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The Nonhuman in Literature

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The Marriage of True Minds: Examining the Intersections of Human and Nonhuman Consciousness

Consciousness in literature is, of course, always created consciousness. Writers render minds based on models: their own minds, and the minds they infer and interpret in their fellow humans. Writers, however, have no model for nonhuman consciousness, since they are not nonhumans, and have never entered the mind of a nonhuman. Thus, challenges necessarily arise in the endeavor to represent nonhuman minds in literature. The poems of Elizabeth Bishop and Walt Whitman, when put in conversation with each other, provide valuable material for the examination of the intersections and divergences in representation of human and nonhuman consciousness. Bishop’s “The Man-Moth” and Whitman’s “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking” both feature human and nonhuman creatures whose minds find common ground standing in the light of the moon. By taking the figure of the moon as an external and objective center, Bishop and Whitman are able to explore three key aspects of consciousness: perception, cognition, and emotion. Through parsing the way these aspects of consciousness are represented differentially for the human, animal, and human-animal hybrid, we can identify and assess both the essential differences and the universally shared elements of human and nonhuman minds.

Both Bishop and Whitman seem to imply a precondition for the existence of consciousness in their creatures, both human and nonhuman: those creatures must have a gender.[[1]](#footnote-1) In Whitman’s poem, the speaker calls the bird whose song he records “the he-bird” (28, 50), demonstrating the preeminence of gender by putting the gendered pronoun in the very name used to refer to the bird. Likewise, man is so-called because of his gender, and all male pronouns derive from that quality. What is more interesting, however, is that throughout “The Man-Moth,” Bishop refers to the titlular creature repeatedly with the male gendered pronoun as well. This is immediately salient because, in being a hybrid and entirely fictive creature, one would expect for the Man-Moth a turn away from the same gendered pronouns used for humans and animals. Just as we refer to moths as “it” rather than “he” or “she,” we might expect the Man-Moth to be given a gender neutral, and inhuman, pronoun. The use of a gendered pronoun, however, indicates the perception of an intelligent mind present in the creature: though we refer to insects and vermin as “it,” we more often refer to more evolved animals, like Whitman’s bird, with gendered pronouns, evidence that the presence of a viable consciousness is different from simply *being conscious.[[2]](#footnote-2)* Thus, the Man-Moth’s hybrid nature lends him more mental capacity than a simple moth. However, the Man-Moth’s hybrid nature also gives rise to complications to our ability to understand his consciousness: in being both man and moth, he is *neither* man *nor* moth. It must be questioned therefore whether we can conceive of the Man-Moth as truly hybrid—a true amalgam unable to be dissolved into independent parts—or whether our understanding of the creature is restrained by mutually exclusive categories. For instance, when we read that the Man-Moth “scale[s] the faces of the buildings” (12), do we imagine that he does so—and is thus cognitively motivated to do so—because he is a moth, or do we accept it as a characteristic of the Man-Moth hybrid? When he “get[s] aboard the silent trains” of the subway (26), does he do this as a man, or as the Man-Moth? In other words, can we truly conceive of the mind of the Man-Moth as a new entity altogether, rather than a combination or overlap of existing entities? The ways in which Bishop and Whitman construct the minds of all three creatures helps us toward an answer to these questions.

