

Gumilev and his World of Animals

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In a 1906 letter to Briusov (Gumilev, *Neizdannoe i nesobrannoe* 93), Gumilev confessed that "in winter I write less and with less power than normally". This lack of inspiration is understandable in a poet who had no desire to write of the mists, yellow street lamps or dusty side-streets of St Petersburg. Why not escape the grey, winter fogs, sailing from the port of "Piter" to visit warm climates, where such animals live about whom bright vivid poems might be written?

In the fall of 1910, Gumilev sailed to Africa, only three months after his marriage to Anna Akhmatova, and spent 6 months there, travelling between several different countries of north-east Africa, on extremely insignificant funds. He even had to stow away on part of his journey (Sampson 94). Several years later he returned to Abyssinia as a geographer for the Academy of Sciences. However, at the time of the publication of his collection "*Romantic Flowers*" in 1908, it was obvious that already 2 years before his first trip to Africa, he had made an escape of the imagination to exotic countries. This collection includes the majority of his poetry about tropical and exotic animals. These poems describe animals which live in the exotic world of Gumilev's imagination and which did not always correspond to their counterparts on the African continent. It is most likely that he had never seen a giraffe before he wrote the first poem in Russian literature about this animal in 1906; otherwise he would not have described the way a giraffe runs as "smooth as the joyous flight of a bird" (Gumilev, *Sobranie socinenii* I: 78).¹ Fortunately, details of reality did not hinder Gumilev in describing a whole series of tropical and semi-mythical creatures which lived in his own fantasy world. The poems about animals which he wrote after his return from many trips to Africa differ little in content from the poems in the cycle *Romantic Flowers* written before his first visit there.

This paper examines poems by Gumilev with the name of an animal as the title, only a few of which have been translated into English. Three themes will be addressed: the animals and their world, the role of people in the world of animals, and the strong influence of dream and magic in the poems.

HIS ANIMALS AND THEIR WORLD

Gumilev didn't write about the domestic or wild animals of Russia, but about the rhinoceros, kangaroo, leopard, crocodile and serpent. Only the poem "Rat" (I:48) is about a local animal. Almost all the others live in distant places, either on the shores of Lake Chad (I:78), in the Javan jungles (like the hippopotamus) or on the banks of the River Nile (like the crocodile and hyena), while his rhino lives in uninhabited jungles, all places far away, romantic and inaccessible to his readers. True, his elephant (2:47) was born in a zoo in Berlin, but only his rat lives in Russia, in the semi-darkness of a nursery. Strangely enough for one of the Acmeist poets, the most popular dwelling is in the dreams of the lyric hero, or in some secret supernatural spot. The peacock and serpent (I:49) wait at the portals of some heavenly gates, guarded by angels. The leopard is occupied with black magic in the room of the hunter who has just killed him (2:54). The eagle (I:112) flies from the wizard's lair through starry portals to a sky of azure perfection.

Each of his poems is named for an animal, but quite frequently the physical characteristics of the animal are given only in a brief but compressed phrase which bears the essence of its character. The rat's eyes "burn with joy and malice, like little coals":

Preening his prickly whiskers,
In the reddish reflection of the lamp
He looks about. (I:48)

The baby elephant "stomps on padded feet around the zoo-keeper's room" (2:47). The animals rejoice in their appearance. One line about the eagle: "he luxuriated in his brown feathers" (I:112) gives the impression of a proud and beautiful creature. The hyena exults, "Look all of you, see how my fur stands on end, how my glance fires evil flames" (I:67). Only "Giraffe" has two whole verses devoted to external appearance:

Listen: far, far away, on the shores of Lake Chad
An exquisite giraffe is strolling.

He is graced with delicate elegance and voluptuousness
And his coat is charmed with a magical design
Such as only the moon may dare to emulate
Splitting and wavering the waters of wide lakes.

In the distance he looks like the colored sails of a ship
And his running is smooth, like the joyous flight of a bird. (I:78)

But usually, physical description is insignificant in quantity, yet evocative of color, as for example the crocodile who "glitters his emerald scales on the silvered deck of the ship" (I:86).

