

## “Adam Ate From the Animal Tree”: A Bestial Poetry of Soul

Patricia Cox

The person has a mould. But not  
Its animal. The angelic ones  
Speak of the soul, the mind. It is  
An animal. The blue guitar —  
On that its claws propound, its fangs  
Articulate its desert days.  
The blue guitar a mould? That shell?  
Well, after all, the north wind blows  
A horn, on which its victory  
Is a worm composing on a straw.<sup>1</sup>

In these lines from a modern poet, we are confronted by a remarkable example of the use of bestial metaphors to give image to the play of language. As we will see, this “modern” idea that language plays like an animal is to be found in a surprising way already in Late Antiquity in the thinking of such authors as Origen and Plotinus. Across the centuries, poets and philosophers, critics and theologians have entertained the uncomfortable thought that speaking is a bestial music.

Wallace Stevens’ “The Man with the Blue Guitar” pictures the mould of a man — his shape, his shell — as an animal. Further, it is angelic ones who speak thus of man, as though the beast were our angelic name. Yet the beast has claws and fangs, which pick a desert tune on the blue guitar.

In these verses there is an abysmal figuration of meaning. It is impossible to tell what is what. Is the blue guitar the animal, the music of our bestial mould? Do we play the blue guitar, or does it play us? There is a play here, which one critic has likened to “a snake almost succeeding in getting its tail in its mouth.”<sup>2</sup>

Stevens was fascinated by this “almost,” by absurd, bestial dissonance.<sup>3</sup> Earlier in “The Man with the Blue Guitar,” he had written:

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1. Wallace Stevens, “The Man With the Blue Guitar,” XVII, in *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977), p. 174.

2. J. Hillis Miller, “Stevens’ Rock and Criticism as Cure,” *The Georgia Review* 30 (Spring, 1976), 14.

3. *Ibid.*, pp. 9-13.

It is the chord that falsifies . . .  
 The fields entrap the children, brick  
 Is a weed and all the flies are caught,  
 Wingless and withered, but living alive.  
 The discord merely magnifies.<sup>4</sup>

In a letter on this passage, Stevens remarked that "the chord destroys its elements by uniting them in the chord. They then cease to exist separately. On the other hand, discord exaggerates the separation between its elements."<sup>5</sup>

The point is that, for Stevens, bestial music is a figure for language. Playing the guitar is a kind of speaking, and a poet finds himself drawn especially to the magnifying discordant notes. "Personally, I like words to sound wrong," Stevens once wrote.<sup>6</sup> Perhaps he was thinking of the dissonant quality of words themselves, where words are images which coil about our thoughts snake-like, succeeding — almost — in biting the tail of meaning.

## I

### *The Bestial Play of Words*

There is something insidiously serpentine about words. If the beast is a metaphor of poetic language, it is so abysmally. As one ancient literary critic, Plutarch, noted, words tell the truth while lying. Naked truth wounds, and is too harsh; thus the Gods speak in poetic circumlocution, that is, in metaphor.<sup>7</sup> Divine language is equivocal, supremely indirect, a beast almost as discordant as the truth which it reveals while hiding it.

Other poets, and literary critics as well, have been drawn to the beast as image for the play of language through us. A gentle example is the poet Howard Nemerov, who found it fitting to open an essay on the nature of metaphor by comparing purple finches to sparrows dipped in raspberry juice.<sup>8</sup> Marianne Moore likened poetry to imaginary gardens — with real toads in them.<sup>9</sup>

4. Stevens, "The Man With the Blue Guitar," XI, p. 171.

5. Wallace Stevens to Hi Simons, August 10, 1940, in *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, ed. by Holly Stevens (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977), p. 363.

6. Wallace Stevens to Henry Church, June 1, 1939, in *Letters*, p. 340.

7. Plutarch *De pyth. orac.* 26, 407e (and see the discussion of Plutarch's position on this issue in Jean Pépin, *Mythe et Allégorie* [Paris: Études Augustiniennes, 1976], p. 180).

8. Howard Nemerov, "On Metaphor," in *Reflexions on Poetry & Poetics* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1972), p. 33.

9. Marianne Moore, "Poetry," in *A College Book of Modern Verse*, ed. by

Somewhat darker is the image offered by the theologian and literary critic, Stanley Romaine Hopper. In one of his essays,<sup>10</sup> he discusses metaphor as a kind of thinking and speaking which creates space for being to come to presence. That is, metaphoric consciousness violates or breaks through those frameworks of interpretation which we absolutize to such an extent that they become the unconscious presupposition of all our thinking. Metaphor places us forcefully in what has been called, variously, the "between," the "gap," the "rift," the "boundary," the "abyss" — in Hopper's words, a gap between the perceiver and that which is perceived, between identity and difference, between self-identity and openness.