In both Bishop’s and Whitman’s poems, man and the other creature present are united in their perception of the moon. However, the ways these beings perceive the moon still differ according to their distinct forms of consciousness. In Bishop’s poem, the speaker asserts that while “battered moonlight” (2) pervades the whole of the world above the cement, Man “does not see the moon; he observes only her vast properties, / feeling the queer light on his hands” (6-7). Immediately, the speaker reveals that man’s perception of the moon is indirect. He “does not see” the moon itself, and whether this is due to an inability to see or simply to a neglect to look remains ambiguous. However, Man here does demonstrate a perception of a very subtle stimulus: since one does not generally conceive of the moon as giving off tangible radiation as well as visual, like the sun does—because, as Bishop’s speaker points out, it is “neither warm nor cold”—Man’s perception of the moon in Bishop’s poem may actually take a more sophisticated form in “feeling” something that is much easier to see. Only a few lines down, the speaker asserts that “the moon looks rather different to [the Man-Moth]” (10). Already, there is a difference in perception between Man and the Man-Moth. They employ different senses: Man feels the moon while the Man-Moth sees it. Moreover, the speaker affirms that the Man-Moth “thinks the moon is a small hole at the top of the sky” (13), giving a direct description of the way the moon itself, rather than merely its properties, looks to the Man-Moth. However, the difference in Man’s and the Man-Moth’s perceptions of the moon are not only evident in their manner of perceiving, but in the structural representation of Bishop’s words as well. For Man, Bishop writes, “He does not see the moon; he observes…her…properties” (6). In each of these clauses, the subject (i.e., Man) precedes the verb (i.e., “see” or “observe”), which in turn precedes the object (i.e., “the moon” or “her properties”). This canonical word order is the most basic and common structure in English. For the Man-Moth, contrastingly, Bishop writes, “The moon looks rather different to him” (10), demonstrating a direct inversion of the basic sentence structure. In this representation of the Man-Moth’s perception, the moon, the object being looked *at,* takes the position of the subject, and the Man-Moth takes the position of the object. In the perceptual aspect, Bishop represents the Man-Moth’s consciousness as reverse that of man.

Whitman approaches perception in man and the he-bird differently. His speaker directly expresses how the moon looks to him, describing it as “that yellow half-moon late-risen and swollen as if with tears” (10), and again later as “[t]he yellow half-moon enlarged, sagging down, drooping, the face of the sea almost touching” (135). Whitman’s man pays special attention to the color of the moon, its shape, and its position in the sky, all purely visual traits. Moreover, his visual perception of the moon is quite detailed. The he-bird takes similar notice of the moon. Initially he remarks, “Low hangs the moon, it rose late, / It is lagging—O I think it is heavy with love” (75-76). He later questions the moon directly, “What is that dusky spot in your brown yellow?” (87), and still later notes, “that lagging, yellow, waning moon! / O under that moon where she drops almost down into the sea!” (102-103). The descriptions of Whitman’s man and he-bird are, in fact, remarkably similar. They both note the yellowish color of the moon, though the he-bird seems to perceive something darker and dirtier in it. They both note its position low in the sky, so low in fact that it seems to “almost” touch the sea. More interestingly, though, they both attribute this low position to a perceived fullness and heaviness of the moon—man thinks the moon “sags” and “droops” because it is laden with tears while the he-bird thinks the moon “lags” and “drops” because it is laden with love. The fact that they both project an emotional element onto the moon, as well as the striking similarity of the words used to describe its position (i.e., the rhyme of “sagging” and “lagging,” and the minimal pair of “droop” and “drop”), signals an incredible likeness in the perceptual tendencies of human and animal.

It is also important to compare the perceptions of the he-bird and the Man-Moth. Both creatures perceive the moon visually, forgoing the more sophisticated[[3]](#footnote-3) “feeling” that Bishop’s Man experiences. However, while the he-bird sees the moon for what it is, the Man-Moth, even in looking, mistakes the moon for something it is not: “a small hole at the top of the sky” (13). The he-bird thus seems to have true knowledge and understanding of the moon, while the Man-Moth is deluded. In other words, while both nonhuman creatures *see* the moon, they form different cognitive schemas for “moon” in their minds. Surprisingly, though, it is the animal’s schema that aligns with humans’ schema for “moon” rather than the hybrid creature’s, even though the hybrid has more of man in him and might thus be expected to have a more similar consciousness. Bishop’s and Whitman’s poems demonstrate, therefore, that rather than indicate more similarity to one or both parts of itself, hybridity may in fact create utterly new and anomalous consciousness.

