

# Juridisk Publikation

STOCKHOLM - UPPSALA - LUND - GÖTEBORG - UMEÅ

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The Case of E. B. White

Särtryck ur häfte 1/2019

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Nummer 1/2019

# TALKING ANIMALS AND THE INTERNATIONALIST LIBERAL IMAGINATION: THE CASE OF E. B. WHITE

By Mark S. Weiner<sup>1</sup>

*This essay considers the significance of the literary representation of talking animals for the legal ideals of midcentury liberal internationalism. Its purpose is to contribute to the cultural history of international law. It does so by reflecting on the conceptual and aesthetic links between the American author E. B. White's classic children's stories *Stuart Little* (1945) and *Charlotte's Web* (1952) and his analysis of: 1) the rules of English prose, in the treatise *The Elements of Style* (1959), and 2) the establishment of the United Nations, about which he wrote extensively. The method of the essay is that of literary analysis, which examines an author's use of and approach to language. In White's view, good English style and sustainable international order both depended on the creation of "hard" rules enforceable, respectively, through critical literary judgment and global legal institutions. White's contemporaneous depiction of anthropomorphic animal speech invites readers to imagine a humankind that has transcended the particularity of nationalism—a global civilization to be forged through the application of critical reading practices within a rules-based international order.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

In this essay, I consider a previously neglected feature of the cultural history of the "rules-based international order" that liberals constructed after World War II.<sup>2</sup> I do so by reflecting on the imaginative link between the literary representation of talking animals and the advocacy of strict rules of English prose style in the work of a prominent American advocate of international

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<sup>2</sup> G. John Ikenberry, *Liberal Leviathan: The Origins, Crisis, and Transformation of the American World Order* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012).

law: the beloved writer E. B. White (1899–1985).<sup>3</sup> An author closely associated with the region of New England, and specifically with the bucolic state of Maine, where he owned a farm and lived for much of his life, White is best known outside the United States for his children’s stories *Stuart Little* and *Charlotte’s Web*, which feature animals capable of fully human speech.<sup>4</sup> I believe that White’s depiction of talking animals provided an important vehicle for advancing liberal jurisprudential aspirations in the realm of popular narrative fiction, especially the effort to constrain national sovereignty within international institutions such as the United Nations. These institutions, for White, could only be sustained through critical reading practices and strict rules of language, of which he also was a renowned proponent. By exploring the relation between the role that animals play in White’s work and his approach to questions of English style, one can better appreciate not only White’s social and political thought—internationalist, individualist, anti-communist, and deeply critical of the United Nations for falling short of its legal and political potential—but also how even a literary form as distant from matters of war and peace as children’s literature forms part of the cultural foundations for the popular internationalist legal imagination.

## 2. WHITE ON PROSE: A RULES MAN

Even more than his success as a writer for children, White was one of the great essayists of the twentieth century, praised for his wit and humanity—and his mastery of English prose. Indeed, in the United States he is celebrated by generations of students and teachers for *The Elements of Style*, an updated edition of a collegiate primer on rhetoric by William Strunk, or as White approvingly calls him, “Sergeant Strunk”.<sup>5</sup> This slim volume lies at the heart of post-war American non-fiction; certainly it is common for authors who attended college sometime between the early 1960s and the late 1980s to declare that they learned the essentials of their craft from the eponymous “Strunk & White”.<sup>6</sup> The book’s significance lies in its “fundamentalist” approach to English style, which White proudly advocated in opposition to the more permissive attitude toward the language embodied in *Webster’s Third* dictionary, published

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3 See Scott Elledge, *E. B. White: A Biography* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1986) and Melissa Sweet, *Some Writer!: The Story of E. B. White* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2016).

4 E. B. White, *Stuart Little* (New York: Harper & Row, 1945); *Charlotte’s Web* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1952).

5 E. B. White and William Strunk, *The Elements of Style* (New York: Macmillan, 1959); William Strunk, *The Elements of Style* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Howe, 1920); E. B. White and William Strunk, *The Elements of Style* (New York: Macmillan, 1979), pp. xii–xiii.

