, “European Fallow Deer,” 57. In Zoo: A History of Zoological Gardens in the West (London: Reaktion Books, 2002), Eric Baratay and Elisabeth Hardouin-Fugier note that for the pre-modern European aristocracy, as for Roman emperors, wild animals “were considered to be prestigious, luxury items indispensable to the nobility and a symbol of its distinct nature” (17 and 18–19).
On the contrary, such animals were valued for their rapid and agile movement, exercised in warrens and parks. Within those bounds, rabbits and deer were cultivated, while their nonhuman predators were excluded to the extent possible: the aristocratic hunt was a chief objective of non-metaphoric gamekeeping.

The management of other species involved tighter control. Animals that naturally herd together had been managed at least since the late Bronze Age through pastoralism, which provides relatively free but guided movement in search of water and grazing. Indeed, cattle and sheep had long been induced to move substantial distances. Transhumance — seasonal migration between ecological zones — served the welfare of both the animals and their owners; it might be done in stages, with stops for rest and grazing, and it often involved a communal effort.

But two medieval developments changed herd animals’ mobility, in opposing ways. The first is evident in a small morphological change: by the late fourteenth century, “drover” joined “driver” as a term for one who “force[s] (living beings) to move on or away.” The distinction concerned distance and destination: the “drover” drives herds of cattle “esp. to distant markets.”

As Hannah Velten writes, large numbers of cattle were brought “along drovers’ tracks which criss-crossed [Britain], traveling at about 2 mph for 12 hours a day — the trip from Wales would take 20 to 25 days […]. After such a tremendous journey, the cattle arrived emaciated and were fattened up outside London.” Sheep might be driven from as far as Devon (over 200 miles).

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20 OED s.v. “drover,” n.1.a.; similarly, MED s.vv. “driver(e)” (n.) and “drover(e)” (n.).
Droves expanded with increasing urbanization; those ending at London’s Smithfield Market continued through the nineteenth century, when they were singled out for contributing to the suffering of animals awaiting slaughter.22 Shirley Toulson suggests that many paths established between Roman times and the eighteenth century were created for and by pack animals and were maintained primarily for drovers;23 thus constraint in conjunction with movement helped to determine the “scape” of modern Britain.

The mobility of herding animals was controlled also in a second and contrasting way: their grazing ranges were bounded when private and public land-holdings developed. Esther Pascua draws on the “extraordinary sources [that] are available for England for the period 1089–1300” to set forth the changes in animal mobility caused by “the so-called manorial or seigneurial system.”24 Before that period, Pascua explains, domesticated animals in Europe were “roaming property,” kept “between the farm and the forest” in forests and natural pastures.25 By the thirteenth century, however, an “astonishing expansion of arable land” limited the space for animals to roam and graze. Pascua suggests that the resulting “neglect of livestock” may explain why “cows, oxen, pigs, and sheep failed to grow larger during the central centuries of the Middle Ages,” otherwise a period of economic growth.26 The enclosure of fields and the increase in agricultural territory seem to have affected sheep in particular. As Pascua observes, “the manorial shepherd moved his master’s fold from place to place within the desmesne” on “the stubble of uncultivated fields after harvest,” in order “to fertilize the ex-

25 Ibid., 82, 83, 84.
26 Ibid., 89.
panding fields.” 27 In a 2009 essay, Lisa J. Kiser reads the fifteenth-century Townley “shepherd plays” in light of these changes. 28 Originally tenant farmers with their own sheep, the main characters in those plays have become shepherds who manage their employer’s sheep day and night. In the winter, they move the flocks into “the most far-flung corners of the estate” and feed them manually to supplement inadequate grazing. 29 Enclosure, a massive but complex determinant of both human and non-human mobility, has visibly transformed the English landscape; one of its components — the management of grazing rights for sheep — is still subject to dispute. 30

**Collaboration: Horsepower**

Robin Bendrey points out that animals were involved in land management as both subjects and agents. From early in the first millennium, Bendrey writes, “Horses offered the means of managing territory, cattle and people […] , and were therefore the means of controlling wealth and exercising power.” 31

Horses “were present in Early Mesolithic Britain,” according to Bendrey, but “became increasingly scarce in the following millennia.” 32 When humans re-introduced them, probably from the Continent after Britain had been cut off, horses do not seem to have served mostly as sources of food. Their importation was similar in that respect to that of rabbits and deer. In contrast to those creatures, however, horses functioned not as cultural or symbolic goods; rather, they were co-agents in work and war-