Man, the Man-Moth, and the he-bird are also differentiated with regard to another essential aspect of consciousness: emotion. Interestingly, no attention is paid to the emotional experience of Man in Bishop’s poem at all. There is a reference to him “feeling,” but it is a physical feeling that he experiences, rather than an emotional one.In Whitman’s poem, on the other hand, the speaker gives a direct account of his emotion upon hearing the he-bird’s songs. He declares that he was “ecstatic” (136), and describes “[t]he love in the heart long pent, now loose, now at last tumultuously bursting” (137), and later the “sullen[ness]” (142) of his soul. The he-bird’s song evokes in Whitman’s man the full range of human emotion: first he experiences an overpowering joy, then is sent into a frenzy that is ambiguously valenced (since love can be both painful and pleasant), then experiences a dull sort of gloom.

The Man-Moth’s emotional experience is different. Bishop’s speaker documents the creature’s emotions meticulously throughout his entire journey up from the underground, toward the sky, and back down again: first, he “nervously begins to scale” the buildings (12), he “trembles” (15), “climbs fearfully” (17), and once he achieves the greatest possible height, “falls back scared” (23) and “cannot get aboard the silent trains / fast enough to suit him” (26-27). Bishop is just as explicit about the Man-Moth’s emotional state throughout the poem as Whitman is about man’s. The verb “tremble” is as demonstrative of emotional experience as the adverb “nervously” or the adjective “scared,” if not more so, because it illustrates the intensity of the emotion as well as its quality: the Man-Moth is *so nervous* thathe“trembles.”It is not, however, just that Bishop is explicit about *what* the Man-Moth feels or how intensely, but she attaches a concreteness and specificity of example to the emotion. The Man-Moth is so shaken that hecannot get on the train home fast enough; he is so afraid that he “does not dare look out the window” (35). There is an exactitude in the way emotional experience in the Man-Moth translates to action that goes further than Whitman’s man. Bishop thus indicates a heavily embodied emotional experience for the Man-Moth while Whitman asserts the abstractness of emotion in the mind of man.

For the he-bird, emotional representation is more vague. Whitman uses none of the explicit emotion words in the he-bird’s narrative song that he does for man or that Bishop employs for the Man-Moth. Rather, for the he-bird, emotional experience is signaled by words and phrases that have valenced connotations. For example, take the he-bird’s first song:

*Shine! shine! shine!*

*Pour down your warmth, great sun!*

*While we bask, we two together.*

*…*

*Singing all time, minding no time,*

*While we two keep together.* (32-40)

While there are no explicit emotion words such as “happy” or “content,” or even something adjacent like “good” or “at peace,” the words of the song still illustrate the he-bird’s emotional state. The words “shine,” “warmth,” and “bask” all connote pleasantness, like clement weather. Similarly, “Singing all time, minding no time” (39) indicates a profound sense of satisfaction and ease of mind, reinforced by the idea that these two bird mates remain “together,” secure because of each other’s presence. This emotion changes in the he-bird’s next song, sung after his mate vanishes: “*Blow! blow! blow! / Blow up sea-winds along Paumanok’s shore; / I wait and I wait till you blow my mate to me”* (52-54). The pleasant passivity of the word “shine” has been replaced by the comparative violence of the word “blow,” signaling unrest, and the refrain of “we two together” that suggested settled contentment has been traded for the refrain “I wait,” which indicates anxious anticipation. The he-bird’s emotion shifts again in the next song, after more time passes without his mate’s return:

*Soothe! soothe! soothe!*

*Close on its wave soothes the wave behind,*

*And again another behind embracing and lapping, every one close,*

*But my love soothes not me, not me.* (71-74)

The he-bird’s song this time transforms into a despairing entreaty. His desire to be “soothed” implies inner turmoil and pain, although that emotional state itself is not explicitly pronounced. Whitman thus represents the he-bird’s emotional experience as being communicated implicitly by a subjectively colored perception of the world, and thereby suggests that for animals, emotional experience is perhaps more instinctual than conscious.