6 Erik M. Jensen, *E. B. White Could Nod Too: Thoughts Occasioned by Reading “Death of a Pig”*, *Journal of Legal Education* 66 (2) (2017), pp. 409–420.

contemporaneously.<sup>7</sup> In its more modern view of lexicography, *Webster's Third* had embraced description over prescription, and it rejected what its editor called "artificial notions of correctness or superiority" in usage.<sup>8</sup>

White was a rules man, and his principles of composition are succinct and unbending: use the active voice. Write with nouns and verbs. Put statements in positive form. Place a comma before a conjunction introducing an independent clause. And the most essential: use definite, specific, concrete language.<sup>9</sup> The advice with which he concludes *The Elements of Style* is characteristic of his principled approach (and also is redolent of a familiar New England spirit) in being earthy and homespun yet thoroughly uncompromising. Mixing military and animal metaphors, he counsels the aspiring writer—who by then ought to be "armed with the rules of grammar"—to "pattern himself on the fully exposed cow of Robert Louis Stevenson's rhyme": "blown by all the winds that pass/And wet with all the showers", yet steadfast, unbroken in its routine.<sup>10</sup> In White's view, for the writer to achieve clarity, grace, and power, it was necessary to follow the good Sergeant's orders.

### 3. A MOUSE BECOMES CHAIRMAN OF THE WORLD

Although *The Elements of Style* has been dethroned from its preeminent place in college instruction, *Charlotte's Web* and *Stuart Little* remain beloved—both stories, for instance, were recently made into successful Hollywood films.<sup>11</sup> One reason for their enduring popularity is how deftly they interweave the charming and the profound. The books are delightful, but they also explore weighty and distinctly literary themes, such as the centrality of language to self-realization. Most notable in this regard is the masterpiece *Charlotte's Web*, which tells the story of a friendship between a naïve pig named Wilbur and a wise spider named Charlotte, who is identified as a writer. Charlotte spells out words in block letters with her silken threads ("SOME PIG!", "TERRIFIC", "RADIANT") and thereby rescues Wilbur in both body and, notably, in spirit.<sup>12</sup> As a physical matter, she saves Wilbur from the slaughter

7 E. B. White, *The Points of My Compass* (New York: Harper & Row, 1961), p. 123; *Webster's Third New International Dictionary* (Springfield: G. & C. Merriam, 1961).

8 White, *Points of My Compass*, p. 123; but see Herbert Charles Morton, *The Story of Webster's Third: Philip Gove's Controversial Dictionary and its Critics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

9 Strunk and White, *The Elements of Style* (1979), pp. 18, 71, 19, 5 and 21.

10 *Ibid.*, p. 85; Robert Louis Stevenson, "The Cow", in *A Child's Garden of Verses* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1897), p. 27.

11 *Charlotte's Web* [film], directed by Gary Winick (Paramount Pictures, 2006); *Stuart Little* [film], directed by Rob Minkoff (Columbia Pictures, 1999).

12 White, *Charlotte's Web*, pp. 77, 94 and 114.

presaged in the propulsive first sentence of the story: “Where’s Papa going with that ax?”<sup>13</sup> Equally important, she saves him spiritually by using language to help him develop into mature consciousness and full subjectivity—that is, to help him grow up. “It is not often that someone comes along who is a true friend and a good writer”, the book concludes, bringing home its core literary theme. “Charlotte was both.”<sup>14</sup>

A far more chaotic work from the perspective of craft, *Stuart Little* follows the adventures of a young mouse who lives in a Manhattan apartment with his human parents, Mr. and Mrs. Little, and his older brother George. The turning-point in the story comes when Stuart runs away to search for a beautiful bird named Margalo, who had briefly taken up residence with the family. When mouse and bird first meet, Margalo introduces herself to Stuart “softly, in a musical voice” by explaining, “I come from fields once tall with wheat, from pastures deep in fern and thistle; I come from vales of meadowsweet, and I love to whistle”. Stuart recalls those words at the end of the book in a conversation with a telephone line repairman before he drives north in his miniature yellow car to continue searching for his avian Beatrice.<sup>15</sup> As in *Charlotte’s Web*, White uses *Stuart Little* to explore mature themes, chiefly related to memory, longing, and loss. Even more than *Charlotte’s Web*, though, the book slips a great deal between its adult and juvenile registers—and in so doing, it lays bare some of White’s core philosophical and aesthetic commitments. They are on display most powerfully in the chapter titled “The Schoolroom”, the eccentricity of which has occasioned remark by both readers and critics.<sup>16</sup>