Of course, as I hope you can hear, to speak about metaphor abstractly is to perpetuate the very kind of thinking which radical metaphor militates against. To speak about figure without figures is to miss the point. Professor Hopper knows this, and turns to the beast. The setting is a conversation among certain Zen masters.

Goso said: "It's like a buffalo passing through a window. His head, horns, and four legs have all passed through. Why is it that its tail cannot?" Master Dogen says: "The tail is the mind which knows neither passing nor not passing. This world is but the tail of a buffalo passing through a window." Master Hoen says: "The tail is nothing else than the formless form of reality." Master Hakuin writes: "Always the same is the moon before the window. Yet, if there is only a plum branch, it is no longer the same." Comment: "If to this tail anything at all is added, its true form of no-form is lost." Hakuin adds: "Goso likes the tail that cannot pass through. As for me, I like the tail that can pass through."<sup>11</sup>

Professor Hopper remarks: "Metaphor is perpetually running the buffalo through windows."<sup>12</sup>

A still more violent play on the violent play of language is offered by the literary critic, J. Hillis Miller. In an essay on Wallace Stevens' poem "The Rock," Miller remarks that, in a poem, even the most innocent-looking words can become "momentarily nodes, at once fixed rock and treacherous abyss of doubled and

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James K. Robinson and Walter B. Rideout (New York: Harper and Row, 1958), p. 325.

10. Stanley Romaine Hopper, "The Bucket as it Is," in *Metaphor and Beyond: Conversations with Stanley Romaine Hopper*, ed. by Mark D. Lombard (Syracuse University Department of Religion, 1979), pp. 5-47.

11. *Ibid.*, pp. 40-41.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 41.

redoubled meanings, around or over which the thought of the poet momentarily swirls or weaves its web."<sup>13</sup> He says further that such words "May not be translated, and thereby made transparent, dispensed with, evaporated, sublimated."<sup>14</sup> He then offers *his* beast, which is, miraculously, *both* man *and* beast at the same time.

Miller conjures up a New Yorker cartoon by Charles Addams which shows "the receding reflections in doubled mirrors of a man in a barber chair, facing frontwards, then backwards, then frontwards again, in endless recession. One figure in the midst of the sequence, five images back into the mirror's depths, is a wolfman with fangs and a hairy face. The wolfman is the terrifying item which is part of the series but does not fit it, though he is neither its beginning, nor its end, nor its base."<sup>15</sup> The wolfman shatters the hypnotic repetition of the mirror's reflections. He refuses to allow for neat symmetry — or perhaps he makes it possible to see the pattern at all. In either case, reflecting seems to be a fearful process. It is not quite canny. There is a wolfman lurking within our efforts to structure experience.

But, in the cartoon's reflections, the wolfman's face is one of *our* faces. Does this mean that there is something irrational about our reflecting? Or do the images of reflection sometimes *seem* irrational because we resist their equivocal character, covering them over with propositions and neat assertions, shaving the hairy face?

The play of language is beginning to seem less playful than sparrows dipped in raspberry juice. Perhaps the darkest image of all is offered by Maxine Hong Kingston in her book, *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts*. The passage which I am about to quote is a figure for memory itself, which Plato said was the truest kind of knowing.<sup>16</sup> In Kingston's novel about ghosts, the following ghost figures all the ghostly images which haunt our thinking. It is bestial, of course.

Kingston begins this extended image by noting that her mother was capable of eating ghosts. Then, she says, at certain moments,

I would hear my mother's monkey story. I'd take my fingers out of my ears and let her monkey words enter my brain. I did not always listen voluntarily, though. She would begin telling the story, perhaps repeating it to a homesick villager, and I'd overhear before I had a chance to protect myself. Then the

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13. Miller, "Stevens' Rock and Criticism as Cure," p. 7.

14. *Ibid.*

15. *Ibid.*, p. 15.

16. See, for example, *Phaedo* 73-76; *Meno* 81c-85b.

monkey words would unsettle me; a curtain flapped loose inside my brain. I have wanted to say, 'Stop it. Stop it,' but not once did I say, 'Stop it.'

