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# Roubaud's Circus: Playing with Words and Animals in Les animaux de tout le monde

Miranda R. Mueller

*University of Connecticut*, [mueller.miranda@gmail.com](mailto:mueller.miranda@gmail.com)

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Roubaud's Circus: Playing with Words and Animals in *Les animaux de  
tout le monde*

Miranda Mueller

B.A., University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2010

A Thesis

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# APPROVAL PAGE

Masters of Arts Thesis

Roubaud's Circus: Playing with Words and Animals in *Les animaux de  
tout le monde*

Presented by

Miranda Mueller, B.A.

Major Advisor \_\_\_\_\_  
Anne Berthelot

Associate Advisor \_\_\_\_\_  
Eliane Dalmolin

Associate Advisor \_\_\_\_\_  
Roger Celestin

Associate Advisor \_\_\_\_\_  
Anne Simon

University of Connecticut

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*To Julie Mueller, my mother, the strongest and most positive woman I know*

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>ACKNOWLEDGMENTS</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>THE OPENING PARADE</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>THE MENAGERIE</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>THE NONSENSICAL RINGMASTER</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>THE PHILOSOPHICAL CIRCUS</b>	<b>26</b>
<b>CONTORTIONISM</b>	<b>33</b>
<b>VENTRILOQUISM</b>	<b>41</b>
<b>THE CLOSING CEREMONY</b>	<b>48</b>
<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY</b>	<b>53</b>

## The Opening Parade

“Certes, l’animal est pris dans la nasse de son espace-temps propre, mais il y a toujours une ouverture, les systèmes – comme l’évolution en répond – ne sont pas fermés...”

-Jean-Christophe Bailly, *Le versant animal*, 98

Must we conceive of a wall of difference between men and animals as a hard, concrete and immovable structure or, as philosopher Jean-Christophe Bailly suggests, can we imagine the separation between the two systems as flexible with openings that allow the definition of the individual to pass from one side to the other? What if this dividing structure were malleable in nature and circular in shape, resembling a canvas wall with openings and passageways leading to a playful circus-like animal kingdom inside?

In his collection entitled *Les animaux de tout le monde* (1983) Oulipien Jacques Roubaud breaks the constraints of an ideologically concrete structure of separation and leaps into this metaphorical circus tent. It is precisely this extraordinary poetic circus that we intend to explore in this thesis, a playful and spectacular space that humans share with animals.

While Roubaud’s text may embody a circus-like atmosphere, it is in no sense a typical three-ring act with traditional circus animals. Roubaud’s one- to two-page poems, loosely based on the sonnet, replace the ferocious tiger and the dancing bear of the original circuses with a confused platypus and a greedy octopus; moths and germs, who are normally not welcome under the tent, are graciously invited to join the poet’s circus act as he dedicates a sonnet to each. Still other poems are dedicated to such untraditional animals as the otter, the koala, the unicorn, the peacock, the doe, and the armadillo. Unlike his contemporaries, Roubaud plays the role of a



charming, quirky poet-ringmaster that calculatedly versifies nontraditional animals' acts as they glide, toboggan, sing, swing, cry, buccaneer, fight, and primp solely for the spectator's delight.

Roubaud's carnivalesque collection is exceptional not only in its original descriptions of the creatures, but also in that this text is the first contemporary book of poetry dedicated entirely to animals. It is followed only by its sister text *Les animaux de personne* (1992), which Roubaud dedicates to endangered or lesser-known animal species.

Despite the collection's incredible uniqueness, to this day, critics have preferred to focus on the poet's significant contribution to the *Ouvroir de littérature potentielle*, better known as the Oulipo, along with his more serious autobiographical works such as *Le Grand Incendie de Londres* (1989) and *Quelque chose noir* (1986).

However, due to the rising popularity of animal studies in the field literary criticism, there have been two significant articles published about Roubaud's animal collections: "L'ironie animal: Apollinaire, Queneau, Roubaud" by Jacques Neefs and "Nobody's Animals: Language, Limits, and Forms of Life in Queneau and Roubaud" by Allison James, both found in the first issue of *Contemporary French & Francophone Studies: Sites*' two-issue series dedicated to the theme "Human-Animal." These articles elucidate the way in which Roubaud's texts, contrary to the uneasy tone of his contemporaries, create a ludic world that embraces the metaphoric circus inside the canvas wall of separation and fosters a complicity and a closeness between words, humans, and animals.

While James' and Neefs' pioneering discussions hint at the poet's relationship with animals vis-à-vis literary and philosophical tradition, this thesis aims to detail this pertinent relationship by exploring the collection's influences from previous genres as well as its

manifestation of new philosophical and biological ideas that imagine Men and Animals as near-equal, or equally present beings, sharing the world in their own rights.

This thesis will outline the poetic and philosophical implications of shared spaces in *Les animaux de tout le monde* in five circus-themed chapters: The Menagerie, The Nonsensical Ringmaster, The Philosophical Circus, The Contortionist, and the Ventriloquist.

Inspired by the outdoor menageries that served as precursors to contemporary animals acts, the first chapter will pull on this metaphor to discuss how *Les animaux de tout le monde* employs tools formed by previous literary collections of animals such as the Medieval bestiaries and La Fontaine's *Fables* centuries ago. It will discuss how the collection updates and redirects its predecessors' animal descriptions in order to focus the verses on the animal itself and to familiarize the reader with the animal. The second chapter, "The Nonsensical Ringmaster", will discuss how the poet-ringmaster uses the notion of nonsense in order to calculatedly announce the absurd – yet true – human relationship with certain animal species.

"The Philosophical Circus" paints traditional philosophers such as Martin Heidegger and Freiderich Nietzsche as a group of thinkers who circle around this metaphorical circus forming arguments and demanding a definition of the categorical separation of Man and Animal without acknowledging the fluidity between the two groups. As a turning point for the thesis' argument, this chapter will also elucidate the connection between Roubaud's animal poetry and hybrid community theory, a theoretical refusal of this categorical separation as developed by contemporary philosophers and ethologists such as Jean-Christophe Bailly and Dominique Lestel.

The following two chapters, "Contortionism" and "Ventriloquism," both provide detailed examples of the collection's link to the ethologist-philosophers' concept of the world as a shared

space between Humans and Animals. “Contortionism” describes how Roubaud’s circus creates a spectacle by twisting and warping the function of animals previously referenced in poetry, and will elucidate how the contorted animal allows the poem to focus on the relationship between the two categories of living beings. Similarly, the final chapter will show how man and animal can become closer when the poet, like a ventriloquist, dupes his audience into believing it is the animals speaking, echoing the sounds, words, and context that we would imagine the animal to possess.

Throughout these chapters, we will explore how *Les animaux de tout le monde* playfully serves as a dialogue between the poet, the reader, and the animal, challenging traditional philosophic and literary separations of Man and Animal. This thesis proposes to follow this challenge and to understand its complexities as it unravels under the poet’s imagination in a circus-like manner where humans, whether they are ringmasters, acrobats, or spectators share a space with animals of all species.

## The Menagerie

Like the menagerie of the early circus that placed small informative plaques alongside the animals' decorated cages, traditional collections of animal poetry such as fables and bestiaries provide short, intriguing descriptions of their own creatures, oftentimes assembled in ornamental pages. By employing the same tools these early poetic "menageries" used to compose their plaques, Roubaud's verses create a familiar space for readers to discover animals. While the poet adheres to certain aspects of his predecessor's animal descriptions, he poignantly strays from these texts' anthropocentric goals and updates them for contemporary readers.

To explore the tools that fables and bestiaries employ to create animal archetypes, we turn to Michel Pastoureau, a Medieval scholar, who defines Medieval bestiaries as

« des recueils qui se proposent de décrire les « propriétés » d'un certain nombre d'animaux et d'en tirer des enseignements moraux et religieux. Ces propriétés – réelles ou imaginaire – concernent à la fois l'aspect physique de l'animal, son comportement, ses mœurs, ses relations avec les autres espèces, voire avec les humains. Elles concernent également toutes les croyances ou légendes qui l'entourent. » (23)

Similarly, Pastoureau comments on the fable, as interpreted by Jean de La Fontaine, describing it as « un récit pittoresque, une allégorie morale, une proclamation emblématique, une devise, un programme didactique ou un art de la mémoire : en un mot, une véritable armoirie » (357) in which the animals are characterized using « [l]es traits distinctifs – physiques, sociaux, moraux ou psychologiques » (356).