However, the awareness of emotional experience is not the only difference between that aspect of human and nonhuman consciousness. The he-bird, though he feels a wide range of emotions (e.g., from happiness to despair), does not seem to experience a range of emotional intensity. All three of his songs, though conveying different emotions, employ the same structure—that is, initial repetition of a single verb three times, punctuated by exclamation points, then several more repetitions of similar words and phrases. This uniformity of structure indicates that the he-bird more or less feels all emotions at the same level of intensity and arousal—a very high one. The Man-Moth differs: while he feels emotions at various levels of intensity (e.g., from low intensity nervousness to a fear so intense he cannot even bring himself to look out the window), he seems to experience a much narrower range of emotional valence. Indeed, nervousness, fear, and agitation are all in the same emotion family. Moreover, the Man-Moth experiences similar emotion in every context: not only is he afraid as he scales the sides of buildings, which is understandable, but he is still afraid as he rides the train home, after the immediate danger has been left behind. Man, Whitman demonstrates, experiences neither of these limitations. He is able to feel both a range of emotional valence—from positive, as embodied in “ecstatic”, to negative, as embodied in “sullen”—and a range of emotional intensity—from high intensity, demonstrated by the “tumultuously bursting” love (137), to low intensity, demonstrated by the dull pervasion of sullenness. Thus, taking the three creatures together, it seems that the human mind is most developed in emotional experience, while the animal mind experiences emotion in a primal sense—intensely, but indiscriminately—and the hybrid mind, in attempting to yoke together two fundamentally disparate entities, is thrown into a perpetual state of emotional crisis.

Yet Bishop’s and Whitman’s exploration of consciousness is not finished: the minds of man, the Man-Moth, and the he-bird are distinguished with regard to their cognitive processes as well. The cognitive processes of Man in Bishop’s poem are straightforwardly represented: “He observes” (6) the moon’s properties, a process that involves not only seeing, but thinking about what is being seen and actively taking note of specific qualities. Furthermore, Man not only feels the light of the moon on him, but thinks about the feeling; he thinks, specifically, that he cannot discern the temperature of the moonlight. Representation of man’s cognitive activity in Whitman’s poem is similarly direct, but somewhat different. Whitman’s speaker characterizes himself as “curious” (30), a quality of the mind that indicates its affinity for knowledge. He also describes himself as “absorbing [and] translating” (31) the he-bird’s song in the moment, “recalling” it (65) years later, and “depositing” (138) the song’s meaning into his soul. His cognitive activities are evidently quite diverse.

The structural representation of the Man-Moth’s cognitive processes is similar to those of both Bishop’s Man and Whitman’s man. The Man-Moth’s cognitive processes are also presented straightforwardly in structure: just as Man “observes” the moon’s properties, the Man-Moth “thinks” the moon is a hole (13)—both of these structures exhibit simple canonical word order. Additionally, just as Man thinks about being unable to discern the temperature of moonlight, the Man-Moth thinks about being unable to discern the speed at which his train moves (31). Most interestingly, however, is Bishop’s representation of the Man-Moth as “sly” (45), a word that comments on his cognitive capacity in much the same way that “curious” comments on that of Whitman’s man. Still, the Man-Moth’s cognitive processes are distinguished from those of man in structure as well. In Whitman’s poem, man’s cognitive action-states are all ongoing: “absorb*ing,*” “translat*ing,*” “recall*ing,*” “deposit*ing.*” The repetition of the present participles indicates the perpetuity of these cognitive actions—they are always in progress, continuing to happen, but not having happen*ed*—and thus speaks to a richness of man’s mental life: some cognitive work is always being done. By contrast, the cognition of the Man-Moth is marked by simple present tense verbs: he “thinks” the moon is a hole (13), “calls” the cement underground his home (25), “cannot tell” his traveling speed (31), and “regards [the third rail] as a disease” (37). These simple present tense verbs inherently demarcate a finite duration for these actions; they begin at some point and end at some point. This perhaps indicates a more stunted mental life of the Man-Moth, or at least, that his cognitive activity occurs at intervals.