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27 Ibid., 89–90.
29 Ibid., 349–50.
30 For current discussion of grazing rights in Britain, see for instance the Web site of the Foundation for Common Land (www.foundationforcommonland.org.uk).
32 Ibid., 10.
In both domains their role has been transformative; they have, in Bendrey’s words, “revolutionised transport, warfare, and trade.” In a major recent study, Pita Kelekna argues that we have underestimated the role of horses in geopolitical and cultural history. “Within anthropology,” Kelekna writes, cultural advance has traditionally been viewed in the context of the sedentary agricultural state […]. Analysis of man’s symbiosis with the domesticated horse necessarily takes the reader to regions remote from the urban center and pays special attention to mobile elements of nomadic society, too often deemed marginal or transitory […]. Tribes of [a] vast peripheral area [from Hungary to the borders of China] were notoriously responsible for the depredations and invasions that over millennia threatened the heartlands of civilization to the west, south, and east. […] It is also true that their far-ranging routes … afforded rapid transport of distant trade goods, both essential and exotic. With trade went cultural exchange […].

Kelekna’s research demonstrates that horses have co-produced the most consequential developments in human culture. In particular ways, horses were crucial in medieval England. As is commonly remarked, etymology renders the so-called Age of Chivalry the “era of the horse”; Middle English chevalrīe, meaning interchangeably “host of mounted warriors” and “chivalry” or its “ethical code,” descends via Old French from Latin cabellārius “horseman.” In daily life, long-distance transport and communication depended on horses; so, increasingly, did agriculture among peasants as well as the elite. Roads and even

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33 Ibid., 10–13.
34 Ibid., 10.
36 *med* s.v. “chevalrīe”; *oed* s.vv. “chivalry” (n.) and “cavalry” (n.).
city streets were designed for horse traffic: London’s first mayor “decreed that the overhanging projections or jetties on the upper floors of houses had to be at least high enough for a man on horseback to pass under.”38 Chaucer’s pilgrims — even the mal-adapt Shipman — take horseback travel for granted. To a large extent, human mobility in the English Middle Ages was equine mobility.

Across its medieval functions, what Kelekna aptly calls “man’s symbiosis with the domesticated horse” was neither simple nor uniform. Studies by Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and Susan Crane present contrasting models for the aristocratic version of that symbiosis. For Cohen, the relationship between knight and horse in chivalric literature is intimate but dehumanizing: “The horse, its rider, the bridle and saddle and armor together form the Deleuzian circuit or assemblage, a network of meaning that decomposes human bodies and intercuts them with the inanimate, the inhuman.”39 In contrast, Crane emphasizes the representation of horses “as resourceful allies, bold and fearless like their knights.”40 She acknowledges, with Cohen, that the relationship “enmesh[es]” the knight “in a prosthetic assemblage” whose technological aspect “threatens [him] with objectification as just so much equipment,” but she insists that it also “carries the knight into a zone of consciousness and an ethical awareness that are not exclusively human.”41 Perhaps both extremes obtained — and not only in aristocratic culture: the plowman and carter, like the knight, probably viewed horses sometimes as transport mechanisms (like themselves) and sometimes as sentient beings (like themselves). Both partners to the “symbiosis” were independent agents powerful enough to exert some control over their mutual mobility.

38 Velten, Beastly London, 45.
39 Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, Medieval Identity Machines (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 76.
41 Ibid., 167.
Admittedly, the balance of control rested more often with the human mover, and the symbiosis lasted only until the human partners found stronger and more biddable forms of “horse power.” Medieval rabbits and deer challenged hunters only by human sufferance, and increasing numbers of species were enclosed and managed. Esther Pascua ends her chapter on medieval domestic animals with a summary that applies also to other large mammals. “As the Middle Ages drew to a close,” she writes, “working animals were more confined to specific spaces than before, their lives controlled more tightly by human beings. Their fate was determined by the profitability of their activities and products.” But at least in medieval England, the patterns of human control and movement—in Urry’s terminology, the configurations of “complex interlocking networks” and “nodes” along which “people, money, capital, information, ideas and images are seen to ‘flow’”—were the work of many species.