The Medieval bestiaries and *Fables* alike describe the creature's physical, behavioral, psychological, and moral traits – the bestiary in particular embroidering the description with legends that surround the animal – in order to create a didactic and moralistic tale reflecting back on Man.

These tools create an anthropocentric text rather than providing a Naturalist representation of animals. Pastoureau affirms that bestiaries « ne sont pas des traités d'histoire naturelle » (11), while the *Fables* embody,

“une attitude qui se construit autour d'un savoir livresque et qui a pour objet non pas la nature mais l'idée que l'on s'en fait [...] c'est là, dans les bibliothèques et non dans l'insaisissable nature, que se trouve la vérité des êtres et des choses » (351).

The educational plaques in traditional literary menageries create images of creatures to educate the spectator on the moral significance animals bring to Man rather than providing an accurate description of the animal's actual role in nature and culture.

As a circus whose animals were handed down by poetic predecessors, *Les animaux de tout le monde* creates images of its animals using the same familiar tools that the fables and Medieval bestiaries employ – descriptions based on physical, behavioral, psychological, and legendary traits – but the animals are placed into a contemporary context and are freed of their symbolic, moralistic function. This phenomenon appears most prominently in the poems “Le Roi lion”, “La pieuvre”, and “Le papillon de nuit”.

This renovated, yet recognizable circus stage can first be seen in poem “Le Roi lion”, which perpetuates typical behavioral and physical characteristics of the lion, yet also includes

contemporary cultural references. From the very title, “Le Roi lion” references the traditional role of the lion as the king of all animals. The beast assumed this role in the twelfth century when the lion replaced the bear as the dominating animal species. Afterwards, the creature had been an essential element of medieval bestiaries oftentimes representing Jesus Christ, reigning over men as the lion reigns over animals (Bibliothèque nationale de France). In Jean de la Fontaine’s poems “Le lion et le rat”, “Le lion et l’âne chassant” and “Le lion et le moucheron”, among others, the lion is specifically referred to as a “roi”, if not more specifically as “Le Roi des animaux”, evoking a political symbolism referring to a governmental official in power – more explicitly, the king of France.

The imagined elevated status of the animal is also seen in Roubaud’s poem, “Le Roi lion”. The verses comment on the fact that many other creatures may be improperly categorized, whereas the lion, above all other creatures, has nothing to fear.

Faut pas confondre les zoziaux  
Avec les personnes avicoles  
Ça rend la perruche folle  
Quand on l’assimile au corbeau

Mais le li-on le Roi li-on  
ne craint pas ces confusions

This excerpt implies that the beast is so well recognized with a role so important that it behaves as if it is impossible to confuse it with anything else.

The poem continues its traditional image of the lion in its physical description of the King of the Jungle: “De sa rugissante crinière / il éparpille les éléphants” Just like the illuminated manuscripts of medieval bestiaries whose images crown the lion’s head with a flowing mane, thereby symbolizing Jesus’ divine halo, Roubaud’s lion is consistently caricatured through the physical description of his distinguishable mane and powerful roar. In this poem dedicated to the lion, Roubaud not only uses the traditional tools of describing the animal in terms of behavior and physical description, but he also adheres to the previously established traits.

However, the contemporary poet does not content himself with regurgitating ancient archetypes. The lion is not only the king of animals we know from the fables and bestiaries, but he is also the lion roaring before each MGM film.

De sa rugissante crinière  
il éparpille les éléphants  
pour la grande joie des enfants  
de la Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer.

Roubaud picks up the plume the medieval monks set down, erases the lion as the bestiaries’ religious symbol and the fables’ political symbol, and omits any other moralistic associations that may have accompanied the beast in the past. Instead, he places the animal in its contemporary context, as a child’s favorite cue for a good family movie, and redirects the attention towards the animal itself rather than dwelling on the insight the animal as a symbol could bring to Man. By employing the bestiaries’ and fables’ tools of physical and behavioral

description and by placing the lion in its current context, the description of the lion becomes is updated to become more familiar and identifiable to the contemporary reader.

Similarly, Roubaud includes creatures that would not be found in any Medieval bestiary or seventeenth-century book of fables in order to modernize previous “menageries” while still employing similar descriptive tools.

The first of these unusual creatures is the octopus, which, in the poem “La pieuvre”, the poet describes in terms of its previously established psychological description. In this poem, the character of the octopus agrees to intentionally lose the last round of an epic battle with a scuba diver in exchange for “quantités astronomiques / de dollars”. The octopus’ greedy, corrupt, and rather pathetic decision aligns with *la pieuvre*’s etymological roots in the Normand word *la pieuvre* meaning “insatiable person” or “contemptible or despicable woman”<sup>1</sup>. The octopus’ insatiable desire for fame and money renders it “contemptible” or “despicable” in the reader’s eyes. This adherence to the animal’s original symbolism is reiterated in the appropriately enjambed closing lines of the poem: “et d’un bras... Voyez comme on tombe / bas quand on veut être riche / et avoir son nom sur l’affiche”. The octopus is insatiable, contemptible, and despicable, as its etymology and previous literary representations have defined.

On the other hand, like the lion, the creature is placed in a contemporary context. The octopus waits at the bottom of the ocean for

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<sup>1</sup> It is also interesting to note that Victor Hugo was the first to write this word to describe an octopus in his 1866 text *Les travailleurs de mer*.  
Citation: Centre nationale de ressources textuelles et lexicales. Pieuvre, subst. fém: **Étymol. et Hist. 1.** 1866 (HUGO, *Travaille. mer*, p.370); **2.** 1866, 18 avr. «personne insatiable» (*Événement* ds LARCH.1872, p.196). Mot normand (cf. *puerve* «poulpe; femme méprisable», DUM. 1849 et DU BOIS, TRAVERS, *Gloss. du pat. norm.*, Caen, A. Hardel, 1856), du lat. *polypus* «poulpe» (cf. *FEW* t.9, p.140a).  
<http://www.cnrtl.fr/etymologie/pieuvre>



la caméra panoramique  
qui va filmer sa lutte épique  
contre un scaphandrier pervers  
d'Hollywood.

The octopus is not only the dark, greedy creature lurking at the bottom of the sea, but with the growth of Hollywood, the animal also becomes a televised actor. Though its etymological and literary roots may not date back as far as that of the lion, the octopus' psychology is described using the available tools and, like the lion, is situated in a modernized space that makes it more accessible to readers.

The poem "Le papillon de nuit" also introduces an untraditional animal, this time following in the trends of Medieval bestiaries' tendency to describe the animal in terms of the legends that surround it. In the poem "Le papillon de nuit", the moth itself is quoted as debunking certain legends that have existed as explanations for the species' attraction to the light. As highlighted in this poem, one legend is that male moths, when rejected by their female romantic interests, search for heat "à cause des froideurs de la papillonne". The second legend the poem proposes ties moths to the myth of Icarus, implying that moths are too prideful or excitable to simply follow on their expected path of flight that carries them away from the light. The poem reads, "et quant à ceux qui prétendent que c'est par orgueil / et que comme monsieur Icare je me jette dans le soleil". While the actual scientific explanation for moths' attraction to light is unknown, the poem, written from a moth's perspective, claims these insects of the night run into lights simply because they inherit a fascination for the warmth from their forefathers. "C'est à cause de cette fascination pour le chaud que j'ai héritée de mes parents". Just as an

excerpt from a Medieval bestiary may recount a Biblical story to remind the reader of its original existence in culture, this poem exhibits several different myths surrounding the moth.

Yet, in the same way that the poems dedicated to the lion and the octopus reference recent inventions, the moth complains that the light bulbs of today are no better than the exposed flames of yesteryear: “C’est bien ma veine, se dit-il, avant c’était les bougies / maintenant c’est les ampoule électriques qui ne sont pas protégées / c’est pas une vie!” The legends are updated to evoke the more familiar image of moths running into light bulbs rather than candles as the latter becomes less frequently used.