The reader receives the impression of a tropical garden from expressions like:

"where only birds and butterflies flutter" ("Hyena")
"with a wild cry onto the lianas" ("Rhino")
"the wind runs East with the scent of honey and verbena" ("Leopard")
"About slender palm trees, about the scent of unimaginable herbs"
("Giraffe").

Gumilev impartially apportioned his animals to a variety of countries with exotic names but with little regard to the animal's actual habitat. The poem "Hippopotamus" (I:194) contains various animals from different continents who supposedly live in the Javan swamps:

A Hippopotamus with an enormous belly
Lives in the Javan swamps;
And in every hole monsters groan hollowly
Like those of nightmarish dreams.

The Boa hisses, slipping over the slopes,
The Tiger snarls threateningly
And the powerful Buffalo snorts (I:194)

All these animals are fine specimens. Few are described as having a negative trait. Even apparently repulsive creatures are described with expressions of delighted malice, as the animals take pleasure in their adverse effect on humans: the rat's eyes burn with joy and malice when it sees that the child in the nursery is alone. The bird with steel-like talons hovers over a cowering human in prayer (I:230). The hyena rejoices that her effect is like that of a wicked tsaritsa:

Is it not so, am I not a tsaritsa
Like she who sleeps beneath these stones.

Her heart beat full of treachery
Her curved brows dealt death
She was a hyena,
Like I, she loved the scent of blood.

Dogs run howling in terror around the villages
Little children sob in the houses. (I:67)

PEOPLE IN THE WORLD OF ANIMALS

Climate plays a significant role in many of the poems. It seems that these animals live in a secret country where rosy mists blow, where slender palms grow, and particularly, where it never rains. The animal world always has perfect weather conditions, while the opposite holds true for Gumilev's human characters. The animals live in desert-like places where the sun is always shining, while humans live in a rainy country. The humans have grey fogs, while the animals have pink mists.

In "Giraffe," the light and colorful world of the giraffe is contrasted with the sorrowful surroundings of the passive woman who has "breathed too long the heavy fogs" and no longer wants to believe in mysterious lands:

I know cheerful stories about mysterious lands,
About dusky maidens, about a young chief's passion.
But you've been breathing heavy fog for too long,
You don't want to believe in anything except rain" (I:78)

The hero of "Rhinoceros" who fortunately does believe in the "other world" needs only to focus his thoughts on it for invisible sailing ships to carry him from his everyday world to the world of "pink mists" (I:77). The "scent of honey and verbena wafts from the Leopard's own country", yet he is condemned to breathe the "damp air in the country of his killer", until the hunter is obliged to end his own life by the "well of the Giraffe" (2:54).

If not the sun, then the moon is shining, for the action of these poems frequently takes place at night:

The nocturnal gloaming spreads its illusions,
The moon rises, like a sinful siren
White mists stream
And out of its cave steals the hyena. (I:67)

In "Hyena", an atmosphere of illusion and mystery are created through the image of the moon: "Look, O Moon, lover of Madmen". In the twilight, when the nocturnal gloaming spreads its deceits, fantastic creatures come out. The hyena steals from its lair, and the rat creeps

out of its cupboard. Gumilev is a nocturnal poet in describing his animals. The reality of the real world begins to seep through at dawn. When dawn breaks, such creatures as the peacock and serpent vanish:

What can we do in the bleached morning light?
Peacock and Serpent are alien to Man
See they disperse in the mist
And we see them no more. (1:49)

Every one of Gumilev's poems about an animal contains a person. The human element introduces negative emotions which do not exist among the animals. People, especially women, are often sad, fall into depression, are always looking for something else, not content with what is. The narrator of the poem "Giraffe" talks about the animal to distracting the sorrowing woman, who is grieving and weeping but still does not want to hear happy stories about secret worlds. The poet applies adjectives to the giraffe ("elegant, slender, graceful, voluptuous") which he might well have used of the woman, had her mood been more to his liking; but she is sorrowing, so the animal becomes the subject of "happy stories". In "The Rat", the scared child hides in the bed, while he mother and nurse negligently ignore her:

The rat looks about: Is there a little girl in that little bed,
A little girl with big, big eyes?