Live Metaphors: Textual Mobility

Like other new paradigms, John Urry’s “mobile sociology” can itself be mobilized in various disciplines. Inspired by Urry’s work, Eileen Joy and James L. Smith have proposed that we “consider literary texts themselves […] as transit systems in which we can glimpse the manifold mobilities of objects, figures, mentalities, tropes and other ‘matter’ in vibrant intermediate networks.” I take that to mean that elements such as metaphors and represented objects exert affective or semiotic force within individual texts and form significant connections beyond those texts. Robert Stanton demonstrates in his essay for this volume that Margery Kempe enacts both kinds of force within and beyond her Book, disrupting expectations for nar-

43 Urry, Sociology Beyond Societies, 12 and 35.
rative continuity and genre. In what remains of this chapter, I will argue that nonhuman animals function in a similar way. Indeed, they are particularly “vibrant” objects—and agents—in the “transit systems” of medieval texts.

That proposition might seem untenable, especially because I choose to support it with reference to a genre notorious for representing animals without natural vitality: the medieval beast book, said to be the most widely disseminated form of secular literature from the late classical period through the fifteenth century.\(^{45}\) Animals are in a sense the co-agents of some modern animal stories—long-haired border collies are among the sources of *Lassie Come-Home*—but medieval animals cannot be regarded as having shaped the bestiary in the same way. Many bestiary creatures are imaginary, for one thing, and some highly improbable behaviors are ascribed to the real ones. Repeated from one bestiary to another, framed by moralizations, the accounts of the animals are more intertextual than zoological. Many commentators argue that bestiary creatures are in fact over-determined, their characteristics dictated contingently by prior texts and ultimately by Christian teleology. Like John Urry when he employs game animals as metaphors, the bestiarists were not really writing about animals, according to this view. Originating from unitary doctrine rather than from observation, confined in a rigid semiotic structure, little changed across innumerable instantiations, the creatures of the texts that we still homogenize as “the bestiary” would seem to have brought their literary transit system to a dead halt.

But that is not the impression conveyed by bestiary manuscripts. A great many scribes and artists illustrated their subjects, and their images are anything but static.\(^{46}\) A frame usually surrounds the creature, just as a verbal moralization might


enclose a description, but a tail, horn, paw, or beak typically protrudes into or beyond the visual boundary. Sometimes the protrusion substantially invades the text; in British Harley MS 3244 (59r), for instance, the long, slender dragon inside a staggered rectilinear frame stretches from near the top right of the page to the bottom left, interrupting many lines of text.\textsuperscript{47} Commenting particularly on the Ashmole bestiary, Debra Hassig describes the effect of this technique: “figures crossing or breaking out of the frame appear more active, as if the frame cannot hold them back.” Alternatively, the frame “can encroach upon and effectively hamper the movement of a figure.” Hassig sees the latter encroachments as opposing the “breaking out” effect, but in both cases the frame “heighten[s] a sense of movement”: escaping or confined, the animal is in motion.\textsuperscript{48} Even when not interacting with frames, most bestiary creatures are depicted in motion. “The essential quality of these pictures,” observes Beryl Rowland, “is their animation. The animals are presented with such vivacity and vigor that they are oddly compelling, pulsating with life even when grotesque.”\textsuperscript{49}

Additionally compelling are the creatures’ facial expressions. The lion in the Ashmole bestiary looks intent but calm as it consumes a small ape; in another panel, the lion’s brows contract as if in anguish as it spares a prostrate man; in a third, it bows to the ground, its mouth half opened, as if in fear of a small cock that wears an improbably haughty expression.\textsuperscript{50} Elsewhere, an ape kisses the offspring that she carries before her, her eyes and

\textsuperscript{47} The image is visible in the online Medieval Bestiary, http://bestiary.ca/beasts/beast262.htm.


\textsuperscript{49} Beryl Rowland, “The Art of Memory and the Bestiary,” in Clark and McMunn (eds), \textit{Beasts and Birds of the Middle Ages}, 12–25, at 17. In that passage, Rowland refers initially to one manuscript (Brussels MS 10066–7) but then generalizes her observation to the sketches that Florence McCulloch made from some two dozen manuscripts (citing McCulloch, \textit{Medieval Latin and French Bestiaries}, 191–212).