As seen in “Le Roi lion”, “La pieuvre”, and “Le papillon de nuit”, Roubaud’s circus displays animals using the same tools employed in previous literature: physical, behavioral, psychological, and legendary descriptions. Because of this familiar structure, Roubaud’s readers can identify with the creatures they know and love – or hate – from previous literature, but are also able to connect with animals in a new yet equally familiar way because of the poem’s references to the animals’ function in contemporary culture. The poet updates La Fontaine’s and bestiary writers’ educational vignettes, showing readers that the animal is still a part of their everyday life.

Most importantly, Roubaud sheds the function of animals as allegorical tools used to access a metaphysical insight into mankind. If the poems describe the animals, like the original menageries, it is because they reflect back on the animal, informing the audience of the animal’s contemporary and historical role in our lives rather using the animal as a tool to educate the reader on Man, God, the Devil, politics, or society as a whole, like a medieval bestiary or a fable. Instead of acting as only a literary symbol or allegorical tool, the animal is presented as a living, breathing creature that merits its own spectacular act in his circus. Roubaud’s poems boldly

permit animals to perform in their own act without bearing the burden of representing or referring back to Man for, as Elisabeth de Fontenay writes, “L’animal a autre chose à faire et autre chose à être que de représenter un homme” (601).

## The Nonsensical Ringmaster

“Alice said, as gravely as she could, ‘They might go a different way.’ But she couldn’t help thinking to herself, ‘What dreadful nonsense we *are* talking!’”

-Lewis Carroll, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, 194

Despite the Fables’ and bestiaries’ heavy influence on the poetic descriptions of animals in *Les animaux de tout le monde*, the poet-ringmaster’s grand speeches about his animals’ acts are not exclusively influenced by these two literary traditions. Neither are the descriptions of Roubaud’s animal actors simply updated encyclopedic narratives of their counterparts in nature. Indeed, encountered by a scattering of blue gnus, ducks graduating from Cambridge, and a small bird that forgets to put its head on before leaving the house, readers of Roubaud’s poetry can easily identify with Alice’s commentary on her dream-like surroundings. Roubaud and Carroll readers alike are led through a nonsensical Wonderland with only vaguely recognizable logic and creatures. Roubaud appreciates yet calculatedly manipulates the meaningless nature of Carroll’s nonsense genre in order to reflect back on the animal’s connection with Man.

According to Elizabeth Sewell, author of *Field of Nonsense*, the nonsense genre is defined by three major elements. First, nonsense literature is composed of incongruous phrases or words that constitute a nonsensical scene. For example, in the preface of “The Hunting of the Snark”, Carroll justifies his nonsense phrase “Then the bowsprit got mixed with the rudder sometimes” by explaining that a bowsprit often gets mixed with a rudder because of a glitch in Rule 42 of the “Code” that doesn’t allow anyone to speak with the Captain, the only person allowed to authorize the rectification – utter nonsense.

The second element of the nonsense genre is the use of nonsensical words. These may be rooted in meaningful language, and may be perfectly integrated into the text with correct grammatical and syntactical form, but they are not themselves actual definable words. It can be a completely invented word like “snark” or it can be what Carroll dubs a “portmanteau”, which, like the word itself, has “two meaning[s] packed up into one word” (Carroll 164).

The third element that constitutes a text in the nonsense genre is the idea that its author creates “a collection of words or events which in their arrangement do not fit into some recognized system”, but which constitute a new system of their own, determined exclusively by the rules they themselves make (Sewell 25). The system of logic is unintelligible for anyone but the author, rendering the reader powerless in his or her attempt to use their familiar systems of reference to make connections between events or pull meaning from the words. It is impossible to understand why the rudder gets mixed up with the bowsprit, and the meaning of “snark” would be entirely different if taken out of the context of Carroll’s poem. The reader, like a creature in nonsense poetry, is at the whim of the creator.

Not dissimilar from Carroll’s hookah-smoking caterpillar or disappearing Cheshire Cat, Roubaud’s text is scattered with nonsensical creatures like whales holding umbrellas, a trout wearing a bowler’s cap, and a pair of recently engaged koalas, just to name a few. From the very title of the book, *Les animaux de tout le monde*, it is obvious that the text owes much of its play to the nonsense genre. Whether the title can be understood as “the animals of the world” or “everybody’s animals”, creating a poem for each one is an impossible task, not only because the choice of animals will always be dependent on to the person naming them, but also because no matter what the range of animals is, it would be an enormous undertaking; in any case, some

animals must be left out. The text is self-aware of this logical gap as the opening poem reads, “Mais on n’en fera pas une ronde : / la girafe, n’est-ce pas, serait immensément / gênée d’avoir à danser avec le paon”, despite the fact that preceding stanza reads: “Animaux de tout le monde / à chacun je donne un poème / on le trouvera ici même” (7).

The reason why the author does not provide a poem for *every* animal is equally as illogical as Carroll’s explanation for why the bowsprit mixes with the rudder. The logic only works in the context of the poem itself whose rules constitute a system of their own; and yet, even this system is broken in Roubaud’s text, as the poem about the peacock and the verses dedicated to the giraffe seem to peacefully reside under the same tent in author’s poetic circus. Roubaud, like Carroll, uses his first words of the text to explain nonsense with nonsense.

The title further evokes nonsense because the logic behind the choice of animals must be relative to the author. One glance at the table of contents shows a grouping of creatures that seems to be syntactically incongruous. The choice of animals seems entirely random without concern for the traditionally recognized system that associates “*les animaux de tout le monde*” with animals that are both familiar and legitimate animals. Instead, the collection includes animals such as the gnu (Les gnous bleus), the armadillo (La tatou), the octopus (La pieuvre), and the hawk and the zebu (Buse et zébu), all of which are animals far from the forefront of French consciousness. There are also poems dedicated to the germ (Le microbe), the unicorn (La licorne), and dinosaurs (Les dinosaurs), all of which seem to precariously perch on the tightrope between “animal” and “other”. There is a nonsensical incongruity between what the title proposes – a collection of poems about well-known animals – and what it actually presents.

The title and table of contents, however, is just a taste of the nonsense that lies inside the microcosms of the poems themselves. In these animal-centric vignettes, we see the same notion

of nonsense that manifests itself through incompatibility of phrases. “Le saumon” depicts the fish smoking a pipe underwater before taking out his scissors to make paper boats that will sail across the Lake of Constance. The narrator of the poem “La coccinelle” explains Victor Hugo’s assertion that a ladybug symbolizes a kiss on the neck of a beautiful woman, and then continues to encourage readers to – if they are so lucky to see one – take a picture of a ladybug in a Scottish tartan and forget about the beautiful woman. Following in the nonsense tradition, these poems are comprised of several absurd phrases that have nothing to do with one another excepting the fact that they all find themselves in Roubaud’s poetry.

As evidenced through the title’s contrast with collection’s animals paired with the incongruous nature of the poems’ narratives, it is obvious that Roubaud masters the aspect of this English genre that juxtaposes incompatible phrases and words to imagine a nonsensical world.

On the other hand, it is worthy to note that while the poems themselves are filled with nonsense, Roubaud never uses nonsense words in the same vein of the nonsense tradition. Where Carroll became the father of portmanteaus, Roubaud rarely departs from using traditional language. He never goes further than a misspelling of “porc” in “Ce que dit le cochon” (“ce que j’aime c’est les mots porqs”) and an improper accent over “poète” in “Le lombric” (“sans le pöete lombric et l’air qu’il lui apporte / le monde étoufferait sous les paroles mortes.”) and over “poème” in “Ce que dit le cochon” (“et ça fait un pöeme de porq”).

While these misspellings are the author’s own manipulation of the language, thereby making new associations, they are not entirely nonsense. The improper accents over “poète” and “poème” refer to the ancient Greek spelling of the word, “poëte”, while the misspelling of “porc” is a nudge at the irony inherent in the word “porque”, a word etymologically rooted in the Italian word for pig, though its actual definition – un “pièce de renfort d'un bateau”, “Dans la

construction métallique, raidisseur primaire transversal de bordé ou de cloison a metallic reinforcement” (Larousse) – hasn’t the slightest connection to any porcine matters.