Yet Bishop troubles this conclusion in the poem’s third stanza. In describing the Man-Moth’s objective, she asserts, “[H]e climbs fearfully, *thinking[[4]](#footnote-4) that* this time he will manage / to push his small head through that round clean opening / and be forced through, as from a tube, in black scrolls on the light” (18-20). This entire description is rich with detail and imagery, and even includes an analogy. If we take everything after the phrase “thinking that” as the thought itself—this being the structure of indirect discourse or psychonarration—then the imagery and analogy are the Man-Moth’s rather than the speaker’s.[[5]](#footnote-5) If the Man-Moth’s thought were to be reconstructed as direct discourse,[[6]](#footnote-6) the fact that the imagery and analogy are his own would become more evident. It would read, “He climbs fearfully, thinking, ‘This time I will manage to push my small head through the round clean opening and be forced through, as from a tube, in black scrolls on the light!’” This formulation of analogy and figurative image is a very sophisticated level of cognition, and for the Man-Moth to exhibit it, while neither Bishop’s nor Whitman’s man does, suggests a rich mental life of the Man-Moth and may even indicate that his mind, in its hybrid nature, has surpassed humanity.

However, this is a not conclusion we can rely on either, Bishop asserts, complicating matters again. We must remember that the Man-Moth is utterly deluded in this mission of pushing himself through the moon, which he believes is a hole. She asserts, “Man, standing below him, has no such illusions” (21). Her statement seems to be an indictment of the Man-Moth’s folly and a celebration of Man’s resistance to such deception, which demonstrates mental fortitude. Although, perhaps it is the case that Man is not deluded merely because he “does not see the moon” at all, and thus can have no illusions about something he has no sight of. The Man-Moth is deluded, but he at least employs vision. It is possible, then, that in being deluded, the Man-Moth is mentally freed to have a more creative and flexible cognitive life. Bishop refuses to definitively uphold one or the other possibility.

Whitman joins the conversation with a similarly ambivalent stance. For the he-bird, he represents cognitive structures less frequently altogether; instead, the he-bird’s narrative is characterized largely by emotional and perceptual content. However, when the he-bird does engage in cognition, it is less overtly cued—there is only one instance of the word “think” in the he-bird’s song, and no evaluation of his intelligence or cognitive capacity as implied in the words “curious” and “sly.” The only explicit demonstration of cognitive activity in the he-bird comes when he observes the moon’s low-hanging position: “*O I think it is heavy with love*” (76). In this moment, the he-bird combines visual observation of the moon with deductive reasoning to infer the explanation for its lowness. Cognitive activity in the rest of the he-bird’s song is less straightforward. At one instance, the he-bird declares, “*I am almost sure I see her dimly whichever way I look”* (92), and at another he notes, “*For somewhere I believe I heard my mate responding”* (108). While it may initially appear that these vague statements signal a deficiency in cognitive capacity, Whitman in fact represents more complex mental structures with phrases like “ am almost sure” and “believe.” “To be sure” is a complicated cognitive action-state: it is not merely *to have a thought*,[[7]](#footnote-7) but rather, to have a thought *about a thought*.[[8]](#footnote-8) The same is true of the cognitive action-state “to believe”: to hold a belief is likewise to have a thought about another thought.[[9]](#footnote-9) Moreover, the already complex mental states of belief and certainty are tied up in a variety of subliminal factors such as instinctive emotion: if you ask someone to explain why they believe in God, for instance, they may find it difficult to tell you, and ultimately may resort to a phrase like, “I just do.” It is nearly impossible to tease apart all of the social, biological, and emotional influences that go into constructing a belief, which is still at its core a cognitive action-state. The fact that the he-bird exhibits these incredibly complex cognitive structures subverts the assumption we might be inclined to make that animal consciousness is inherently less sophisticated.