\textsuperscript{50} Facsimile of MS Ashmole 1511 fol. 10r, from http://bodley30.bodley.ox.ac.uk:8180/luna/servlet/s/2saxot.
brow suggesting tenderness. And Christoper De Hamel is right that at least one of the two kids that “[turn] their heads backward to nibble the leaves at the top of a tree” do so “playfully.”51 Perhaps the illustrations’ vitality served a mnemonic function, as Rowland maintains, but they strike the viewer first as lively, intentional creatures, not as signposts to particular moralizations.

In that respect, the verbal descriptions match the illustrations: if the creatures described in most beast books are signposts to moralizations, they are animated, internally motivated ones. Following a scent in the mountains, the lion detects the odor of a hunter, so he covers his tracks with his tail. The *autolops* (antelope? oryx? self-wolf?) is so exceedingly alert that the hunter cannot reach him until he tangles his horns in a spiny shrub. When the *serra* (saw-fish?) sees a sailing ship, he raises his wings in imitation, but he can match the ship’s pace for only thirty or forty stadia. Even the igneous rocks are self-moving as well as gendered: they do not ignite unless the male one approaches the female.52

Nor do the descriptions themselves stay within a hermeneutic frame. Of the serpent, for instance, we learn that “when he grows old, his eyes become dim and, if he wants to become new again, he abstains and fasts for forty days until his skin becomes loosened from his flesh. And […] he goes and finds a narrow crack in the rock.” The corporeal details in that mini-narrative have no place in the moralization, in which good Christians “throw off for Christ the old man.”53 Moreover, the moral va-

51 Christopher De Hamel, ed., *Book of Beasts: A Facsimile of MS Bodley 764* (Oxford: Bodleian Library, 2008), fol. 16v; fol. 36r; p. 29, note to plate 41.


53 *Physiologus*, trans. Curley, 16. Curley’s base text is a manuscript from the stemma known as Versio y (see Curley, xxxiii). My summaries here include his interpolations from the elaborations in Versio b, which is said to be
lences of some figurations are surprising: we expect poisonous serpents to represent something evil, for instance, not the good Christian. Often a creature’s moral valence shifts polarity, as the author acknowledges after declaring that the caladrius “stands for the person of our Savior.” “Perhaps you say that the caladrius is unclean according to the law,” he writes, but so too the unclean serpent was exalted by Moses just as “the son of man should be exalted” (alluding to John 3:14); indeed, “there are many other things in creatures that have two meanings; some are indeed to be praised, others to be blamed.”

Thus both parts of the description/signification pair are internally complex. Indeed, the two-fold semiotic structure is less a general rule than a ground for variation. In some beast books, many chapters have no moralization at all. More commonly, significations abound, intertwining with the descriptions that generate them. An extreme instance of such chaining is the self-similar explication of the oyster and pearl that comes midway through Versio y of the Physiologus as translated by Michael J. Curley. We learn first of the agate-stone that divers use to find pearls. Without pausing for moralization, the author moves to the pearl itself, born when the “stone in the sea called oyster” (sostoros) swallows the light and dew of celestial bodies. The agate, we are told, corresponds to St. John, who showed “that the intelligible pearl is Jesus Christ our Lord,” who is brought up from the sea of the world by “holy doctors.” And although sinners/divers carry the pearl back down, the Savior is “found intelligibly receiving food […] in the middle of the shell” — that is, between the Old and New Testaments. The “stone which is

“particularly well represented by English MSS of the thirteenth century” (Eden, ed. and trans., Theobaldi “Physiologus,” 3). The serpent is not in Versio b but appears in Versio y and in the early, versified “Physiologus” attributed to one Theobaldus and believed to have been used as a school text; see Physiologus, trans. Curley, 103.

54 Physiologus Latinus, ed. Carmody, 15–16 (my translation).
55 Clark, Introduction to Medieval Book of Beasts, 115; McCulloch, Mediaeval Latin and French Bestiaries, 35.
56 The segment of the oyster/pearl passage summarized after this point is absent from Versio y and from Carmody’s edition of Versio b; Curley trans-
called the conch” is (also?) a figure for Holy Mary, who rose, like the stone from the sea, out of her father's house to receive the dew of Gabriel’s annunciation, foreshadowed in Genesis 27:28—“May God give you of the dew of heaven”; the “opening of the mouth of the conch” indicates Mary’s receptive reply to the Angel, in Luke 1:38. Two scriptural elaborations of the Incarnation follow before we move to the “pearl of great price” (Matthew 13:46), itself explicated through ten additional Bible passages that confirm the value of the figurative pearl. At this point, after four full pages (in the translated version), the writer would seem to have lost sight of his first metaphoric vehicle. But he brings us back to the adamant-stone with a short chapter on its other “nature,” the imperviousness that confers power on its owners. And this time, the significatio is brief and direct, closing the circumlocution: “My Lord is adamant-rock. If you possess him, no evil will befal you.”