"Mommy, Mommy!" But mommy has guests
And Nanny Vasilisa is laughing in the kitchen
And the rat's little eyes burn with joy and malice
Like little coals. (1:48)

Gumilev did not write about animals to proclaim their beauty or as a triumph of their glory as the English poet Blake did in "Tiger", but rather to compare the color and exotic quality of the animal world with the depression and greyness of the human one. Gumilev did not write poetry about a certain giraffe whom he had seen one time in Africa, but about an architypal giraffe. Each animal appears to be perfection of its type. The animals appear to recognise and value their perfection. They suffer no angst, they know their place and fulfill the role appointed to them, knowing neither sin or doubt.

Only those animals whom humans have in some way harmed do not appear in triumphal form. The elephant ought to be like "that magnificent beast who once carried Hannibal to trembling Rome". Instead he

is condemned to spend his life in a cage while salesmen blow smoke up his trunk and snigger:

Don't cry, my sweet, that in a cramped cage
He'll become the laughing stock of mobs!
Salesmen will blow cigar smoke up his trunk
While their girls laugh them on.

Don't imagine, my dear, that the day will come,
When he will go beserk and break his chains,
And charge through the streets
Crushing howling people like a bus.

No, rather dream of him early morning
In brocade and ostrich feathers.
Like that Magnificent Beast who once
Carried Hannibal to trembling Rome." (2:47).

The parrot from the romantic Antilles Isles also lives in a wizard's cage with only memories of his native sun:

I dream of a ship in a quiet cove
I remember the sun; and in vain
I strive to forget that mystery is ugly (1:130).

When humans find themselves away from their own world, they are often disadvantaged by animals. The rhinoceros unexpectedly appears in the forest glade, and the hunter cannot save himself from death (1:77). The little girl has nowhere to hide from the wicked rat. The hunter in "Leopard" did not have the strength to fight with the leopard because he had forgotten to singe the leopard's whiskers after killing him, in accordance with the Abyssinian belief cited in the epigraph to the poem. When people come into conflict with animals in the animal's world, it is always the animals who are the victors.

Sometimes animals act as agents of the poet's caprice. In fact, several of the animal poems are concerned not with the animal but with their relationship to real or imagined people. The imprisoned baby elephant represents the poet's love for a woman:

My love for you now is a baby elephant,
Born in Berlin or Paris
Stomping with padded feet

Around the zoo-keeper's rooms. (2:47)

Animals may be presented as a means of clarifying the emotions of the human. The girl in "Kangaroo" (I:128) experiences as yet unclear desires (the poem is also called "Morning of a Maiden"). She wakes after a night when:

Sleep did not refresh me last night.
I woke up early in the morning
And set out, breathing fresh air,
To see the tame kangaroo.

He tore off bundles of resinous needles
Stupidly, and chewed them for some reason,
And comically, comically jumped towards me
And still more comically called out.

Her undefined feelings are expressed in her relations with the kangaroo, which can caress only clumsily, yet still needs love as the girl does. The dreams of the night are transformed into daydreams when the girl sits moping on a bench:

Why does he not come, that distant, unknown one
He alone, whom I love.

The lack of coordination of the kangaroo gives a pretext for the theme of the awakening of the young girl who become conscious of her desire to love and be loved, yet still feels herself awkward as the kangaroo is awkward:

He has such clumsy caresses,
But I love to stroke him,
So that his little brown eyes
Light up for a moment in triumph.

The comparison of girl and kangaroo is expressed clearly through the image of leaves as thoughts:

Thoughts are laid out so distinctly
Like shadows of leaves in the the morning.
I want to caress someone
As the kangaroo caressed me.