Soon after beginning his quest for Margalo, Stuart sees a man sitting dejectedly at the side of the road.<sup>17</sup> He is the Superintendent of Schools for his town, and he complains to Stuart that one of his teachers, Miss Gunderson, has called in sick, and that no replacement is available. Stuart gamely offers to serve as a substitute, changing into “a pepper-and-salt jacket, old striped trousers, a Windsor tie, and spectacles”. After a fast-paced exchange with his students about a range of instructional topics, including spelling (“I strongly urge every one of you to buy a Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary and consult it whenever you are in the slightest doubt”, he counsels), Stuart asks the class to pretend that he is “Chairman of the World”. Accordingly, he directs the students to list

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13 Ibid., p. 1.

14 Ibid., p. 184.

15 White, *Stuart Little*, pp. 51 and 128.

16 Ibid., pp. 83–99; G. Douglas Atkins, *E. B. White: The Essayist as First-Class Writer* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), p. 32.

17 All quotations from *Stuart Little* below are from White, *Stuart Little*, pp. 83–99.

some basic values that should guide him in his office—or as he puts it, to tell him “what’s important”. The students quickly oblige, correctly identifying the important things as “a shaft of sunlight at the end of a dark afternoon, a note in music, the way the back of a baby’s neck smells if its mother keeps it tidy”, and “ice cream”. Is “a note in music” an allusion, perhaps, to Margalo’s whistle? In context, it surely possesses a parallel emotional significance as a symbol of spiritual yearning.

Next Stuart turns—rather jarringly for a children’s book—to legal issues. Specifically, he asks the class to propose some “good laws” that should be enacted for the planet. Otherwise, he explains, “it will be too confusing, with everyone running every which way and helping himself to things and nobody behaving”. The request naturally raises a larger jurisprudential issue: what is a good law and, for that matter, what makes law *law*?

In a madcap exchange, the students make five suggestions, of which Stuart approves of only two. Albert Fernstrom begins by proposing the law “Don’t eat mushrooms, they might be toadstools”. Stuart describes this as “very good advice”, but he counsels that “advice and law are not the same”. Law, explains Stuart, is “extremely solemn”. John Podowski is next: “Nix on swiping anything”, intones John—solemnly. “Very good”, replies Stuart. “Good law.” Then Anthony Brendisi—the names that White uses are a wonderfully American ethnic jumble—proposes: “Never poison anything but rats”. Stuart objects: “That’s no good. It’s unfair to rats. A law has to be fair to everybody”. Although rats are objectionable, and though Stuart is a mouse, he explains that as Chairman of the World he “has to see all sides to a problem”. Agnes Beretska raises her hand to recommend that “there ought to be a law against fighting”. Stuart dismisses this as impractical, because “men like to fight”, but he observes “you’re getting warm”. Mildred Hoffenstein makes the final suggestion: “absolutely no being mean”. Stuart isn’t sure whether the law will work. As one student notes, “some people are just naturally mean”. But he declares “it’s a good law, and we’ll give it a try”.

An experiment follows. Stuart orders Harry Jamieson to “do something mean” to Katharine Stableford. Katharine is holding a small scented pillow of the kind that once was common in New England and upstate New York gift shops. It is embroidered with the words “For you I pine, for you I balsam”: for you I *pine* (as in, the aromatic tree and the feeling of longing), for you I *balsam* (as in a flat-needled pine and “bawl some”, or cry a bit). The pillow is meant to conjure up memories of someone far away. Harry does as Stuart orders and steals the pillow. Stuart then consults the laws of the world: “Here we

are. Page 492. ‘Absolutely no being mean.’ Page 560. ‘Nix on swiping anything’”. He declares that Harry has broken two laws, and he orders the students to take action. The students jump up from their seats, race down the isle, and surround their classmate, who looks frightened. Stuart demands that he return the pillow, and he does. “There”, Stuart declares, “it worked pretty well. No being mean is a perfectly good law”.