If the animals in such texts are fundamentally “vehicle[s] for understanding religious truth,” as Joyce Salisbury claims, the oyster and pearl are rather inefficient ones, linked as they are to multiple biblical passages whose meanings are already explicit. It makes better sense to see them as semiotic engines. The scriptural and didactic significations that they generate outweigh them in authority, but rhetorical agency belongs to the creatures that call them forth. The relationship is beautifully figured in two illustrations that Hugh of Fouilloy designed for his De avibus. In one, a dove is encircled by a segmented ring and a rectangle containing small circles. Those circles, the segments, and


a space between two borders all contain phrases from Hugh’s scriptural and homiletic explication of the dove. A falcon occupies the center of the other illustration, enclosed by a double-lined rectangle with double-lined arms that quadrisect the outer area; the inner spaces and outer segments contain text with “a few essential ideas” concerning the falcon.60 The diagrams reverse the usual relationship between central text and marginal image in medieval manuscripts: here, discourse emanates in various directions from the animal at its center.

The dove recurs in many beast books, seldom generating exactly the same significations. The authors draw on a large stock of features and behaviors, some with Biblical warrant, some derived from Isidore of Seville’s *Etymologies* or Alexander Neckam’s *De naturis rerum*, and a few attested by observation: “I have found no written reference to the colour of the dove’s wings, but it can be attributed by analogy with the material dove (*ex similitudine materialis columbe*).”61 Through many variations, including its material form, the creature being described remains the same—the dove, subject to interpretation but not completely knowable.

The generative power of bestiary creatures extends beyond the bestiaries. Predictably, bestiary descriptions and significations appear in sermons, but they also migrate to beast epics, fables, debate poems, travel narratives, and even romances.62
Those reappearances demonstrate the influence of the bestiary, but I would argue that they also exemplify the mobility of the creatures themselves. For literary animals do not merely migrate across genre barriers; they trample them. At least three scholars observe that readers often ignore or misidentify the genres of texts that center on animals. Clark writes that modern commentators exaggerate the popularity of bestiaries because they use the term ‘bestiary’ “for any animal lore in text or art.”63 Jill Mann makes a similar observation, though for her the overused term isn’t “bestiary” but “fable”; thus Mann opens her masterful book on beast literature in medieval Britain with a remedial lesson on genre distinctions.64 And the tendencies deplored by Clark and Mann are generalized in a trenchant observation at the beginning of Jan Ziolkowski’s study of medieval Latin beast poetry. “When authors or readers are confronted with an animal protagonist,” writes Ziolkowski, “they are inclined automatically to think of other types of literature about animals, regardless of whether those other types are in the same genre. The moral of the story is that beasts override genre.”65

If they can do that, literary animals share a power possessed by entities at the opposite end of the ontological scale—that is, by sin, virtue, the trinity, and other elements of Christian doctrine. For many readers, allusions to those theological realities dominate any lyric, epic, fable, or narrative in which they emerge, pulling the text into a supercategory that some call “allegory.” Like allegory, the supergenre that we might call “beast literature” is established not simply by a shared theme or subject-matter but by a particular rhetorical stance toward its

63 Clark, Introduction to Medieval Book of Beasts, 13.
64 Mann, From Aesop to Reynard, 1.
shared subject-matter. Fables, bestiary entries, beast epics, avian
debate poems, and modern animal fiction all present their ani-
mal agents as members of real species — a rooster, the serpent,
the dove, my dog. As signifieds, both beasts and the sacred are
existentially real but beyond full human comprehension. Thus
they act as semiotic magnets. They produce what Urry might
call “flows,” attracting and resignifying figures and themes with-
in individual texts and among texts that are otherwise diverse.
Inevitably, of course, readers recognize that the representation
of a species in a particular text falls short of mimesis, produc-
ing what might be called animal nominalism. Genres differ in
their characteristic strategies for subverting and acknowledging
that shortfall; texts (and readings of texts) differ in their fluc-
tuating distances from the animal real. But if we ignore that
movement — by, for instance, defining the action in fables and
the descriptions in bestiaries as expendable fabrication — we
de-animate the texts.