'Do you know what people in China eat when they have the money?' my mother began. 'They buy into a monkey feast. The eaters sit around a thick wood table with a hole in the middle. Boys bring in the monkey at the end of a pole. Its neck is in a collar at the end of the pole, and it is screaming. Its hands are tied behind it. They clamp the monkey into the table; the whole table fits like another collar around its neck. Using a surgeon's saw, the cooks cut a clean line in a circle at the top of its head. To loosen the bone, they tap with a tiny hammer and wedge here and there with a silver pick. Then an old woman reaches out her hand to the monkey's face and up to its scalp, where she tufts some hairs and lifts off the lid of the skull. The eaters spoon out the brains.'

Did she say, 'You should have seen the faces the monkey made'? Did she say, 'The people laughed at the monkey screaming'? It was alive? The curtain flaps inside my brain closed like merciful black wings.<sup>17</sup>

This is a dangerous ghost, difficult to eat. Were one to imagine that this is what thinking and speaking are like, it would truly give pause. Perhaps it would even provoke a shaving of the wolfish face in the mirror and a closing of the black curtains in the mind. This is the danger of the beast . . . yet this beast has a beauty, too. Encountering an image like this, the reader falls into the text, and the words begin to show their animal faces, taking on a writhing, twisting life of their own. Such word-images become an indelible part of imagining — or perhaps they are imagining itself.

## II

### *Adam's Beasts, The Imagination, and Soul*

The French poet Valéry once said that "language is the beautiful chains which entangle the distracted God in the flesh."<sup>18</sup> Who is this distracted God, entangled in the flesh of his speaking? For some ancient authors in the Western tradition, this entangled God was Adam, and I would like to turn now not only to the book of Genesis, where Adam plays out his dramatic bestial role, but also

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17. Kingston, *The Woman Warrior*, pp. 107-8.

18. Quoted by Norman O. Brown, *Life Against Death* (New York: Random House, 1959), p. 73.

to certain Greek interpreters of Adam, who have let the sensuous force of Adam's story play through themselves in remarkable variations on the animal theme.

As Genesis says, in Eden Adam named the beasts, and was tempted into knowledge by the wiliest beast of them all.<sup>19</sup> In the Hebrew original, God gives Adam the beasts, to see what he will call them, and whatever he called the beasts, that was their name. The Greek rendition of Genesis in the Septuagint gave this story an interesting twist. There God gives Adam the beast, as in the Hebrew original. But what Adam names is "the living soul."<sup>20</sup> What was Adam doing when he named the living soul, the beasts? Was he, as Howard Nemerov has suggested, pointing to the "gorgeous or powerful or merely odd emanations of our as yet undivided selves"?<sup>21</sup> Further, what was *God* doing when he made "coats of skins" for this living soul now endowed with bestial names? It seems to have been the Biblical intuition that we are involved with the beast, and that this involvement is a knowledge as intimate as a name, a knowledge which finally casts us out into the "cursed ground" of our living selves, sheathed by the animal.

Such questions — what was Adam doing, what was God doing — were precisely the kind of questions which were asked by Origen of Alexandria, the third-century Christian Neoplatonist who flirted with Gnostic thinking. Origen seems to have known what Rilke later wrote in the *Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, that "before one can write a single verse, one must get to know the animals."<sup>22</sup> For, running through his always imaginative, often phantasmal, metaphoric glosses on Scripture is an intrigue with the animals which writhe and twist there.

For Origen, animals are "chimeras and fantastic monsters of the mind."<sup>23</sup> Theologically, their gruntings and brayings and hissings and howlings give voice to aspects of soul — in particular, to the abysmally diverse nature, the *pathos*, the instinctual existence of the soul which is not one, but many. Origen describes Scriptural animals variously as our "unreasoning instincts"; as daimons which "stir up" our bestial imaginings; as bodily affections; as "dispositions of the soul and the thought of the heart."<sup>24</sup> Rarely

19. Gen. 2:19-20; 3:1-7.

20. "psyche zosa."

21. Nemerov, "On Metaphor," p. 36.

22. Rainer Maria Rilke, *Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, trans. by M.D. Herter Norton (New York: W. W. Norton, 1949), p. 26.

23. The phrase is Montaigne's, in *Essays*, trans. by Donald M. Frame (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1960), 1, 26.