The significance of this exchange is clarified by its contrast with another classic children’s tale about talking animals, *Alice in Wonderland*. In that work, Lewis Carroll uses nonsense and zany stories to explore the nature of a wide variety of rules, especially rules about language and legal process. Like Carroll, White loved nonsense, and seven years before he wrote *Stuart Little* he singled out Dr. Seuss among children’s authors for praise.<sup>18</sup> Yet there is something programmatic in Stuart’s discussion that sets him apart from Carroll’s literary creatures—most pertinently Mouse, whom the dog Fury seeks to “prosecute” by acting as both judge and jury.<sup>19</sup> Mouse’s story explodes the very idea of legal process. Stuart’s classroom teaching, humorous though it may be, directly advances a strongly normative, liberal view about the international legal order. In Stuart’s telling, international law ought to be: 1) based on shared beliefs about fundamental things, or “what’s important” (what today might be called common human values); 2) “solemn”—based on hard rules rather than flexible guidelines; 3) “fair to everybody”, treating all people, or all nations, equally, including rats (a classic liberal perspective); 4) “practical”, addressing only problems that can actually be solved; and 5) enforceable. In other words, “law” truly exists in Stuart’s view only when there are institutions that can apply force to vindicate it, as when his class compels Harry to give back Katharine’s pillow.<sup>20</sup>

In advancing a normative vision of law and justice, *Stuart Little* finds a parallel in an allegorical episode in the Swedish children’s book series about Pelle Svanslös, the tailless cat. In the second book of the series—published roughly contemporaneously to *Stuart Little*, in 1940—the evil cat Måns, often described as possessing character traits of German and Italian fascism, hosts a general knowledge quiz in the old barn on Övre Slottsgatan.<sup>21</sup> Måns has fixed the quiz to humiliate and embarrass the kind, handicapped Pelle.

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18 E. B. White, *One Man’s Meat* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1944), p. 25.

19 Lewis Carroll, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, edited by Donald J. Gray (New York: W. W. Norton, 1992), p. 25.

20 For an explicit comparison of international law and the “terrors of nationalism” to a children’s game, see E. B. White, *The Wild Flag* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1946), pp. 132–133.

21 On Måns and fascism, see, e.g., Unn Torell, *Karl för sin katt: Gösta Knutsson som vi inte minns honom* (Uppsala: Uppsala Publishing House, 2008), p. 108.

But his ruse is discovered by Gammel-Maja (Old Mary)—who, as “the Cathedral Cat”, is a feline representative of universal, rules-based, institutional authority.<sup>22</sup>

#### 4. WHITE ON INTERNATIONAL ORDER

To understand why White’s story contains a didactic concern with jurisprudence, and why it is meaningful that it is advanced by an animal capable of fluent speech, it is helpful to appreciate an aspect of the writer’s career that has been largely forgotten. White composed the bulk of *Stuart Little* in the winter of 1944, and during that time he also was writing extensively, in essays collected in *The Wild Flag*, about the emerging international order that would help keep the peace after World War II.<sup>23</sup> Revealingly, just after he gave his publisher the completed manuscript of *Stuart Little*, he took a train to San Francisco to serve as a reporter for *The New Yorker* covering the formation of the United Nations and the writing of its charter. “My editor ... had been urging me to finish the narrative, and I determined to put it off no longer”, he recalled in 1966. “Mornings I sat at a top-floor window looking out into West 11th Street and there I completed the story. I turned it in to Harper and then took a train to San Francisco, to join Stettinius, Molotov, Lawrence, Spivak, and that crowd, for the formation of the U.N.”<sup>24</sup>

In reporting on the work of “that crowd”, White was influenced especially by the theories of world federalism, a relatively obscure political movement today which had special purchase in the aftermath of the war.<sup>25</sup> The movement sought (and still seeks) to achieve world peace by creating institutions of global government—or as one prominent midcentury legal analyst put it, to create “world peace through world law”.<sup>26</sup> White read widely among its proponents, and once indicated that he would keep an almanac of their opinions “by the wood box in the kitchen”.<sup>27</sup> He was particularly taken with the writing of Emery Reves, author of *A Democratic Manifesto* and *The Anatomy of Peace*, calling the first volume “the best book on the war”.<sup>28</sup> Reves promoted the creation of international bodies that would vindicate their rules not only

22 Gösta Knutsson, *Further Adventures of Pelle No-Tail*, translated by Stephanie Smee and Ann-Margrete Smee (Carlton: Piccolo Nero, 2017), pp. 74–93.