Gumilev wrote to Briusov (Gumilev, *Neizdannoe i nesobrannoe* 108): "Incidentally, 'Rhinoceros' will be called 'Meeting death'". The characters of the poem are an animal, the rhinoceros, and a man who is in love with "the world beyond". A third person describes the scene to this man "You see monkeys flash by" (I:77) and tells him that death is coming close "from your forest glade an infuriated rhino..." In the poem, the rhino acts only as the agent of the man's death. The third person gives instructions on how to meet death ("Raise your hands high in a song of happiness and separation") in such a way that the man can pass through to the country of rosy mists:

Keep your eyes fixed in the rosy mists
Your thought carried away
And from promised lands
Invisible rigged ships
Will come sailing up for you.

In the poem "Hippo" (a translation of a work by Théophile Gautier called "L'Hippopotame"), the powerful and invulnerable figure of the animal is an example to the man who also desires such qualities (Gautier 207). The huge-bellied hippo fears nothing. No weapons can harm him:

Neither shots nor sharp assegai —
He's not afraid of anything
And the sepoi's well-aimed bullets
Slide off his armour. (1:194)

The hero compares himself to the fearless hippo as to some marvellous knight at arms:

And I am a kind of hippopotamus
Dressed in the armour of my sacred places
I go triumphantly forward
Fearless in the middle of desert places.

This comparison is not only with the physical characteristics of the hippo. There are hints at the magic strength of "my sacred places" which can protect him as the hide of the hippo protects it from bullets, arrows, and sharp assegai. Yet the geographical location of the poem is indeterminate. "Sepoi" and "desert places" would indicate an Indian

hippo, "assegai" an African, although the first verse of the poem locates the hippo in "Javan swamps".

WITCHCRAFT

In each one of the animal poems, people and animals interact. This interaction frequently takes the form of enchantment — either the bewitching of man by animal or vice versa. The parrot from the Antilles Isles is bewitched by the wizard. In "Bird" (I:230), the threatening bird stands over the praying man, not bewitching him, but rather distracting him from prayer:

I don't dare to pray any more
I've forgotten the words of the litany
Above me is a threatening bird
And its eyes are fires.

Now I see steel talons
Curved over me
Like river streams trembling
Lit up by the moon. (1: 230)

He realizes that the bird is a representative of the other world, but is unsure in what capacity it is there, and he is afraid. The suspicion that it may be the dove of the Lord does not comfort him at all. In many of the animal poems, the terror of death is described, as here, in a way which includes an element of farce:

What if it's the dove of the Holy Spirit
Flown in to say: Your time has come?
But then why is it so unlike
The doves in our gardens?

In the poem "Jaguar" (1: 72), the elements of witchcraft and transformation prevail as the man is changed in his sleep into a jaguar and, experiencing the same desires as the animal, wanders the fields at night searching for prey:

Today I dreamed a strange dream,
I saw in my dream that I twinkled in the sky,
But that life, that monstrous pimp,

Had dealt me a bad hand.

Suddenly I was changed into a jaguar,
I burned with wild desires,
My heart — a flame of thunderous fire
My muscles — a craze of shuddering.

And I crept towards the dwellings of humans,
Through the deserted twilight field,
To earn my midnight meal
My allotted portion from the Lord.

There he meets with the girl with whom he is already in love. She bewitches him with the words "Don't move from this spot". Then she "quietly and lovingly" watches while wild dogs tear him to pieces:

I kept silent, submissive to her call
I lay shackled by her sign,
And became the quarry like a jackal,
Of savage dogs who came running.

Another femme fatale plays a role in "Leopard" and also does not act to save the hero from destruction by the animal. The hunter, already bewitched by the spirit of the leopard, is waiting in his room while:

People come and go
And the last to leave is she
For whom golden darkness
Courses through my veins. (2: 54)

The spirit of the leopard enters the man's world to pursue the hunter who has killed him.