24. Origen *Contra Celsum* 4.81 and *De prin.* 3.1.2; *Contra Celsum* 4.92-93;

does Origen speak about animals from the objective stance of an Aristotelian naturalist. For him the world of the beasts is an interior geography of the human soul. It is the ark of our covenant with the serpent, but also the firmament of our heavenly gifts from the Creator.<sup>25</sup> Animals are the bestial clothing of the soul, the almost innumerable "coats of skins" whose layers give shape to an inner cosmos: "Understand that you have within yourself herds of cattle . . . flocks of sheep and flocks of goats . . . and that the birds of the air are also within you . . . You see that you have all those things which the world has."<sup>26</sup>

So, for Origen, the beasts form a zoological garden of the soul, the swarming, creeping, slithering chaos of the mind made in the image of God which has not yet achieved his likeness. But animals are not merely faces of the soul; they are also figures for the working of the human imagination. Often in Origen's writings, animal figures are parabolic.<sup>27</sup> They are ways of expressing the soul's roaming, its quest for its true nature. Animal images, then, have a place in the tropical density of Origen's interpretative theories, which have to do not only with *how* we look at texts, but also with *what* we are doing when we look.

Bestial images are phantasms — "chimeras and fantastic monsters of the mind" — but it is precisely in that realm of *phantasia* that soul begins to move toward self-knowledge. Beasts are the tropes of our imaginative looking; they are metaphors for thinking about thinking.

For Origen, soul is mind embodied. There are several kinds of "bodies" in which minds find themselves — ethereal, aerial, earthy, demonic, and so on — which represent the character of the mind's thoughts.<sup>28</sup> "Body" is a metaphor for a way of thinking, so that the variety of embodied minds which one finds in Origen's writings form the pleroma of the soul's dispositions.<sup>29</sup> Body and mind come together as soul, and soul is the carrier of our perceptions about the nature of things, including ourselves.

The most basic character of soul is imaginative.<sup>30</sup> We perceive through fantasies, whose images Origen describes as "bodily

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*Hom. in Gen.* 1.17; *Hom. in Gen.* 1.16.

25. *Hom. in Gen.* 1.8; 2.6.

26. *Hom. in Lev.* 5.2.

27. *Contra Celsum* 4.87.

28. See *De prin.* 1.4; 1.8.4.

29. For an extended discussion, see Patricia Cox, "In My Father's House Are Many Dwelling Places': *ktisma* in Origen's *De principiis*," *Anglican Theological Review* 62 (October, 1980), 322-37.

30. *De prin.* 3.1.2-3.

affections."<sup>31</sup> These bodily affections are the beasts, the *pathemata* of soul which can either devour or nourish, depending upon how we interact with them.<sup>32</sup> Thinking, then, is an act of imagining, and the beasts form the "body" of our untamed thoughts. It is in the imaginal realm of soul that we learn how to wear our animal skins. The ways in which we wear them give shape to that "immense, monstrous animal,"<sup>33</sup> the universe of our soulful quest for understanding. What Adam named, God clothed and set free: the ravening longings of the soul to know itself.

Clement of Alexandria said that Adam "uttered prophecies" when he named the animals,<sup>34</sup> and Origen seems to have been following in that tradition when he suggested that the "breath of God" which made man "a living soul" may have been the (prophetic) Spirit of God, "in view of the fact that Adam is found to have uttered certain prophecies."<sup>35</sup> If Origen means, like Clement, the prophecies regarding the bestial names, he has linked the animal imagination with the Spirit in us. We are spirited by the beasts, whose passionate nature is the life of soul.

Origen knew that the passions are divine blessings, bestial food given to man by the grace of God.<sup>36</sup> But he also knew that these divine beasts have a monstrous side. We have a tendency to make the animal more divine than the human, turning our irrational thoughts into concrete actions, making the trope literal.<sup>37</sup> We forget to think. We lose the scent of the spirit's breath in the beast's panting. The kingdom of the Spirit within is the hunting ground of beasts, but we need not fall prey to its chimeras. As Jesus says in the *Gospel of Thomas*, "Blessed is the lion that the man will devour, and the lion will become man. And loathsome is the man that the lion will devour, and the lion will become man."<sup>38</sup> The man who devours the lion, who "reduces the Monster to himself,"<sup>39</sup> knows like Origen that his bestial names figure the passionate realities of being human in the world.

Within and through the animal, Adam turns the world to trope

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31. *Hom. in Gen.* 1.17.

32. *De prin.* 1.8.4; 2.9.2; 4.4.10.

33. *Ibid.*, 2.1.3.

34. *Stromata* 1.135.3.

35. *De prin.* 1.3.6.

36. *Hom. in Gen.* 1.17.

37. *Contra Celsum* 4.92-93.