Indeed, Whitman and Bishop together demonstrate that the issue is not easily resolved simply by saying the minds of nonhumans are crude and underdeveloped while the minds of men are sophisticated and evolved. The nuance with which they represent the minds of their human and nonhuman creatures undermines that presumption. Animals, like Whitman’s he-bird, may have intensely emotional interiors as well as moments of cognitive complexity, while men may at times fail to live up to their acumen. Indeed, animal consciousness and human consciousness overlap and intersect rather intricately, and the hybrid Man-Moth, in his ability to travel across categories, if not transcend them, offers important insight into these intersections and divergences of human and nonhuman consciousness. In humanizing the animal, Bishop’s Man-Moth also animalizes man. Consider his entire nighttime mission to reach the moon: we can read it as the primal evolutionary drive to be close to the light literally;[[10]](#footnote-10) but we can also read it as the self-actualizing aspiration to be close to the light metaphorically[[11]](#footnote-11)—to reach his highest potential, to be enlightened. The nature of a truly hybrid mind requires both readings simultaneously, and reveals that perhaps these two motivations—the evolutionary and that of self-actualization, or, the nonhuman and the human—though ostensibly different, find common ground. Though we still cannot inhabit nonhuman minds, the hybrid may provide the key to examining nonhuman consciousness through the lens of the human mind. Just as importantly, though, it may also be the key to looking back into the human mind through the lens of the nonhuman.

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1. Gender, of course, is a quality that is highly contended today; gender-identity is different from biological sex, and one is thought to be socially constructed while the other can be taken more objectively. However, the difficulty many people face in accepting an individual’s existence as gender-neutral evidences the fundamentality of gender in the perception of intelligent minds. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Compare, for example, in Octavia Butler’s *Dawn,* the alien race has three genders: male, female, and Ooloi, a kind of genderless being. Though, because it is genderless, it is be incorrect to refer to Ooloi as anything other than “it,” some of the humans in the book insist on calling them “he,” an indication of the difficulty to separate the perception of an intelligent mind from gender. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ironically, touch is actually a more primal sense than vision. It is only the fact that Man employs it to sense something that is more easily seen that in this case makes it sophisticated. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. While this would appear to undermine my previous claim that there are no present participles in the Man-Moth’s cognitive structure, this is in fact different: this “thinking” is not indefinite like in man, but rather bound in space and time by the act of climbing. It is as though the line reads, “he climbs fearfully *while* thinking” or commutatively, “he thinks, *while* climbing, that…”, the “while” indicating that when one stops (i.e., the climbing), so does the other (i.e., the thinking). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Dorrit Cohn refers to the narrative mode “indirect discourse” as “psychonarration”: “the narrator’s discourse about a character’s consciousness” marked by overtly demonstrative words signaling mental action (i.e., “he thinks that…”). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Or for Cohn, “quoted monologue.” [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The thought, in this case, is that the he-bird sees his mate; thus, “I think I see her.” [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. The thought *about* the thought, in this case, is that the first thought (i.e., “I see her”) is correct, or almost correct; thus, “I think it is correct that I think I see her.” Even the confusing syntax of this sentence evidences the complexity of the cognitive action-state “to be sure.” [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. For the he-bird to say “I believe I heard my mate responding” is to say “I think it is true that I think I heard her.” [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Moths and several other species of insects are positively phototactic, meaning they are biologically inclined toward light. A cockroach, by contrast, is negatively phototactic, tending to scurry into the shadows when a light is pointed at it. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. For examples of “the light” as a metaphor for goodness, truth, and all things righteous, we need not look any further than the Bible itself: in 1 Peter 2:9, Peter addresses believers, “You are a chosen people…a people for God’s own possession, to proclaim the virtues of Him who hath called you out of darkness into His marvelous light.” [↑](#footnote-ref-11)