More abstractly, the final criterion for a true nonsense poem is its resistance to meaningful interpretation and, therefore, a clear departure from allegorical narratives. As Michael Holquist states, “The Hunting of the Snark”, a true work of poetic nonsense,

“best dramatized the attempt of an author to insure through the structure of his work that the work could be perceived only as what it was, and not some other thing; the attempt to create an immaculate fiction, a fiction that resists the attempts of readers, and especially those readers who write criticism, to turn it into an allegory, a system equitable with already existing systems in the non-fictive world” (390).

Like Carroll’s work, Roubaud’s fantastical incongruous circus seems to exist not for a moral goal, but for simple amusement. It would be absurd to pull didactic meaning from a poem whose sole goal is to describe a salmon smoking a pipe.

However, it is the last point of Holquist’s description that pushes Roubaud’s works away from the nonsense genre. Armed with a system that exists in the “non-fictive world”, it is possible to pull logical, non-fictional associations from the superficially nonsensical associations.

The list of *les animaux de tout le monde* that originally seems nonsensical and incongruous becomes surprisingly coherent with an understanding of France’s cultural and sometimes accidental encounter with the animal: “Les gnous bleus”, for example, is a reference to Matisse’s “Nus bleus” that marked the French artistic transition from Impressionism to Fauvism. The armadillo (le tatou) references the widespread use of these sounds in the colloquial



phrase “t’as tout?”, the word “tatouage”, and in reference to the actress Audrey Tautou, among many other wordplays mentioned in the poem. With the understanding that Victor Hugo first coined the word for octopus in 1866 based on a Breton word that means “miserable person”, the presence of this creature in the text becomes much more intriguing. The poem on the hawk and the zebu exists solely for a play on words between the final two verses of the poem “ici finit l’histoire / de ma buse et du bel zébu” and the phrase the verses imply: “ici finit l’histoire / de m’abuse du Belzébuth”, “Belzébuth” referencing a strong Belgian beer popular in France. The common thread between these unknown creatures is the system of knowledge of the untraditional human-animal contact in France. As for the other animals that seem to straddle the line between a legitimate and false animal, the germ is biologically in the family *animalia* and the unicorn and the dinosaur, while equally inaccessible to the human, were real animals at one time, if, like the unicorn, only in the imaginary of a certain period.

In the same vein, there is often a logical explanation for the nonsense present in the microcosmic narratives of the individual poems as well. The salmon smoking is a literal interpretation of smoked salmon, of which France is the largest consumer in Europe (Xie 268). The ladybug is wearing a Scottish tartan because its etymological cousin (and biological predator) – the cochineal – is crushed to make carmine, a red dye traditionally used to color the plaid fabric; like smoked salmon, Western Europe, notably France, is the largest consumer of carmine (Green 75).

Faithful to the nonsense genre, Roubaud invents his own system that determines what animals can and can’t do, as seen by his tartan-clad ladybugs and smoking fish, but the logic behind this system is not exclusive to the author. This is because he also uses a non-fictional

system in order to create his poems: the system of general partnerships that connect France with the animals it encounters everyday.

What is utter nonsense on the surface is actually a puzzle that can be solved with a non-fictional system extant outside of the text itself. In addition to being a fun, nonsensical poem, as seen through their use of elements from the nonsense genre, each of the poems can, if the reader so chooses, be a didactic tool informing the reader of the general partnership he or she inevitably, yet often unsuspectingly, has with animals.

Roubaud's poems are not intended to resist the works of those "readers who write criticism". It is precisely those readers with a childlike curiosity who benefit the most from Roubaud's manipulation of animals and the nonsense genre as the incongruous phrases, syntax, and made up words double as a collection of tools available to the curious reader to discover new facts about France's absurd and often elusive partnership with animals. Just as the poet's adherence to literary traditions of the bestiaries and fables allow for a familiar platform upon which to broadcast educational tools for his spectators to learn about animals, so do his playful nonsensical poem-puzzles give him the platform to elucidate a circus-like shared space in which humans and animals coexist.

Absorbing and contorting the influence from the literary traditions of fables, bestiaries, and the nonsense genre creates a new concept of a shared space and allows it to function in an innovative, but easily recognizable form, as it bears traits of texts that readers of all ages already know and love. Borrowing elements from beloved literary traditions that give animals center stage renders the nonsensical poet-ringmaster's circus quirky but loveable and most importantly, accessible to reader-spectators of all ages.

## The Philosophical Circus

The result of Roubaud's manipulation of both allegorical literary tradition and the nonsense genre breaks not only literary tradition, but also the philosophical circus that surrounds it. Western philosophers, self-proclaimed ringmasters of the human-animal categorizations, only master the ring in their ability to constantly circle around the canvas wall that divides Man and Animals. Focusing only on the imaginary, indefinable, hidden structures that define the composition of this wall of separation, philosophers like as René Descartes, Martin Heidegger, and Fredereich Nietzsche are unable to see the openings that lead to a lively circus in which man and animals play together – the passageways and playspace that contemporary philosophers are beginning to examine. Roubaud's collection seems to break the hierarchies Western philosophy establishes, instead serving as poetic precursor to contemporary philosophy that focuses its attention on the notion of a “hybrid community” or “shared space” wherein animals and humans cohabitate a single space.

This notion directly opposes centuries of philosophy that allots Man a privileged status over animals because of his connection with the metaphysical realm. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, Man was first given dominion over animals when God gave Adam and Eve the gift of language and the respectable task of naming all the living beings around them. The concept that Man's superiority over Animals is his God-given right is one that has been perpetuated in Christian and non-Christian Western philosophers alike.

The Cartesian *machine-animal* is the prime example of the perpetuation of this separation and hierarchization, as René Descartes denies animals any trace of thought, soul, or significant

being<sup>2</sup>. In what philosopher Elisabeth de Fontenay calls the “Fable of machines”, Descartes argues that animals function solely on instincts, whereas Man is graced with thought (*ergo sum*) and free will. Man’s privilege as a metaphysical being grants him immediate superiority over the creatures that do not have the language to claim otherwise.

It is this self-reflective, metaphysical privilege Man has over animal, not necessarily the concept of God, that perpetuates this separation and classification. Friedrich Nietzsche adds memory and promises to Descartes’ list of items – language, thought, soul, and free will – that define the boundary between Man and Animal. Martin Heidegger confirms Nietzsche’s points, retracing this wall of separation in defining animals as *weltlos*, or “poor in world”. Influenced by Jakob von Uexküll’s text *Streifzüge durch die Umwelten von Tieren und Menschen* (1934) and Rainer Maria Rilke’s “Eighth Elegy” (1923), Heidegger claims animals are unable to access the “Open”, or “pure” space, because of their inability to form their own world (Elden).

Because of the existence of a soul, thought, memory, history, and/or what Heidegger calls an “Openness” to the world, philosophy paints Man as a separate spectacle that is more diversely talented than its animal counterpart. The separation between Man and Animal is defined in terms of what Man possesses and what Animals do not.

Furthermore, Western philosophy groups all kinds of animals under one term, creating a vast homogenous group that ignores the obvious diversity inherent in a group of animals, be they a litter of Dachshunds or an ecosystem of ants, birds, and monkeys. Vinciane Despret writes that the function of the term “animal” is used in order to negatively define Man rather than to actually discuss the nature of the individual animal, « L’animal va être enrôlé comme un collectif, qui,

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<sup>2</sup> Carolus Linnaeus, the father of modern taxonomy, wrote, “*Cartesius certe non vidit simios.*” (“Descartes never saw an ape.”) An interesting examination of Linnaeus’ attempt to define Man in respect to Animal can be found in Giorgio Agamben’s *The Open: Man and Animal*

par son exclusion, permet à l'être humain de se créer une identité par contraste » (213).

Discussion on animals in Western philosophy is wildly anthropocentric, constantly reflecting back on Man, much like La Fontaine's Fables and Medieval bestiaries.