38. *Gospel of Thomas*, logion 7, in James M. Robinson, ed., *The Nag Hammadi Library* (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), p.118.

39. The phrase is Wallace Stevens', in "The Man With The Blue Guitar," XIX, p.175.



— or so Origen seems to have thought. But certainly the bestial Adam turning within Origen provoked a poetry of interpretative vision and even what one might call a subversive love for the creative possibilities of the word.

From an Origenist perspective, seeing through the animal names seems to involve a creation, and a *poiesis*. One of Origen's loves, Plato, had described the dream as the place where the beastly and savage part of the soul gambols.<sup>40</sup> Having already described the soul as a "many-headed beast,"<sup>41</sup> Plato now suggests that what the dream holds is a lawless brood of desires. Dream-images are beasts glutted with food and blood. Origen, we might say, was glutted with the food and blood of the Scriptural texts, which he treats as though they were dreams, lawless broods of images within which he turned, spinning intricate webs of meaning. Like Adam, Origen was a distracted God, entangled in the fleshy insides of words, the "beautiful chains" of language.<sup>42</sup>

### III

#### *Pathos and the Bestial Image*

Perhaps Norman O. Brown was thinking in this Origenist fashion about the interior spaces of the beast when he wrote the following aphorism:

Turning and turning in the animal belly . . . The way out: the poem.<sup>43</sup>

Turning with this aphorism, we find ourselves in the belly of the beast. We are placed, and find our place, according to Brown, in a bestial vessel, and it is a vessel defined not by its exterior but by the movement which happens in its inner spaces. The animal belly is a void, an abyss in which a turning takes place. The turnings in this bestial emptiness give shape to the void — coils, labyrinths, serpentine tracings.

This turning which shapes by its sensuous indirection is the way out, the poem, which is, curiously, another way in. For the poem is itself a beast, harboring within its bestial body vast empty spaces where its images writhe and twist together, marking and remarking the traces of the deep.

40. Plato *Republic* IX, 571c.

41. *Ibid.*, 588c.

42. See p. 7 above.

43. Norman O. Brown, *Love's Body* (New York: Vintage Books, 1966), p. 56.

As the poem is an animal belly, so the animal belly is the poem — if only we will turn in the right way; turning, not to escape, but to dwell more deeply in the inner spaces, where the turning is.

To say “bestial” is to suggest “pathological,” as Origen knew. Bestial images, like Brown’s animal belly, are pathologized images. They are, for thinkers like Origen, Plotinus, and certain Gnostic authors, the body of our *pathos*, where *pathos* is considered to be a profound interior bond to soul’s experience. In traditional philosophical terms, the word *pathos* is defined as affection.<sup>44</sup> As it is used by these ancient thinkers, pathetic affection is an embrace of those moods, emotions, and thoughts which stir the soul deeply.

Fundamental to strenuously pathologized images — the shining fireface of the *Apocryphon of John*, for example<sup>45</sup> — is a prodding of the soul lost in its literal perspectives on life’s meaning. Animal images are pathologized images which provoke movement in the soul stuck in the coagulations of physical, merely material realities. They skin this perspective alive, releasing the soul into other ways of seeing. As one scholar has suggested, pathetic images “express the decomposition of the natural: they are images which do not and cannot take place in the natural world.”<sup>46</sup>

Rufinus’ translation of a passage in Origen’s *De principiis* makes this bestial point with an appropriately bestial vocabulary. “Images drag the soul,” says the text.<sup>47</sup> The Latin verb which Rufinus has chosen for the action of images on the soul is *rapio*, which carries the following meanings: “seize and carry off,” “snatch,” “tear,” “drag,” “ravish,” “ravage,” “plunder,” “take by assault.”<sup>48</sup> Lurking behind the Latin is the Greek *harpe*: the bird of prey (also elephant-goad and hippopotamus’ tooth!).<sup>49</sup> Images are the mind’s harpies, pecking and tearing at our material, merely natural obsessions, forcing us to let go our grasping ways.

Such images are pathetic beasts. They are both coarse and subtle bodies: coarse in their violent provocations, subtle in their poetic bearing of inner worlds where the whispers and echoes of the soul’s presence to itself can be heard. What they bear are perspectives on *how* the soul is present to itself — and for one

44. Liddell, Scott, and Jones, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, s.v. “*pathos*.”

45. *Apocryphon of John* 11, in Robinson, ed., *Nag Hammadi Library*, p. 105.