The "Lion's Bride" (1: 72) continues the theme of the animal as agent of vengeance. A girl who has been condemned to death must go into the desert to meet the lion who will kill her. The action proceeds like a heroic epic without any element of tragedy. The lion is called not an animal but a Sun-Beast, Prince, a Golden Bridegroom. He isn't an executioner but a handsome god who awaits her in the "paradise steppe":

The priest decreed. The people agreed
To put my mother to death.

The desert lion, a handsome god,
Awaits me in the paradise steppe.

The girl, "the lion's bride", dresses in a "scarlet belt of amber and of pearl". The triumphant atmosphere is created through images of the exotic and of marriage:

May I quiver in your heavy paws
Fall and never rise again,
May I breathe that dreadful breath
As dark, as drunken, as love.

The grasses are scented, like incense,
I am quiet, like a bride,
And over me the blood-filled gaze
Of the golden bridegroom. (1:77)

DREAM AND MAGIC

Gumilev said that "poetry must hypnotise" (4:247). In his animal poems he does this through images of fantasy, fairy tale and enchantment. Both the very earliest verses in the collection "*Romantic Flowers*" and the last ones of "*Pillar of Fire*" are full of words of magic and spell-binding. On examination of the earliest poem "Giraffe" and the latest "Leopard", one is confronted with the signs and symbols of dream, hinting at the control of this world by magic and mystery, even by occult powers. If the action of the poem does not take place in dream, then it often takes place in the imagination of the hero, and never (with the exception of "Rat") in the real world.

According to an Abyssinian belief, the spirit of a slain leopard will come back to haunt its hunter unless its whiskers have been singed. Such a slaughtered leopard torments the hero-hunter of the poem "Leopard" with spells and prophecies. The leopard lives in his room, purrs by his bed and surrounds him with an atmosphere of hostile occult power:

Casting spells and telling fortunes,
Deep in the night stillness
The leopard I slew
Is busy in my room

It's late. The mice pipe up,
The house spirit wheezes hoarsely,
The leopard I slew
Purrs beside my bed. (2:54)

The scent and atmosphere of the alien animal world invade the human's world and draw him powerfully towards it. The leopard affirms that:

No, you, my slayer, must
Die in my land
So I may be born again
To a leopard's clan

Finally the leopard overpowers him, and the hero surrenders. He no longer has strength to fight:

Must I listen to this
Sly summons till dawn
Alas, I didn't pay heed
I didn't singe his whiskers.

Now it's too late. The Evil Power
Has overcome and is coming closer.
Now a hand like copper
Squeezes my head.

Overcome by occult power, he decides to return to the leopard's world and die there:

He neither knows nor cares
What my soul may take pride in,
Yet he will cast my soul
He himself knows not where.

I have no strength to fight.
I am calm, I stand,
I will finish with my life
By the giraffe's well.

The most interesting encounters and transformations take place in dream, or directly before sleep (the bird persecutes the man who is

praying before sleep), or after sleep (the girl with the kangaroo). Man, transformed in sleep into a jaguar, meets death. The eagle also dies but:

Without knowing decay, he flew ahead
And looked at the stars with dead eyes
And was changed into a constellation. (1: 112)

Dreams change those who see them. Dream and magic combine, because within dream, the reality of our present world no longer exists. We enter another world where animals possess more influence, either because they use occult powers like the leopard, or because they act as agents of those powers like the bird and hippo, or as simple symbols of charm and enchantment like the giraffe, serpent and peacock. People are wary of such apparitions, knowing they are alien to them. People are entrapped in present time, like the woman in "Giraffe". They know that time controls them and they fear:

We tremble like little children
The ravages of time frighten us.
We will go to pray at dawn
In friendly marble grottos. (1:49)

Only those "in love with the beyond" like the man in "Rhino" are able to escape from the gray reality of time into the country of wonders. Magic leads the believer from present time into the sphere of mystery where time no longer exists.