Even after Darwin's theory of evolution that rewrites Man's original God-given superiority over animals, the tradition of separating and hierarchizing Man and Animal continues because, as a metaphysical creature, Man needs this abyssal space of separation in order to refuse the belief that this life is as easily explainable by Darwinian order as animals' lives. For if a human life is as easily explainable as an animal's, any search for a higher purpose becomes utterly useless (Rackin, 399).

Despite this inherent need for hierarchies and separations, Roubaud's poems do not continue this tradition of using animals' have-nots to define Man as a superior being. In fact, as we have seen previously, Roubaud's poems do not exist to reflect back on Man. Instead, the verses break the animals out of their assigned roles as symbols; the lion, the ladybug, the lizard, the hippopotamus, and other animal performers exist without a moral or allegorical function, and the poet's definitions of the creatures do not define Man by exclusion. These animals' perform purely for the reader's enjoyment, subtly sparking a childlike curiosity to discover more about the animal in nature rather than about Man in everyday life.

Because Roubaud's animal poems are not about Man despite their perpetuation of animals' physical, behavioral, and psychological representations of literary tradition's allegorical tools, they destroy Western philosophical hierarchies that place Man as the center of the universe, the subject of all philosophical reflection, literary prose, and poetic verses. *Les animaux de tout le monde* allows for an animal-centric space in which Man and Animal are equal, not defined as two groups separated by what the animal is lacking.

However, not all philosophical thought has put up this negative, fixed barrier between the two groups that Roubaud's poetry opposes. In the groundbreaking essay "L'animal que donc je suis" (2006), Jacques Derrida redefines the shape and purpose of this wall of separation by employing the term *limitrophie* to discuss it. The deconstructionist accepts that this boundary exists accepting that, as the suffix *trophie* would imply, Man feeds off of this separation. Derrida clarifies, "Tout ce que je dirai ne consistera surtout pas à effacer la limite, mais à multiplier ses figures, à compliquer, épaissir, délinéariser, plier, diviser la ligne justement en la faisant croître et multiplier" (Derrida 51). The line between Man and Animals is indefinable, and although we may feed off of it to confirm our metaphysical existence, it is a complicated space that is worthy of a study in and of itself, worthy enough to put aside the philosophical musings of Man as a being entirely disconnected from Animals.

It is precisely this shared space that *Les animaux de tout le monde* occupies and that contemporary French philosophers and biologists have begun to explore. Ethologist and philosopher Dominique Lestel describes this shared space a "communauté hybride" which he defines as "une association d'hommes et d'animaux, dans une culture donnée, qui constitue un espace de vie pour les uns et pour les autres, dans lequel sont partagés des intérêts, des affects et du sens" (Lestel 19).

In addition to Lestel and Derrida, several other contemporary French philosophers have defined the concept of the hybrid community and dedicated their work to a study of this shared space. These thinkers include but are not limited to philosopher Elisabeth de Fontenay, contemporary author and philosopher Jean-Christophe Bailly, and Vinciane Despret, a psychologist and philosopher who works in the field of animal studies. While each philosopher's unique background places them at different points around the center ring of the philosophical

circus, there are common threads that link their observations together and form a global understanding of a hybrid community.

First, in order to imagine a hybrid community, one must acknowledge what Lestel calls “associations particulières”, or “particular partnerships”, which he opposes to “associations générales” or “general partnerships”. A general partnership would be defined as a unspecified partnership between Man and Animals, while the particular partnership is more focused: a relationship or encounter between a defined man or group of men and a specific animal or group of animals in any given culture. A particular partnership is not a generalization such as, “The West has a close relationship with the dog as a domestic and feral animal”. Instead, an example would be the relationship formed when a woman recovering from a knee injury finds motivation to walk again as her corgi sits patiently by the door every morning, occasionally looking back at her with a whimper of inspiration, encouraging her to pick up the leash for their morning promenade.

As seen in this example, this partnership will also, because of “proximité spatiale et continuité temporelle” (Lestel 21), bear the fruit of a sort of familiarity or *intimité* (Bailly 22, Lestel 21). However, this relationship is not limited to the relationship between a man and a pet or another domestic animals. It can also touch on a partnership with other animals encountered on a daily basis like pigeons, moths, ants, and seagulls. These animals “excèd[ent] pourtant de beaucoup cette sphère simplement privée” (Bailly 14). In short, a particular partnership is a Man and Animal act in which a sort of familiarity or complicity grows between the two as a result of the amount of time both parties have spent together in the same ring.

Next, in building a hybrid community, the traditional hierarchies established between the two groups must be erased. As we have seen, not only does philosophy traditionally treat Man

and Animal as two distinctly separate acts, it also places them in a hierarchy. Traditionally, Man is privy to a metaphysical understanding of certain parts of life because of the existence of a soul, free will, *das Offnen*, among other metaphysical pleasures previously mentioned. The animal with its “instinctual”, “mechanical”, and “thoughtless” nature, is a sideshow to the wonderful metaphysical being that is Man. The funambulist gets center ring while the equally as nimble chimpanzee shows his similar talents in a tiny cage outdoors. However, a hybrid community imagines an act that features the acrobat and the primate as equal features on the handbill. The acrobat is no longer more graceful and more attractive than its less evolved animal counterpart; they are simply players that perform equally but differently in the spectacle of life’s circus.

Finally, the hybrid community is an acknowledgment of the modifications this particular partnership act has on the space and/or on the partners in the association. Vinciane Despret explores the exchange of characteristics between Man and Animal during their interactions, just as Deleuze and Guattari pull on this exchange of qualities in their theory of the “devenir-animal” inspired by Kafka’s literature that so embodies this exchange. Lestel and Bailly, on the other hand, specifically react against this study, admitting that it is impossible to define what exactly is exchanged between the two parties in a hybrid community. Instead, these philosophers stress examining the “*côtoisement*”, or “closeness” between Man and Animal, thereby proposing a study of how the relationship modifies the space instead how it modifies the parties involved in the relationship.

As a whole, like Derrida, contemporary animal studies theories reject tradition by directing philosophical thought towards these openings in the permeable wall that lead to a space that Man and Animals have occupied together rather than obsessing over the hidden structure that will always support the wall separating the two groups.



As the previous pages have elucidated Roubaud's tendency to playfully contrast the philosophical tradition that separates and venerates Man over Animal, the following pages will explore how, through a display of mutual modification and a veneration of particular partnerships, Roubaud adheres to this new philosophy that explores the ever-present detailed closeness that could only come from a serious recognition of the passageways hidden in the canvas wall that allows for a hybrid community of human-animal encounters.

## Contortionism

While some of Roubaud's animals serve as updated versions of their traditional archetypes, others are so disfigured from their previous appearances in poetry that, like a contortionist, their transformation itself becomes a spectacle worthy of praise and admiration.

To explore the effects of Roubaud's manipulation of other poets' creatures, this chapter will closely examine two poems by Jacques Roubaud, "La coccinelle" and "Le crocodile". We will see how they both pay homage to and contort the poems' animal subjects' original representations in the poems "La coccinelle" from Victor Hugo's 1856 collection *Les contemplations*, and "Odile" from *Potomak* (1924) a collection of poems written by avant-gardist and cineaste Jean Cocteau.

The original poems use animals exclusively as vessels for moral tutelage and wordplay, while downplaying the interaction and relationship the creatures have with the human characters. Instead, they focus on the human aspect or the moral advice the animals could bring to Man's everyday life. As our contemporary ringmaster rewrites these poems, stretching the animals into a form other than their original symbolic and allegorical shape, the inherited creatures are able to take the stage with men as the focus of the spectacle shifts from the human to the relationship between the human and the animal.

The original poem called "La coccinelle" by Victor Hugo recounts the story of a young boy and girl in the forest. An audience of tiny wild animals comes out to watch the romantic scene unfold, but the boy's opportunity to kiss the beautiful young woman flies away from the main character because he is too focused on the ladybug resting on her neck. The ladybug itself then reproaches the boy for his misdirected attention, saying, "Les bêtes sont au bon Dieu, / Mais la bêtise est à l'homme". Through a clever wordplay that would appeal to any Oulipien, these

closing verses express the moral of the poem – that one should take romantic opportunities as they come – by juxtaposing the words “bête” and “bêtise”.