46. James Hillman, *Re-Visioning Psychology* (New York: Harper and Row, 1975), p. 91.

47. Origen *De prin.* 3.4.4.

48. Lewis and Short, *A Latin Dictionary*, s.v. “*rapio*.”

49. Liddell, Scott, and Jones, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, s.v. “*harpe*.”

ancient author, this presence is the presencing of God, the man-eater, in the human soul.<sup>50</sup>

The same author who pictures God as a monstrous man-eater has an unusual vision of Paradise. "There are two trees growing in Paradise," says the *Gospel of Philip*. "The one bears animals, the other bears men. Adam ate from the tree which bore animals. He became an animal and brought forth animals. For this reason the children of Adam worship animals."<sup>51</sup> The eating from the animal tree was Adam's fall. What Adam beheld when he woke from his Paradisal innocence were monstrous images and bestial forms — including, perhaps, the man-eating nature of God himself.

Truth, according to the *Gospel of Philip*, does not come naked; it comes in "types and images."<sup>52</sup> What is the resurrection? "The image must rise again through the image."<sup>53</sup> The coarse body must become a subtle body. Adam's real sin was not that he brought forth animals, for the animals are his children, and his children are described as his "accomplishments." "They originate in a moment of ease." "You will find," says this author, "that this applies directly to the image. Here is the man made after the image accomplishing things with his physical strength, but producing his children with ease."<sup>54</sup>

Adam's real sin was not his bestial imagination; it was, rather, his failure to let go of the images once they appeared. He worshipped them, and they became opaque idols.

Adam forgot that, lying latent, ready to pounce within the comfort of our material sleep, is the bestial violence of insight, the prowling animal of imagination, the raw insides of words which, finally, insist upon the lack of innocence which characterizes every attempt to fix meaning. There is always an abyss lurking within our efforts to structure experience. "If you become horse or ass or bull or dog or sheep or another of the animals which are outside or below, then neither human being nor spirit nor thought nor light will be able to love you. Neither those who belong above nor those who belong within will be able to rest in you, and you have no part in them."<sup>55</sup>

Adam's goal, for the *Gospel of Philip*, is to eat from the human tree. It is "to make the things below like the things above, and the

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50. *Gospel of Philip* 63, in Robinson, ed., *Nag Hammadi Library*, P. 138.

51. *Ibid.*, 71, p. 143.

52. *Ibid.*, 67, p. 140.

53. *Ibid.*

54. *Ibid.*, 72, p. 143.

55. *Ibid.*, 79, p. 147.

things outside like those inside."<sup>56</sup> His task is not to turn away from the bestial bodies, but to turn within them. What Adam must suffer, pathetically, is that "truth is a life-eater";<sup>57</sup> it is a "law of shadowing"<sup>58</sup> which makes of every image a luminous body of reflections within reflections, of "visions envisioning the soul itself."<sup>59</sup> The truth eats life by depriving our reflections of safe resting-places; it devours all of our efforts to secure what is present by noting what is absent; finally, it shatters even those pathetic images which bore it into consciousness. For just as the abysmal truth of our reality is the secret generator of the images which embody it, so also is it their secret destroyer. Perhaps the *Gospel of Philip* describes truth as a life-eater because truth seems destructive and subversive. Its call is not to see images, but to see through them; it dwells in the moment when the world disappears into meaning; and it loves nothing so much as the twists and turns of a paradoxical figure: the luminous body, the invisible image, the silent word.

#### IV

##### *Traces of a Bestial God*

##### *In Image, Imagination, and Serpentine Speech*

Twisting and turning — what was on that animal tree from which Adam ate? The *Gospel of Philip* does not say. Its author was concerned with the first step of establishing the bestial fruit of the tree and Adam's involvement with it.

Mircea Eliade and C. G. Jung, however, have both remarked that philosophical or world trees are almost always associated with animals, and, with surprising frequency, with particular animals — serpents and dragons.<sup>60</sup> As in Genesis, trees of wisdom are laced about by serpents, who guard the words of life.

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56. *Ibid.*, 67, p. 141.

57. *Ibid.*, 73, p. 144.

58. For a discussion of the "law of shadowing," see J. Hillis Miller, "The Critic as Host," in Harold Bloom et al., *Deconstruction and Criticism* (New York: Seabury Press, 1979), pp. 217-53.

59. The phrase is Heidegger's, in *What Is Called Thinking?*, trans. by J. Glenn Gray (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), p. 140, where Heidegger is referring to the "wealth of images" which the soul "pours forth."