23 White, *The Wild Flag*.

24 Elledge, *E. B. White*, p. 254.

25 Joseph Preston Baratta, *The Politics of World Federation*, 2 vols. (Westport: Praeger, 2004).

26 Grenville Clark, *World Peace Through World Law* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1958).

27 White, *The Wild Flag*, pp. 136–141.

28 Emery Reves, *A Democratic Manifesto* (New York: Random House, 1942); *The Anatomy of Peace* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1945); White, *The Wild Flag*, p. 4.



through economic incentives, pressure, and diplomatic persuasion, the stuff of standard international agreements, but also by the unhesitating use of military power: a global police force. Only then, he explained, would the world be truly governed by law. Accordingly, Reves also undertook a vigorous attack on the idea of national sovereignty, calling it the “Golden Calf” of the day (White deemed it a “dead cat”<sup>29</sup>). “No symbol carrying the pretension of a deity, which ever got hold of mankind”, he wrote, “caused so much misery, hatred, starvation and mass execution as the notion of ‘Sovereignty of the Nation’”.<sup>30</sup>

It was this internationalist legal ideal of global law and government that White had in mind in “The Schoolroom” chapter of *Stuart Little*. For White, a transactional approach to international relations was insufficient to protect “the ‘I’ in man which Hitler has set out to destroy”—to protect “the first person singular”—and to safeguard all the world’s peoples (including, for Stuart, rats).<sup>31</sup> “Government is the thing”, he asserted in the penultimate paragraph of *The Wild Flag*. “Law is the thing. Not brotherhood, not international co-operation.”<sup>32</sup> What was needed were objective, inflexible, normative rules of conduct whose meaning everyone could apprehend, and which when violated would be enforced by a world police force. Otherwise, humanity might just as well “retire from the field, to lie down with the dinosaur and the heath hen”.<sup>33</sup> As he put the matter in December 1944, just as he was completing the story of his yearning, questing mouse: “Our belief is that a just future lies through a federation of democratic countries, which differs from a league in that it has a legislature that can legislate, a judiciary that can judge, and an executive that can execute. It does not have to operate through diplomacy, and it has a No Fooling sign on the door”.<sup>34</sup>

On this view, the United Nations disappointed utterly, falling so far short of its potential that White objected to its very name: he thought “*Untied Nations*” or “*United Notions*” might be more appropriate.<sup>35</sup> His central criticism was that its rules were too open to interpretation: its charter used too many weasel words. White’s reportage thus involves him line-editing U.N. documents—bracing

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29 White, *The Wild Flag*, p. 4.

30 Reves, *A Democratic Manifesto*, p. 53.

31 White, *One Man’s Meat*, p. vii.

32 White, *The Wild Flag*, p. 187.

33 *Ibid.*, p. 188.

34 *Ibid.*, p. 47.

35 E. B. White, *The Points of My Compass* (New York: Harper & Row, 1961), p. 93 (emphasis added).

passages for readers who have grown up on his children's stories.<sup>36</sup> "The subtlest joker in the Charter", he argued, was the term "aggression", which was left vague. "This isn't surprising", he mused:

To define aggression, it is necessary to get into the realm of right and wrong, and the Charter of the United Nations studiously avoids this delicate area. It is also necessary to go back a way. Webster says of aggression, "A first or unprovoked attack." And that, you see, raises the old, old question of which came first, the hen or the egg.<sup>37</sup>