Surprisingly, Gumilev uses symbols just as frequently as the symbolists who preceded him (and from whom, as one of the founders of the Acmeist movement, he claimed to depart). It might seem that the use of dream in the animal poems is the essence of the poetry of Gumilev. Beginning in dream, he proceeds through symbols into the real world. He does not use real images as symbols of mystery. The locus of such poems as "Leopard", "Dawn", "Hippo" and "Rhino" — is dream. He created poetry from dream and symbols which sometimes, but not always, were transported from dream into the real world. In dream, many humans were thought to possess occult strength with which they were able to force animals to fulfill their whims. In "Jaguar", a "tender maid" stops the jaguar with the words "Don't move," then stands by while wild dogs, obedient to her, tear him apart. In "Lions Bride", the avenging agent is the priest who appears as a desert lion, waiting in the paradise steppe to execute a death sentence.

Gumilev was continually searching for a heavenly country without tears, a sunny country without the complications and disenchantments of everyday life. This was not only an exotic colorful country where elegant giraffes wandered and where serpents and crocodiles shone wondrously, but also a country where the lyric hero met death in its many terrible forms ("Rhino", "Jaguar", "Lion's Bride") bravely. Gumilev did not want to live in an ordinary world, nor to subordinate himself to the commonplace. He was drawn to heroism, heroic feats, romance. Through travels in Africa and through his verses on fantastic animals and brave powerful heroes, he entered this country. In a late poem, not about animals but about trees, he expressed his longing for such a country, but recognised that such perfection is not given to men:

I know that to trees not to men
Is given the majesty of a perfect life.
Here on the caressing earth, sister to the stars,
We live in exile — they in their homeland.

O could I but find that country
In which I may neither weep nor sing
But silently rise to the heights
Through uncountable generations. Trees (3:282)

But like the elephant and the parrot, confined in cages, the poet was confined within the cage of boring reality where he strove toward the sun and wonderland.

● NOTES

¹ All subsequent references to Gumilev, *Sobranie Sochinenii*, will be indicated in parentheses by volume and page number only. All quotations from Gumilev's *Sobranie Sochinenii* are translated by the author of this paper.

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Calderón's Snakes: Emblems, Lore and Imagery

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¿Qué sierpe astuta sus viboreznos no cría con
cariño y con blandura, pareciéndole que son, lle-
nos de escamas y artugas, más hermosas que las
aves, que ramilletes de plumas, cuando ellos la
tierra arrastran, esotras el aire surcan?

(*Fortunas de Andrómeda y Perseo, Obras com-
pletas 2: 1675*)

Serpentine imagery abounds in Spanish Golden Age literature. The snake, in all of its manifestations, was imbued with rich and varied nuances doubtless familiar to its intended audience. The confluence of Biblical, classical and mythological traditions, along with the pseudoscience of natural history, offered the creative writer a panoply of evocative associations that could be invoked by the mere mention of a given reptile. James Hall, in *Diccionario de temas y símbolos artísticos*, details many of the symbolic properties of the serpent, especially in iconographic representation, and summarizes its contrary depictions as: "Símbolo del mal y sinónimo bíblico de Satanás, 'la serpiente antigua'. Pero la serpiente significaba también la fertilidad, la sabiduría y el poder de curar, y formaba parte de los ritos religiosos de los pueblos primitivos" (283). In *Diccionario de iconografía*, Federico Revilla adds: "El simbolismo de la serpiente tiene un número desconcertante de valencias, pero todos sus símbolos convergen hacia una misma idea central: es inmortal porque se regenera; por tanto, es una 'fuerza' de la luna, y en cuanto tal dispensa fecundidad, ciencia (profecía) e incluso inmortalidad" (337). Calderón de la Barca is but one of many Golden Age playwrights who availed themselves of visually striking snake imagery to enhance poetic metaphors. Indeed, rare is the Calderón play without frequent evocation of snakes and the lore associated with them. Calderón's snakes come in many varieties: *culebras*, *áspides*, *víboras*, *hidras*, *sierpes* and *serpientes*. The dramatist's predilection for serpentine imagery is a logical consequence of his interest in all facets