60. See Mircea Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion* (New York: Meridian Books, 1963), ch. 8: "Vegetation: Rites and Symbols of Regeneration," pp. 265-330, and various passages in his *Shamanism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972). Jung's discussion is in *Alchemical Studies*, The Collected Works of C. G. Jung, Vol. 13 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), Part V: "The Philosophical Tree," pp. 251-349.

One of the *Gospel of Philip's* Gnostic predecessors, a teacher named Justinus, suggested that the serpent in Eden *was* the tree of knowledge.<sup>61</sup> Yet another twisting of the serpentine image has been offered by the poet Robert Duncan, in his "Narrative Bridges for *Adam's Way*." Envisioning Adam before the tree in Paradise, Duncan writes about the tree's inhabitant: ". . . the Serpent, the hydra Wisdom in the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, that multiplies, rising until his snakey heads brood in all the lights and centers of our being, and to certain sleights of hand and meaning therein."<sup>62</sup> Duncan goes on to suggest that Adam's encounter with the serpent is his "awakening" to the "depths and distances" within himself. Adam awakens to his bestial self, the "snakey heads" which brood within. It is a rude awakening, this coming face-to-face with serpentine wisdom:

Perhaps, before the betrayal of the Creator's secrets, Adam was no more than a reflection of his maker, having within no inkling of depths or distances. But now, toucht by the dragon's cold, the lingering knowledge of old orders in their extinction, he must reflect himself upon that which he is a reflection of. Creature of the creative angst, he is drawn into the magic of (the anxiety of), the creation of — his Self.<sup>63</sup>

In Eden, Adam was touched by "the dragon's cold," by the fierce power of that primal serpent which, for Duncan, gives image to the coiling shape of our knowing.

Perhaps the brooding which Adam's encounter with the primal serpent brings is a bestial music, like Stevens' "worm composing upon a straw." Such was the thought of "Hermes Trismegistus" in the *Poimandres*. In this Hermetic treatise, an initiate seeking wisdom receives a vision "without limit, all becoming light." Within this light, however, a darkness "winds towards the depths," a darkness wound round in "torturous spirals like a serpent," breathing a vapor of fire. From this frightening apparition there issues "a voice of fire," described as a "loud cry," an inarticulate sound." This vision, says Hermes Trismegistus, is a vision of Mind (*Noûs*), and the resounding cry which issues from the dark serpent is the "luminous Word, the son of God."<sup>64</sup>

61. Hippolytus *Refutation of All Heresies* 5.21.

62. Robert Duncan, "Narrative Bridges for *Adam's Way*," in *Bending the Bow* (New York: New Directions, 1963), p. 106.

63. Duncan, "Narrative Bridges," p. 108.

64. *Poimandres* 1-6, in *Corpus Hermeticum*, Vol. 1 (Paris: Société D'Édition "Les Belles Lettres", 1946) (trans. and ed. by A. D. Nock and A. J. Festugière), pp. 7-8.

As with Stevens' bestial music, so here there is an abysmal figuration of meaning. The inarticulate sound of the beast, the divine son, the winding monster, all give light and fire to the *Poimandres'* thought about thought itself. When Mind speaks, it is serpentine music. The luminous word which is the child of God proceeds from the mouth of the dragon primeval.

According to the *Poimandres*, then, when Mind shows itself, it is a winding serpent. The endless "reflections within reflections" which characterize our knowing are imaged here by that most ancient of abysmal images, the dragon, whose way with man is dark, tortured, spiraling, — and divine.

"Hermes Trismegistus" was not the only thinker in his time to imagine an intimate connection between God, wisdom, and the dragon. Origen of Alexandria, for example, was interested in the Biblical dragon, Leviathan. With Psalm 103 in mind, he says: "The Jewish scriptures, with a hidden meaning in mind, said that this Leviathan was formed by God as a plaything."<sup>65</sup> The dragon, it would seem, is God's play in the world; or, God's play in the creation is serpentine. But this is not all, for Origen suggests that the Psalmist had a hidden meaning in mind, and, in a curious passage in his long meditation on John 1:1, "In the beginning," Origen may be suggesting one way of imagining that meaning.

In his *Commentary on John*, Origen, following Job 40.19 (LXX), says that the dragon is "the beginning of the creation of the Lord, made for the sport of the angels."<sup>66</sup> After a brief discussion, he quotes another Old Testament passage about the beginning, this one from Proverbs 8:22, where Lady Wisdom says: "The Lord made me as the beginning of his ways for his works." Like Hermes Trismegistus and Robert Duncan, Origen has brought the dragon and wisdom face-to-face. Although he has not made their connection explicit, these two images, Sophia and the dragon, jostle one another in rather close quarters in his discussion. It is tempting to imagine that, here too, the play of divine wisdom in the world is serpentine.