Such ambiguity had practical implications; most notably, it enabled the abuse of civil and political rights by the Soviet Union, whose appeasement by western powers White roundly deplored, especially after its invasion of Hungary.<sup>38</sup> But the consequences of ambiguity went well beyond the behavior of individual nations in particular conflicts. Open-ended language undermined the very possibility of legality by preventing rules from taking on an objective, normative, enforceable character. "To speak as though we had law", White protested, "when what we've got is treaties and pacts, to use the world 'law' for non-law, is to lessen our chances of ever getting law among peoples".<sup>39</sup> In the jurisprudential idiom of *Stuart Little*, White believed that the rules developed by the United Nations were nothing more than advice: "Don't eat mushrooms, they might be toadstools".<sup>40</sup>

## 5. IMAGINING GLOBAL GOVERNMENT

Yet if one of the great obstacles to constructing a global legal order was language, for White its solutions lay there as well, in both language and the imagination. In those solutions, the seemingly disparate elements of White's literary corpus are linked together in a worldview consonant with post-war internationalism. Most immediately, the path toward robust international institutions lay in the rhetorical commands of *The Elements of Style*—a book that in historical perspective comes into focus as a liberal, American parallel to George Orwell's roughly contemporary "Politics and the English Language".<sup>41</sup> "Some people, perhaps most people, think words are not really important", wrote White in *Points of My Compass*, reflecting

36 See, e.g., *ibid.*, p. 92.

37 *Ibid.*, pp. 95–96.

38 See *ibid.*, p. 94.

39 White, *The Wild Flag*, p. 7.

40 White, *Stuart Little*, p. 93.

41 George Orwell, "Politics and the English Language", *The New Republic* 114 (24) (1946), pp. 872–74.

specifically on the language of the United Nations, “but I am a word man and I attach the very highest importance to words”.<sup>42</sup>

Moreover—and more strikingly—in White’s own literary practice, one significant remedy for the lack of a global legal order lay in the imaginative perspective on human affairs fostered by his depiction of nature and animals.

The very title *The Wild Flag* highlights the deep interweaving in White’s mind of an international legal order and the natural world. The title comes from his description, on Christmas 1943, of “the dream we had, asleep in our chair”. The dream is that, “after the third war was over”, the delegates of the remaining eighty-three countries on earth gathered together to forge “a lasting peace”.<sup>43</sup> Each delegate brings a flag from his homeland, except for the Chinese representative. He explains that he and “an ancient and very wise” fellow survivor had decided that their country should no longer have a cloth flag. Instead, they agreed that China ought to be represented by the iris—a wild flag. “In China we have decided to adopt this flag”, remarks the delegate, “since it is a convenient and universal device and very beautiful and grows everywhere in the moist places of the earth for all to observe and wonder at. I propose all countries adopt it, so that it will be impossible for us to insult each other’s flag”. “Can it be waved?” asks the American delegate in response, “who wore a troubled expression and a Taft button”. The reply: “It can be waved, yes. But it is more interesting in repose or as the breeze stirs in it”.<sup>44</sup>

Animals indeed hold a similar symbolic place in much of White’s writing—not simply as an instructive allegory, but rather as a literary vehicle for conceiving of a community of inter-subjective recognition and mutuality. Of course, it is hardly surprising that a writer living on a farm in Maine should have included so many metaphors drawn from the animal world in his non-fiction, even that which doesn’t take the environment as its main subject. White grew up taking care of animals at his family’s home in Mount Vernon, New York. He spent time amidst them each summer when his family retreated to Maine. He also surrounded himself with them—sheep, chickens, pigs, geese—when he and his wife, Katharine, purchased the home and barn near North Brooklin that became the inspiration for *Charlotte’s Web*. When he concludes *The Elements of Style* by turning to Robert Louis Stevenson’s cow; or when, two days before the German surrender, he calls for the U.N. to begin its session with a reading from *Walden* about the harmony that Thoreau could discern as listened to

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42 White, *The Points of My Compass*, p. 93.

43 White, *The Wild Flag*, p. 20.

44 *Ibid.*, p. 21.

the “voice” of a cat-owl respond discordantly to the honking of a goose, he writes with images drawn from his immediate milieu.<sup>45</sup> It was partly his intimacy with animals that made White one of the century’s great environmental writers.