Despite the animals’ cameos and the young boy’s “misplaced” attentiveness to the ladybug, the poem itself is focused on human characters and moral tutelage. Hugo’s poem revolves around the encounter between the young boy and beautiful girl while the forest creatures merely serve as a decoration of fauna around them: “Les fauvettes pour nous voir / se penchaient dans le feuillage”. Because of its didactic dialogue, “l’insecte du ciel bleu” is separated from its actual presence in nature and, much like the Roi lion of the Medieval bestiaries, functions instead as a symbolic vessel through which the narrator communicates his lesson to naïve lovers. Furthermore, the ladybug serves as the trigger for the young boy’s curiosity for nature, which, in turn, becomes the problem that prevents the poem’s narrative resolution. Hugo’s “La coccinelle” paints a vivid image of a brief encounter between man and animal. However, following in the genre and anthropocentric literary tradition, the poem places a romantic moment with a woman over a special encounter with an animal.

Roubaud highlights the anthropocentric nature of Hugo’s animal encounter in the first half of his poem:

Quand une coccinelle  
se pose dans le cou  
dans le cou d’une belle  
ça veut dire voyez-vous  
  
qu’un baiser vous attend

qu'il faut prendre très vite  
ce qui arrive ensuite ?  
eh bien cela dépend. (67)

Roubaud playfully oversimplifies the original poem to a nonsensical form all the while ensuring that the human is the main focus. The “coccinelle” only appears in the first line whereas human features decorate the rest of the verses in the first half of the poem: twice we see “le cou”, followed by “d’une belle”, “voyez-vous”, and “vous attend” in the second, third, fourth, and fifth verses respectively. Roubaud’s stress on human action and body parts in the summary of Hugo’s poem highlights the anthropocentric nature of the original referent. Above all, Roubaud ensures that this vision, a slightly deformed version of its original, is concretely ascribed to Hugo and not to himself. “(c’est à Victor Hugo / que nous devons ce conseil.)” This allows the contemporary poet to establish a new, contrasting vision of the ladybug in the second half of his poem that is wittingly his own. He makes this distinction through the repetition of this parenthetical verse at ends the second half of the poem: “(ça c’est moi qui vous le dit)”.

It is in this second section that Roubaud’s version of “La coccinelle” shifts the focus of poetry from Man to Animal. He achieves this by dedicating his verses to describing the ladybug instead of the beautiful woman and the boy.

mais si la coccinelle  
arrive de Glasgow  
elle porte (c’est très beau)

son *tartan* sur le dos  
il faut prendre une photo  
et oublier la belle (67)

Unlike the first half, the first four verses are dedicated solely to a nonsensical description of the ladybug, while the fifth is used to provide advice, and the last is used to erase the image of the beautiful woman altogether.

Whereas Hugo's animals are the missed-lovers' spectators, Roubaud's version sketches the animal as the main act and the boy as the audience member. He magnifies the encounter between the boy and the ladybug in Hugo's poem and instead of using the ladybug to remind the reader that all creatures belong to God ("les bêtes sont au bon Dieu"), he transforms the insect into an object of wonder with neither owner nor creator. The ladybug becomes the true subject of the poem, as the titles of both the original and the rewrite would suggest, and the poet intentionally leaves behind the romantic portrait of a beautiful woman with a ladybug on her neck.

Roubaud honors lesser-known encounters between man and animal in previous French history, as seen through this intentionally oversimplified reference to the most famous French Romantic poets, but manipulates the ladybug's original function as decoration and tutelary vessel. In Roubaud's circus, a ladybug is transformed from a glitch that ruins the performance to a center ring performer.

Similarly, Roubaud contorts the representation of the crocodile in Jean Cocteau's "Odile". "Odile" is a poem about two people named Caï and Aligue that react to a story about Odile's death at the jaws of a crocodile. The narrator claims Caï may have invented the story,

while Alligée's tears and moving outbursts in reaction to her friend's death seem to validate the possible fiction. The narrative can be reduced to a child's imaginary game taken a bit too seriously and, not unlike Hugo's "La coccinelle", Cocteau's "Odile" places more weight on the interactions between the human characters than on the interaction between the human character and the crocodile.

However anthropocentric the narrative may be, it is the linguistic puns at play that make this poem significant to Roubaud's ludic masterpiece. Cocteau uses verbs and the names of the characters to construct a bestiary of creatures classified in the order *crocodylia*. In the first stanza, Cocteau repeats the word *crocodile* twice in the second and fourth verse, then once again through a combination of "croque" and "Odile":

Odile rêve au bord de l'île  
Lorsqu'un crocodile surgit  
Odile a peur du crocodile  
Et, lui évitant un "ci-gît"  
Le crocodile croque Odile (39)

This wordplay that combines a verb with a name becomes the crux of the author's – and the reader's – amusement in the second and third stanzas. In the second stanza, "Caï ment" stands in for *caiman*, a smaller species of the alligator from South and Central America ("Et, dans ce cas-là, Caï ment"), just as "Alligée a tort" replaces the aforementioned *alligator* in the final verse of the third and last quatrain ("D'aucuns disent qu'Alligée a tort").

Their inclusion of these creatures in the poem shows the author's knowledge of the animal kingdom and obvious love for wordplay, but the alligator and the caiman are essentially shells of ideas whose existence depends on the presence of active human characters. Without a lying Caï or an incorrect Alligue, the caiman and the alligator could not exist. These other *crocodylia* exist in ideological word puns rather than as characters in their own right.

On the other hand, the crocodile, by (hypothetically) eating Odile, is the only animal that plays an active role. It is because of Cocteau's original wisp of characterization of the crocodile that Roubaud takes up this poem and hones in on the encounter between Odile and *le crocodile*. The contemporary poet abandons Caï, Alligue, and the vestiges of the caiman and the alligator altogether.

In Roubaud's reworked poem that clings to its avant-gardists origins, the crocodile has an obsessive desire to eat Odile, a plump young girl that walks on the banks of the water. As the crocodile's conventional efforts of attaining his coveted meal have apparently failed, the crocodile employs "la méthode Coué", also known as "autosuggestion"<sup>3</sup>. As he remains unable to fulfill his desires, the poem ends with the poor creature only able to dream about eating the young girl.

The last two verses of Roubaud's "Le crocodile" evoking the image of the creature's unattainable dream is a direct reformulation of "Odile". The first and last verses of Cocteau's first stanza ("Odile rêve au bord de l'île," and "Le crocodile croque Odile") are manipulated to the following concluding verses in Roubaud's poem: "et c'est seulement dans ses rêves / que le crocodile croque Odile". The contemporary poet pays homage to Cocteau's wordplay and

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<sup>3</sup> *La Maîtrise de soi-même par l'autosuggestion consciente* in which Émile Coué develops his theory on autosuggestion, was published in 1922 and, like avant-garde art, gained popularity with the rise of psychoanalysis in the Interwar period (1920-1939).

repetition of the word “crocodile” in the literal sense and through ideological wordplay, but the functions of the animal and the human in the poem are inverted. Roubaud’s poem reduces Cocteau’s predatory crocodile to a lazy, dreaming lizard while Odile is the one indulging in her own guilty pleasure: “elle se promène sur la grève / mangeant des beignets de banane au mil”.

This armored beast is no longer just a character alluded to in a hypothetical situation, nor is it like its cousins, a vaporous idea produced by wordplay. In Roubaud’s poetic circus, the crocodile is a familiar animal whose literary encounter with Man is worth a space all to itself.

In *Les animaux de tout le monde*, Roubaud exemplifies two instances in French literature wherein humans and animals come together through poetry. “La coccinelle” by Victor Hugo and “Odile” by Jean Cocteau both hint at representing the world as a place of coexistence between humans and animals. However, Roubaud’s predecessors’ poems do not give the human and animal encounter its own space. Hugo’s poem lightly condemns a boy’s interest in a ladybug as a distraction from important things like love, while Cocteau’s verses show the interaction as a hypothetical sideshow. Roubaud, on the other hand, trains and twists his inherited animals so they may perform new tricks for his own act, giving the creatures their own poetic play space in which to perform their act with Men. This spectacle of contortion magnifies and glorifies the encounter between human and animal. It praises the childlike imagination and wonder that can create an absurd image of a ladybug, and the image of a ferocious creature hypnotized by an indulgent little girl.