Conclusion: Our Move

As I read about “mobile sociology,” I thought of Stephen
Glosecki’s essay on early Germanic animal imagery. “Strik-
ing creatures stare across the centuries at us,” writes Glosecki,
“blankly indifferent to our urge to understand […]. Literally,
many were movable goods back then; figuratively, they cross
historical boundaries, too, with whispers of ways forgotten.”66
Indeed, medieval animals were literally — that is, materi-
ally — movable objects, but as Glosecki’s rhetoric implies, they
were also moved and moving agents. The “ways” that they both
followed and produced have left traces on the British landscape,
from half-vanished drovers’ roads to the invisible plot lines of
medieval deer parks within which wild fallow deer still live.67

66 Stephen O. Glosecki, “Movable Beasts: The Manifold Implications of Early
Germanic Animal Imagery,” in Animals in the Middle Ages: A Book of Es-
67 Naomi Sykes writes that although deer parks “fell into disrepair” early in the
twentieth century, the “current distribution” of fallow deer “is remarkably
And co-mobility itself is by no means an historical artifact. Human mobility today relocates far more living things than the exotic mammals trafficked by our distant ancestors. Elizabeth Kolbert reports that some “ten thousand different species are being moved around the world just in ballast water” during any twenty-four-hour period, for instance, and that in one summer, tourists and researchers to Antarctica “brought with them more than seventy thousand seeds from other continents.”

Organisms of all kinds have invaded territories where they were not previously known, often producing competition, genetic change, and occasional extinction. “We are,” writes Kolbert, “in effect, reassembling the world into one enormous supercontinent — what biologists sometimes refer to as the New Pangaea.” The effects on particular species are under widespread investigation, but “biotic homogenization” inevitably involves all creatures, including homo sapiens, in a network of change.

If a parallel “cultural homogenization” is taking place, as some maintain, the figurative beasts of the Middle Ages may be among the most successful invading species. Modern bestiaries abound: as of March, 2015, Barnes & Noble offers 379 products titled “bestiary,” including collections of modern and contemporary poems (by Guillaume Apollinaire, Ted Hughes, Elise Paschen, and many others), music albums (a dozen of them, the most recent from the “left-field hip-hop supergroup ‘Hail Mary


69 Ibid., 208.


71 “Cultural homogenization” seems to be used freely without attribution, but scholars associate the phrase and concept with the work of Ernest Gellner, Jürgen Habermas, and Wolfgang Welsch.
Mallon”), an “artist’s guide to creating mythical creatures” (William O’Connor’s Dracopedia: The Bestiary), a self-published cultural commentary (Rori O’Keeffe’s My Little Blue Bestiary, with chapters on “The Fire-Breathing Lesbian” and “The Long-Nosed Neighbor”), and serious studies of animals in a particular culture (Thailand, Siam, or J. R. R. Tolkien’s Middle-earth). There is even a charming Punctuation Bestiary (by Kiran Spees) featuring the Exclamatore and the Punctuation Rabbits. Few of those products appear to be about animals; if they allude to medieval bestiaries at all, they do so under the assumption that those too had little to do with actual beasts. Of course, that assumption is shared by scholars who argue that the existential reality of bestiary animals did not matter: the animals’ role “was to provide metaphors or symbols for a variety of Christian mandates and beliefs.” If that were true, bestiary animals would always have been homogenized by the cultural systems that they invade, perhaps so thoroughly that they would bear little resemblance to biological conspecifics.

I do not know how true that is of the denizens of modern bestiaries. But I can attest that their medieval precursors derive one crucial feature from what can be called the Animal Real: locomotion. Illustrated in action, gesturing through painted borders, bestiary creatures carry diverse significations into multiple texts without regard to genre. As centers of metaphoric interpretation, they precede metaphor and remain demonstrably apart from it. As Lesley Kordecki points out, variant figurae produce “indeterminacy […] that arises out of the knowledge of the verbal game afoot at the very core of the bestiary.”


Glosecki’s intersubjective zoomorphs, literary beasts participate in semiotic networks, but they also pull us out of interpretation altogether, onto the presymbolic terrain that we share with other living creatures.