In the context of legal history, however, White’s most noteworthy animals are fantastical, endowed with the ability to speak—and precisely through their use of language possess a complex subjectivity. One feature of White’s literary brilliance was to depict this subjectivity without being at all patronizing. Stuart is an ordinary member of the Little family, and no different in his consciousness from any of the characters he meets along his journey. His utterances are not simply communicative of his actions or intentions; they also indicate that the mouse possesses theory of mind. This rendering of subjectivity in and through language is significant in fostering an imaginative displacement of human consciousness. Stuart, Charlotte, and Wilbur dethrone human readers from their place of metaphysical preeminence—a venerable literary device among political visionaries and humane dreamers. For a point of comparison, one might turn to Volney’s *The Ruins*, or to *Star Trek*, which canvasses a multi-galactic barnyard of alien creatures in a story inspired by the United Nations project.<sup>46</sup> By providing individuality and subjectivity to animals, as with his depiction of the natural world, White invites readers to imagine a humanity that transcends the particularity of nationalism. He creates a literary device for fostering the consciousness of world federalism. The “moist places of the earth”, the sights and sounds of the New England woods, the identification readers feel with a pig—“Where’s Papa going with that ax?”—all ask readers to see the world and its peoples with a larger view, and to recognize “what’s important”.

White’s representation of talking animals in this respect was of a piece with his pervasive theme of longing, which in his work took both spiritual and political forms and, implicitly, often blended the two together. His work could usefully be compared on this score with both other postwar American writers and artists who consciously sought to contribute to the midcentury social imaginary by depicting animals, such as Dr. Seuss. Indeed, in a striking parallel to the bird Margalo in *Stuart Little*, composer Marvin Hamlisch, in a tribute to Emery Reves’s work, once represented the federalist ideal of “one law” for the world as the soft, bird-like notes of a single flute, its vocal refrain sung by

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 83–84.

<sup>46</sup> Constantin-François Volney, *The Ruins: or, Meditation on the Revolutions of Empires: and The Law of Nature*, translated by Quai Malaquais Levrault (New York: Peter Eckler, 1890); *Star Trek* [television series], produced by Gene Roddenberry (CBS Television, 1966–1967).

children.<sup>47</sup> Yet within this company, White is remarkable for the proscriptive quality of his engagement with language. For White, “what’s important” could be vindicated only through hard legal institutions, and the only way to build those institutions, and so to protect the “I” that Hitler and the Soviet Union had sought to destroy, was to follow the example of Charlotte the spider and be a great writer—to use definite, specific, concrete words and sentences of human language on behalf of a rules-based rather than a transactional international order. His writing thereby possesses a rich and complicated nexus of hard rules of language and of law; imaginative displacement in the service of international institutions designed to merge national sovereignties; and an embrace of humanity’s connection to the natural world through the literary rendering not only of animals who talk but animals who have deep, unassuming personal subjectivity through their use of speech.

Wittgenstein wrote famously that to “imagine a language” was to “imagine a form of life”.<sup>48</sup> For White, to imagine an animal endowed with human speech was to imagine a form of law—and to contribute to its foundations in public consciousness. His representation of animal utterance contains a politics, a jurisprudence, and an ethic of humanity’s relation to the natural world characteristic of an important, fading tradition of liberal thought and rhetoric in New England and the United States.<sup>49</sup> 

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47 Marvin Hamlisch, composer, *Anatomy of Peace: A Symphonic Suite in One Movement* [audio compact disc], Dallas Symphony Orchestra (Dallas: Dallas Symphony Association, Inc., 1993).

48 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, translated by G. E. M. Anscombe, P. M. S. Hacker, and Joachim Schulte (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), p. 11a.

49 Thus the owl of Minerva spreads its wings at dusk. See Donald J. Trump, “Remarks by President Trump to the 72nd Session of the United Nations General Assembly”, WhiteHouse.gov (19 September 2017), available at [www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-72nd-session-united-nations-general-assembly/](http://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-72nd-session-united-nations-general-assembly/) (last accessed 13 February 2019), and Daniel W. Drezner, *Present at the Destruction: The Trump Administration and the Foreign Policy Bureaucracy*, *Journal of Politics* 81 (2) (April 2019), pp. 723–730.