As also seen in the logic behind his nonsense, Roubaud’s reworking of these poems playfully honors France’s connection with animals in a literary context. By magnifying already existing encounters between humans and animals in the French literary tradition, Roubaud’s verses foster a vision of the world that glorifies a representation of the world as an enjoyable



shared space. Through wordplay, punning, and a contortion of previous representations, Roubaud transforms his inherited animals and therefore refocuses the poetic lens on the human-animal interaction. This allows animals into the poetic space that is traditionally reserved for the elaboration of human emotion. Roubaud's reworking of Cocteau's and Hugo's poems transport us from a poetic landscape occasionally decorated with symbolic fauna to a playful circus that throws animals and their human character-companions into the center ring. As Roubaud bends the bodies of work written by Hugo and Cocteau, thereby distancing them from their symbolic and allegorical debuts, the spectators are able to see that the circus tent under which they are seated is actually a shared space where humans and animals are both part of the show.

## Ventriloquism

“L’animal que donc je suis, parle-t-il ?”

-Jacques Derrida, *L’animal que donc je suis*

Just as contortionism creates a spectacle out of the animals in Roubaud’s circus, so is ventriloquism an important performance for both the animals and the ringmaster. If Roubaud describes animal behaviors in poems such as “Le lézard”, “La marmotte”, “La loutre”, and “L’hippopotame,” he transcribes and imitates them in “Ce que dit le cochon” and “L’âne entre les deux seaux d’avoine”. In these poems, Roubaud changes his own voice in order to make it appear that the sound is not coming from the poet, but from the animal in the circus ring, in the same way that a ventriloquist keeps his lips still and changes the tone of his voice to make the audience believe his puppet can speak.

However, unlike a puppet, who has no actual sound to begin with, in order for Roubaud to make the ventriloquism believable, he must adopt the animals’ “language”: the grunts, snorts, sighs, whinnies, and sniffs the creatures make in nature. The end result is an exchange of linguistic characteristics between all players involved in this act – the poet-ringmaster, the animal actors, and the spectator-readers. Vinciane Despret calls this exchange of qualities a “mutual modification”, something that inevitably occurs in a hybrid community. Deleuze and Guattari call this phenomenon a “*devenir-animal*”. The philosophers define this term as, “faire le mouvement, tracer la ligne de fuite dans toute sa positivité, franchir un seuil, atteindre à un continuum d’intensités qui ne valent plus que pour elles-mêmes, trouver un monde d’intensités pures, où toutes les formes se défont, toutes les significations aussi, signifiants et signifiés, au profit d’une matière non formée, de flux déterritorialisé, de signe asignifiants” (24). It is not a

simple imitation or reproduction, for Roubaud's ventriloquism is not composed of onomatopoeias. Nor, as previously stated, does Roubaud invent nonsense words like Carroll and other authors of the nonsense genre; he does not use words without meaning and he chooses not to manipulate the portmanteau. Instead, by employing normal words that happen to have animal sounds and by creating a lexical field that refers back to our preconceptions on the animal's natural attributes, the poet fuses together meaningful symbolic language with animal sounds in order to create new associations that allow the reader to experience a shared space with animals.

This shared space made clear through a mutual linguistic exchange can be seen specifically in the first and second stanza of "L'âne entre les deux seaux d'avoine":

Alors j'y vais ou j'y viens  
si j'y viens alors j'y vas pas  
et si j'y vas alors j'y viens pas  
mais si j'y viens alors j'y viens.

et si j'y vas alors j'y vas  
peut-être que si j'y vas et viens  
ou viens et vas peut-être bien  
(peut-être) qu'alors ça ira (12)

And throughout the entirety of the poem "Ce que dit le cochon":

Pour parler, dit le cochon,

ce que j'aime c'est les mots porcs :

glaviot grumeau gueule grommelle

chafouin pacha épluchure

mâchon moche miches chameau

empoté chouxgras polisson.

J'aime les mots gras et porcins :

jujube pechblende pépère

compost lardon chouraver

bouillaque tambouille couenne

navet vase chose choucroute.

Je n'aime pas trop potiron

et pas du tout arc-en-ciel.

Ces bons mots je me les fourre sous le groin

et ça fait un pöeme de porq. (42)

In the first poem, “J’y vais”, “J’y viens”, and “J’y vas” are Roubaud’s transcription of the onomatopoeia “hi-han”, the sound a donkey makes, into normal language. “J’y” replaces “hi”, while “vais”, “viens”, and especially “vas” replace “han”. The future tense of aller, “ira”, contains both sounds.

Similarly, instead of writing “grouin grouin”, the sound representing what a pig actually says, Roubaud creates a poem composed of words with porcine sounds in “Ce que dit le cochon”. Two of these sounds are taken directly from the composition of the onomatopoeia: the hard “gr” sound and the nasal “ouin” sound. The “gr” grunt comes to play in words such as

“grumeau,” “gromelle,” “chouxgras,” and “gras,” while the hard “r” paired with a consonant is repeated again in the word “choucroute”. The nasal “ouin” appears in the words “chafouin”, “bouillaque”, “tambouille”, and “couenne”, while the two sounds come together in the second to last verse in the word “groin”. The poet goes further than reconstructing the onomatopoeia, however, by adding sounds that the pig makes that are not traditionally represented in the transcription of the animal language. This is seen in the poet’s transcription of the sound a pig makes when quickly exhaling, here translated to a “ch” sound in “chafouin”, “mâchon”, “moche” “miches” “chameau” “chouxgras”, “chouraver”, “chose”, and “choucroute”.

The words in both poems superficially appear to be nonsense without any concern for logical connection. What good does it do to ask whether or not one comes “j’y viens” or goes “j’y vas” when it comes to choosing one’s bucket of oats? And, other than the “ch” sound, what does a camel (*chameau*) and sauerkraut (*choucroute*) have in common with each other? Furthermore, what do either of these words have to do with a pig? It is precisely the production of the sounds that connect these nonsense words to each other, and the sounds that connect the words and the entire poem to the animal.

On the other hand, following in Deleuze and Guattari’s definition of the “devenir-animal”, these poems are not simple a simulacrum of animal noises. This phenomenon is seen in the poem “L’âne”, comprised solely of the sounds “hi han”, added in 1990 to the postface of *Les animaux de tout le monde*’s second edition, but is nowhere to be found in the original collection. Putting aside the few nonsensical juxtapositions of words that are solely connected through sound, these poems build a lexical field that predominantly references the animal through the ideas they evoke. Most of the words the pig “likes” in “Ce que dit le cochon” are related to rural areas where one would find pigs. This is seen in the use of the peculiar word “bouillaque”, the

adjective used to describe someone or something from the small rural town in southwestern France called Bouillac. Furthermore, Roubaud's pig appreciates words used in rural dialects like "pépère" and "tambouille", further tying it to its residence. The pig also "likes" vocabulary that is inherently related to the slovenly, everyday experiences of a pig: "glaviot", "gueule", "grommelle", "compost", and "tambouille" and even, uncannily, its own byproduct, "lardons". The poem's lexical field reproduces the stereotypes we have had on pigs dating back to the seventeenth century when "cochon" was first recorded as meaning "personnage grossier (physiquement ou moralement)" as a noun and "indécent" or "osé" as an adjective.

Similarly, in "L'âne entre deux seaux d'avoine", the author builds a lexical field that illustrates the donkey's temperament. After the first two stanzas dedicated to a deliberation between going to one bucket of oats or another, the donkey expresses how his distress about the disappearance of one of the buckets has brought him to the following nonsensical conclusion:

j'ai peur qu'un des seaux disparaisse  
et ça me jette dans la détresse  
alors je vas plus et je viens plus.

Since the word "âne"s history of being synonymous with "personne stupide", it follows that the donkey's failed attempt at explaining his own stubborn nature ties back to the original characteristics we attribute to the donkey.

By fusing animal sounds with lexical fields connected to our history of characterizing the animal, the poem creates new associations that provide a convincing imitation of the animal,

ingeniously poking fun at Ludwig Wittgenstein's assumption that "If a lion could talk, we could not understand him" (Wittgenstein 223).