A final spiraling image from Greek antiquity will bring us back to our beginning, to that metaphoric play of wisdom in the word which was likened to "a snake almost succeeding in getting its tail in its mouth."<sup>67</sup> The thinker to whom we now turn is Plotinus, who knew like Origen that there is something truly pathetic — ravishing and ravaging — about the word-images which bear our

65. Origen *Contra Celsum* 6.25.

66. Origen *Commentary on John* 1.17.

67. See p. 165 above.

reflections on the nature of things.

Speaking in *Ennead* 5 about that groundless ground, the primal no-thing which he calls "The One," Plotinus finds himself in agony for a true expression.<sup>68</sup> Speaking is an agony; the *topos* of language is an *agon*. Yet Plotinus wrestles with his interpretative expressions anyway, in spite of his agony. He suggests that perhaps the phrase "beyond being" is the best name for that abysmal reality which, he says, "coils" around us.<sup>69</sup> Primal reality is serpentine, and "beyond being" is the best name for it because such a name "assigns no character, makes no assertion, allots no name, carries only the denial of particular being; and in this there is no attempt to circumscribe it; to seek to throw a line about that illimitable nature would be folly, and anyone thinking to do so cuts himself off from any slightest and most momentary approach to its least vestige."<sup>70</sup> Our inclination, of course, is to think positively of this primal nothing, but Plotinus says that "there would be more truth in silence . . . For this is a principle not to be conveyed by any sound; it cannot be known on any hearing but, if at all, by vision; and to hope in that vision to see a form is to fail of even that."<sup>71</sup>

How, then, can we speak, and what do we know? According to Plotinus, "outflowings" from The One "break into speech."<sup>72</sup> Like Hillis Miller, Plotinus knew that language plays through man. It is, however, a violent play, for what comes to us are the "strikes and stings" of being which give the "impress" (*pathema*) of reality.<sup>73</sup> Plotinus has a bestial word for these strikes and stings which bear the real: it is *ichnos*, the "footprint" or "trace" which a beast leaves behind. Existence itself, he says, is a "trace" of The One.<sup>74</sup> Thus what we know and speak are the traces of the coiling abyss.

When this bestial word appears in Plotinus' writings, it is generally used metaphorically, as in Wisdom of Sirach 50:29: "The light of God is his *ichnos*." This trace is not a vestige or remnant of some higher form of ontological reality, nor is it a way, a form, which one can imitate. It is not a loop around the abyss, which Plotinus called folly. Rather, the traces are like what Rilke called "A breath for nothing. A wafting in the God. A wind."<sup>75</sup> To be stung

68. Plotinus *Ennead* 5.5.6.

69. *Ibid.*, 5.5.9.

70. *Ibid.*, 5.5.6.

71. *Ibid.*

72. *Ibid.*, 5.5.5.

73. *Ibid.*, 6.6.12.

74. *Ibid.*, 5.5.5.

75. Rilke, *Sonnets to Orpheus* 1.3, trans. by M. D. Herter Norton (New York: W. W. Norton, 1962), p. 21.

by a trace entails a willingness to listen to the word of fire proceeding from the dragon, or, like Wallace Stevens, to like words to sound wrong.<sup>76</sup> This kind of knowing is a learning of what is unspoken, a being touched by the presence of what is absent. As Plotinus would say, it is giving a name to the nameless, a face to what is fundamentally faceless — and to *know* that that is what one is doing. The traces are images, momentary lightbearers which fade, leaving however the shadow of presence, a meaningful phantom, a coiling serpent.

All of the thinkers who have spoken in this essay seem to agree that there is a wise serpent in every Adam, and that listening to that beast involves an agonizing fall into a particular perspective on language.

The original mistake in every sentence: metaphor. Metaphor consists in giving the thing a name that belongs to something else . . . The original sentence, the original metaphor: Thou art that . . . Metaphor is mistake or impropriety; a faux pas, a slip of the tongue; a little madness; *petit mal*; a little seizure or inspiration.<sup>77</sup>

The chord that falsifies, magnifies, such that when Adam wakes to the dragons in his speaking, there is angelic play.

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76. See p. 166 above.

77. Brown, *Love's Body*, p. 244.