Through a creation of a linguistic exchange, Roubaud playfully reverses the role of language in the separation between Man and Animal, revealing the absurdity in the long-held belief that the one element that separates man from animal is language. On the contrary, the meaningful language Roubaud uses to ventriloquize the animals in these two poems shows how humans can haphazardly perform animal sounds in everyday language; our ringmaster just assembles them in one space in order to display their pervasiveness. Because the poems are representative of a shared space between Man and Animal, the poet becomes the animal by modifying his words, just as the character of the animal adopts meaningful language that is normally privy to Man. As a result of this act of coming together, both parties are modified in a fun, playful, and punning manner.

This ludic ventriloquist act that uses symbolic language containing animal noises is not just about the mutual modification of language between the poet and his animals. This act transgresses the relationship between the poet and the animal. The reader-spectator also experiences a "*devenir animal*" as the words pass into the reader's mouth when reading or saying the poems aloud. It is as impossible to read the poem about the donkey's indecision without following (becoming) the donkey in sound and character as it is for the reader to avoid snorting and grunting when the reading the pig's "pöeme de porq". Through the exchange and the fusion of meaningful language and animal sounds, the reader, who, at this time in the book, is already inside Roubaud's circus, is now thrown from the bandstands into the circus ring and becomes a ringmaster himself.

While the philosophical circus loops around outside the tent, defining one of the canvas wall of separation's supports as "language", Roubaud plays with this support from the inside by speaking on behalf of the animals in sonorous, poetic, animalistic language that fosters a mutual modification between the human poet and the animal – and encourages his reader-spectators to do the same.



## The Closing Ceremony

This canvas wall - the soft separation between Man and Animal - is not the concrete structure centuries of tradition have tried to establish. The permeable circular barrier is filled with openings and flaps where animals and humans can sneak to and from the human-dominated outside to the circus-like animal kingdom inside.

The fanfare of Roubaud's book of poetry, *Les animaux de tout le monde*, provides us with a unique vision of this kingdom that challenges traditional representations, as this thesis has demonstrated.

This projection is first seen through the poet's careful and playful manipulation of literary traditions that represent animals. "The Menagerie" displays how the collection pays homage to Jean de la Fontaine's *Fables* and the medieval bestiaries, the foundational literary animal collections, just as "The Nonsensical Ringmaster" demonstrates Roubaud's use of the nonsense genre, equally as abundant with realistic and invented creatures, to form his circus in a familiar and beloved context. Like the traditions out of which they grow, Roubaud's poems often reference the animal's presence in cultural history as well as describing their behaviors as outlined in previous texts. The verses' use of incongruent phrases, invented words, and nonsensical depictions of animals transport the reader to the nonsensical Wonderland that Lewis Carroll painted for us in the nineteenth century.

However recognizable the poems may be due to their resemblance to previous collections of animals, it seems that Roubaud calculatedly strays from these traditions. The culturally historical literary representations of the animals are based on biological facts, while the superficially nonsensical parade of animals have perfect logic when the reader takes into account man's and society's deep relationship with the animal. The semblance to previous genres is used

to contextualize the poems, but Roubaud writes about animals new way that playfully rejects the function of animals as symbols or tutelary vessels; instead the nonsensical ringmaster distorts tradition and creates poems about animals that reflect back on the animal's actual existence as well as its complicated – and not always welcome – existence with Man.

Just as the collection departs from literary tradition, so does Roubaud's circus stray from the classical philosophical tradition that places Man and Animal in two separate and unequal categories, as seen in the chapter "The Philosophical Circus". Philosophers like Descartes, Heidegger, and Nietzsche create their own imaginary circus in the space they believe to be designated for humans. Their circus is based on the parts of the wall of separation between Man and Animal that they choose to see. They focus on categorizing and classifying Man in one group and Animal in another through concepts that solidify the separation and aim to prove human dominance – not least of all because of their ability to see this dividing line and reflect on it. Contemporary philosopher Jacques Derrida, followed by ethologist-philosophers Jean-Christophe Bailly and Dominique Lestel, examines the space of separation in a different light, illuminating the passageways and openings in the canvas wall that gently wavers as the philosophical circus rushes around it. Roubaud jumps inside these openings that contemporary philosophy has detailed and breaches the border between the two categories to provide his readers with his personal interpretation of the animal kingdom under the circus tent.

Roubaud's circus further illustrates this animal kingdom through a spectacle of contortionism and ventriloquism. The poet first bends original bodies of work that have represented the animal as a sideshow or a less important creature, focusing on Victor Hugo's ladybug and Jean Cocteau's *crocodilia*. The changes the contemporary poet makes fosters a shared space that, rather than minimizing it, treasures the relationship between Man and Animal.

He then speaks in the place of the animal as he creates meaningful animal sounds out of the French language and slips them into his reader-spectator's mouth. The poet and the reader "become" the animal through an assembly of meaningful words comprised of animal noises, resulting in an assembly of circus performers that are neither entirely human nor entirely animal.

Roubaud's contortionism and ventriloquism both serve the same goal of entertaining rather than moralizing as, similar to the result of the Roubaud's manipulation of literary genres, both performances blur the line between Man and Animal, allowing both humans and animals to freely slip through the openings in the canvas wall of separation.

Roubaud plays in the context of traditional representations of animals, as seen through his adherence to the fable, bestiary, and the nonsense genre. However, the departure from the tradition this network is not slight as he slips in facts about the animal and the animals relationship with humanity, presenting this relationship as a noteworthy experience, and using language to tie the Man and Animal together rather than pushing them apart. This rejection has allowed Roubaud to parade his animals to the tune of his choosing, embracing a new vision of the animal that, like contemporary hybrid community philosophers, rejects the theoretical categorization of Man and Animal; Roubaud's speech does not display the animal world as a detached, instinctual, mechanical society, but rather as a living, breathing space composed of both animal acts and human spectators and announcers.

By accepting Roubaud's playful, circus-like vision of an animal world, the function of animals in poetry is no longer anthropocentric, as Jacques Derrida implies in "L'animal que donc je suis." No longer are the creatures that parade around literary circles just figurative tools poets use to communicate an insight into human nature. In Roubaud's poetic circus, animals are beings with their own society that exist in poetry as just that. By accepting Roubaud's whimsical verses,

we accept a departure from centuries of literary and philosophical tradition that fabricates a hierarchy, places animals below humans, and uses animals as allegorical vessels. Roubaud encourages his readers to instead embrace a new vision of the world we live in as a space where animals and humans exist in a hybrid community without hierarchies or classifications.

If a respected poet can successfully publish an entire book of poems about animals that represents creatures in their own right – something that no other French poet has ever attempted –, we may wonder if animals haven't found a new role in contemporary literature. Is Roubaud's silly, playful, yet calculatedly constructed poetic space the beginning of a literary movement that relieves the animal of bearing the burden of man's metaphysical complexities?

While it may be odd to think that the only other example of poetry entirely dedicated to the animal is *Les animaux de tout le monde*'s sister text, *Les animaux de personne*, it would be incorrect to say that other contemporary poets have entirely neglected the world of animals. On the contrary, animals often play a significant role in contemporary collections of poems and poetic prose. Roubaud's fellow Oulapiens have expressed their views on the unfortunate shared space between men and pigeons, Raymond Queneau in his poem "Le petit peuple des statues" and Jacques Prévert in "Tentative de description d'un dîner de têtes à Paris-France". Francis Ponge, like Roubaud, plays with the etymological roots of the names for animals by dedicating his poetic prose to animals in his poems, "Escargots", "Notes pour un coquillage", and "L'huître" from *Le Parti pris des choses* (1943), while Christian Doumet adopts a more somber poetic expression of the animal in *Traité de la mélancolie de Cerf* (1992).

In the end, the concrete wall of separation between humans and animals can only be imagined by a philosophical circus. As Roubaud's work emblemizes, the dividing line between our two systems is permeable with openings inviting individual to transgress what Bailly calls

“la nasse de son espace-temps propre”. It is up to the reader to choose whether or not to enter this playful circus-like space where poets and all men can play with words and animals.

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